

MORAL OBLIGATION AND ETHICAL VALUES IN VISUAL JOURNALISM

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The contemporary world is divided into radically different political and social sides. Photos documenting the differences and diversity of these worlds are in increasing demand as fast-moving current events make the world more photocentric.

To navigate this diversity, moral obligations and ethical values have been clearly defined in alignment with international declarations and professional codes of ethics. However, moral obligations and ethical values in photography are often contradictory concepts, sometimes defending the former means rejecting the latter.

This is especially true of photojournalism as it is the source of daily news, investigative reports, celebrity lifestyle, political events, and high-profile meetings. Clearly, photographers working in this environment are expected to cover the facts and events impartially, while at the same time creating visual effects that meet professional standards and create unique, high-quality works of art.

Visual journalism reports facts or events so explicitly that explanatory texts are frequently omitted, captions reference only place, date, and event. Such approach is becoming more and more widespread in the contemporary media as it tries to answer modern demands of obtaining and spreading information promptly. This principle radically changes public mentality and systems of social communication. The public gets information through an image and spreads information through the same. Accordingly, the code of thinking, culture of perception is altered, people are identifying events, facts and their own emotions through images. “Must-have” social platforms reinforce the impact of image, which

substitutes traditional forms of communication and creates a new type, *photo communication*.

If such abundance and ubiquitous access to images reinforce their impact, it also causes the adverse effect of devaluation and loss of interest. Humans have seen almost everything, so it becomes hard to offer something interesting, there are almost no surprises left.

“Industrial societies turn their citizens into image-junkies; it is the most irresistible form of mental pollution,”¹ this statement was made 50 years ago. Rapid technological progress makes modern humanity even more addicted to image, a degree of the “mental pollution” is much higher as well. The increasing process of making photography easily accessible further complicates the job of visual journalism, moral obligations and ethical values become more sensitive.

In this environment, the moral obligation of a photographer is to maintain complete objectivity. The public sees a given event or fact through their eyes, while sometimes reporting highly inaccessible information, coverups or crimes. Fulfilment of such moral obligations is quite dangerous and risky. So, photo reporters accomplish a tough mission as they become:

- The authors of visual symbols compressing the essence of large-scale conflicts and problems in a single shot.
- Exceptions, daring to face the truth, and create an evidentiary document, a photograph.
- Individuals exposing social crimes.
- Artists reporting facts in such a powerful way that their photos force governments to revisit their legis-

¹ Sontag, *Photography*, p.18

lation and change their positions.

- Professionals frequently facing a dilemma to care about a victim or to photograph, deciding between moral obligations and ethical values, taking a defensive position for exposing the truth.

If such muckraking photojournalism with a strong social-political message also delivers strong, ethically and esthetically correct images as Lewis Hine's child labor photos or Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, the problem does not arise. Authors are both heroes and artists at the same time, fulfilling moral obligations while also upholding ethical values.

But there are well-known cases in photojournalism that still stir controversies. Iconic examples are Pulitzer Prize photos *Napalm Girl* (known as *The Terror of War*) by Nick Ut (1972) and *The Vulture and The Little Girl* (1993) by Kevin Carter. These photos profoundly changed the world. Six months after publishing the *Napalm Girl*, in January 1973, the *Paris Cease-Fire Agreement* was signed, USA began to withdraw the troops from Vietnam, the girl in the photo received medical treatment as a result of Nick Ut's demand and today she is the UN Goodwill ambassador. But debate around this photo started from the very beginning. The girl was considered "too naked" and problematic for publication, but Associated Press made a decision in favor of the photo. On the day of its publication, almost the entire world 'heard' a scream of this little girl. Nevertheless, the central question whether it is justified to take and publish a photo of a naked child, even in the name of shedding light on a tragedy of massive proportions and terror of war, still stands.²

The Vulture and The Little Girl by Kevin Carter also immediately caused public outrage at seeing a little starving child left facing a vulture and therefore unavoidable death. As Carter later explained, he chased the vulture away after he took a photo, but the fate of the child was unknown to him. Although Carter offered this clarification and defended his position, he came under a harsh public attack. One American newspaper wrote: "The man adjusting his lens to take just the right frame

of her suffering, might just as well be a predator, another vulture on the scene".³ In 1994, the photographer committed suicide. This tragedy could have caused intense public debates to seek answers to many questions around it: Should the photographer take a photo or help? Why was he not interested in the fate of the child? Can an effective photo be the only goal? Does the end indeed justify the means? These questions still remain unanswered, but the fact is that among many victims claimed by the Vietnam War and African tragedy, Carter's Sudanese girl and Napalm girl by Ut are faces of these devastating humanitarian tragedies.

As a contrast, public reaction to Horace Abrahams' *Under fire, French journalist Raymond Vankers dashes across the International Bridge to save a baby during the Spanish Civil War, 6th September 1936* is very different. This breathtaking photo depicting a brave man with a tightly held infant is truly effective and emotional, albeit not as popular and well-known as the previous examples. The reason could be that the author does not touch a sensational theme, does not push any moral and ethical boundaries, and does not strike at the conformist public with its illusory moral principles.

It seems that society fears and shuns the results of its own amorality. In self-defense, the public is seeking a new victim, which frequently becomes a photographer, as that is exactly the one witnessing inconvenient facts and not any of us.

For the Sudanese girl the public sacrificed the author. Such was the result of "human justice." But the real tragedy is that this "moralist society" only in 2011 found out that the Sudanese girl, according to his father, was actually a boy who lived 14 more years and died in 2007 of fever. But all of these facts appear to be less important as society had delivered a verdict for the "guilty" and the problem was solved.

In the discourse of photography, reality and photo are identical, they only have different "authors." The public should demand answers from the authors of reality, visual journalists are responsible to "reveal great truths and operate as trustees of the public."⁴

2 In 2016 a Norwegian writer shared *The Napalm Girl* on Facebook, in a post about *Photos That Changed the History of Warfare*. His account was suspended for a violation of Facebook policy on banning nudity and child porn. Global protest forced Facebook to reinstate his account.

3 Eshwar Anand, Jayanthi, *Journalism*, 2018 <https://books.google.ge/books?id=l61SDwAAQBAJ&pg>

4 Code of Ethics; <https://nppa.org/code-ethics>

Interestingly, controversial photos happen to be the most influential, which is why photos by Nick Ut and Kevin Carter remain so popular. Otherwise, home painted by *Terezka* is a powerful “scream” as well.⁵ Similarly, we can reference many brilliant images with a profound emotional effect but because they involve no controversy or scandal, there is no particular social interest.

But even social interest and *Photos That Change the World* (impactful photos widely shared across social platforms) are only posturing. As disturbing as it is, we must confess that these photos change almost nothing. We are left with numerous victims, a polite debate on moral obligations and ethical values and a very cruel world.

“Visual shocks” and emotions, reactions or political shifts in response to them are just illusionary fulfilment of moral obligations. Even with photos by Lewis Hine that contributed significantly to the reform of child labor laws, we still see underage children in factories of mega brands. We even proudly wear products of their labor. We still see hundreds of victims of political interests and conflicts. Most of them are just statistics, not a loss and a tragedy that they are. After the 2013 earthquake in Bangladesh, adbuster⁶ Igor Dobrowolski created a billboard with photos of corpses in the garment factory. The photo with H&M logo in it, reads: *Don't Worry, Consume*. Collapse of the dilapidated building caused the death of 1134 people, including children. They were producing clothing for H&M, Benetton, Prada, Gucci, Mango, Versace, Moncler, and other well-known brands.

The authors of such visual documents exposing results of social crime are the best examples of defending, not violating, moral obligations and ethical values. Ethical norms established under professional codes of conduct and human rights regulations are infringed not by photographers, but by the society. Photographers just create an evidence to defend human rights and ethical norms.

Yet photojournalists will probably always face familiar speculative demands from the public to uphold moral

obligations and ethical values until conformist societies recognize that they are a big part of the universal acceptance of unimaginable human tragedies and casualties around the world. Complicit in crimes against humanity, they themselves are “another vulture”.

Undoubtedly, taking and publishing pictures of a naked child is a crime. However, if cloths of a child have been burnt by the prohibited napalm bombs, leaving a little body twitching in an unbearable pain what is a right moral position banning naked child photos or allowing a photographer to expose hidden, cruel reality?

We all agree that taking photos of mutilated bodies of the diseased is also ethically unacceptable. But if these people, including minors, have died in a collapsed building of a famous clothing brand, are we supposed to ask a photographer to turn a blind eye on the victims or to expose the imaginary “democracy” causing immeasurable suffering?

Clearly, double standards of the contemporary world make it especially difficult to find and expose the truth. Documentary photography, however, does not exist without standing up for truth and justice, and expressing a morally sound position of an author. Therefore, violation of ethical principles by photographers is often driven by moral obligations.

In my view, such violations of ethical standards should be even more common in photography (obviously, I don't call for ungrounded, unjustified breach of standards) to make us think about people that we leave behind, people who are facing death, hunger and homelessness in isolation. Photographers should remind us that in their fight for moral values they hold the weapon accessible to anyone, a photo camera.

We have agreed on the concept that photography is “an act of non-intervention,”⁷ so any objections towards the photos depicting the truth, are a result of the frustration provoked by our weakness and the attempt to hide or mask this weakness. It must be convenient to hide from the fact that as a member of the society, we are complicit.

5 *Terezka*, photo by David Seymour (1948). A 7 years old girl, in a Residence for Disturbed Children after WWII, is painting home at the blackboard as a tangle of frantic, chaotic lines with haunted eyes.

6 Adbusting (advertise busting), art movement initiated in 1990s. Adbusters are mainly street artists, their goal is to create and spread aggressive, sarcastic billboards or posters to stand up against violations of social justice, oppression and consumerism.

7 Sontag, *Photography*, 1990, p.8

“Photographs cannot create a moral position, but they can reinforce one, and help build a nascent one.”⁸
The photos discussed in this essay are textbook exam-

ples of reinforcing the moral position. Photographer’s moral position then plays a decisive role in creating art.

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⁸ *ibid*, Sontag, Photography, 1990; p.13