

The Ethics of Photojournalism: An Exploration into Exploitation

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Within the field of photography, ethics are defined as the moral principles which guide the taking and sharing of photographs. They are a standard to be considered when photographing subjects and displaying said photographs. Morals and ethics vary from person to person, as they are based on individual beliefs gathered from personal experience and environment. Photojournalism is unique compared to fine art photography because there are certain ethics that are universally shared in the photojournalism field. For instance, photojournalists generally agree on avoiding excessive staging and editing in their works, as their aim is to capture real-life issues as accurately as possible.¹ Photojournalism covers many topics, though certain subjects raise the issue of ethics more than others. These subjects involve the potential exploitation of struggling or impoverished people. Homelessness, indigenous peoples, and war and conflict are three subjects that are frequently documented and often are the subject of debate over ethics. A large part of this debate centers around keeping the photograph genuine and organic while still making sure that the subjects are aware of and comfortable with being photographed. Another aspect of the debate focuses on the use of the photographs once captured, and whether they are being used to aid the people that the photographs feature. This can mean financially aiding them by giving a portion of the income to the subjects, or aid by evoking emotion and calling for action from the audience. There is a general consensus that photographs taken of impoverished people and published or displayed in a way that benefits the photographer but not the subject is exploitation of the impoverished person. This also includes photographers documenting people who do not wish to be photographed and have made that known.

In an article from the Phoblographer, author Chris Gambat describes questions a photographer can ask themselves when unsure if their work is ethically responsible. Many of the questions deal with the intention of the photograph, "Why are you taking the picture of the person? What are you hoping to achieve by taking this photo? What do you intend to do with this photograph? Where is this photograph going to be displayed?". Gambat goes on to state that photographing underprivileged people is exploitative when it is done for selfish reasons.²

Photographer Eric Kim operates on a "treat others as you would like to be treated" method when shooting street photography. Street photography is the practice of

¹ Dodd, Savannah, *Photography Ethics and Why They Matter*, (Photography Ethics Centre, 2018).

² Gambat, Chris, *On the Ethics of Taking Photos of Homeless People*, (The Phoblographer, 2015).

capturing random events and candid actions in public spaces. Kim feels comfortable being photographed candidly, therefore he photographs people both with and without their permission. This, however, does not include underprivileged people. Kim states that he feels that taking candid photographs of homeless/impoverished people could potentially be exploiting them, and suggests asking for their permission to photograph them if a photographer is unsure about whether it would be ethical. Like Chris Gampat, Kim suggests that the photographer ask themselves a series of questions related to the ethics of photography, “‘Why do I shoot street photography?’ Are you shooting street photography to empower people on the streets, to show the beauty in the mundane, or to just photograph a homeless person and try to present it as ‘art?’”³

Robert Shults, a photographer that has experienced homelessness firsthand, struggles with how homeless people are treated and represented within photojournalism. In an interview discussing his time being homeless, Shults mentions the psychological strain of having to live publicly at all times and states that photographers who attempt to photograph the homeless without their knowledge worsen that strain. Shults also discusses how many depictions of homeless people create one narrative for all homeless, rather than depicting them as individuals. In his opinion, documenting homeless people in their environment shows the audience something they have already seen, and therefore does nothing to generate empathy or action from the viewer to help the subject.⁴

Many similar ethical dilemmas exist around war photography. Photojournalists and photographers travel to war zones with the intention of documenting the effects of the conflict occurring there. In general, war photographers believe that by documenting victims of conflict, they are giving them a voice. As Ashley Norman states in an article regarding the ethics of war photography:

You are showing through photographs just what drastic and brutal damage war can do. You are showing the world what war caused this young girl and so many others to lose- her home and potentially even her family. Think of a war photographer’s camera as the visual voice of the civilians and soldiers who lose everything in these conflicts and do not have the chance to open the eyes of those fortunate enough to be safe at home with their family.⁵

³ Kim, Eric, *The Street Photography Code of Ethics*, (Eric Kim Photography, 2016).

⁴ Walker, David, *A Formerly Homeless Photographer on How to (And Not to) Photograph Homeless People*, (Photo District News, 2017).

⁵ Norman, Ashley, *The Ethics and Morality of War Photography*, (Medium, 2018).

According to Norman, traditional ethics issues such as consent of subject are not important to war photography because the overarching goal of giving victims a voice takes precedent. This statement gets challenged in particularly graphic or violent cases. One example is the 2010 World Press Photo of the Year General News Stories, 2nd prizewinner, *Stoned to Death, Somalia, 13 December* by Farah Abdl Warsameh⁶. The work consists of four pictures that show the before, during, and after of the execution of a man by stoning in Somalia. They are uncensored, unlabeled, and unexplained. The work as well as the artist have come under much scrutiny, not only for the shocking nature of the images, but also for the lack of explanation. Without details, story, or a call to action, many people wonder if the images are giving any victim a voice. Rather, people express concern that the images simply shock viewers rather than make them feel empathy or learn something. There are also questions about the ethics of capturing of these images. Did the photographer have the permission of the victim to photograph him? On some level, the photographer had to cooperate with the executioner to document the stoning so closely⁷.

Another example of war photography that challenges the boundaries of ethics is *The Vulture and the Little Girl* by Kevin Carter⁸. Taken in Sudan in 1993 during severe famine, the picture depicts a child suffering from starvation laying face down in the sand. Behind the child a vulture is waiting. The ethics of the picture, which was published in the New York Times in March of the same year, have come under extensive debate since its publishing. A large part of the debate centers around the way in which Carter captured the photograph. Though he initially claimed that he came upon the scene, quickly took the picture and then chased the vulture away, Carter later admitted that he waited at the scene for about twenty minutes in the hopes that the vulture would spread its wings. After twenty minutes, Carter chased the vulture away and left. He did not help the child or make sure that the child made it to a feeding center⁹. Many people were appalled upon hearing this story, and outraged specifically at Carter for not doing more to help the child. Though Carter's inaction would seem to go against many people's basic code of ethics, the photograph went on to be used in many campaigns to end the Sudan famine as its shocking nature gave it a popularity that caused many people to donate to relief funds. Though the photograph/photographer did not help the subject of the photo, *The Vulture and the Little Girl* went on to help many Sudanese people. Is the photograph still exploitative? Does it violate a code of ethics for photojournalism, or is it redeemed because it helped the greater good overall?

⁶ See Figure 1.

⁷ O'Hagan, Sean, *Viewer or Voyeur? The Morality of Reportage Photography*, (The Guardian, 2010).

⁸ See Figure 2.

⁹ *The Vulture and the Little Girl*, (Rare Historical Photos, 2017).

Simon Sharp, a documentary photographer, discusses issues that Carter and Warsameh's photography deal with in an article written for Petapixel. When discussing using struggling people as subjects in photos, Sharp says, "where is the line between the commodification of suffering and telling stories?...Such representations do not humanize the suffering that they picture...the sole purpose is to create an aesthetic out of a situation in which the 'models' clearly wanted no part in being scrutinized"¹⁰. Though Sharp takes a strong stand against exploitative photography of those in need, he also believes that this exploitation is not the fault of the photographer but rather of the industry creating the market that this type of photography succeeds in. Because the industry demands shocking, dramatic photos, photojournalists are forced to sacrifice their dignity and the dignity of their subjects to be successful in the market.

Whether certain types of photojournalism defy ethics and who is at fault for this defiance will likely always remain a topic of debate among the art community. Photography displaying sensitive topics in an ethical manner is important, as it invokes a desire to assist those in need and make changes to these situations without exploiting the subject. That is the overarching goal for the photographers featured in *War is Only Half the Story*. After viewing the exhibition, at the Susquehanna Art Museum through January 19, we must consider what the photos are asking from us. How can we help?

¹⁰ Sharp, Simon, *Can('t) You See?*, (PetaPixel, 2017).

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CONTENT WARNING:

Figures 1 and 2 on the following page depict violence and starvation.



Figure 1



Figure 2