

Question of ethics in photojournalism media essay



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Ever since the practice of illustrating news stories with photographs was made possible at the turn of the 20th century, newspapers have relied heavily on strong, topical imagery that contributes greatly to the news media by making facts of an event relatable to the viewer. Photojournalists thence are not only expected to produce content that's timely and narrative, they're also guided by a rigid ethical framework which demands that the work is both honest and impartial in strict journalistic terms.

We've all heard the saying: "A picture is worth more than a thousand words," and over time, it has become apparent that no picture is worth more words than a picture that documents death and suffering caused by natural disasters, or "death porn," as it's often referred to as. It's true that when it comes to making headlines, photographs of human misery and devastation win the prize. Whether it's an earthquake in Haiti or floods in Pakistan; a Tsunami in Japan or a hurricane in North America - nothing resonates with viewers and readers like a graphic - sometimes even downright gory - image of the incident printed on the front page of a newspaper the very next day, or in a matter of hours in case of websites, making photojournalists and their work more and more popular and significant as we progress further into the digital age.

It is important to note, however, that with such popularity comes great responsibility. While it would be nice to presume that every photojournalist is honest and complies with the ethical framework that dictates absolute objectivity, it sadly isn't the case. Like any other form of journalism, the problem with photojournalism ethics is that answers are not easily found when they are most needed. Ethics is an inherently subjective field, and

hence what answers there are, are often derived from emotional outbursts of personal opinion rather than from the calm of reason like they should be.

What are the Photographer's personal motives?

We need to understand that photojournalists are constantly defining reality. By selecting what stays in the 35mm frame and becomes a picture that will eventually be seen by the world, the photographer makes a conscious decision to edit out parts of a scene which may or may not have contextual relevance to the story. Decisions regarding camera, lens, angle of view, lighting, and modern editing tools such as Photoshop can very well change a photograph's meaning and are therefore constant considerations. Especially in cases of natural disasters when conveying the news of the calamity's magnitude is important but the honour of victims is also at stake, photojournalists have a moral responsibility to decide what pictures to take and what pictures to eventually show to the public.

This is where the issue of personal loyalties comes in. Photojournalists, like the rest of us, are human beings driven by self-esteem, self-actualisation and economic motives. It might be in some ways right to assume that if a photographer while on assignment in Haiti, for example, was more loyal to their own career progression, high on the idea of winning the Pulitzer for taking heart-wrenching pictures of children crushed under rubble of cement and steel while their mothers weep helplessly, instead of being loyal to the profession and documenting the aftermath of the earthquake in an impartial, non-sensational fashion, might be more prone to ethical oversights. The same rule applies for editors that operate in the newsrooms. It is important to understand that a photographer may – in fact usually does – have a very

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different ethical alignment than an editor, the organisation or the readers depending on catastrophe that he or she is covering. Taking a picture of a subject in an unfortunate state is the photographer's choice, usually based on a split-second decision, while publishing that photograph on the front page for the world to see is the editor's choice which is made after a significant amount of contemplation and discussion.

The problem of unpredictable audience reactions and a photographer's dilemma: to shoot or not to shoot?

“ You have to have an inner voice to tell you when to shoot and when not to shoot. Try to be the eyes of the reader – you know that you are there doing your job because other people can't be there. It is a pretty heavy responsibility... Our job is act as professionals and to show the world images that they can't see because they aren't there.” Says veteran photojournalist and Pulitzer finalist John Tlumacki, who has documented many natural as well as man-induced disasters during his decades-long career.

News organizations and photojournalists often find themselves besieged by furious critics accusing them of publishing insensitive, graphic photos of disaster-struck zones that are not necessarily newsworthy and only serve to further the victims' misery. However, according to Saeed Memon, a photojournalist who works for Pakistan's Dawn News, the only way he felt he could really help people during the 2010 floods was by “ taking pictures that told the world of people's stories and plight.” Photographing the flood victims was one of the hardest jobs Memon was ever assigned. The misery and destruction is not something one can imagine sitting in the comfort of their homes, and photographing people die of disease and hunger following a

natural disaster, he says, can be more psychologically rattling than photographing dead bodies in a war zone. “ I’ve photographed dead children and people from decent families who were literally begging for food. The pictures I took not only haunt me but keep reminding me of the misery that I witnessed – But do I regret taking the pictures? Absolutely not. The world needed to know.”

The same goes for every photographer who has covered the events in Haiti, New Orleans and South-East Asia after the Indian Ocean Tsunami: they just happened to be at the right place at the wrong time, and most of them seem to concur that the enormity of such disasters just cannot be communicated without graphic photos, which eventually foster support for rebuilding the devastated regions. But the questions that arise about these photographers’ moral and professional character once their work reaches the public are just a small price to pay. The public’s reaction serves as a barometer of a photojournalist’s ethics.

Public generated content

Today, with the rise in technology and digital cameras, photographs flow in torrents. We have become documentarians; recorders of anything and everything, all the time, so if and when a disaster strikes, the influx of amateur photos and videos shot by self-proclaimed citizen journalists who know little or nothing about the journalists’ code of ethics is overwhelming. Although such no-holds-barred or ‘ tabloidy’ content might not be published by credible newspapers run by trained journalists and ombudsmen, it is quickly and easily splashed over the internet for all to see. And this gives professional photojournalists a bad name, according to Tlumacki. “ What

people need to realize is that we are news photographers, not somebody out there with an iPhone, jumping over people to put images on YouTube.”

The decision making process: questions to ask self

After every natural disaster, editors struggle to come up with answers to some critical questions: Will a picture offend the dignity of victims? Will the viewers appreciate it? Will not showing it sanitise the heartbreaking reality that is in fact newsworthy? All these contemplations lead to the ultimate question: where should the news media draw the line?

The sheer magnitude of a disaster has much influence on an editor's disposition. The Times ran a dramatic front-page photo of a woman overcome with grief amid rows of dead children after the Indian Ocean tsunami, and again, when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, it ran another front-page picture of a body floating near a bridge where a woman was feeding her dog. The newspaper's first public editor, Daniel Okrent, despite being bombarded with criticism, concluded the paper was right to publish these pictures because they told the story of the disaster.

It is true that the more images of unimaginable suffering are published, the more international aid pours in because the victims are representatives of tens of thousands of people whose plight is essentially exemplified by the photojournalist, and it thus publicising their suffering can prove to be valuable in potentially saving many others. At the same time however, it must be remembered that if the images don't help propel the story, and are not respectful to the victims by infringing their privacy and photographing the deceased in stages of undress, or simply taken out of context by

irresponsible and/or sensationalist close-ups, then the whole purpose of their job is rendered moot.

Media biases

There are multiple standards for choosing the photographs that go into print. One of the most significant standards – proximity to readership – prevents most newspapers from publishing graphic photos with local stories, no matter how significant the catastrophe. Many editors argue that if audiences are only exposed to explicit photos when the subjects can be classified as geographically, racially or socioeconomically different from the locals, then the photos themselves become a marker of difference. Western media has time and again been accused of treating deaths of these “other” more graphically and insensitively than the deaths of white people in the U. S. and Europe, and this was illustrated well in *The hierarchy of global suffering: A critical discourse analysis of television news reporting on foreign natural disasters*, published in the *Journal of International Communication*, a comparative analysis of glaringly biased news coverage by Western media during disasters in Australia, Indonesia, Pakistan and USA.

Concluding philosophies

As a medium of storytelling that has progressively come to take precedence over the written word, photojournalism today has become more popular than ever, with thousands of brilliant, newsworthy – but often also unnecessarily explicit – images being published in newspapers, magazines and websites across the world every day. In his seminal textbook, *Photojournalism, the Professionals' Approach*, author and photojournalism professor Kenneth Kobre writes, “Photojournalism has no Bible, no rabbinical college, no Pope
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to define correct choices.” Many studies conducted on the ethics of photojournalism over the years try to reach a conclusion by either interpreting general moral rules or specific guidelines of professional, ethical behavior in a journalistic context, but the truth is, no specific course of action can ever be completely right for all audiences for every imaginable situation. What can be conceded to however, is that truth laced with objectivity, beyond all other principles, is the guiding warranty for ethical journalism in all situations – and disaster coverage is certainly not an exception.