The Fourth Estate and its Side Effects

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CJN 352: Visual and Global Contexts
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April 27, 2021
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Photojournalists often capture the present in such detail that words fail to accomplish. They are the eyes to the ears that is the fourth estate, the watchdogs of democracy. The presence of a photographer practicing journalistic ethics provides credible testimony to complex conflicts. However, the field of photojournalism is anything but flawless. Photojournalists make massive contributions to society, but the field as a whole is riddled with complex issues of morality which consequently result in issues of human rights.

Perhaps the most compelling feature of photojournalism is its documentation of history. The photographs verify and refute historical claims and capture the moments to hold society accountable for its actions. Photographs of concentration camps exist in glaring contrast to Holocaust deniers. They document the violent racial oppression America would have erased if they could. They show the grandfathers and grandmothers of today sitting beside Dorothy Counts and jeering at her Black skin in their white school. Photojournalists captured the shocking moment Lee Harvey Oswald was assassinated. They conveyed the animosity of the men trying to knock down a forbidden woman running the Boston Marathon. The photographs of these events serve as testimony to the oppression of women and minorities and nullify denial.
Surely photojournalists enter the field without meaning to cause harm. Most hope that their photographs contribute to good in society, like the famous photographs aforementioned. As representatives of what many refer to as the “fourth estate,” they have a responsibility to monitor local democracy and alert their civic constituents of any violations. This liability extends outside of politics; people rely on photojournalists to be their eyes, to provide visual proof for claims insubstantial with words alone.

Unfortunately, the public rarely scrutinizes these images for bias. They take the picture to be the truth, even though it shows only one perspective. Consequently, the public may not even realize when they are being manipulated by a political or ideological narrative.

Despite the common idea that photos are accurate in the truth, they work to show the veracity people are seeking is nonexistent; truth to one witness may not be the same truth to another. Not only does the photojournalist’s lone perspective taint the photograph’s objectivity, but the viewer’s prejudices also permeate their point of view.

In a study titled *The Visual Image and the Political Image: A Review of Visual Communication Research in the Field of Political Communication*, author Dan Schill urges viewers to take care not to overlook visual symbology. “Images do not function independently; rather, they tap into existing cultural and historical knowledge within the audience and typically operate in conjunction with linguistic or textual arguments.” (Schill, 2012). Schill informs that the information offered through the photographs, especially concerning gender or ethnicity, may work to alter the viewer’s judgments on the represented matter. However, research suggests that the “emotionality of visuals” does not effect on the rational or logical process of the viewer (Schill, 2012). Meaning the implications of a certain photograph aren’t entirely the
photojournalist’s responsibility; the viewer’s preconceived notions are essential to their take-away from an image.

A major ethical issue in photojournalism is that participants in the field benefit from what is usually the exploitation of minorities. Firefighters also profit from tragedy. However, they do not make more money with every fire, nor does any particular fire promise them fame and fortune. On the other hand, photojournalists are highly enticed by the fame and recognition that comes with prestigious and monetary awards. If played correctly, one crucial photograph has the potential to change a scarcely-paid photojournalist’s life. As a result, the suffering of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, & People of Color) communities around the world is compounded by additional exploitation. Chances are, the subjects did not consent to be photographed and are not being paid for it either. Instead, their struggles are put on display for the descendants of their oppressors, who revel in their pathos for those less fortunate. Meanwhile, the photojournalist who took the photo profits immensely.

A jarring example of the stark contrast between the fate of the photographer and their subject is seen in the tragic story of Edward Crawford. In an article about photojournalist Robert Cohen, author Chuck Baldwin paints his interviewee as a war hero for his award-winning photographs. Cohen was witness to tense protests in Missouri following the police murder of Michael Brown in 2014. There, he captured a powerful image of Edward Crawford, emblazoned with a shirt of the American flag throwing a tear-gas canister back at police. In the interview, Cohen prides himself on “cover[ing] their community” (Baldwin, 2016). The article is featured on the Pulitzer-Prize website, as Cohen received the distinguished award for his renowned photograph.
The prize is not solely symbolic but accompanied by $10,000 (it has since been raised to $15,000 as of 2017).

Cohen very clearly profited from this endeavor, gaining wealth and notoriety. The subject, however, was not as lucky. In 2017, Crawford was found in his car, dead from a gunshot wound. Despite being ruled as self-inflicted, the death raised suspicion alongside the deaths of other leading Black Lives Matter activists. Learning from the fate of their fallen peers, modern activists cover their faces to obscure their identities. In a 2020 article titled *The Implicit Bias in Photojournalism*, *DAME Magazine* journalist Sadatu Futa assesses these facts in the context of worldwide BLM protests. She urges photojournalists to act responsibly: “We are living in historical times, and it is of course expected that many will flock to capture it...this moment presents an opportunity to use the power of [the photographers’] lens to create a historical record.” (Futa, 2020).

The power lies in the photojournalists’ coverage of protesters. Cohen’s photograph identified Crawford and likely led to his death. Futa urges photojournalists to work alongside activists, for “powerful institutions that violate and infringe on the rights of the people, inevitably extend that abuse of power towards journalists.” (Futa, 2020). The author argues that to accomplish this, photojournalists should cease documenting protesters and instead focus on the object of their grievances. Otherwise, they are contributing to the “surveillance” of individuals exercising their First Amendment rights, consequently infringing on the civil rights they attempt to protect.

In conclusion, Edward Crawford’s freedom of assembly was co-opted by Cohen’s freedom of the press. Cohen profited immensely while Crawford suffered
disproportionately. This is a very clear example of just one of the ways photojournalists profit off of the exploitation of marginalized people.

The evidence of prize-winning photographs provides ample proof for the claim of exploitation. Greenwood and Smith’s 2007 study of award-winning photographs from 1943 — 2003 indicts the field as quasi-colonist. Imperial western society snatched native land, ravaged it, enslaved its people, and centuries later its descendants returned to photograph the results of their terrorism. The study is titled How the World Looks To Us and assessed the winning photographs of Picture of the Year International and the Pulitzer Prize over the past several decades. The purpose was to identify the most common categories of winning photographs. Results determined that “war and coup is the visual theme most often represented in both studies of award-winning news photographs” (Greenwood & Smith, 2007). The authors concede that capturing a single image of conflict is certainly easier than encompassing cultural changes within developing nations within a single image. The study concludes with a call to action for a shift away from episodic representations of regions and invests in long-term coverage. To accomplish this, Greenwood and Smith urge publications to allocate resources to allow their photojournalists to cover a region or conflict over time to accurately represent it.

As Futa justly declares in her article for DAME Magazine, “in order to move beyond the single story, we must acknowledge that photography is a field dominated by classed white men” (Futa, 2020). This recognition is necessary in the effort to repair the field and make it a safe space for both BIPOC photographers and their subjects. It is imperative for journalists today to eradicate the “colonist mindset” from their projects.
so they can accurately and respectfully depict international life because their work culminates in the West’s perspective of the developing world.

