

The ethics of photojournalism



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Is a photograph worth more than words? Do the visuals of a photograph have more impact than language? Can one photograph put over the same point across to all its onlookers? Does one single person have a right photograph something that may question moral standards? All these issues arise when considering the field of photojournalism, but do photographs that are published in the media have more impact on the public and because it is a photograph, should we assume that what is being shown is the real truth, opposed to it being a very life like painting?

Photojournalists have to comply with a set of ethical rules, the same as writers and editors in the world of media. Each photograph published has to conform to regulations, whether written or unwritten. These sets of rules have precedence in deciding if that photograph is a true and authentic image of what is being shown to the public. In some cases this may rely on the personal principles of the photojournalist and what they perceive to be what is morally right to publish or not. Many topics are raised when considering these rules such as, the behavior of the photographer when taking pictures, what images can be altered by the photographer and the most important one, what can and can't be photographed. Technological competence and the ever-changing values of society have influenced this structure of ethics to evolve; and it is still constantly progressing today.

Ethics, in any case, is inevitably going to be an area that provokes debate. Kenneth Kobre, a professor in photojournalism and author, writes in his book, *Photojournalism, the Professionals Approach*, "Photojournalism has no Bible, no rabbinical college, no Pope to define correct choices." What Kobre means by this is, there is no single referee that determines what is or

isn't ethical. However, if there were, it still isn't a field where a right or wrong label can be administered. In many books that consider the ethics of photojournalism, one main focal point is often talked about and that is how truthful a photograph can be. It is a question of whether a certain image shows the subject in an accurate light or if it is deceptive to the onlooker.

The National Press Photographers Association Code of Ethics states that "Our primary goal is the faithful and comprehensive depiction of the subject at hand." So does this mean that a photographer can alter a photo, or set one up? Would these photographs be deemed as faithful and comprehensive depictions? Many texts have been written on the ethics of photojournalism and have tried to answer those questions.

However, other debates reach much further when considering these questions, like the debate between ethics and preference. This is particularly true when contemplating photographs of a sexual or violent nature. Some may feel that sexual and violent imagery are in the field of personal preference, whereas the counter argument could be that ethical values must be considered when images such as these are taken.

Another angle that could be looked at when thinking about the ethics of photojournalism is what the journalist does when taking their photographs. Perhaps, if a person requested not to be photographed, should the photographer go ahead with it anyway? Or another instance could be, if a photojournalist was covering a major natural disaster, should he stop taking pictures to help someone in desperate need? Then, of course, the argument between being a professional and the ethics of journalism comes into play. If, like stated in the NPPA Code of ethics that all depictions should be

“faithful and comprehensive”, does that also cover a situation where the journalist may deliberately not using a photograph to its full potential?

There is one book in particular that tries to solve these questions. Written by Paul Lester, *Photojournalism: An Ethical Approach*, spells out six different ethical philosophies in order to sort out the baffling queries in this ethical field. The first being the Categorical Imperative. Lester states, “Categorical” here means unconditional, without any question of extenuating circumstances, without any exceptions. What is meant by this is that if it is ok for one, it is ok for all. If, for example, an editor was thinking about publishing a photograph of a white policeman using physical force against a black female citizen. That editor should then reflect on whether they would publish it if it was under a different situation; say if the policeman was a black male and the citizen a white female, or if they were both of the same race or gender.

The second of the six philosophies is Utilitarianism. Utilitarianism is the belief that tries to maximize the greatest good for the greatest number of people. So, for example, a photograph of a child with severe burns may offend some people, especially those who have children. However, if this image will raise awareness for fire safety within the area, then going by the philosophy of Utilitarianism, the capturing and publication of this image is seen as morally right.

The third that Lester talks about is Hedonism. Phrases such as, “ Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die,” “ Live for today,” and “ Don’t worry-Be happy,” are present examples of the Hedonism philosophy. It is

to justify publishing photos for their aesthetic nature (to sell newspapers) rather because of their importance. An example of this is perhaps where a young lady is pictured on the front page rather than a boring old politician.

The fourth of the six is The Golden Mean, a compromise between two extreme points of view or actions. Here, Lester explains that if there is a photograph that is less offensive or invasive, but still gets the same point across then that photo is the best one to publish. So, for example, if there was a photo of the funeral of a dead soldier or a photo of a memorial with the inscription of the names of lost soldiers, then the memorial image should be the one chosen as it still shows the impact of war.

The following two philosophies, Veil of Ignorance and Golden Rule, are usually used to argue against the taking and printing a controversial image by photographers, editors, subjects, and readers.

The Veil of Ignorance is where in practical terms, a photographer tries to imagine what it would be like to be the subject of the photographs. What is meant by this is, if the photographers themselves wouldn't feel comfortable in the place of the subject, then it would be best to find another image. For example, if a riot was being photographed and someone was pictured with their clothes torn off, then this could be a situation which the photographer may not feel comfortable in, because of the unforeseen nudity.

Finally, the last of the six is The Golden Rule. Lester explains The Golden Rule as being the philosophy that teaches persons to “love your neighbors as yourself.” In other words, they should treat the subjects in their

photographs the way they would want to be treated. This philosophy is one that relies on the photographers or editors own morals.

Although there is no definite system that the ethics of photojournalism can be regulated by, there are other conducts that can establish its present shape to a degree. By investigating certain circumstances that have encouraged debate on the ethics of photojournalism, one can unearth any potentially unethical photograph or photographer, as people don't usually question anything that is evidently all well and good. So, by doing this helps highlight the unclear guidelines to what may be or not be ethical; with unambiguous cases of unethical and ethical journalistic works, the understanding of the ethics in photojournalism can be broadened.

Case Study

As I have stated previously, the ethical quandaries that photojournalists and editors have to face is an area of grey. It could be argued that manipulation of a photograph can be as simple as changing it from colour to black and white. On the other hand, manipulation can also include a photograph that has been taken from a series of snaps, and published in a certain way that changes the whole concept entirely.

That subsequently brings me to the photograph of 'The Falling Man' in the September, 11th attacks in New York. The photograph was taken by Richard Drew at 9. 41 am. In the United States, people have taken pains to banish it from the record of September 11, 2001. The story behind it, though, and the search for the man pictured in it, are our most intimate connection to the horror of that day.

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It has been documented throughout the world that this photograph is just one that was selected from a series of photographs taken of this man plummeting to his death. Some may feel that this particular image is one that depicts elegance and peacefulness, whereas the others are said to be of a disturbing nature. This evidently shows that the alteration of an image and the editing process are one of the same, which leads one to question the ethics behind this photograph.

One could argue, on ethical grounds, that the victim falling to his death in this photograph did not attend work that day to become a tragic figure.

The victim falling to his death on 9/11 did not go to work to become an icon of a tragic day. It could be said that it is regrettable that this man, through the acts of terrorism, became a reluctant hero in his last living moments, yet it brings a recognition to the photojournalist who captured these terrible happenings. Is this ethically right?

Afterward, the photograph was then used in a search to identify the falling man which later provoked strongly opinionated debates about the shame and anger the families of people pictures were feeling. The well known phrase "jumpers" came in use not long after this photograph was printed, which implied they had committed suicide. This created controversy throughout many communities in America, as suicide was a shameful act. Again, did Richard Drew consider any ethical reasoning before selling on this picture? This photograph doesn't reflect any of the rules stated in the NPPC Code of ethics, but still the American newspapers felt it was right to publish.

Photojournalists, and journalists alike, have a responsibility to provide the public with the news. Yet, on ethical terms, they also have to strive to achieve equilibrium between their professionalism as well as respecting the privacy and dignity of their subject. However, could it be said that photo was in the public interest?

It could be suggested that, while this photograph may be a controversial one throughout America (and even the world), ethics has nothing to do with it. A photograph can also be seen as a work of art; this one being no exception. The aim of a work of art is to trigger an emotional reaction to the person who is looking at it. Even when considering the horrific circumstances it was taken under, this photograph is still deeply moving. Therefore, it may be argued that this photograph cannot be controlled by ethics; somewhat our perceptions of ethics are fixed and then are subsequently challenged by art.

My personal view of this photograph is undecided. Considering each argument that could hypothetically be put across I still have no solid opinion on it. However, I feel what Peter Howe wrote on Richard Drew does show a flicker of truth. This photograph has impacted on American society, even reaching out the other nations.

Drew hasn't seen one image that he considers to be the iconic summation of the disaster, but he feels that the photographic coverage of it has influenced the American public:

I think it has rallied the Americans. At least what I can see. It's seemed to have rallied everyone. Everyone is carrying flags, they have flags on their cars, and they have flags on their lapels, flags on their hats at the NY stock

exchange. They have flags everywhere. People on the street corners are all selling flags. There is a sense of patriotism that probably wasn't that strong as it was when this thing started, you know. You can't screw with us. We are going to go after you. We're not going to sit back here and take it. ¶

In my conclusion, I feel that while the roots of print journalism can be traced almost to the origins of the written word. However, photojournalism is a pretty new thing when put in comparison with language. In 150 years a whole framework of ethics has evolved. When photojournalism first came about, technology ruled what was acceptable, because if it was possible then it must be ok. However, after the industry began to mull over what the essence of news really was that is when it all began to change. By introducing notions such as trust and fairness, that is when an ethical system had to be applied; as a result, the concept of photojournalistic ethics.

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After looking into much detail about ¶ the falling man ¶ photograph, it is clear how much of an impact photojournalism, and other journalistic works for that matter, have on our society as a whole. By sparking a debate from one single photo, creates thought processes which one may never have considered in any other instances. That leads on to the way society thinks and acts.

Lastly, the vital aim is to put forward accurate and trustworthy photographic journalism to the public. Although, as I have stated previously, it may be published at a cost, the negative effect of a photograph must be put against

the possible benefits it may have to the viewing public. However, we cannot assume that today's ethics, will be the same as tomorrows.