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Photojournalism Ethics
A 21st-Century Primal Dance of Behavior, Technology, and Ideology

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Everything that happens is fluid, changeable. After they’ve passed, events are only as your memory makes them, and they shift shapes over time.

Charles Frazier (2006, p. 21)

We need our intellectual eyes wide open.

Clifford G. Christians (2005, p. 3)

The photographer Walter Curtin (1986), who lived through much of the 20th century, once said he was waiting for the day when he could simply blink an eye to take a picture. He would see something, blink, send the electrical impulses down his arm, and transfer the energy of what he saw through the touch of his fingertip to sensitized material. Today, entering the third decade of the 21st century, Curtin’s prescient imagining is close to actuality. In fact, we can now use brain-computer interface to play video games (Abu-Rmileh, 2019).

I often wonder how our perceptions of such ethical issues as photographic intrusion, the gaze, or even digital manipulation might shift if we removed the camera from the process of making images so others could see what we see directly through our eyes. Would the instant of perceiving light reflected from people and things become more credible or less so? Would photography, or “light writing,” be viewed as more of an extension of human perceptual processes than a process of constructing false realities? Would seeing and creating images be considered processes of thinking and being, parallel with writing words, rather than problematic exercises of power or deception?

Ethical discussions about the practice of photojournalism and the meanings and significances of its resulting artifacts and influences often are sidetracked by general confusion about the nature of seeing and practices related to seeing. Seeing begins and ends in the living organism of the human body. Yet the process of seeing—a biological process—and, by extension, the practices of seeing, have been alternately ennobled/vilified, overrated/underrated, blamed/ignored. Even seeing by robot has to at some point become seeing by human if we are to see it at all. This chapter explores photojournalism’s role in this normative dialectic by addressing three aspects of seeing: behaviors, technologies, and ideologies. This chapter focuses on human seeing, not to extoll the superiority of human vision, but, following Cliff Christians’ (2019) humanocentric
ethics, the focus is on the ethical doing and perceiving of human visual reportage. In the end, regardless of the assistance of external entities, our perception and reflection determine what we understand to be true. And that is the heart of visual ethics.

**VISUAL BEHAVIOR**

The human visual system is driven by both conscious and nonconscious processes of the brain. We are drawn to movement, brightness, sharpness, and difference as part of our physical surveillance and self-protection processes. We are particularly drawn to look at violent or sexual activity, the color of blood, a sudden movement or noise. Yet, if we choose to do so, we can ignore the fluttering movement of a golden leaf framed by a ray of sunlight as it spirals downward from a tree limb—or turn away from seeing the suffering of millions of other humans. Both conscious and nonconscious cognitive processes drive human visual behavior, which encompasses all the ways we use seeing and imaging in everyday life (Newton, 2005a).

The visual system is part of the larger system of human perception, the physiological and psychological means through which we respond to and make meaning of stimuli. Brain researchers estimate at least 75 percent of information we take in is visual. One matter of debate in cognitive neuroscience is whether we know something when we perceive something (as Aristotle maintained)—or whether knowledge comes afterward (as Descartes maintained), when the brain has processed the stimuli and made meaning by organizing stimuli according to innate and learned patterns. Although research supports the former as the nonconscious foundation for decision-making (Damasio, 1999; LeDoux, 1996), research also supports the latter in that we can, by drawing on our continuum of experiences, make decisions based on accepting responsibility for our actions (Gazzaniga, 2005). Cognitive neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga (2005) puts
it succinctly: “Brains are automatic, but people are free. Our freedom is found in the interaction of the social world” (p. 99). He explains:

Most moral judgments are intuitive…. We have a reaction to a situation, or an opinion, and we form a theory as to why we feel the way we do. In short, we have an automatic reaction to a situation—a brain-derived response. Upon feeling that response, we come to believe we are reacting to absolute truths. What I am suggesting is that these moral ideas are generated by our interpreter, by our brains, yet we form a theory about their absolute “rightness.” Characterizing the formation of a moral code in this way puts the challenge directly on us [emphasis added].

(p. 192)

This ecology of seeing through which a human organism gathers and makes use of visual stimuli not only creates and stores images internally but also can create and produce visual stimuli for other humans to see (Newton, 2005a). Bodily generated visual stimuli can be as subtle as a tightened muscle in the face or as intricate as a pirouette, as external as the skin or as internal as our dreams. Following Edward T. Hall (1959) and Marshall McLuhan (1964), we extend our internal processes of perception and communication via external forms, such as clothing, pen and ink, paper or canvas, light-sensitive materials, electronic media and architecture. Each process entails its own set of behaviors. For example, we alter our behaviors when we think we are being observed—either by other humans, or by extension, by seeing devices such as cameras. This tendency is not unique to humans. Heisenberg’s principle describes the effect of observation on the action of subatomic particles. Yet the changes in human behavior resulting from being observed surprise us. The social psychologist Stanley Milgram (1977a, 1977b) described such unique “photographic behavior” patterns as the tendencies to cheat less on exams and to give more money to charity when we think someone is watching or even if a camera is simply recording our actions.

We can further extend behavioral effects to media consumption and production. We have little choice but to consume some forms of media; a highway billboard, for example, casting a nearly nude figure alongside a bottle of beer is likely to grab our attention because of its disproportionate size and distinctive, out-of-context content. Other media we can clearly choose to see or to ignore; a news photograph of a war scene from Iraq, for example (see Figure 9.4), may, sadly and outrageously, look like dozens of other war scenes we’ve viewed in recent years and hence go relatively unnoticed within the larger system of media imagery.

VISUAL TECHNOLOGIES

Moss (2001) offers a useful definition of technology as “the means by which human societies interact directly with and adapt to the environment. Technology can also refer to the steps taken, or manufacturing process used, to produce an artifact (npn).” The most significant technology, then, for the present discussion, is the brain, which gathers stimuli perceived by the body and creates what we think of as the mind.

Our bodies evolved to believe what the eyes see, to translate light rays into electrical signals and send them along the optic nerve to the thalamus. From there a rough schema of what we see is quickly—and first—sent to the amygdala, the part of the brain that can signal the body to fight or flee. In the meantime, a more detailed schema of what we see is sent (more slowly in brain time) to the visual cortex for conscious processing (LeDoux, 1996).
We found ways to translate our perception of the multidimensional world into externalized forms—first with scratches on bone fragments and rough drawings on cave walls, then through drawing and painting on paper and canvas. We created visual symbol systems—writing—to convey the words we had learned to articulate. We devised techniques such as two-dimensional perspective to create the illusion of a third dimension—depth—within a frame limited by height and width. We used Aristotle’s observations of the behavior of light rays passing through a hole in a leaf to help us construct a camera obscura for observing the world and to help us draw more realistically. Then we determined processes through which to convert the energy of light to record the reflectances of objects “out there” into forms we could peruse and collect at will. In this way, photography, or light writing, came to be. Added to the reproducible texts we already had created through movable type and printing processes, we quickly determined the usefulness of combining verbal and visual reports of daily occurrences as a means of disseminating information about our world.

Even more profound for the extension of the human perceptual system was learning how to use other wavelengths from the electromagnetic spectrum—radiowaves, for example—to carry sound and other forms of energy across great distances and quickly. But only now, in the 21st century, are we learning how to use the “speed of mind,” as McLuhan termed it, to move prosthetic devices and communicate. Through our behaviors, we have learned how to extend the technology of the brain and central nervous system into machines and processes—print publications, movies, television, the Internet, smart phones, virtual realities, and images of information, advertising, entertainment, art, and social interaction.

This gloss of the history of communication technologies highlights the extensional properties of contemporary media. They originated with humans. Much of the time they are still operated and used by humans; increasingly they are operated and used by forms of artificial intelligence, which, of course, humans originated. Yet we more often blame media technologies than ourselves for abuses of those technologies. This problem can apply to the brain as a technology, as well as to what we traditionally consider a technology—machines constructed of inanimate materials to accomplish specific tasks. What we too seldom stop to consider is that blaming mass or personal media technologies too easily removes responsibility for our use of them from the primary mediating entity we can indeed influence through conscious reflection—our own brains.

**VISUAL IDEOLOGIES**

For this discussion, I define ethics as the dynamic process through which we determine how to behave in daily life. Media ethics, then, become the dynamic process through which we determine how to create, disseminate, and use communication forms to behave and live. Communication forms are the messages we create, perceive, and convey via various transmission and reception systems in order to interact, not only with other humans but also with other entities. It is fundamental that our understanding of the meaning of every stimulus is mediated, regardless of the source of the stimulus. We know, for example, that anything we think we see directly with our own eyes is a mediated form organized by the brain (Gazzaniga, 2005). That organization process takes time—milliseconds, yes, but time nonetheless—and is influenced by the physiological abilities of our individual brains, by our individual experiences and by the nature of the stimulus itself. The great Spanish perspectivist Ortega Y Gasset (1941) said it well: “Yo soy yo y mis circunstancias” (“I am myself and my circumstances”). Gazzaniga (2005) believes the seat of the soul (which he calls the interpreter) is a part of the brain that attempts to make sense of non-conscious responses to stimuli as it creates a story of the self. This scientific basis for 21st century
understanding of the self supports the social construction of the self espoused by 19th-century psychologist William James (1890/1962).

Following this line of thought, visual media are any form of imagery we create, perceive or organize for internal or external communication. Visual ethics are the dynamic process through which we determine how best to create, disseminate, and use image-based stimuli. Inherent in that definition are the behaviors—both conscious and nonconscious—humans enact as perceivers and communicators.

PHOTOJOURNALISM

A journal is a record of daily activities—those behaviors, including thoughts, that may be either internally or externally perceived and recorded. Photojournalism is writing with light to report daily activities. That is the basic definition. However, the practice of photojournalism connotes far more than that simple definition indicates.

Photojournalism, now often called visual journalism in order to encompass other forms of nonfiction imaging such as video and graphics, is a professional practice through which visual reporters seek, document, and present moments of time to multiple viewers. This chapter, titled “Photojournalism Ethics: A 21st-Century Primal Dance of Behavior, Technology, and Ideology,” focuses on photojournalism as both still and moving reportage. As human beings, visual reporters possess varying degrees of skill and talent, preparation and luck, resources and integrity. Their behavior has consequences beyond those of many other professionals’ behavior because their products are (1) disseminated as if they are visual facts, and (2) we tend to believe and remember what we see when it looks real, even if we have reason to question that belief. Although a viewer pausing to contemplate an image of photojournalism might be fully capable of distinguishing whether the image is authentic or false, too seldom do viewers stop to do so, especially in this time of propagandistic memes and deep fakes. Images of photojournalism, therefore, carry weight beyond words: the human perceptual system has evolved to first believe what it sees, question only later, if at all, and to remember what it saw, even if what was seen is proven to be untrue.

This inherent authority of images of the real feeds a range of ideological points of view. On one end of the ethical continuum, an idealized photojournalist visually captures history, documenting moments and people for the world’s diary. On the other end of the ethical continuum, a photojournalist is little more than a scavenger, a voyeur turning tragedy and victory into commodities for sale through media industries—yet still, and profoundly, human in effects on perception and living. Similarly, the concept of photojournalism evokes a range of ideological attributes: objectivity/subjectivity, power/powerlessness, truth/fiction, document/commodity, self/other, rescuer/victim, seen/unseen, visible/invisible.

The core of the best photojournalism is an intuitive connection visual journalists feel not only with individuals but also with all of humanity. This is evidenced in self-sacrificing acceptance of the “call” of photojournalism, which some compare to a spiritual calling, a call that lures those destined to be international seers into solitary personal lives and the willingness to put themselves at ultimate risk for the sake of an image testament to their witness. The important point to note, however, is that what they do is not really about the images. What good photojournalists do is seek to understand humankind by understanding human life and showing it to other humans. Good visual journalists seek to know themselves by knowing others, gathering visual information for that part of the brain that weaves the tale of the self and trying to satiate existential curiosity about the nature of life and death. Good visual journalists operate from
a base of hope that in seeking, in seeing, in documenting, in showing the many selves of the world to the world, that world can become known and can move beyond the darkness of fear and loathing engendered by ignorance into the brightness of acceptance and caring engendered by awareness.

All this, from a practice some believe has more in common with pornography (as an exercise of voyeurism, domination, violence, and exploitation) than with enlightenment? Yes.

Consider that the simultaneous, conflicting passions of the human drive to know/survive and the fear of knowing/dying fueled the Western ideology of the biblical location of original sin within the feminine, with Satan’s deception and Eve’s hunger for the apple of knowledge.

This classic parable applies to photojournalism in two ways. One, people want to know, in fact are driven to know, and seeing is the primary way most people know. Photographers and videographers document what they see and make images based on their abilities to see and know. Other people then see and learn through the eyes of those controlling the recording devices. Two, we harbor an uneasy, ongoing questioning of what we see, even as we yield to our instinct to believe what we see. People are both drawn to look at and repelled by the frightful and the serene. The frightful is too harsh a light, too reflective of our worst attributes as living organisms and fears of the uncontrollable—yet so often essential for survival. The serene can be too soft a light, too reflective of our best attributes as living organisms—yet, again, essential for survival in its own way. The frightful assures us we are alive. The serene comforts and invites contemplation.

Photojournalism embodies a masculine/feminine metaphor for understanding the gaze. The lens looks outward, penetrating space and moment, then receives the light, holding a moment that has the potential to become a frame of collective memory. Through the extension of human vision via photojournalism, seeing and its instruments (such as cameras) are both active agents, extending into space and time to capture and create moments and likenesses, and passive conduits, receiving light to record form and action for later contemplation and communication. It is the technology of the human organism consciously and nonconsciously interacting with the technology of the camera that facilitates the interaction of both active and passive elements of vision, knowing, decision-making and behaving.

ROOTS OF THEORY AND RESEARCH IN PHOTOJOURNALISM ETHICS

We can divide the study of photojournalism ethics into two categories: process and meaning (Newton, 1984, 2005). Ethics of process in photojournalism refers to how images are gathered, created, and used. Ethics of meaning in photojournalism refers to what images convey. Intentionality becomes an issue in both categories, which are not mutually exclusive but rather overlap in complex ways in everyday practice. Does a photographer intend to show the truth or to deceive? Does an editor intend to convey the truth of an event or to use an image to startle or draw a reader/viewer? Does a viewer engage an image with the conscious intent to determine authenticity and respect the human framed within? Or does the viewer read the image through the filters of uninformed, nonconscious prejudice, seeing only what she or he chooses to see?

Finding an effective starting point for a review of literature is difficult. We can reasonably argue that the roots of observing the world lie in the survival tools with which the human species evolved: the ability to observe our surroundings, perceive danger and respond, choose and construct environments to protect our young, and create symbols external to the body for communicating with other humans. As noted earlier in this chapter, photography’s own technological ontology blossomed from our desire to reproduce realistically what we see in the world around
us. If only we could find a *Pencil of Nature*, as William Henry Fox Talbot (1961), the inventor of the paper negative, termed it, we could capture what is true. Yet even the image credited as the “world’s first photograph” incorporated the hard-to-discern phenomenon of collapsing more than eight hours of shifting highlights and shadows into one still, ambiguous frame (Williams and Newton, 2007).

In middle and late 19th-century Europe and America, the technologies of talbotypes, daguerreotypes, tin types, and cartes de visite became the media for the masses to record self and other. Previously, only the rich had been able to indulge this passion through the use of the masterful hand art of oil painting. Within decades, the painstaking recording of life became a relatively rapid pursuit, collapsing the days, weeks, months required for drawing or painting into eight photographic hours, then into 30 minutes, then into fractions of a second, and now an instant equivalent to or perhaps even faster than the speed of mind. The complexities of recording technologies continued to diminish, evolving from a carefully coated pewter plate, to paper negatives, to the roll film loaded by technicians into George Eastman’s Brownie box camera, to 35-mm film loaded by consumers and pros alike, to the instant pictures of Edward Land’s Polaroid process, to the digital-image processes proliferating in our 21st century world via high-resolution cameras and ubiquitous smart phones.

Important to note here are converging forms of technological advances: (1) tool (brain and eye; hand; stylus, brush and pen; camera; computer); (2) medium (energy, light, memory, earth, stone, clay, pigment, ink, paint, cloth, chemical, electricity, byte); (3) container (living cell; DNA; body, including brain; rock, wall, landscape; token; sculpture; structure; paper; canvas; book; photograph; radio; movie; telephone; television; computer; building). Along the way observer and observed, self and other, body and mind, object and subject shift from what once were considered discrete elements of the processes of knowing into the integrated dialectics of the ecology of knowing in a world made increasingly complex through our own doing.

Visual journalism offers a form of virtual living through which we experience worlds beyond our own. The people portrayed in images of photojournalism are, in some ways, our avatars, offering journeys to spaces and moments about which we might wonder but never actually visit. And actual virtual and augmented realities inform our understanding of why we are drawn to the real. Through the frame, screen and headsets we enter a timeless world of the other by taking on the other’s image self—how else can we understand what we see unless we have some memory, some frame of reference for empathy, myth, understanding?

THE LITERATURE

The literature of visual ethics derives from several strains of thought: (1) the physical sciences, which include principles of physics and biology; (2) the social sciences, which include principles of observation, interaction and annotation; and (3) the hermeneutical traditions of philosophy, exploration of discourse practices, artistic expression, and introspection.

Through the physical sciences, we came to understand the properties of energy, particularly the behavior of light as it passes through space, and refracts through and reflects off objects. Our study of the unique behaviors linking observation and being observed originate in the physical responses of atoms and their parts, and emanate outward to include reflexive humans whose behaviors shift when observed by other human eyes as well as by the mechanical eye of the camera (Milgram, 1977a, 1977b).

Through the social sciences, we came to understand the properties of human interaction, particularly the desires for preservation and connection that drive our voyeurism, observational
imperative, exoticization of the other, stereotyping, preoccupation with self, and empathic expression of love and hate, joy and sorrow.

Through hermeneutics, we employ dialogue, letters, journals, art, dance, theater, mass and personal media, in the discovery of self through interaction with others, presentation of self through performance, and the self’s interaction with self.

For the origins of photojournalism as a specific field, we might look to the 1930s documentary movement promulgated by the U.S. Farm Security Administration, to the picture magazines originating in Europe and then proliferating in the United States, then to the 1960s when photojournalism became part of journalism curricula and blossomed in newspapers as editors learned the readership value of pictures. For ideological exploration of photojournalism, we can look to the decade of the 1970s, which generated Stuart Hall’s (1973) exploration of the news photograph, Susan Sontag’s (1973) articulation of photography as aggressor, Tuchman’s (1978) characterization of news as constructed event, Foucault’s (1977) application of panopticism, and such movements in anthropology and sociology as Harper’s (1979, 1981) assertion that social science photographers must earn the ethical right to photograph.

Early work in photojournalism ethics focused on both process and meaning. One of the earliest studies, Emily Nottingham’s (1978) ethnographic investigation of subject feelings during a photographic event, laid the groundwork for Newton’s qualitative (1983) and quantitative (1991) examinations of the influence of photographers’ behavior on how people felt about being photographed. On the other side of the process continuum is research exploring what editors and photographers think about various practices in photojournalism. Craig Hartley (1981) conducted what may be the first study of such practices as setting up a scene or photographing the victim of a wreck. Sheila Reaves (1995a, 1995b) moved the research discussion into the digital arena with her seminal explorations of the differences between newspaper and magazine editors’ views on the ethics of altering images.


The last twenty-plus years have seen an explosion of scholarship about the visual, an indication of increased recognition of the prominence of visual forms of communication in contemporary life. Among the most important works are Barbie Zelizer’s (1998) explorations of the influence of photojournalism archives on what and how we remember such events as the Holocaust and David Perlmutter’s (1998) work on the use of photojournalism images in international politics. Lester (1996) and then Ross and Lester (2011) contributed significantly to our understanding of the potential harms of stereotyping people in media images. Tom Wheeler (2002) explicated the concepts of phototruth and photographic fiction in the digital age and outlined his theory of viewer expectations of reality. Gross, Katz, and Ruby edited a second book, Image Ethics in the Digital Age in 2003. Newton’s (2001, 2005a, 2005b; 2020) work on visual ethics and a typology of visual behavior outlined a theory and method for analyzing intersections of ethical issues arising through the creation, dissemination and viewing of photographs of people. Lester

THE INTERSECTIONS OF BEHAVIORS, TECHNOLOGIES, AND IDEOLOGIES

In photography, truth is an ideology, an encoding of information deemed authentic within a frame according to conventions of professional practice (sharp, well exposed, not set up, not digitally manipulated). Yet truth in photojournalism is more about the mindfulness of the seer than the neutrality of a mechanistic technology. Truth in pictures is about truth in self, the search for moments of empathy as gateways to moments of revelation about the story of the self. Here seer and self may be photographer, subject, viewer; each is interchangeable. Yet each is different—never the same. Applying Foucault (1988), we might say that photojournalism is a “technology of the self,” a tool for excavating society and culture for the bones of truth about the “history of the present.”

It is here that technology, behavior, and ideology come together. Life itself is energy; self is energy; light is energy. Whether recorded by gelatin silver granules or by a sensor that converts light into digital bits, energy is at play. Laura Marks (1999) argues that this is enough to maintain the organic correspondence so long valued in photography and used as the justification for photography’s ability to record “truth.”

Yet it is more complicated than that, as we know. Let’s take an example, a set of front-page images published by The Oregonian, winner of eight Pulitzer Prizes.

On April 2, 2003, The Oregonian published a front page (see Figure 9.2) featuring a photograph of a grieving Iraqi father kneeling beside the wooden coffins of his children. By itself, the photograph evokes empathy, engendering a feeling of connection between viewer and subject: one of the greatest—if not the greatest—losses a human can face is the death of one’s child. For two weeks before the publication of the photograph, Oregonian editors had selected photographs showing U.S. soldiers in battle in the relatively new war in Iraq (Randy Cox, 2003).

That night, after the front page had already been designed, another story from Iraq broke. Missing POW Jessica Lynch had been rescued. With the early deadline for statewide delivery upon them, The Oregonian editors quickly rebuilt a section of the front page to run the Lynch rescue story as an off-lead on the top left side of the page (see Figure 9.2).

Many Oregonians who received the paper that morning were not pleased with the page design that gave more prominence to a photograph of an Iraqi than to the photograph and accompanying story about Lynch. Readers communicated their negative responses by canceling subscriptions and calling editors to accuse them of being unpatriotic and caring more about Iraqis than U.S. soldiers. By the time the noon April 2 edition of The Oregonian hit the Portland streets, editors had had time to redesign the front page to feature a large photo of the rescued Jessica Lynch (see Figure 9.3).

What had transpired? Both photographs were true and it is likely that each was selected for front-page, above-the-fold display because of its news value and visual appeal. To some readers, however, the photographs and page designs connoted more than visual reports of news events. Consider a set of possible interpretations of how the images were used. The photograph of the grieving Iraqi father made clear that the war was harming the innocent; it also focused attention on the “enemy” rather than on U.S. troops. The photograph of Corporal Lynch affirmed U.S. military prowess by portraying a female soldier as a heroine rescued from the enemy by U.S. heroes. The first photograph proclaimed the injustice of war on citizens who happen to get in its
way, visually reporting a negative aspect of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The large photograph of a rescued Corporal Lynch affirmed U.S. ability “to make things turn out all right” in the face of an enemy who had captured and perhaps tortured (we learned later how Iraqi medical personnel had helped save Corporal Lynch) a young U.S. woman who had entered the military to get an education.

FIGURE 9.2 The Oregonian, Sunrise Edition, April 2, 2003. Used with permission
The photographs were of real people and real events. Yet each came out of and entered into discourses of individual differences, national identity, and international disagreement. One could be read as about loss of innocence, the other as about recovered pride and vindication. Each photograph was contextualized by the front-page design of headlines and text within a newspaper frame—and by the perceptions and biases of reader/viewers.
The next day, April 3, *Oregonian* page 1 editors returned to visual content that was similar to the content they had published for two weeks preceding the breaking of the Lynch story. In Figure 9.4, we see the story of the War in Iraq as it was most acceptable to many U.S. readers/viewers in 2003: U.S. troops marching on Baghdad as fighters for freedom and national security.

CONCLUSION

The prevailing culture of visual journalism, coupled with humans’ perceptual propensity for believing—without reflection—that what looks real is real, confound our understanding of the real.

In other words, the very nature of being photographic was a good enough reason for all of us to consider the photograph as a reliable witness of events in our daily life…. However, upon closer inspection and scrutiny, we start to find all sorts of loopholes that bring up a high degree of doubt to this otherwise empirical comparison between the photograph and reality.

(Meyer, 2002)

Mexican photographer Pedro Meyer (1995) is known for images he constructs, through digital processes, to be “true fictions.” He believes that the digital process facilitates his ability to communicate truths that are truer than the original images alone. In this way, he calls attention to and makes use of the all-too-real human perceptual principle known as the Gestalt. Formulated by early 20th-century psychologists, the principle asserts the now-classic idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. One way to apply this principle is to consider how different a room looks when we remove one item—a piece of furniture, a painting, a window. The great *Life* magazine picture editor Wilson Hicks articulated the principle in regard to journalism when he noted that putting a picture and words together communicated meaning beyond what either the picture or words alone communicated. To envision this “third effect,” try covering up the main headline in one of the sample pages from *The Oregonian*. What if, instead of “U.S. Forces Sweep Past Republican Guard Units,” the headline had read, “U.S. Forces Find Lynch in Care of Iraqi Physician”? Or change “Troops Close on Baghdad” to “Troops May Kill Thousands.” The content of the images has not changed, but the way our minds perceive and use them to make meaning from the combination of words and images changes dramatically.

When the Gestalt principle is applied through digital manipulation (for example, envision changing Lynch’s smile to a sob), the content of the image itself is changed. In art, such as with Meyer’s work, the act is considered ethical because the artist seeks to express truths for which there may be no real-world referent. In photojournalism, however, the act is decidedly unethical. Why? Because we expect an image produced and disseminated through journalistic processes to be exactly like the real world. If the image looks real, it should be real. Yet we know that photographers, subjects, editors, and viewers can mislead, deceive, and even lie with images just as they can with words. Intention is sometimes conscious, sometimes not. Subjects can pose in a certain manner (such as President Bush did when declaring victory in Iraq), photographers can frame a nonrepresentative part of a scene or use photographic techniques to blur or freeze action, editors can select a nonrepresentative but highly appealing image to report a story, designers can place an image next to words that anchor its meaning erroneously, and viewers can misread (or ignore) the content of an image to support preconceived or even nonconscious ideas about reality.

Photojournalism organizations, such as the National Press Photographers Association (2019), have enacted codes of ethics to guide the professional practice of photojournalism. However, the
burden of visual truth must be carried by all those who make and consume images of visual journalism—not just the professionals who make the images (Newton, 2001). This assertion is idealistic but worth pursuing through education about the ways images communicate. Although we cannot pause to consciously analyze every image or everything we see, we can occasionally pause to consider the ethical complexity of image making and visual perception. Over time, we can increase our awareness of ethical concerns, as well as our visualcy (Newton, 2018).
I want to conclude this synopsis of photojournalism’s relationship to reality, to technology, to truth, and to contemporary culture through ideological discourse by exploring the idea of “reasonable truth,” the best information a human can discern, given the variables of perception, behavior, culture and institutional practices that affect all understanding between humans (Newton, 2001).

The call to continue the search for a reasonable truth through whatever means available to us is idealistic. It is grounded in Christians’ (2005) universal ethics based in the core principle that all life is sacred: “Human beings resonate cross-culturally through their moral imagination with one another. Our mutual humanness is actually an ethical commitment rooted in the moral domains all humans share” (p. 9). Christians writes:

In the process of invigorating our moral imagination, the ethical media worldwide enable readers and viewers to resonate with other human beings who also struggle in their consciences with human values of a similar sort. Media professionals have enormous opportunities for putting universal protonorms to work—such as the sacredness of life—and enlarging our understanding of what it means to be human.

(p. 12)

Christians’ universal ethics is supported by a growing group of scientists, exemplified by Michael Gazzaniga (2005), who writes:

I am convinced that we must commit ourselves to the view that a universal ethics is possible, and that we ought to seek to understand it and define it. It is a staggering idea, and one that on casual thought seems preposterous. Yet there is no way out. We now understand how tendentious our beliefs about the world and the nature of human experience truly are, and how dependent we have become on tales from the past. At some level we all know this. At the same time, our species wants to believe in something, some natural order, and it is the job of modern science to help figure out how that order should be characterized.

(p. 178)

Notably, in his tour de force Media Ethics and Global Justice in the Digital Age (2019), Christians explicates a comprehensive theory based on three principles: truth, human dignity and nonviolence: “Thus, the ethics of global justice in ontological; it is a communication ethics of being that takes seriously a human-centered philosophy of technology” (p. 31). In a time often labelled the “post-truth era,” could any theory be more salient? Truth, he writes, “needs to be located in human existence” (p. 183) and is “best understood” as the Greek concept of “aletheia: uncovering the authentic, disclosing the genuine underneath” (p. 159). By intuition and learned practice, the best photojournalists seek to show the world to itself through authentic, human-centered images with the goal of facilitating understanding and peaceful interaction.

I believe photojournalism—reporting through images—plays a crucial role, along with education, philosophy, art, and science, in helping humankind determine how best to live together in coming centuries. As the great photojournalist Gordon Parks once wrote, “My eyes only act as conduits for my heart” (inscription on photograph).

This chapter has explored photojournalism ethics by journeying through human visual history toward building a broader theory of visual ethics. I have sought to extend understanding of photojournalism beyond political or economic interpretations of media—big or small—toward core human behaviors of seeing, knowing, communicating, and living.
We need more research about these behaviors to ground our professional practices and consumption of photojournalism images. Psychologist Paul Slovic (2007), for example, has determined that viewers respond with more empathy to images of one suffering person than to images of many suffering people. This is in keeping with Christians’ (2005) articulation of the need to resolve one/many issues by considering “the many as being reconstituted into the one” (p. 11). Journalism has a long tradition of “humanizing” stories by focusing on individuals. In photojournalism, the “Day in the Life Of” story comes to mind.

We also need more research about the current trend toward participatory visual journalism. As Maria Puente (2007) wrote for USA Today: “Oh, for the good old days when all we worried about was Big Brother government watching us. Too late: Now we have Little Brother to contend with, too—and he has a camera phone.” Interestingly, the teaser for the article read, “Cell phone cameras continue to haunt both celebs and Ordinary Joes. Can morals keep pace with technology?” USA Today posed these “quick questions” to its online readers: “Will citizen outrage eventually quell the use of cell phone cameras in public?” Possible answers were: “Yes, boredom and social conventions will set in,” or “No, this is only the tip of the iceberg.” Clearly, the latter has proven to be true.

One relatively early example of smart-phone visual reporting is the allegedly unauthorized video of Saddam Hussein dangling from the executioner’s rope. Many people decried the posting of the video on the Internet. But we can look at the issue as a photojournalist would: without the crude video, most of us would still have little recourse but to accept the official description of Hussein’s execution as dignified and orderly. In other words, we might have believed the official lie. Regardless of whether we think it ethical to show the video to the public, we needed the visual evidence in order to know what happened. More recently, and horribly, people have been invited to witness suicides and massacres via streaming video.

The concerns of those who fear we can no longer use photography or video as evidence are valid. Ethicists and practitioners alike predicted the demise of visual truth when it became possible to digitally alter a photograph in seemingly imperceptible ways. Although we have been able to lie visually as long as we have been conscious, new technologies are taking us to levels of deception that threaten not only our perceptions of truth but also how we live. Digital forensics expert Hany Farid (2018) writes:

> While issues of digital authentication and verification have always been important, we have entered a new age in which the implications of digital fakery are impacting everything from our trust in news and democratic elections, to threatening the lives of our citizens. (p. 269)

Farid calls for “immediate and aggressive action” from the scientific community:

> The responsibility for reining in these abuses falls on us as a scientific community, funding agencies, the social media giants, and legislative bodies. The past few years have given us a glimpse into the consequences of what happens when these issues are left unchecked and so it is with some urgency that we as a community and society should be addressing these pressing problems. (p. 269)

Viewers of news images can develop their critical observation abilities to interpret what they see with increased clarity. They also might want to embrace serious photojournalism’s creative vision, its selective construction of news stories, its carefully crafted construction of features. Visual journalists edit and compile their “findings” just as word journalists record,
select, and edit quotes, facts, and descriptions. Yet a core problem is that visual journalists—and viewers of visual news—continue to reject the constructionist nature of visual reporting for fear of delegitimizing its authority. When we stop to think about it, we so distrust the visual (yet we cannot help but trust our eyes) that we cannot fathom trusting anything other than what we think we see directly with our own eyes. Yet we face the paradox that 1) we know that our vision is subject to limits (to borrow from Schopenhauer), and 2) to be fully aware citizens of this diverse globe of ours, we need the eyes of others. Consider, for example, that no amount of carefully selected words can make visible the invisible in the manner evoked by pictures. Photojournalism confronts us with the ambiguities of seeing—indeed with the ambiguity of truth and the processes of knowing.

When we look—really look—into the image in Figure 9.2 of the Iraqi father mourning the deaths of his children, we are confronted by the self we see in the other, and we cringe at the pain we sense and at the need to acknowledge our own complicity in the father’s suffering. In her provocative book *Vision’s Invisibles* (2003), philosopher Véronique Fóti (2003) explores the complexities of seeing external forms versus knowing internal realities:

There really is no antithesis between philosophy’s fascination with dimensions of invisibility, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a cherishing of visuality and sensuous presencing. Their traditional but artificial opposition only abets the impoverishment of sight. If both are to be optimally realized, their opposition needs to be crossed out to allow one to understand them more meaningfully and to bring them into an intimate reciprocity. (p. 8)

Fóti draws on Aristotle and Heidegger to reassert that perceiving is knowing: “envisagement is [author’s italics] already understanding …” (p. 104). She cautions, however, that vision “is historically and culturally formed and also has its critical powers, which give it the possibility of education, refinement, and transformation” (p. 104). Fóti further invokes an active, “compassionate vision” that is “unconcerned with self.” This compassionate vision is “indissociable from what in Buddhist thought is called ‘all-accomplishing wisdom’ (a wisdom fully realized only by enlightened awareness)” or, in Judeo-Christian thought, “a compassion so intolerant of the sight of suffering as to find the power even to restore a dead man to life” (p. 104).

We know, from our history on this planet, that humans need guidelines (and laws) for behavior. Humans make those guidelines, too—and they violate them. The answers to the ethical challenges brought to bear via technologies are found in the hearts and minds of human beings.

We have come a long way, as the saying goes, in understanding the complex natures of truth and reality. We may not have satisfactory definitions for either concept, but we can appreciate both their complexity and their centrality to living the ethics-grounded life. Given this desire to understand truth and reality, addressing ethical concerns about the role of photojournalism and its multiple technological forms in contemporary culture is easily mired in confusion about the origins and uses of images of photojournalism.

To get at the ethical core of photojournalism, I have focused on three themes: photojournalism as human behavior, photojournalism as technologically based practice, and photojournalism as ideology. Some would argue that one cannot simultaneously ground a theory of ethics in theories of self-construction and universal values. Christians (2019) explores this conundrum beautifully. My goal with this chapter was to demonstrate the value of both/and thinking in regard to self and other, the particular and the universal, and practices—such as photojournalism—that both articulate and evoke on their way to helping us determine reasonable truths for living.
REFERENCES


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