

# [Ethical issues in photojournalism media essay](https://assignbuster.com/ethical-issues-in-photojournalism-media-essay/)

Photojournalism is an easily neglected aspect of journalism. It is a particular form of journalism, which includes the gathering, editing, and presenting of news material for publication, in order to tell a news story.

We have to ask ourselves, what does a news photograph indicate to its audience and how is it interpreted by the news audience? It was once stated by Hall (1981) that photographs “ are often seen as “ literal visual-transcriptions of the real world”. Although, it can be argued that photographs can reveal the journalists ‘ bias’ and are sometimes not always seen to be ideologically neutral. However, this does not mean that photograph’s, are additionally mediated compared to other components of news discourse.

News photography can raise certain ethical issues, such as taste and decency, intrusion, etc. According to Bersak (2006) “ With great power comes great responsibility. Responsible photo journalism means adherence to a standard of ethics”. Additionaly to this, photographs are said to have close links to claims of ‘ objectivity’, which I will later go onto examine in more detail.

I am going to study how World Press journalists, best strike a balance between good taste and the need to convey the realities of violent conflict and the ethical issues within this. I have taken the photographs from the first, second and third place of World Press Photo gallery for the year 2010, in the category of general news.

I thought that taking the photographs from this website was appropriate as they focus on delivering a narrative to the viewer. The company is also worldwide and captures pictures from all over the world, which I think is interesting as this broadens the possibility of narrative. I focused on the year 2010, as this obviously contains the most up to date photographs of violent conflict.

The first photograph I have chosen to look at was awarded 1st prize singles award by Kent Klich, Sweden. The photo is taken from the Gaza photo album and shows light entering a hole in the roof of a room. The blurb next to the photo explains that the hole was caused by a tank shell in Tuffah, northern Gaza. The family that lived in the house fled during operation Cast Lead, the Israeli attack on Gaza that began at the end of December 2008. Mohammed Shuhada Ali Ahmed, 39, had gone back to fetch clothes for his children and was killed when the shell struck.

The second photograph I have chosen was awarded 2nd prize singles award and was by Carlos Villalon, Chile, Redux pictures. The photo features a youth lying dead in a pool of his own blood. The blurb next to the photo explains how it was taken in Madellin, Colombia on 27th September 2009. President Alvaro Uribe has moved successfully against drug cartels in recent years, but as international traffickers left Medellin, their place has been taken by gangs fighting for control of the local drug trade. Violent deaths in the city doubled in 2009, often related to clashes between drug gangs, but sometimes involving innocent bystanders.

The third photograph I have chosen was awarded 3rd prize singles award by Rino Castelnuovo, Israel, for the New York Times. The photo features a Jewish man throwing wine at a Palestinian woman. The blurb next to the photo explains how the attack was before a Purim parade in the West bank city of Hebron on 10th March 2009. Purim is an annual Jewish festival with celebrations that include feasting and drinking. Hebron is divided into two zones. In one, under Israeli security control, several hundred Jewish residents live among tens of thousands of Palestinians. Tension between the communities is expressed in acts of harassment and provocation from both sides.

All three of the photographs briefly discussed above have been published whether it in a book or a newspaper, for the public eye to consume. The pictures convey an urgent global issue such as violent conflict, which is a true reflection of the world we live in today for some. It would be safe to suggest that the photos discussed, use modern photography, in a very powerful way to portray three different narratives. All of these photographs are used by their publications as a shock tactic, to make the public aware of the realities of violent conflict, whether the photos hold good taste or bad.

A main concern is, although, the photographs are the realities of violent conflict for some, the photographs do raise huge ethical issues.” This is due to the dissemination of controversial images, and along with this comes many unanswered questions. According to Franklin (2005) “ When news reporting, it is a journalists professional obligation to be ethical”. Meaning basically it is a journalists own commitment to be ethical. Most journalists in Britain today are ethical

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Journalists follow ethical guidelines due to a number of reasons such as to cover themselves ethically, in order to avoid being sued by an organisation or person/s, not to cause damage to their reputation as journalist etc. In Britain, journalists generally tend to follow the National Union of Journalists’ ethical guidelines, and the first point on it states “ A journalist has a duty to maintain the highest professional and ethical standards.

According to Bersak (2006) “ The ethical framework a photograph holds has evolved over time, influenced by such things as community values and it is continually developing today”. Although, we do have to take into account that not all countries follow this guideline and they can vary.

An example of where the journalist may not have been ethical is in the second photograph, of the youth lying dead. Is this right or wrong to show this picture, just to try and accomplish a sensational news story, and thus boosting the circulation of sales of the publication? We have to take into consideration that this youth is a son to someone, how would they feel about this photo? The fact that is has been widely published by Redux pictures (an independent commercial and editorial photo agency, used by publications) would his family have wanted that? Would the youth’s family have allowed the photograph to be published, to convey to the world the realities of violent conflict?

Can World Press Photo justify this journalist taking this photograph? Is it in the public interest to show this photo, or could it be subjected to invasion of privacy? According to Franklin (2005) public interest “ is the need for information to be published to benefit society”. The youth is dead, should he not be allowed privacy at this time and die without being photographed, surely the need to convey the realities of violent conflict cannot be that great.

Sometimes in photo journalism, ethical guidelines are broken to represent the true horror of a subject. However, the photograph could offend others and could be the subject of bad taste. It was said by Emery and Smythe (1995) “ Violence and tragedy are staples of journalism. If it bleeds, it leads, is a popular, unspoken sentiment in many newsrooms. The reason for this obvious incongruity is that a majority of viewers want to see violent pictures, but through gaps in the fingers in front of their face”.

In an overview of this, journalists should ensure that photographs that display gruesome images (like the photograph of the youth) are really vital, in order to inform the news reader. Journalists, frequently refer to the explanation for using such gruesome photographs as a way to inform the public of the risk, which in this case would be the realities of violent conflict.

Personally, I think it is in the public interest to let the public know the realities of violent conflict, however, I do not think this photo is appropriate. If the parents gave Redux permission to go ahead and publish it, I think I would be more accepting of the photo. I think the fact, he is only a youth as well has a part to play, it highlights the fact that he was more vulnerable and thus, maybe why he was attacked.

Whose interest is it in to see this poor youth dead and what benefit does this bring to the public, no one’s. I think there are other photographs that could have been used to convey the realities of violent conflict, which could have the same affect on the news reader. I do not believe the journalist has tried his/her best to strike a balance between good taste and the need to convey the realities of violent conflict at all.

Another interesting point to make is that, although, the photographs convey the realities of violent conflict for some, the photographs hold no objectivity. This is a recurring issue that is often questioned in today’s society, should the journalist hold neutrality?

Quill (1996) who supports this view states “ I believe that the journalist should have objectivity, when reporting, they should give all sides a fair hearing”.

An example, whereby the photograph holds no objectivity, is the third photograph of the Jewish man throwing wine over the Palestinian women, as this is not showing a neutral point of view at all, and in fact conveys that the Jews were the ones in the wrong, the aggressors in this violent conflict, which may/may not have been the case. According to Emery and Smythe (1995) “ Media critics and viewers question the use of gruesome images and visual messages that perpetuate negative stereotypes of individuals from various multicultural groups”.

Although, Vistens (1992) argues with this and states “ journalists do not take sides just pictures”, supporting the view that the picture does not need objectivity as it shows the true realities of violent conflict. Reporting the realities of violent conflict encapsulates many journalistic dilemmas.

For me this is the most shocking photo, I think it may be because I have never seen a photograph like this before where the man is abusing a woman by throwing wine over her. I do not know whether, it has more of an affect, as it is a man throwing it over a woman. I feel a lot of the time, I am desensitised to photographs of dead people, through seeing them so often in news coverage and this is maybe why I found this image more shocking. It was quoted by Lester (1999) “ The media have been criticized for showing so many gruesome images that the public has hardened toward violent injustices”.

The concept of journalistic objectivity is problematic, and has been described as one of journalisms thorniest dilemmas, from both a conceptual and practical point of view. It nevertheless remains at the forefront of societal debate about journalisms role and in journalists own legitimisation of their profession (taken from handout). Although a post modern approach to objectivity supports the view that it is impossible and/ or irrelevant in this day and age, to show objectivity when news reporting, whether it be in photography or writing.

I think it is safe to say that the journalist, who took this picture, does give ‘ a best strike a balance between good taste’ and the need to convey the realities of violent conflict. As although, the picture is offensive to some, I do not think it can be subjected to bad taste. The picture does not make the audience look away in horror, as the picture does of the bloody youth. It shows the approach of some Jews, towards the Palestinians. It provokes the emotions of anger and sadness in the news reader and conveys the realities of violent conflict in a powerful way without being distasteful.

We have to consider that, the majority of texts concerning ethics in photo journalism concentrate on the subject matter of what could be coined as the ‘ photographic reality’. In other words, whether a certain picture accurately conveys the topic or whether it misleads the news reader viewer. A journalist is said to give a ‘ faithful and comprehensive depiction of the subject at hand” in his/her work according to The National Press Photographers Association (NPPA Code of Ethics).

However, we have to think about what happens when the journalist is not ‘ faithful and comprehensive’ as it were. The matter of the fact is a journalist can set up a staged news photo and s/he could change it in the darkroom if s/he sought to, in order to enhance the photo’s impact.

New technological equipment is so advanced in society today, that it easily allows journalists to manipulate photographs (for this instance) to convey the realities of violent conflict, which would not be ethically correct. To illustrate this point, if we take photograph one, the picture features a hole in the middle of an empty room of someone’s house, with a massive hole in the roof. I would like to think this photo had not been altered. Although, it could be possible that the journalist took the photo of the room, without a hole present and added it later on for affect, and the news reader would be none the wiser. Lester (1999) agrees with this viewpoint and states “ A camera is only as truthful as the hands that guide it”.

The risk to manipulating photographs, is the public starts to doubt the truthfulness of the news photographs in general, and therefore this could cause the public’s view of the journalist profession to suffer, as it has done before in the past.

I do not think that the photograph has been manipulated to convey the realities of violent war and conflict. Nor do I think the photograph is distasteful, when viewing the photograph at first, it was actually quite unclear to what the photograph was meant to be conveying. I think that the photograph definitely has a shock tactic, as it shows a hole was caused by a Tank shell, which is incongruous to most of us, as news readers. I think the photograph conveys the realities of war and conflict, with striking a balance between good taste. Although, the photograph is shocking and could offend some, it like photograph three, does not make you look away in horror. This photo, especially does not make me question the ethics of whether the photo should have been published or not, maybe this is because no person is actually featured in the photograph. It was said by Bersak (2006) “ Each publication has a set of rules, sometimes written, sometimes unwritten, that governs what that publication considers to be a truthful and faithful representation of images to the public”.

It can be argued, that the difference among ethics and taste is continually up for discussion, particularly, with regards to violence. It was once mentioned to me that, if you would not show the photo to a child then its suitability, taste and decency was too bad and the photo should not get published. There are many models that a journalist can follow, in order to decide whether their story should be published or not, such as Ward’s (2009) model, who believes there is “ four stages a journalist can follow for ethical reasoning”. STUDY 8888888888

Despite the fact, that a number of us view violence as a matter of taste, others embrace this as ethics. Furthermore, photo journalism ethics may include the decision a journalist photographer makes.

For instance, if we take photograph two of the youth lying there, should the journalist have put down his camera, in order to help the bloody youth, is this not intrusion on the youth’s life, is there really a need to convey the realities of violent conflict that badly? Secondly if a person request’s the journalist not to take his/her photo or not to publish the photo, is it ethically correct to go ahead and take/publish the photograph regardless of what the person requested? For example, if we take photograph three of the Jewish man throwing wine over the lady, yes this is a perfect picture of conveying the realities of violence and conflict, that holds a balance between good taste and the need to show the effects, but is it fair to publish the photo say for instance if the Palestinian woman asked for it not to be? Again the journalist is being very intrusive to the Palestinian woman. All of these factors come very close between journalistic photography ethics and a photo journalist’s professionalism. I would hope that World Press photo has an ethical policy that, journalists have to adhere to.