



**> Tampa, Florida (left), and Fallujah, Iraq, have about the same population, 300,000. When American troops invaded Fallujah last year, they forced the residents to flee the city. However, during the battle the American public was almost exclusively shown images of military personnel and not**

# On mentors, ethics, & weapons

It is no light matter to use words and images together in mass

**By Paul Martin Lester**

*Four giants of photojournalism died last year. They taught us that word and image choices demand a high level of ethical thought. When hurricanes Katrina and Rita flooded and flattened whole cities, images of how people coped made*



*the plight of the civilians. If a hurricane had hit Tampa, photographers would have shown the plight of the people and not the storm. Fallujah image courtesy of DigitalGlobe. Tampa image courtesy of the U.S. Geological Survey.*

# war, hurricanes... *of mass instruction*

communications... they demand respect and responsible use.

*the front pages, not the storms. That is ethical coverage. But the choices from Iraq too often show the military's "storm" and not civilians. Photojournalism teaches that the story of humanity is the only story worth telling.*

In as many months, the photojournalism profession has had to endure four significant deaths.

Henri Cartier-Bresson died in August 2004. I interpret his famous phrase, “the decisive moment” as the meeting in an instant of the best of form and content. His description is more elegant: “the simultaneous recognition in a fraction of a second of the significance of an event, as well as the precise organization of forms that give that event its proper expression” (Kimmelman, ¶ 9). How is it possible to take that moment? His advice was, “Approach tenderly, gently on tiptoe even if the subject is a still life [and use] a velvet hand, a hawk’s eye—these we should all have” (Kimmelman, ¶ 27).

Cartier-Bresson was also an advocate for saving space on your card when he said, “Above all, I craved to seize the whole essence, in the confines of one single photograph” (Henri Cartier-Bresson Quotes, n.d., ¶ 1). What I always love about seeing any of his pictures is that you can imagine the precise instant his finger presses the shutter button. Seeing one of his photographs is like looking out from his eyes—you are one with him.

Eddie Adams died in September 2004. Adams was burdened during his long career, as Dorothea Lange was with her “Migrant Mother” portrait of Florence Thompson, by taking a photograph that became an icon. For Adams, it was a reluctant icon. About the image, he said, “Two men died that day: the Vietcong and Col. Loan who shot him.” Then he added, “Pictures do not always tell the full story. And this is one case where that is true” (Buell, 2004, ¶ 12). That image also in no way told the whole story of his career, which was filled with a portfolio that demonstrated a kind of gentle toughness where world events were somehow seen through a microscope.

Journalist Pete Hamill wrote that Adams once said, “All that a Pulitzer really does is give the obit writers something to put between the commas after your name” (Hamill, 2004, ¶ 7). Sure enough, the 902-word *New York Times* obit started with, “Eddie Adams, a Pulitzer prize-winning photojournalist and combat photographer who produced one of the most riveting images of the Vietnam war, died on

Saturday in Manhattan. He was 71” (“Eddie Adams, Journalist Who Showed,” 2004, ¶ 1). About the photographic process Adams admitted, “I always tell photographers that you never know who is looking at your pictures or how your pictures are going to affect other people’s lives.” Adams later said, “I wasn’t out to save the world. I was out to get a story (“Eddie Adams, Journalist Who Shot,” n.d., ¶ 8).” However, as it turned out, his Vietnam picture did help save the world. I suspect his later work helped save himself.

Richard Avedon died in October 2004. His semiotic studies of people with only the clothes on their backs and frames devoid of background distractions allowed a viewer to study the often vacant, haunted eyes of his subjects, perfectly illustrating the pessimism expressed in T. S. Eliot’s (n.d.) poem, “The Hollow Men.”

Avedon always revealed his own point of view. In looking at his subjects’ eyes, you saw Avedon’s eyes, too. In that sense, I wouldn’t call his work photojournalism but a highly personal style in the documentary tradition of social commentary. In that way he was somehow on both sides of the viewfinder. “Sometimes I think all my pictures are just pictures of me,” he admitted. “My concern is ... the human predicament; only what I consider the human predicament may simply be my own” (“Richard Avedon Quotes,” n.d.). His struggle to understand the false boundary between subjective and objective reality led him to understand a fundamental concept about photography. He said, “the moment an emotion or fact is transformed into a photograph it is no longer a fact but an opinion.” Then he added, “There is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth” (“Richard Avedon [1923–2004],” n.d.). For Avedon, the people standing in front of his lens foretold the way the world might end, in Eliot’s words, “Not with a bang but a whimper” (Eliot, n.d., ¶ 19).

There was a fourth giant of photojournalism who died recently, Vi Edom. Vi was Cliff Edom’s partner in life and in the profession they both loved and worked tirelessly to promote—through the photojournalism school at Missouri, the workshop in a small town every year, and countless other ways.

After a workshop in Lebanon, Missouri, in 1978, I had lunch with Cliff and Vi at their home. Bill Eppridge was there working with Cliff on a new edition of his photojournalism book. It was a magical afternoon, but damn it, I didn't take any pictures! Like too many other successful couples (John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor come immediately to mind) the media and society often concentrate on the accomplishments of one (usually the man) at the expense of the other. However, it was Cliff and Vi Edom's energy that created a kind of third effect that helped establish and promote gatherings like that weekend. Quite simply, we all would care a little less about what we do and how we do it if not for Vi Edom.

## The Dance of Words and Images

From the work and inspiration of these four and many other mentors in my life, I have learned that it is no light matter to use words and images together in mass communications, for their combination is powerful; they demand respect and responsible use. However, their power-sharing dance defined by content and context is only one of many frames that a reader uses to evaluate their messages. There are also many other schemas from the audience that often are never consciously applied and that go beyond size, position, timing, and other editorial concerns to include a viewer's memories, personal experiences, and countless other culturally specific narratives.

It may be heresy to say this here, but I think that words are every bit as important as pictures. They are especially useful when you need a justification for running or airing an image after a reader or viewer complains.

## Learning Ethical Behavior

That leads to one of my favorite topics—ethics.

I have learned that ethics is the study of how people behave and how they should behave. You will not get far with a discussion about ethics if you simply describe what bad thing someone else has done. You need to practice normative ethics and

figure out what *should* be done, given a set of circumstances. One key toward that end is to use the ethics mantra that summarizes 2,500 years of moral philosophy:

Do your job and don't cause unjustified harm.

Thinking about what you do to perform your job should help you identify the specific values that you cherish. What you value might include fairness, balance, foxiness, truthfulness, and credibility. Thinking about harm that might be caused by taking and publishing an image should help you see the loyalties that you have—to yourself, to your family, to your job, to your readers, to your community, and to your profession.

The best ethical dilemmas challenge us because they force us to take a hard look at the ways values and loyalties conflict. From that process, credible alternatives are imagined and selected. An ethical decision, then, takes into account all affected sides.

Another key is to know when a dilemma involves ethics and when it does not. Issues that are sometimes called ethical issues are really matters of aesthetics or etiquette. Knowing the difference between ethics, aesthetics, and etiquette helps focus the dialogue on those issues that really affect subjects, victims, readers, and viewers. It is important to distinguish ethics from aesthetics and etiquette for two reasons. A question that is truly ethical deserves a response that addresses the human cost. If, for example, a photograph scheduled for publication is likely to cause viewers to be upset and the only justification mentioned is that it is "a hellova picture"—an aesthetic justification—that phrase does not provide the needed ethical grounding that is called for when someone complains. On the other hand, ethics can provide good reasons for publishing or airing images that readers and viewers find offensive. Sometimes, all aesthetics or etiquette aside, the public simply needs this picture—to have unpleasant information provided to them visually.

I do not like it when aesthetics trumps content. My photo editor once told me that he loved foggy, Mississippi River pictures. So I shot one and he put it on Sunday's front page. Yuck. After that, I was his fog whore.

Meaningless silhouettes, cute kids eating ice cream while dancing in a water fountain, people wearing stupid shoes, whatever. Those pictures do not help the photojournalism profession advance. Worse, at some shops photojournalists are sometimes asked to be advertising photographers or to at least use advertising techniques to shoot fashion, food, architecture, portrait, and editorial illustration assignments. They take photojournalists away from what I think is the primary role for journalists—doing meaningful stories about social conditions in your community. News directors, publishers, editors, and photographers who do not distinguish between commercial setups and classic photojournalism often push for these economically driven assignments. When photojournalists are expected to split

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their time between news and corporate-controlled images, it is hard for them and others to take them seriously as on-call photojournalists.

I once had to take a picture of an Italian restaurant owner. The newspaper's advertising guy, whom I had never met, was with me and said to the restaurant owner, "Relax. He's a great photographer." The owner shot back, "Oh yeah?" If he's so great, why is he working for the *Picayune*?" Yuck. I was his penne pasta whore.

Concentrating on aesthetics can also result in undue emphasis on fixing supposed flaws in a picture—lighting, cropping, dodging and burning, software filters, color corrections, sound effects, music, and so on—and can, in the end, result in a misleading image. Imagine a not-too-uncommon scenario in which a photographer spends time on a fashion shoot in the studio and on a computer and then is asked to make an on-location portrait. Because of the advertising shoot, it is tempting to use all the tricks that are available to portray the person as positively as possible.

Aesthetics also involve how an image is used—its size, location, whether in color or black and white, for print and the Web, or its length and position for television news reports. Here is an interesting part of this distinction—*aesthetically pleasing* does not imply *ethically problematic*.

Unless a photographer, editor, or news director manipulates the aesthetic features of a news visual in a way that misleads or could cause harm to a subject, reader, or viewer, no ethical problem exists. Although aesthetic qualities cannot substitute a need for meaningful content, it is also not unethical to include graphically pleasing visuals in a publication or newscast as part of its daily variety of visual messages. These pictures may not elevate the profession to a higher standard, but they are not necessarily unethical. Sometimes you should take a utilitarian approach and help educate readers and viewers to the artful world around them, a world that most untrained persons miss.

Etiquette is a system of social customs agreed on by members of a culture. Being polite is an element of etiquette. With shooting and presenting, etiquette includes topics that come up frequently on the National Press Photographers Association listserv, such as inappropriate dress at a funeral, showing vulgar images, or paparazzi-style pack coverage.

Questions of this type seldom really belong in a discussion of ethics. Not dressing properly for an assignment can show disrespect for those who are not getting paid to attend the funeral. Chowling down from a reception's food line is just plain rude. Telling a subject that she looks tired to get a reaction is unacceptable. However, it may be justified to wear sandals, shorts, and a Hawaiian shirt to a funeral, to accept an offer of food and drink from a subject, or to take pictures of a celebrity who flaunts his rudeness.

However, dictates of etiquette can provide guidelines of what not to shoot. Everyone has had unattractive moments when eating, walking, or even thinking. Rarely does an embarrassing picture sum up the whole story. Newsworthiness—and not commercial and entertainment values—should dictate the way images are taken and displayed.

Because visual messages have long-term emotional power to educate, entertain, and persuade, there should be a great responsibility put on you for every image produced for public consumption. The best reasons, ethically speaking, to show any news image are that it moves people to care and that it helps people to safely navigate through their daily lives. The greater the potential harm caused by showing the photograph or videotape, the greater benefit it should also have for people. Consequently, a journalist must be clear why a subject is selected, what tools are used and why, what words accompany the image, and how those words and images are used. If those decisions cause harm to subjects, readers, or viewers, then they need to be explained to those who complain.

The ability to separate out the ethical questions and the vocabulary to argue from a perspective of ethical justification helps visual reporters take their rightful part in the discussions and to expand the idea of collaboration. However, you must be proactive. You need the courage and the gumption to talk about ethical issues to your fellow staffers and to your editors. You will want to choose your words—and your battles—carefully. Like religion and politics, ethics discussions are sometimes considered breaches of etiquette.

## Iraq and Hurricanes: On Not Covering the Storm

Now let me concentrate on one specific story and how it is being covered—the war in Iraq. After the night-vision, infographic-driven war coverage of the first Iraq war led by Bush the elder, the current war is the first American conflict in which journalists and the military have worked so closely together to provide stories and images for the public back home. Instead of a tiny pool of reporters covering the war, more than 500 “embedded” journalists, those sanctioned and trained by military officials, rode along with coalition combat units at the start. Sure enough, we are seeing the results of unprecedented access to fighting scenes because of the military’s unprecedented helpfulness. However, you should ask yourself, as the cynical, questioning pros that I know you are, “Why?”

For journalists, of course, the overriding motivation is safer access to battlefronts that were denied in wars past. For the military, the overriding motivation is the prospect of promilitary reports. Sherry Ricchiardi in *American Journalism Review* explained, “The media’s access to America’s fighting forces [gave] a far more complete mosaic of the fighting—replete with heroism, tragedy and human error—than would have been possible without it” (as cited in Ricchiardi, 2003, p. 7).

David Shaw (2003), the media critic for the *Los Angeles Times* wrote, “The U.S. military has generated a bounty of positive coverage of the Iraq invasion, one that decades of spinning, bobbing, and weaving at rear-echelon briefings could never achieve” (p. 12). Indeed, most photographic coverage looks like the photographers are auditioning for jobs as military photographers—just in case their newspaper goes belly up. Governmental officials bless the feet of whoever dreamed up the embedding program when they rejoice after a three-pack-a-day cigarette smoker becomes a national icon for the tough, sensitive soldier. Imagine the jump in new recruits when a poor, out-of-work, just-out-of-high-school kid finds out you get free smokes if you join the army. However, those same leaders curse the sandals of anyone making images that do not support the troops, whether taken by the soldiers themselves or by journalists.

When I talk with my visual journalism students about picture stories, the one type of story I tell them to always avoid is the “how to.” The worst of them use a clunky, sequential narrative structure on topics that range from how to wash a car to how to feed the homeless.

Most of the coverage I have seen from Iraq could be labeled “how to drive a tank,” “how to aim a rifle,” “how to storm a town,” or “how to chill with your buddies.” Once in a while you might see a captured or dead Iraqi insurgent, defender, rebel, freedom fighter, foreign invader, militant, criminal, guerilla, mug, thug, or terrorist, but rarely have we seen or heard about the ordinary people—the civilians—who are the real losers with any war. That is a product of photographers wanting to stay close to their military escorts because of the extremely



**> Oncoming storms: When Hurricane Charley threatened Tampa, Florida, in 2004, most of the images published showed everyday people preparing for the worst, but not the storm itself. File caption for the above photograph: "David Dean and his sister Deborah Fite secure plywood over the front door of their mother's Seminola Heights home at the corner of Henry and Otis Streets in preparation for the coming Hurricane Charley, Friday, August 13, 2004. David says they have just renovated the home and hope the storm will not be too bad. He hopes the latticework that creates a covered front porch will not blow away." Photograph by Kathy Moore-Lengell, copyright © 2004 Tampa Tribune.**

dangerous conditions—more than 100 journalists have been killed in conflicts around the world in 2004—and editors who simply do not use those images.

Perhaps your local paper showed pictures of civilians. However, by and large those pictures did not come from the embedded photographers. Freelancers gave us those views.

I do not blame the embeds, whose courage cannot be questioned, for showing us few nontroop-related news images. I blame their editors who did not use those pictures because of editorial decisions mostly related to the presumed public distaste for them. Once again, etiquette rears its impolite head.

Nonetheless, it is the story of the civilians that should be the main story in Iraq.

Many years ago, for every 10 soldiers killed during a war, only one civilian was killed. Think of Sparta versus Athens, the American Revolutionary War, the Napoleonic wars, the American Civil War, the Spanish American War, and World War I. However, since Dachau, Treblinka, Dresden, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, the Mei Cong Delta, the killing fields, and the World Trade Towers, the ratio has reversed: For every soldier who is killed, 10 civilians die. If you trust the medical journal *The Lancet*, since the killing machines from both sides were unleashed in Iraq, the ratio has drastically changed (Rosenthal, 2004).

For every soldier killed in Iraq, 100 civilians die. Yet, despite this accelerated ratio, the images that we mostly see through traditional media—newspapers, magazines, and major television outlets—are the same. Either photographers are not seeking and



**> When the United States invaded Fallujah, Iraq, last year, the pictures published rarely showed how the 300,000 residents of the city prepared for and escaped the violence. Instead, photo coverage concentrated on the military storm. File caption for the above photograph: “US Marines of the 1st Division pass a mutilated body which they believe to be a western woman, in the western part of Fallujah, Iraq, Sunday, Nov. 14, 2004. The remains, which were found lying in the street covered with a blood-soaked cloth, are to be subjected to a DNA test to try and determine identity.” Photograph by Anja Niedringhaus, copyright © 2004 AP/Wide World Photos.**

taking images that reflect the civilian holocaust or editors are choosing not to show them.

Make no mistake—war is about killing. More specifically, it is about killing civilians—not soldiers (“Images From the War in Iraq,” n.d.).

For example, Fallujah, Iraq, has a population of about 300,000. Most of the civilians were said to have left town before the advance of U.S. troops in November 2004. Where did they all go? What were their living conditions? Did they have enough food, water, and medical services? Were the children going to school? How were the adults making any money? Three hundred thousand people. That’s about the same size as Anaheim, Buffalo, Corpus Christi, Saint Paul, or Tampa. Imagine if Tampa were evacuated.

Imagine that, instead of a hurricane, an advancing army was on its way. Would you scramble out of there to stay with family members or strangers temporarily out of harm’s way, or would you buy tons of food from Publix, plywood and generators from Home Depot, automatic weapons and bullets from Wal-Mart and hunker down until it was safe to show your face? During the hurricanes, Florida photographers took those preparation and hunkering-down pictures; but there were almost no pictures taken of the storms themselves.

That is because in the end, people, ordinary people and how they cope in a crisis, are always the most important story—not the storm. The story should be about ordinary people because that is a story we all share.



Ironically, the most intimate images of ordinary people in Iraq were not taken by photojournalists but by the troops themselves.

We would never have known of the torture of Iraqi prisoners held in Abu Ghraib prison had the guards themselves not taken the pictures—modern-day digital trophies as prized and valued as any scalp from 150 years ago.

Depictions of horror neatly framed and with few words of explanation render the viewer feeling impotent and useless. Watching becomes the end desire. Without context and without explanatory words, watching supplants other possible verbs, such as engaging, understanding, or preventing.

In his 1998 work, *Body Horror*, John Taylor wrote, “On balance, it is more important to have reports and see images of horrors than to risk forgetting them” (p. 7). Ethicist Deni Elliott (2004) also argued that the public should get more from its media. She wrote,

U.S. citizens need something from the news media that is different from that which they get from the government. To make educated decisions for self-governance, citizens need a media perspective that is broader than the governmental rhetoric, and citizens need images that do more than serve the government’s agenda. (p. 51)

However, photographers have a medium-specific problem with regard to subjects. For no matter how noble and caring are the motivations for telling of another’s suffering through the mass communication process, the end result must make an object of that person’s plight—a photograph, film, video, or, as shown on a street in Tehran, a larger-than-life mural.

Words are easy to replace with new words. However, for some images, turning the page, switching channels, or clicking a new link should not be options until their meaning is fully expressed and understood.

## Hope for the Photojournalism Profession: Being Critical and Caring

I am concerned for this profession that I love. I worry that aesthetics and etiquette considerations manifested in economic, entertainment, and political justifications

are winning the hearts and minds of photographers, editors, educators, readers, and viewers. Ethics should never be a reason to prevent showing the public what our government does in our name, whether in Iraq or in Pittsburgh, south of Atlanta.

I am also concerned when journalists are embedded, but I do not mean with the military in Iraq. I am afraid that there is a kind of “domestic embedding” going on here at home. Embedding, by design, supports the status quo. When photographers take only pictures that corporate sponsors and politically correct or cowardly publishers desire, social problems reported visually get left out of the bed.

A photojournalist is a mixture of a cool, detached professional and a sensitive, involved citizen. The taking of images is much more than f-stops, shutter speeds, white balances, and flak jackets. The processing of images is much more than upload speeds, software settings, and shot transitions. The presenting of images is much more than cropping, sizing, and timing decisions.

A photojournalist must always be aware that the technical aspects of the imaging process are not the primary concerns.

A father crying over an injured child is not simply an image to be focused, a print to be made, a shot to be edited, a picture to be published, and a segment to be produced. The father’s grief is a lesson in humanity.

If you produce a picture without a thought for his tragedy, the lesson is lost. However, if you care for his loss, are made more humane because of your care, and that care causes readers and viewers to share in his grief, photojournalism has reached its highest potential.

Despite its frustrations and low moments, the lesson of humanity is why photojournalism is an extremely rewarding profession. For that reason, photojournalism is worthy of the best thought and actions possible by its participants.

We need that unblinking stare that can be recorded only by a camera’s lens that is held in front of a journalist who understands that stories about people should bond, not divide us. We need those who

have the courage to publish those images with enough words to make the story fully engaging for the viewer.

We need the passion of Henri Cartier-Bresson, the reflexes of Eddie Adams, the detachment of Richard Avedon, and the relentless commitment of Vi Edom that inspired generations of photographers.

However, they are dead and so we carry on. We do because those who came before taught us what it means to be critical and caring—that is what it means to be an ethical photojournalist. That is the only way we progress as a profession.

Therefore, I am encouraged because you are here. I am encouraged because I know that this fact is true—we are all weapons of mass instruction.

Let us all work to make sure that no politician, no prosecutor, and no terrorist takes that away.

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