Assoc. Prof. Dr. & Dr. Honoris Causa

Sabahudin Hadžialić

**Media ethics in professional journalism:**

The case of Kevin Karter

Allow me to tell you, please, a story which brought us to the mentioned conclusions through the conflict – professionalism and ethics: About human responsibility of the journalist talks in hard and dramatic way also a life story of Kevin Carter – photo journalist who committed suicide back in 1994.

* *Pulitzer price and ethics*
* *Boomerang effect vs. strong ethical standards*
* *Different kind of risks for professional journalist work*

His story shows that must be ethical limits in documentary photography. In March 1993 Kevin Carter made a trip to Sudan. Near the village of Ayod, Carter found a girl who had stopped to rest while struggling to a United Nations feeding centre, whereupon a vulture had landed nearby. Careful not to disturb the bird, he waited for twenty minutes until the vulture was close enough, positioned himself for the best possible image and only then chased the vulture away. At this point Carter was probably not yet aware that he had shot one of the most –or even the most- controversial photographs in the history of photojournalism.

The photograph was sold to The New York Times where it appeared for the first time on March 26, 1993. Practically overnight hundreds of people contacted the newspaper to ask whether the child had survived, leading the newspaper to run a special editor's note saying the girl had enough strength to walk away from the vulture, but that her ultimate fate was unknown. On April 2, 1994 Nancy Buirski, a foreign New York Times picture editor, phoned Carter to inform him he had been awarded with the most coveted prize for photojournalism; the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography.

As with many dramatic photographs, Carter came under criticism for this shot. He was blamed for just photographing — and not helping — the little girl. The St. Petersburg Times in Florida 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”. The attitude that public opinion condemned was not only that of taking the picture instead of chasing the vulture immediately away, but also the fact that he did not help the girl afterwards –as Carter explained later- leaving her in such a weak condition to continue the march by herself towards the feeding centre. Carter committed suicide two years after receiving the Pulitzer Prize.

To ethically judge Carter’s attitude, we can start by discoursing the elements that should conform an initial ethical code for both photojournalist and documentary practitioners. As a starting point, we could say that these photographers should engage with ethics in four ways:

1. The ethical position in the discourse of their photograph
2. The aesthetic representation of such ethical position
3. The ethical practice in the production of their photographs
4. The way in which their work is displayed and presented to the public.

In first place, when it comes to judging the ethical position on the discourse of the photograph is something that must be analysed together with what it is or not accepted as a valid moral content for the vast majority of the photograph’s spectators. In general terms, what the public opinion usually expects from photojournalism –concretely when dealing with human suffering- is that of condemning the absence or violation of Human Rights. In this sense, we could say that the discourse of Carter’s photograph followed this request by he book. He was clearly condemning the absence of Human Rights in his photograph –concretely its article 25th on the Right to a Standard of Living adequate for their health and wellbeing-. But condemning here also means the fact of showing certain “compassion”, -as Susan Sontag demands through her critical analysis in On Photography- for the concrete person’s suffering. Though its very hard to judge whether a photograph shows or not compassion –for Sontag for example this can be achieved by placing a caption that concretes in time and space the subject matter- the truth is that after Carter’s explanation about what he had done before and after the actual shooting, it was understood that he acted with no compassion at all towards the girl.

In terms of the aesthetic representation of the photograph, what is requested in this case from the photojournalist in order to act ethically would be to show reality as it is, that is, to show the truth without manipulation. In a world leaded by the media information, it is essential that society can be put into a position to trust the media; to believe that what it’s been shown and told corresponds to reality, so that a reaction against such reality could be properly achieved. In this sense, Carter did not interfere in the scene in an active way, though he did passively, as he forced reality to become even more visually tragic by waiting for the vulture to come as close as possible to the girl. The public opinion could easily perceive such a lack of humanity. When one sees the photograph the first thing, we think about is to grab the girl and take her immediately away from the vulture’s talons. As he did not, the aesthetical representation became a violation of Human Rights in itself.

When it comes to the ethical way in the production of the image, the photographer should then act with respect for “the other”, following not only the law –as it won’t even apply in most circumstances due to the territorial aspect in its application- but a personal moral attitude towards the respect for the human being, their work and their culture. This could be stated as: “before the person and only, then, the photograph”. And it is precisely here where Carter made the biggest mistake. The critics arisen on his lack of humanity reside mainly in his failure to follow this point of the ethical code. Not only did he put the photograph before the girl’s safety by letting the vulture come closer to her, but furthermore, he was happy enough with the shot and he did not help the girl after taking it. What he understood as a “professional duty” had ended for him in that exact moment. For Carter it was the photograph that had more importance that the actual girl’s fate.

Finally, the way in which the work is displayed and presented to the public is also crucial to judge whether the practitioner’s attitude was or not ethical. If the aim of photojournalism and documentary photographers is that of “creatively inform” society about current issues and condemn certain attitudes that could conform the absence or violation of Human Rights, it would be their duty then to try and communicate such a reality to the largest group of spectators as possible, trying not to turn the subject matter into something banal due to an inappropriate way of showing the work. In this sense, Carter’s photograph was presented in the front page of one of the most popular US newspapers, The New York Times, and then reproduced in hundreds of them worldwide. This fact placed the work into a generally accepted ethical path for presenting it, as it achieved the request to show it to the largest group of spectators as possible, in order to widely condemn African children’s living circumstances. But probably what the public opinion did not agree with after they knew Canter’s attitude during the shooting, was the fact that he had been awarded with the Pulitzer Prize; he seemed to be rewarded on despite of his lack of humanity and that fact placed as well the Pulitzer Award itself into the ethical debate. Though it was not Carter’s fault to be awarded for this shot –in fact he said after a while that he did not deserve it, that he hated the photograph and could no more look at it- the truth is that with this prize photojournalism and its morality was once again put into question. This award was meant to reward the work of the best photojournalist of the year and if such a leading institution considered that the actual photograph had more importance than the human being depicted in it, then the aim of photojournalism had no sense anymore. The Pulitzer Prize became banal, it turned Carter’s subject matter into something banal and with it, it placed photojournalism into an even more critical position in terms of its ethical debate.

It seems then that Carter failed, in one way or the other, through all points of the ethical code proposed. But what from my point of view conforms the most surprising aspects in this debate is the fact that he explained the real circumstances once the photograph was published. In fact, he had no need to tell that he had waited twenty minutes for the vulture to come close enough to the struggling girl and probably no one would have ever found out the truth. Neither he needed to say that, instead of helping the little girl in her way to the feeding centre, he sat under a shade and smoked a cigarette after making the photograph. What was it that made Carter put himself in such a conflictive position? Only he knows. But we must say then in his favour that his sincere response to the critics made him at least recover part of his initial lack of humanity. Whether he did the wrong thing or not when making the photograph, he was truthful to society and to himself. From a lot of points of view, he was dignified again since he recognised his guilty, but unluckily for him, we won’t be remembered for that.

Before dying of carbon monoxide poisoning, Cater wrote a note in where he explained the reasons for committing suicide: “*I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings and corpses and anger and pain ... of starving or wounded children, of trigger-happy madmen, of killer executioners*”. Carter did not kill himself only because of the controversy arisen after this shot –though most sensationalist press like to say so- but because he had seen far too much suffering during his whole career and could not cope any longer with living with all these memories. Whether or not he did the wrong thing when photographing the struggling girl in Sudan, the truth is that Kevin Carter gave his whole life for the sake of information. He communicated reality in the most truthful way, hoping to make a change by increasing society’s awareness of the world’s injustice. No one said that dealing with human suffering was easy and it should be understandable that one could lose the sense of what is moral or not after witnessing the world’s worst human tragedies. From my point of view –and probably for Carter too- it is a pity that the photograph will only be remembered for its ethical controversy and not for what for the human tragedy it depicts.

According to Eduard Steichen “The mission of photography is to explain man to man and each man to himself”. If this statement can be taken as certain, then [Kevin Carter’s photograph](https://vimeo.com/193943815) fulfilled such a mission.

*Ethical questions for the professional journalism within the world of reality & Photojournalism as educational tool*

The discipline of journalism ethics developed with a focus on professional ethics – on the values, guiding principles, and codes of the journalism profession. During the last 35 years, questions have revolved around who journalists should be and what those journalists should do, and these questions have almost always considered journalism in a particular situated context. Today, however, foundations are being reimagined: first, by ethicists who contend that we need a global media ethics, which transcends the limitations of place, and, second, by ethicists who advocate for a return to a common morality that focuses on our general moral commitments and our obligations as human beings, rather than our particular role-related responsibilities as journalists. All of this leaves journalism ethics in an interesting theoretical place. What is the proper way – or ways – forward to best understand the influences on journalism ethics? And once that is established, what is the proper way – or ways – forward to make normative claims about fostering the most ethically justifiable practice of journalism?

As media ethicists grapple with these questions, they are constantly reminded that the questions are not only abstract and theoretical. Real life intervenes – sometimes with examples of ethically praiseworthy behaviour, the kind that makes us proud to be associated with journalism. We can’t ignore that journalists and journalism organisations do good work every day. On the other hand, the reason that media ethicists have steady jobs is that the examples we would call ethically praiseworthy are often overshadowed by examples of another kind – behaviour that makes those ethicists and their journalist colleagues cringe. What’s more, these behaviours are what tend to attract the public’s attention. Even if news people and news organisations act daily to serve the public’s best interest, that public notices when something goes wrong. It is one of these examples – the phone hacking scandal in the UK into the culture, practice, and ethics of the press – that serves as the origin for this kind of lessons.

A number of themes serve as threads that connect the individual efforts of professional journalists and help make sense of the multiple ideas presented by all of them around the world:

* **Both the descriptive and normative realms matter. Typically**, scholarship in journalism ethics falls into two categories: (1) work that describes the ethical landscape and helps make sense of it; (2) work that enters the normative realm by prescribing ethical values, principles, standards, and behaviours. Both approaches are useful; clearly, we must understand before we can recommend. Some journalists reside in the realm of the descriptive, establishing the landscape of journalism ethics and building the all-important foundations. Others make the move to the normative, offering prescriptions aimed at making journalism better.
* **Theory and practice can and should intersect.** Moral philosophy serves as the theoretical underpinning of much scholarly work in journalism ethics. Unless that theory can connect to practice, however, the work is merely an academic exercise. Several different ways of journalistic approach address how theory can – and, normatively speaking, should – inform practice and how practice can and should exemplify theory. In addition, the professional journalists usually stretches beyond moral theory and considers the contributions that other kinds of theory – democratic, legal, organisational – can make to the practice of ethical journalism.
* **The global, digital age affects journalism ethics.** Perhaps the top item on the agenda of media ethicists today is the nature of the global, digital age; a sophisticated discussion of journalism ethics requires consideration of the context in which journalists now work. Journalists should both predict and prescribe, how that use virtual world of internet, how the bases of journalism ethics will and should evolve in today’s global, digital age. New questions arises, as we mentione earlier.
* **International perspectives are crucial.** And should be examined through multiple cultural lenses. Journalists should offer a range of perspectives on the practice of journalism and journalism ethics.
* **Newsrooms are important sites for investigation**. Just a slighet view on it illuminate the strong influences of the newsroom on journalism ethics and journalists, through discussion, should suggests how newsrooms of the future (either real or virtual) can become ethically healthier workplaces.
* **Journalism ethics is individually, institutionally, and culturally based.** Exploration of journalism ethics does not lead to a single influence but rather to multiple influences that work together in complex ways. Journalism ethics is the result of multiple competing and complementary forces.

For example, the distinction between ethics and taste is constantly up for debate, especially in relation to violent or sexual imagery.  While some see sex and violence as issues of taste, others include them under the heading of ethics.

Additionally, photojournalistic ethics might encompass the choices an individual photographer makes while shooting.  For example, should a war photographer put down his cameras in order to help an injured soldier or, as we have seen above, a child?  If someone asks that his or her photo not be taken, is it ethical to photograph that person anyway?  If ethics in photojournalism is about being “faithful and comprehensive,” is intentionally underexposing or poorly focusing unethical?  Some of these questions sit on the line between journalistic ethics and professionalism.

Also, we cannot forget Media Ethics in digital age because digital technologies raise a host of thorny and troubling ethical challenges for journalists and media practitioners, whether professional or citizen.

Plagiarism has become an often-accepted practice and international cultural norm due at least in part to the ease and temptation of copying online sources.

Digitally altering images or video is common in advertising and sometimes in news. Is it ever really okay from an ethics point of view?

Using anonymous sources is frequently an accepted practice in journalism.  When is it okay, if ever?

[Omnidirectional](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/omnidirectional) imaging is more than science fiction.  Is it the all-seeing "Panopticon"?

[WikiLeaks](https://wikileaks.org/)and the transparency of public records have changed how the public understands government, the military and big business around the world.  Is this a threat to national security or an ethical dilemma for journalists who write stories based on the data these records contain?

Artificial intelligence and computerized newswriting are commercial realities.  Do they pass the Turing Test (a definition of human-level intelligence)?  What about a test of ethics?

Social media, Web-cams and privacy are part of citizens' daily lives.  Can society protect civility in the digital, networked age?

Conducting interviews via e-mail is increasingly easy and common practice in journalism, but does it cross a line ethically for journalists?  What if the source asks the reporter to e-mail any quotes for pre-publication review…just for the sake of "accuracy"?

Journalism codes help provide guidance but may be inadequate in specific circumstances, or need updating in the face of rapidly changing technology.  For instance, the emerging technology known as three-dimensional (3D) printing may become a tool for storytelling in journalism in the years ahead (e.g., in science or medical reporting), and may have ethical implications for its appropriate use (e.g., when is it appropriate to incorporate a 3D printable object with a story?, how can the veracity of a copied 3D object be authenticated?). Yet, it is not mentioned in the Society of professional journalists or any other journalism ethics codes.  These codes may need to be updated to incorporate the ethical use of 3D printing technology, or other unanticipated emergent technologies (e.g., augmented reality, now in use in a growing number of newspapers and other media) and the new dilemmas they may present.

Seeing is notbelieving.  Image and video manipulation represent another significant error of commission in the digital age.  In perhaps the first dramatic case of digital image manipulation in the media, National Geographic magazine editors in February 1982 digitally moved an image of  the great pyramids of Egypt to obtain a better aspect ratio for the cover of their magazine.  Editors at Time magazine performed a similar digital sleight-of-hand when they published a cover on June 27, 1994 showing a darkened image of a police mug shot of [O. J. Simpson](https://www.apnews.com/0fea103ed1014714a966bd75c475880d).

The alteration of the image might have gone unnoticed except competing weekly newsmagazine Newsweek featured on its cover the same mug shot, but unaltered—on the same day.  Anyone who saw the two covers, especially side by side, immediately recognized that the timecover had been darkened, giving Simpson a more sinister, menacing appearance.

Publishing images, photos, video and audio often involves editing of that content in some fashion, such as simply for length or cropping to fit a screen or other media space.  Many of these simple edits involve no ethical concerns.  In general, the types of digital media manipulations possible include: 1) the addition or subtraction of content; 2) composite imagery or constructed images, where multiple video or still images or their audio equivalents are merged into one seamless image; 3) synthetic images, video or audio, where completely real-looking scenes are created artificially depicting events that might have taken place or that might take place in the future; and 4) animations.  Three-dimensional (3D) printing is rapidly emerging as a commercially viable technology that may soon be available for storytelling in journalism (e.g., a 3D photo could be printed at home), and these same ethical principles should apply.

Most importantly, proefssional journalists should never edit any images, photos, video or audio that results in altering or distorting the meaning of that content.

Ultimately, democracy and society depend on an ethical media system. In the digital age, an increasing portion of the citizenry is actively engaged in that media system as a consumer or producer, whether via news, social media or entertainment.  Each person’s actions, or inactions, are part of a global network and can contribute to making it an ethical digital media system as well. It becomes our real world and less virtual, by all means.

Question to think about: *Is Kevin Carter victim or offender?*

Next: Media ethics in professional journalism: Tolerance as the presumption of media survival

Signature under the photo: Kevin Carter’s most famous photo, The Vulture And The Little Girl.