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Reforming Visual Culture: The Ethics of Hunger Photography

Introduction

Photos are rich data that elicit emotion, inspire action, describe issues effectively, and transcend literacy and language barriers in research and journalism. In the field of nutrition, visual methods have been used to study visual hunger [1] and estimate the nutrient density of meals [2]. Photo voice, a participatory method "in which people take pictures to identify, discuss, and address their challenges" [3], has been used as a dignified, participant-empowering approach to food security advocacy [4]. Food and nutrition imagery in journalism span health, industry, policy, and lifestyle sections, and share the common potential to influence hunger awareness and food security policy.

While images can bring about change, their use is complicated by serious ethical considerations. In research, risks of violating privacy and confidentiality must be balanced against the benefits of the visual method. Institutional review boards (IRBs) have been criticized for their highly restrictive attitudes and discouraging research involving photos [5]. In journalism, insensitive intrusion, digital manipulation, and misrepresentation can lead to the aestheticization of suffering ("poverty porn"), proliferation of false memories, illegitimate reportage, public distrust, and unintended legal consequences involving facial recognition technology.

Motivations

Visual ethics have been considered in some social science fields, however, more scholarly work using visual methods in nutrition research is needed. Additionally, the limited uses of visual technologies in research is incongruous with the rapid expansion of digital technologies and their uses in other disciplines. This underappreciation is poorly addressed and may, in part, be due to fears of ethical ramifications and researcher inexperience.

This paper will review current ethical principles that guide best practices in photojournalism and human subject research using professional and scholarly statements about standards and codes of conduct. A prescriptive, catch-all procedure is unsatisfactory because there are strengths and weaknesses to both approaches regarding consent, anonymity, confidentiality, compensation, and editing in photography. Ethics ought to be an ongoing, iterative, and collaborative process tailored to each photographic endeavor. Four photos related to food insecurity will help distinguish which aspects of IRB and photojournalism ethics ought to be retained to encourage dignified image-making and minimize harm. Intentions to approach the photographic process with sensitivity does not immunize against potential offense, but anticipating ethical considerations can inspire person-centered approaches to a tool with untapped potential to further mobilize hunger relief efforts and advance inclusivity in political processes.

Defining Photojournalism

First, it is necessary to distinguish different forms of photographic reportage. Documentary photography and photojournalism are ways of reporting using the identical medium, but they communicate distinct messages. Documentary photography is slower in pace and seeks to story-tell through artistic techniques. It is an endeavor that takes place over longer periods of time and typically results in a series of images [6]. Photojournalism, or news

photography, however, captures and communicates truth about an emerging event using a realistic, direct style.

Although photographic reportage is widely assumed to be credible and authentic eyewitness evidence, the reliability of images has been destabilized in an era where digital manipulation is widely practiced. As the accessibility of photographic technology has increased, a new era of citizen photojournalism is emerging. While the citizen photojournalist's contributions are valuable, photojournalists maintain that their professional role is irreplaceable, because the "trained observer may see more and gather and recall more than someone who does not 'practice' observation as a core method of everyday life" [7]. To be credible and deserving of public trust, photojournalists prioritize their pursuit of the truth, and to distinguish themselves from lay photographers, they obtain specialized training and operate according to professional standards.

Ethics in Photojournalism

Constitutional protection of the freedom of press enables anyone to take a photo of others in public areas without consent, however, legal standards are not equivalent to professional and ethical standards. The values of four professional organizations will be considered to better understand ethical concerns. While these organizations are not representative of the entire field of photography, they are prominent professional groups with great influence for shaping industry standards of practice.

A comparison of the four organization's standards is found in Table 1. All communicate a concern for representing the truth with an accurate, objective depiction of events as they occurred. This goal is achieved by minimizing the photographer's influence on the scene,

forbidding subject compensation, and preserving visual evidence by discouraging nonessential editing. Acceptable limits for editing are described in detail, but specific guidelines stipulating consent, anonymity, and confidentiality in photo making and taking are lacking. This is concerning, because digital images cannot be retracted. In addition to risking a subject's long-term embarrassment and invading privacy, a lack of procedural guidelines is alarming when controversial facial recognition tools can be applied by law enforcement surveillance, potentially targeting participants of constitutionally protected activities, such as assembling.

Ethical Standards for Human Subject Research

Standards in research differ substantially from photojournalism conventions. Before conducting research, investigators are required to propose their study protocol to an institutional review board as required by 45 CFR Part 46 [8]. This regulation was developed to protect all human subjects and assure that biomedical and behavioral research would be conducted in accordance with the basic ethical principles of beneficence, justice, and respect. There is additional need for special protection of vulnerable populations. Their safety is at further risk due to the nature of visibility in an image, an unfair degree of researcher control over image analysis and interpretation, and the risks of uncontrolled and permanent online dissemination of photos.

Obtaining consent

While some photographers espouse the "better to seek forgiveness than ask for permission" philosophy, consent is required before research participation [8]. When obtaining consent, sufficiently detailed information about the research must be provided in a "language understandable to the subject or the legally authorized representative." Such information includes the voluntary nature of the study, foreseeable risks and benefits, cost of participation and

compensation, procedures to maintain confidentiality, the exclusivity of the subject's information (cannot be used for future studies), and ways to contact the principal investigator and IRB. This practice contrasts the photojournalistic approach of capturing the moment and consulting the subject afterwards for their name.

The consent process must also occur under circumstances that allow the "prospective subject or the legally authorized representative sufficient opportunity to discuss and consider whether or not to participate." In research, consent is more formal than a spontaneous head nod or agreement on the street.

Deviating from the IRB-approved consent process requires an application for modification [9]. Despite select circumstances where consent can be waived, Tufts University's Social, Behavioral & Educational Research (SBER) IRB "considers it best practice to collect consent even if the research is determined to be exempt." Underlying this are institutional values of courtesy, professionalism, and respect. These values are not forgotten in photojournalism, but are difficult to uphold, particularly when moments are spontaneous or fleeting.

At first glance, it appears that IRB approval offers more protective coverage, however, limitations have been raised. One criticism of the consent process is that it ought to be continuous, not a one-time event. Another is that "the mandatory requirement for written consent by some research institutes is usually not so much out of concern with the well-being of the research subjects, but rather to avoid personal or institutional accountability" [5]. This legalistic, contractual approach to consent is insufficient for long-term documentary projects and inadequately addresses unanticipated audience interactions on digital mediums.

Additionally, a Western approach towards obtaining consent may not be culturally appropriate. Customs, literacy, and language barriers are problematic when working in diverse settings. Pauwels argues that "ethical behavior cannot be prescribed in strict rules; it is rather the result of an attitude whereby a particular conduct is suggested in concrete cases," which requires contextual experience. Those seeking to pioneer exploratory studies with images may be discouraged by IRB requirements, which offer limited flexibility to accommodate adaptable procedures where precedence is lacking. However, the formality of IRB approval procedures can also be viewed as a tool to slow an investigator's pace and encourage a more thoughtful approach to participant recruitment and protocol development.

Lastly, consensual techniques that make subjects aware they are being monitored risk behavior modification. Covert techniques, such as shooting inconspicuously with a long-range lens, are discouraged due to the consent-first approach. However, they could capture the un-staged images that photojournalism pursues.

Anonymity and confidentiality

IRBs also require that investigators ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality. By its visual nature, a photo increases a participant's risk of being identified; however, altering the photo-taking process or the final image for the sake of anonymity risks the loss of valuable context. The cumbersome efforts to obtain IRB approval could be in vain when rich, visual data must later be de-identified and destroyed [10].

American research regulations compare similarly to European Commission (EC) guidelines, which recognize the tension between the value of visual data and concerns over anonymity and confidentiality. The only recommendation offered by the EC is to "carefully

[balance] against the risks and benefits of the research" [11]. With vague instructions, researchers lack substantial direction to navigate research opportunities creatively while protecting human subject rights.

Photojournalism and Human Subject Research Approach Ethics Differently

Rules constricting research are stricter than norms guiding photojournalism, which operate under the synergistic influence of media producers and consumers who share an "overly indulgent attitude towards privacy-invading practices" [5]. Both photojournalism and human subject research are concerned with human dignity, but acceptable limits differ. Photojournalism may straddle the line between embarrassment and genuine harm more closely in its unshakeable pursuit of truth. Identifying and addressing potential ethical violations is ultimately relegated to the editor or publisher's discretion, which, as will be illustrated by the first case example, centralizes power and does little to assure maximal dignity and minimal harm. Conversely, the structured IRB approval process suggests that research prioritizes subject protection and institutional liability over information. This conservative posture is more inclined to sacrificing the potential opportunities for social and political reform that visual data can catalyze. Notwithstanding divergent priorities, ethical limitations remain difficult to define in both disciplines. Research responds to uncertainty with disapproval while photojournalism is more permissive towards risk.

Case Examples: Hunger-Awareness Photos in Photojournalism and Research

The following examples (Figures 1- 4) serve as evidence of the complex, and often unanticipated, ethical considerations involved in the photographic process. The lessons learned

demonstrate the limited scope of prescriptive guidelines and challenge photographers to re-assess the ethical nature of their work regularly throughout the process to minimize harm and maximize human dignity.

Dreaming Food

The following controversy was one of several since World Press Photo developed its code of ethics [12]. Having standards does not immunize an organization or photographer from breaches.

In 2018, Italian photographer, Alessio Mamo, was given administrative access to the World Press Photo's (WWP) Instagram account for one week after winning 2nd prize in the People Singles category of the WWP's 2018 photo contest [12]. During this period, he shared photos from his 2011 project in India, "Dreaming Food," one of which is considered for this paper (Figure 1). In this photo, two children, one with a distended belly, stand in front of a wetland. A table full of fake food lies before them, a stark contrast to their fruitless background. According to Mamo's instructions, they covered their eyes and dreamed about the foods they wished were in front of them.

While the provocative nature of this photo effectively caught their attention, viewers criticized Mamo for his insensitivity. In the photo caption, Mamo explains he intended to draw attention to Western food waste [13]. Regardless of his intentions, offense was deeply felt. Indian journalists and hunger organizations criticized Mamo for staging photos in India when the focus of his commentary was Western indulgence. Special protection of the children's vulnerable status and consideration of cultural differences appeared to be lacking in Mamo's following statement: "Most of the people enjoyed spontaneously to be part of this and photographed behind

the table. The people I photographed were living in a village and they were not suffering from malnutrition anymore, they were not hungry or sick, and they freely participated in the project" [14]. Depicting poor people in a vulnerable situation stripped them of their agency and led to skepticism about whether or not they were sufficiently informed during the consent process. By asking his subjects to cover their faces, Mamo allows destitution and helplessness to mask any sign of individual identity and resilience. Photographing from a downward angle further reinforces a power differential between the European photographer and his subjects.

Despite conveying poor respect for his photo subjects, Mamo does not violate World Press Photo's requirement to "resist [misleading the audience] by staged photo opportunities" because he explained his use of props in his caption. Similarly, his editing did not compromise the photo's accuracy, though his photo-making process was arguably unfair in its representation. Mamo reported receiving no financial gain from the "Dreaming Food" series, but his work was featured in two photo exhibitions and he gathered significant public attention on social media, meaningful gains for a visual artist.

This example is a reminder that ethical standards can be inadequate in their protective coverage. WPP's attention to manipulation in its code of ethics further demonstrates the leading focus on image accuracy over human subject protection in photojournalism.

"I need food to grow"

A stark contrast to "Dreaming Food" is Esther Haven's photo story, "Back to the Land of a Thousand Hills." Haven, a self-proclaimed humanitarian photographer, partners with non-profit organizations to raise awareness and funds for humanitarian campaigns.

In 2014, she traveled to Rwanda to continue a 5 year-long collaboration with Africa New Life Ministries, where she took a photo of a young child standing under a sign, "I need food to grow" (Figure 2) [15]. Haven adopted a slight upward angle to position the child above the viewer, an empowering effect. The photograph's simplicity communicates a clear message: this child has potential but needs a basic provision to achieve it.

While one of Mamo's subjects was undressed and exposed, Haven's subject is fully clothed. She appears to be no more vulnerable than any other child except for the unfair circumstances of poverty and food insecurity. The child's smile and posture communicate comfort. Her strength is not compromised by her situation; rather, her youthful resilience is evident in spite of it.

Photojournalism culture encourages capturing but not interacting with scenes and subjects, however, chronic food insecurity is not a one-time event to gawk at. Perhaps some topics that require intervention, such as protecting the human right to food, can afford a photographer's involvement at the expense of the rigid journalistic construct of "authenticity."

Both Mamo and Haven sought to captivate the attention of a Western audience, but through different emotions. Mamo intended to induce shame and self-reflection. Haven attempted to elicit inspiration and intervention without emotional shock. One could argue that Haven is more effective in mobilizing sustainable action; "Dreaming of Food" clearly depicts poverty, but it caused public uproar and drew attention to the photographer. Instead of

sensationalizing hunger, "I Need Food to Grow" points viewers towards the program recipient. However, this argument struggles to be convincing in a digital world saturated with images. It is difficult for photos to stand out when most viewers are habituated to mindless scrolling. There appears to be a tradeoff between what is eye-catching and what is dignifying, and photographers must push their creativity to overcome this challenge, or, re-evaluate their goals.

Witnesses to Hunger

As with photojournalism, decisions about food insecurity programs lack civic engagement from recipients, particularly mothers. Women who face food insecurity feel socially isolated and removed from the policy-making that shapes the public nutrition programs that serve them [4]. Drexel University's Center for Hunger-free Communities sought to enfranchise women through the transformative storytelling power of photos. Witnesses to Hunger (WH) is a participatory action research (PAR) project with a human rights framework that prioritizes inclusive participation and checks to maintain investigator accountability.

The project's consent process involves granting researchers a license to use the media for educational purposes and being informed of the project's advocacy and public exhibition opportunities. Social assistance is also provided to help families navigate the issues they face, and while traditionally forbidden in photojournalism, all participants are compensated for their involvement at each phase of the study. WH members retain copyrights to their content, select their degree of engagement throughout the process, and can choose to remain anonymous or assume a pseudonym when their work is exhibited. Like Haven's sustained relationship with her partner organizations, WH is an ongoing activity, one that adopts a documentary-style approach rather than photojournalistic.

In Figure 3, Crystal frames the impact of food stamps on her family with a photo of her daughter eating breakfast. Artistically, the image is unevenly exposed and lacks an interesting composition, but the girl's eye contact draws the viewer in to linger. Work that has a rich story is arguably more compelling and memorable than a meaningless snapshot that meets traditional, subjective artistic conventions. The image and caption provide an intimate look into her experience, a fresh point of view when the voices that dominate public and political hunger awareness tend not to be firsthand witnesses. Note that censoring her eyes for anonymity and confidentiality would compromise the photo's value.

As a result of their contributions to WH, members have been invited to give speeches, provide their input on televised discussions, and submit testimonies for congressional hearings about poverty. It is unclear what steps were taken to obtain IRB approval to publish images of children, and investigators acknowledge ongoing challenges with sustaining equitable and transparent compensation of participants, however, this work has expanded the creative boundaries of visual methods research and advanced participant dignity, respect, and agency. Contrary to the argument that storytelling is best left to the trained journalist, there is a need for non-professionals to witness their lived experiences. A flexible attitude towards who tells the story and who helps set the stage may lead to more constructive and dignified approaches towards visual storytelling.

Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue [16]

The theme of this last example, food sovereignty, is closely related to food insecurity, yet is often excluded from food insecurity images. In a project similar to WH, recent high school graduates in Mexico were recruited to participate as youth researchers. The goal was to explore the processes that define and re-define foods as culturally appropriate "by a group that is seldom

heard from" and provide tools that could empower these voices. The investigators recognized the need for diverse storytellers. "A voice in the formal and informal politics of food is necessary to make claims to the material things of food sovereignty: enough food, healthy food, and the means to produce it. It is also necessary in the ongoing, messy process by which food systems and one's place in them are defined."

Project activities were cyclical. Youth researchers developed photographic and visual literacy skills through workshops, took photos, critiqued one another's images, and reflected on their work, which culminated in exhibitions in the youths' community of Tzucacab, Merida, Mexico City, and California.

Several themes emerged from the images, including the complexity and dignity of their parent's labor, frustration with outside disregard for their town, and concern for its future. In Figure 4, Leonor captured the tension between cultural appropriateness and new food traditions. Her family is gathered around a table to eat lunch. The image is not so much about the people but the table's contents. The cultural practice of using hands to eat a stew contrasts the glaring Pepsi bottles at the center of the table and photo, which can be interpreted as a threatening symbol of cultural erosion.

The investigators recall that a tourist cornered Leonor during a gallery opening to lecture her about sugar-sweetened beverages and diabetes. "To Leonor the Pepsi is one component in a meal, to the tourist (and many other people who have since voiced similar concerns about that photograph), it is evidence of declining integrity, or even inauthenticity, in reference to an imaginary version of what indigenous food culture should be." At first glance, Leonor's image may be interpreted as a critique of the globalization of the food system. After deeper consideration, it appears to highlight the iterative process of determining cultural appropriateness

and interrogates assumptions of what it looks like. Who gets to define what foods are included in traditional foodways and how to eat them?

Leonor's work is a strong reminder of the importance of including fresh perspectives in politically relevant topics. Women and youth are seldom heard from and photography can provide a more democratic platform to voice underrepresented values. The challenge is providing vulnerable voices with ample preparation and adequate protection when they participate in spaces that are highly controversial or traditionally dominated by an oppressive visual status quo. While Leonor responded to the tourist's comment with understanding and maturity, the investigators chose not to intervene but watched from a distance with concern. What is considered adequate protection? It is difficult to balance insufficiency with excess because many circumstances cannot be anticipated. Ongoing collaboration between researchers, photographers, and subjects to assess adequacy is needed.

Recommendation: Interdisciplinary Reform of Standards of Practice

Based on the ethical guidelines considered, photojournalism appears to prioritize the public's desire for truth while research prioritizes institutional liability and participant protection. However, pitting norms is not advantageous, particularly as visual ethics, camera technology, and image sharing platforms are ever evolving. Practice guidelines that advance dignity and avoid unnecessary harm most successfully are ones that integrate the strengths of photojournalism ethics – a more yielding approach towards anonymity and confidentiality, attention to unnecessary photo directing, and minimal editing, with those of research ethics – ongoing consent, subject compensation, and an open-mindedness about who the expert storytellers are.

Constructive discussions across disciplines about integrating and advancing respectful, responsible practices in image-making and publication are also needed for future direction. As illustrated by PAR, democratic decision-making requires input from subjects and the affected communities; their inclusion is non-negotiable.

Intervention opportunities to keep power in check and advance ethical practices exist throughout the photo making process and involve various actors (Table 2). Additional general and discipline specific recommendations can be found in Table 3.

Conclusion

Images can be used as evidence to improve the food insecurity landscape, domestically and internationally. As demonstrated by the four case examples, their impact depends on the ethical grounds by which they were produced and published. Some images reiterate oppressive structure and "othering," while some support individual agency and civic engagement. The most responsibility to steward power justly continues to be assigned to those with greater financial resources, visual tools, and digital literacy. The hands of investigators, media producers, and consumers retain tremendous control. By individualizing requirements for adequate and appropriate consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and degrees of editing, they can exercise discretion and referee visual culture when human dignity is threatened without discouraging photography.

It is reassuring that there are multiple opportunities for various stakeholders, including research participants and photo subjects, to intervene and prevent harmful consequences from occurring throughout the photographic process. Likewise, multiple points of intervention exist, from preparation, to image production and editing, to presentation and publication. Collaboration between photojournalists, researchers, individuals who face food insecurity, and hunger relief

organizations to advance ethical standards of practice can help address aversion to photography in food insecurity research and enhance the efficacy of its use for public awareness and advocacy. Expanding the uses of photography further can meaningfully enfranchise subjects, not only in the image making process, but in the political process as well.

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