

# ETHICS OF IMAGE JOURNALISM



**Internews**  
Local voices. Global change.



A picture has the ability to speak to a broad spectrum of people that many other non-visual arts cannot reach.

*Dr. Maher Abdel Mohsen, "Aesthetics of the Image in Semiotics and Phenomenology."*



*Zydeasika, March 2020*

## JOURNALISM DURING THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect all aspects of life, has severely damaged the global economy, and has led millions of people to fall into extreme poverty. The pandemic has triggered a global health emergency and claimed the lives of more than 2 million people, while intensifying pressure on health systems all around the world. The threat of depression and anxiety increased all over the world. Families of COVID-19 patients were especially subjected to tremendous psychological pressures, some faced the pain of death and loss on their own, in light of the precautionary and preventive measures that accompanied the pandemic.

The field of journalism, like other professions, was affected by the disastrous effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to significant changes in the profession as well the information needs of the recipients of the media's messages. Media institutions are now confronted with the effects of COVID-19 in the form of financial risks, threats to physical safety and restrictions imposed on press freedoms. The media is also dealing with unprecedented amounts of false and misleading information that misinforms the public about the pandemic.

The pandemic has also renewed a dialog among journalists about the ethical considerations that arise when covering those affected by humanitarian crises – particularly journalists who take photographs and record video of the victims of those crises. In order to tell the stories of COVID-19, journalists need to tell the stories of the people who have suffered and the health care workers who risk their lives to save others, all while taking precautions to protect themselves from contracting the disease. The journalist's need to get the story must be balanced with people's right to privacy; much has been written about journalism and privacy rights in reporting on famine, earthquakes and other humanitarian and natural disasters, but the COVID-19 crisis brings coverage of health emergencies into this discussion as well.

For photo and video journalists, the pandemic has raised difficult questions regarding how they show the grief of the victims and the courage of medical workers in order to illustrate their stories and show the deadly impact of the virus, without exploiting grief and without inserting themselves into crisis situations where they are not welcome. This guidance document examines the ethical issues of producing visual coverage of the pandemic, and offers some rules journalists can follow to help ensure they do not cross the line from professionalism to sensationalism.



## THE HISTORY & IMPORTANCE OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

Some historical sources attribute the beginnings of professional photojournalism to the work of a number of photographers in the mid-19th century, most prominently the American Mathew Brady, nicknamed the father of photo journalism. Brady's images of the American Civil War drew attention to the horrors of the battlefield and the lamentable fate of dead and wounded soldiers.

According to a scientific study from the College of Arts at Bahrain University, "Press photos attract readers more than written content, and readers consider news without a photo to be inadequate or incomplete news."

It is widely said that "a picture is worth a thousand words because of its dual nature," but that phrase applies only to a good picture, one that adds to the subject matter in the press or the explanation that the words provide. A good photo does not repeat the content of the text. Photo journalism requires specialized skills to approach events and phenomena creatively and at the right time.

A photo conveys situations and events with extreme accuracy. It may beat out reality by bringing distant objects closer (close-ups), or by making something nearby seem far away, and because of its wondrous ability to highlight certain aspects and themes that are part of non-verbal communication. Photo journalism documents and complements news, confirms authenticity, reflects other aspects, and makes news themselves. Photo journalism tells people about something that happened at a specific time and place. The image must be clear in all aspects, dimensions, and details at a reasonable size and should be commensurate with its importance.



# SCOOPS VERSUS PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

When it comes to scoops and upholding the ethics of the profession, there is a constant debate among media experts about standards and criteria for publishing shocking or grim photographic or video images, but there are points of agreement among most media experts on minimum ethical standards. These include not depicting staged scenes or inventing scenes; avoiding stereotypes of certain groups, individuals, and cultures; and treating subjects and events with respect.



*A woman looks on beside a shelter after arriving at the Zam Zam IDP camp in North Darfur, Sudan on April 9, 2015. The new arrivals at the IDP camp were fleeing from clashes in East Jebel Marra and Tawilla. REUTERS/Mohamed Nureldin Abdallah*

## PROFESSIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PHOTOGRAPHERS

Consider whether a given image accurately and comprehensively represents the subject matter and avoids bias toward a specific idea or opinion. For example, edits to a photo must retain the truthfulness of the image, be consistent with the content and true context of the event, and not add or delete any images in a way that would mislead the viewer. The picture should not be so small that it fails to draw attention, or so large that it gives an impression that is out of proportion to the importance of the report. Nor should it be packed with irrelevant details or unclear in its details.

Photos should be photocopies of truth, without modification or alteration for any reason, and the image should add fundamental clarity to the news so as to keep the public informed of all details. The content of the image should not be altered using technology, and nothing should be deleted from or added to the image. Only minimum editing is allowed, i.e. minor edits that in no way affect the image content, such as removing dust from photo objects.





## SHOCKING AND GRIM PHOTOS

---

The publication of photos of victims of assassination, murder, and war in pursuit of a scoop has given rise to a fervent debate among journalists about the ethics of publishing such photos. There are those who support publishing shocking photos regardless of the content and impact. Others refuse to publish photos of bodies and other shocking photos, seeing it as a press taboo because it violates the sanctity of death. A third group tends to publish shocking photos when they have news value, while taking various measures to mitigate the effects of those images on the public.

Despite all this controversy, the press has ethical and professional traditions to follow when dealing with human vulnerabilities, disasters, and conflicts. Many visual media organizations have editorial and professional rules that announce warnings before showing potentially shocking images; the viewer has time to close the page, turn the TV channel, or ensure children are not exposed to such images.

When covering accidents, disasters, and wars, it is very important for any journalist not to compromise the dignity of the victims and their relatives.

The generally accepted rule is to avoid photographing or videoing people in vulnerable situations or taking pictures that are degrading.



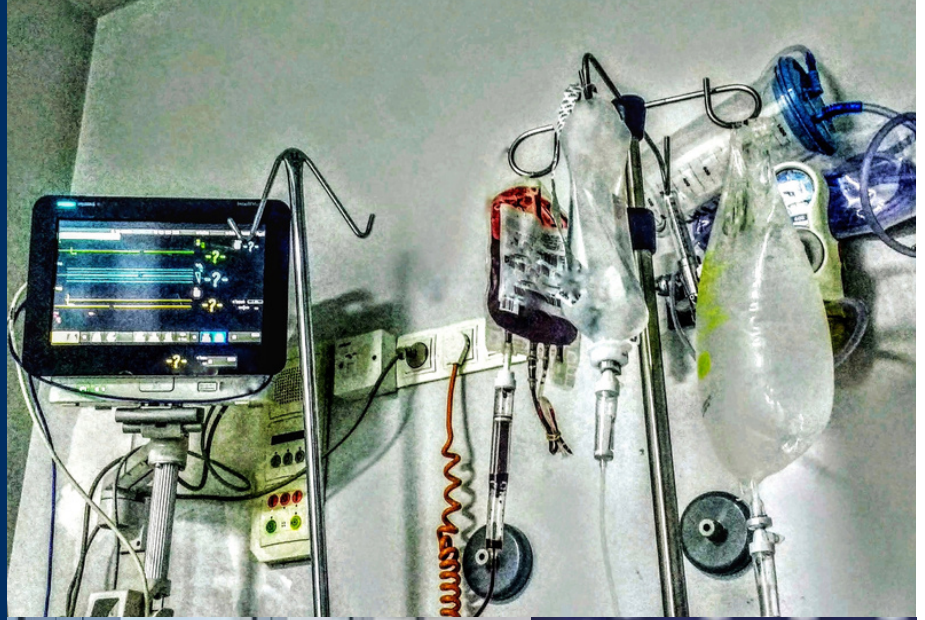
*American Civil War, Gettysburg, 1863*



# PHOTO AND VIDEO JOURNALISM IN THE TIMES OF COVID-19

In the face of an avalanche of false and misleading information about the COVID-19 virus, controversy raged in many countries around the world about professional ethics during the pandemic and the role of journalists in confronting false news and publishing accurate, and fact-based information on the COVID-19 virus, and the balance between the journalistic scoop and professional ethics.

The balance between the privacy of patients and the public's right to information is important in media coverage, but it is also crucial to know that the privacy of patients should take precedence over media coverage. According to Roger Severino from the U.S. Office of Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: "The last thing hospital patients need to worry about during the COVID-19 crisis is a film crew walking around their bed shooting 'B-roll'."



**HOT** The big stories of t  
**END TO COVID-19**



# QUEBEC: THE SCOOP VS ETHICS

In the same context (the balance between the scoop and the ethics of the profession) a controversy took place in Canada between the right of journalists to obtain and publish for the public benefit information and images regarding the healthcare system's fight against the virus, and the privacy rights of individuals and groups.

In January 2021, 19 media companies in Quebec signed a letter to the public health authorities urging them to open their hospital doors to Quebec's journalists, to allow them to show the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic. With rare exceptions, Quebec's journalists have been forbidden to enter hospital emergency rooms or long-term care housing communities in their attempts to tell the COVID-19 story.

"In March 2020, the entire planet understood the magnitude of the developing health crisis when it saw the dramatic images that came to us from Italy.... Photos and videos showed patients crammed into hospitals, many of them intubated, while distraught doctors bore witness to the seriousness of the situation...These images raised more awareness of the seriousness of the situation than any WHO press releases on COVID-19," the letter read.

The news outlets that signed the letter said it became clear that these images and stories are essential, and urged the Quebec authorities to allow these stories to be told. Without access, François Cardinal, deputy editor of La Presse, said, "We cannot bear witness to reality."

Luce Julien, director-general of information at Radio-Canada, said opening the doors of the hospitals and care homes to journalists can actually help the government in its fight against the virus. "The circulation of images from the front lines...can be used to raise awareness among those who may be tempted to minimize the risks of COVID," he said.

The Canadian authorities responded to the appeal by saying they would facilitate the entry of journalists to health facilities and find a solution that balances the public's right to know and the privacy of individuals.

*Vidal Balielo Jr, June 2014*





# TUNISIA: THE SCOOP VS ETHICS

Despite acquiring the license to film a live broadcast, "The channel did not respect human dignity or the private lives of individuals, and the program also included a clear violation of press professional ethics and rules," said the High Individual Authority of Audiovisual Communication, which is responsible for monitoring and regulating the media scene in Tunisia.

In Tunisia, a satellite channel's photography team provoked outrage by entering a quarantine area, as well as a major controversy in media and press circles about the journalistic ethics of photographing coronavirus patients. The channel correspondent quarreled with some of the people in the isolation center who protested their filming.



## BALANCING THE RESPONSIBILITY TO REPORT WITH RIGHTS TO PRIVACY: PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE

El Tayeb Siddig, a Reuters television correspondent in Khartoum, has hands-on experiences in these considerations and ethical trends on how to handle events and disasters all over Sudan. During his years of work with Reuters, El Tayeb has been all over Sudan, and he says: "I have often found myself conflicted between maintaining people's privacy and the demands of journalistic work for how to photograph people, especially in cases of illness and vulnerability.

It is a difficult equation between preserving the rights and privacy of patients and victims, and the necessities of photojournalism and highlighting the suffering of these groups to contribute to solving their problems and delivering their demands to the authorities.

Once, in one of the states of Sudan, I photographed the house of a woman who supported children of unknown parentage, whose husband left the house and abandoned the woman because of the children and because the community did not accept the adoption of children of unknown parentage. Because of all these complications, while shooting I was careful not to show the woman's face so she would not be subjected to risks and threats.

Before shooting, I asked for permission to take a picture and afterwards I used technological tools to help maintain her privacy. In general, when covering events related to displaced persons, refugees, and victims of natural disasters, we take great care for the privacy of those communities and create good connections and relationships that lay the groundwork to earn those communities' trust in the various media outlets."



# HOW IMAGE JOURNALISTS CAN BALANCE THE NEED TO “SHOW” WITH THE NEED TO RESPECT VULNERABLE SUBJECTS

According to the Code of Ethics of the National Press Photographers Association in the United States, “We must look beyond the photo and enhance the dignity of people who are the subject of an image, and the context in which the filming took place must be presented. We should avoid stereotyping individuals and groups, and press editing must preserve the integrity of the content and context of the image.”

**Article 4 of the NPPA Code of Ethics states:**

“Treat all subjects with respect and dignity. Give special consideration to vulnerable subjects and compassion to victims of crime or tragedy. Intrude on private moments of grief only when the public has an overriding and justifiable need to see.”

For more, please refer to:  
[Code of Ethics | NPPA](#)

**AS A JOURNALIST, THERE ARE GUIDELINES YOU CAN FOLLOW THAT WILL HELP YOU TO NAVIGATE THIS DIFFICULT ETHICAL LANDSCAPE. HERE IS A CHECKLIST YOU CAN FOLLOW:**

- Do not violate the privacy of people with the virus or in quarantine.
- Take pictures in a way that preserves their dignity.
- Avoid intruding on moments of sadness and grief among family members and relatives.
- Focus on depicting stories and subjects that will contribute to educating people about the risks of the pandemic and how to deal with it and protect themselves.





# CONCLUSION

Images in the media have an important and basic role in media work, and therefore any media content benefits from a great image (video or photograph). Visual content has professional and ethical requirements and journalists must pay attention to the appropriate use of images in media pieces. By applying the ethical standards to their visual content, journalists can preserve the dignity and privacy of individuals and groups who are the subject of an image.



## REFERENCES

[Photo of Refugees: Photojournalism Ethics | Ethical Charter for Syrian Media](#)

[Photography in Online Journalism | Al Jazeera Media Institute](#)

[Thekatna \(Our Trust\)](#)

[Study: Press photos attract readers more than content | Akhbar Al Khaleej](#)

[A picture is worth a thousand words because of its dual nature | Ahmed Marwan | Al-Arab](#)

[Between the scoop and professional ethics .. 20 tips for publishing pictures of corpses](#)

[In the time of Corona ... Tips and advice for photojournalists in the field](#)

[The ethics of publishing pictures of assassinations of public figures in electronic newspapers](#)

[Media in the "presence" of Corona ... between the search for excitement and respect for professional ethics](#)

[Show the reality of COVID-19: Quebec media outlets call for better access to hospitals](#)

[Open letter: Quebec media must be allowed to show the ravages of COVID-19](#)

"The credibility of photography, the digital photocopy: Sudan as a case study", Mohamed Nureldin, Reuters photographer in Khartoum and Dr. Ali Mohamed Othman, Faculty of Arts, Sudan University

\*Most images used in this Guide are from [Canva](#)

