

Ethical issues in photojournalism

Rrapo Zguri*

Abstract

Photographic cameras are based on the fidelity of the eyes. Consequently, the camera never lies. For many years, media photographers have used this reasoning typology as a shield and justification during early debates regarding the relationship between this visual medium and the objective truth.

Simplifying the theoretical and philosophical analysis, the questions which arise here are: Is photography a mirroring of reality or a kind of visual information which is affected by the subjectivity of its author? What role do beliefs, stereotypes, prejudices, interests, personal standpoints, individual affiliation or tastes of the author of a photograph play in creating the final product?

The following article intends to shed light on the relationship between media photography and the objective truth, focusing on the theoretical debate in this field. The analysis of ethical problems in Albanian photojournalism and the role of media digitalization and Internet in amplifying these problems, occupy a considerable place in the article. After a detailed panoramic view, the conclusions and recommendations that follow will serve for the practice of photojournalism in minimizing ethical violations by building a self-regulatory framework and an effective and transparent editorial policy.

Keywords: visual media, objective truth, interpretation of reality, photojournalism, ethics, mirror photography, window photography, self-regulatory framework, editorial policy

Is photography (including news photography) a true copy or an interpretation of reality? Arthur Berger in "Seeing is believing" is

* Rrapo Zguri, PHD candidate, Department of Journalism and Communication, University of Tirana

categorical in his reply: "A photo is always an interpretation of reality, not reality itself."¹

Most authors dealing with the study of photography are on the same terms with Arthur Berger, when it comes to the relationship between photography and reality. Terence Wright states that "interpretation would seem to be the closest term that can be used to account for our understanding of a photograph."² For Kenneth Cobra "photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression."³

In the course of Albanian journalism and world-wide journalism there are many cases where media pictures, even when they are not manipulated, are affected by the subjectivity of the author. As for Daniel R. Bersak "photojournalistic ethics might encompass the choices an individual photographer makes while shooting."⁴

In Albanian media it is not rare that the same event would be presented in two different views. For example, when taking pictures of a governmental rally, the photographers of a pro-governmental newspaper find a shooting angle which creates the impression that the participation has been very high. On the other hand, the photographers of a pro - opposition newspaper find a shooting angle which creates the impression that the participation has been very low. Although the same event is photographed, the message conveyed through the photograph about the participation in this event is different, often opposite. In other cases, an individual, a statue or a building, photographed from below or more close to the base, may seem gigantic in the photograph, affecting and distorting the real

¹ Arthur Asa Berger, *Seeing is believing: an introduction to visual communication*, McGraw Hill Education, 2007, p. 13

² Terence Wright, *The Photography Handbook*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003, p.6

³ Kenneth Kobre, *Photojournalism: The Professionals' Approach*, Taylor & Francis, 2004, p. 27

⁴ Daniel R. Bersak , *Ethics in Photojournalism: Past, Present, and Future* , Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Comparative Media Studies, 2006, website: <http://web.mit.edu/drj/Public/PhotoThesis/>

view. Creating optical illusions or different perceptions often become part of the political game. This happens because the message conveyed is influenced by personal beliefs and / or editorial policy of the media outlet where the photographer that took the picture works.

Media photography researchers have found that stereotypes and prejudices (which more or less are present in everyone's view) have a big impact on decision-making and the process of photographing.⁵ It often happens that images from different places or events don't reflect reality but they appear to be a reflection of the stereotypes and prejudices of the author of the photograph. There have been cases, for example, when articles about Albania in foreign media are accompanied by photos that show Albanian women belly -dancing or completely covered in veils. In these cases, stereotypes create an image that does not match reality. Fortunately, Albanian media is generally careful in choosing images from other countries, while the opposite rarely happens. However, even in Albanian media images that reflect prejudices in relation to specific ethnic, linguistic, sexual communities, etc. are present.

With the development of technology, a lot of tools or accessories that contribute to the alienation of reality in pictures have emerged. Today's cameras contain a large number of lens or filters through which the appearance of an event can easily be changed or distorted during shooting or filming.

Regarding this situation, Steve Larson, director of photography at *U.S. News & World Report*, says, "Photography is the recording of a real moment. We are making a mistake if we try changing this. We must come to terms with it. This is where the power of photography lies." Decades ago, researchers warned of the damage that photography could bring in the media through deviation from the truth. In his well-known *Needs No Ally: Inside Photojournalism*, Howard Chapnick emphasises, "Credibility. Responsibility. These words give us the right to call photography a profession rather than a business. Not

⁵ Paul Lester, *Photojournalism: An Ethical Approach*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Incorporated, 1991, p. 134

maintaining that credibility will diminish our journalistic impact and self-respect, and the importance of photography as communication.”⁶

Media photography is also accused for recreating reality. During the 1930s, at the time of the Great Depression, USA media professionals were involved in a long debate on the phenomenon known as "scene preparation". The photographers did not capture pictures of the poor or beggars in the streets as they really were, but placed them in specific positions creating an even graver image of the crisis. The debate was subsequently extended between the concepts of "mirror photography" and "window photography", coupled with the relations of photography with reality. In Albanian media photography, the phenomena of recreating reality or "scene preparation" can be noticed in various forms. For example, interviews of well-known people are often associated with pictures of them, not taken in real life but in photographic studios, where they carefully have removed any moles or wrinkles, have matched the color of the make-up tone with the eye shadow color or dress color, etc. And, even worse, these "artistic" photos are often made by the newspapers' or magazines' photographers and published by them along the interviews of these people. We also often encounter cases when politicians or spokesmen, after having prepared the scene and everything themselves, invite photographers to say, "Ready?" (Say cheese, please). So now the scene is ready. Now they can take pictures from scene, as regulated by the political parties.

Ethical problems are observed especially in the "post-production stage", where often, cases of manipulating existing photographs are encountered. In fact manipulation or retouching of photography started earlier in time and was applied even before the era of digitalisation. The well-known case of Abraham Lincoln's photograph, published in a U.S. newspaper at the beginning of the last century, made headlines when it was discovered that in the picture only the head was Lincoln's; the body was taken from another picture and belonged to Senator John C. Calhoun. Particularly in

⁶ Howard Chapnick, *Truth Needs No Ally: Inside Photojournalism*, University of Missouri, 1982, f. 41-42

authoritarian and dictatorial regimes, photo manipulation became a common practice. Manipulated photos of Lenin, Stalin, Enver Hoxha, etc., were countless. But this continues even today, when, often, random, informal meetings of Albanian leaders with foreign dignitaries in hotel corridors are shown by photographers as official meetings.

One of the most sensational cases of manipulation in professional photography in recent years is that of the photographer Brian Walski of *LA Times* in the U.S., who was fired when they revealed that he had published an altered photo from the war in Iraq. This photo was actually a composite of two images he had captured.⁷ (See images below- the picture above is created by mounting the two photos below)



With the digitization of the photography and the emergence of the software for its processing, the possibility for further manipulation increased, and in many cases it is difficult to ascertain. The Internet

⁷ Daniel R. Bersak , *Ethics in Photojournalism: Past, Present, and Future* , Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Department of Comparative Media Studies, 2006, website: <http://web.mit.edu/drb/Public/PhotoThesis/>

itself has expanded the distribution of manipulated photographs. The term "photoshopping" has already entered all languages of the world, even in Albanian, implying alienations or interventions made in photography through the Photoshop program. A lot of digital manipulative operations carried out through computer programs are considered unethical by most codes of ethics of photography in different countries. Here are some of these ethical violations:

- Adding, removing or moving objects in such a way that the context of the event is altered,
- Changing a subject's facial expression, gestures, clothing, body parts or personal accessories,
- Age progression or regression (e.g. adding gray to hair),
- Image retouching that overestimates or underestimates the quality or demand for a product or alters aesthetically the environment
- Using effects or color changes in such a manner that it is unclear whether the effects or color changes were applied through digital editing or were part of the original event that was being covered
- The use of other digital editing procedures in a way that is not misleading as to the events, participants or context,
- Removing of the authenticity elements like watermarks, signatures, stamps and studio names, etc.
- Cropping of an image to exclude its damaged parts, when this procedure alters the context or the objectivity of the event.⁸

Of course, not every type of digital intervention is considered to be a violation of ethics. For example, computer operations related to the improvement or restoration of the objectivity or accuracy of the image not only aren't considered as ethical violations but are recommended to be applied. Such operations are: Color balancing and correction, file optimization, correction of lens distortion, focus adjustments, glare elimination and red eye elimination, overall lightening or darkening, etc. Other permissible operations are: image cropping in a manner that preserves the context of the event, enhancing of an image, or part

⁸ *DigitalCustom Model Ethics Guidelines*, website: <http://digitalcustom.com/howto/mediaguidelines.asp>

of an image, when it serves an investigative purpose, legally-required (or advisable) concealment of a subject's identity, etc.⁹

Other ethical problems of media photography are those related to the violation of privacy. The paparazzi phenomenon was first introduced in Albania after the 90's. While deepening in their tabloidization, Albanian newspapers and magazines expanded their space for gossip news and scandals. Some of ethical problems in relation to privacy that are observed in the Albanian media are: photographing or filming in the private space of public persons, politicians, artists, singers, etc., publishing photos of minors raped or massacred and photos of victims of prostitution, distortion of the image of a person or placing him under a false light, and using the image of an individual for various purposes, etc.

Violation of copyright, publishing of original photos without prior approval and without rewarding the author of the photograph, are also frequent violation cases found in Albanian media. Hunting of the photograph through internet and grabbing by right clicking, have created new ethical problems that require answers and immediate solutions. Obviously the best recommendation in this case, besides strengthening the legislation, would be the application of self-regulation instead of self-destruction. Establishing codes of ethics for media photography and applying regulations for digital photography processing, can help greatly in this regard.

Conclusions

Despite the fact that media photography presents the visual aspect of a scene at a particular moment, it actually remains an interpretation of the reality. It is affected to a large extent by its author's subjectivity, beliefs, views, stereotypes, prejudices, interests, individual affiliation or taste. The editorial policies of various media outlets play a major role in this aspect. This kind of dependence of media photography on subjective factors is affecting not only its relations with the objective

⁹ *DigitalCustom Model Ethics Guidelines*, website: <http://digitalcustom.com/howto/mediaguidelines.asp>

truth, but has become the cause for the emergence of a myriad of ethical problems, such as the manipulating of reality for various purposes (especially political), putting events under a false light, damaging the image of various public or non-public persons, intrusion into the private life or territory of the other, infringement of copyright, etc.

Although several codes of ethics have been developed for journalism in general in Albania, there is still no existing self-regulatory framework for media photography and photojournalism. Photojournalism organizations are almost inexistent. In the meantime digitization of the media and the expansion of the Internet have increased the range of ethical issues and have made urgent the need to address deeper theoretical analyses and to undertake practical solutions to minimize cases of ethics violations.

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