Ethical Dilemmas in Journalism

With reference to the controversial photograph, the key question raised is whether the public can trust the photographs that they see every day. Herein lays the ethical dilemmas faced by both the New York Daily News (NYDN) editors and photographer, John Tlumacki, as they are deeply involved in the publication process.

As part of a professional media body, NYDN is expected to adhere to the standard codes of ethics and practices proposed by the National Press Photographers Association (NPPA, n.d.) and Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB, n.d.; Kaplan, n.d.; Stavitsky & Dvorkin, n.d.). In essence, the ideals of publishing news content and photographs as the unvarnished truth should be the common code of practice for journalists and editors alike.

Despite these guidelines, there are many sensationalist publications (such as the National Enquirer) that do not conform to these standards in the pursuit of readership and advertorial profits. The need to balance commercial success with conformity to journalistic standards provides a challenge to the ethical ideals that the NYDN editor may have.

While the guidelines propose ethical reporting through the usage of truthful photographs and news content, the fact that both the editor and photographer are opinionated creatures means the creation of news content which may be angled along certain slants. As the NYDN photograph was manipulated out of sensitivity towards the victims and their families (Pompeo, 2013), it clearly states the aesthetical opinions of the editor towards journalism.

When traversing the issue of aesthetics, it can be argued that the photographer is a subjective creature that creates his personal perspective in a matter of expression. The single frame of a photograph is the representation of the photographer’s perspective at that point in time. Viewing the numerous Boston bombing photographs (boston.com, 2013), Tlumacki presents a variety of perspectives of the situation –
based on locations, timing, subject foci, and those of graphical nature. While each photograph is a witness of truth of that particular moment, it is important to acknowledge the fact that photography is subjective in nature through the photographer’s personal interpretation and selection of the moment.

With that in mind, it can be argued that the idealistic nature of factual reporting is defeated by the subjective nature of the photographs themselves. While this argument may be excessive, it clearly draws attention to the need for a balanced attitude towards truthfulness of journalism. Thus with Tlumacki’s photograph, readers should be allowed to form opinions of their own based on the original photograph (Stroud & Reese, n.d.), and editors not seek to alter or guide reader opinions through image manipulation.

**Contextual Solutions as the Editor**

With the furore caused with regards to the photo manipulation, *NYDN* and its editors can now codify a set of rules and expectations for its staff and photographers as well as explore alternatives to its current “case study”.

The creation of *NYDN*’s rules and standards can be derived from NPPA’s proposed code of ethics (NPPA, n.d.) and additional guidelines to allow editorial control over news content. These additional guidelines should be explored and negotiated by *NYDN* photographers, editorial and management staff. The need for all *NYDN* stakeholders to be involved is to allow for the understanding and perspectives of their individual needs and concerns with respect to the publication of news content while balancing the need to present truthfulness in their news content.

One proposed guideline would be to improve the selection process of the published photograph. From Tlumacki’s range of photographs covering the Boston bombing, the editors are presented a good selection of choices that can create maximum news impact without the need for image manipulation – an alternative photograph can be proposed to that effect.

**Comment [L2]:** Does allowing photos used in journalism to be altered, does it make the photo more or less subjective?

**Comment [L3]:** However, if no other alternatives were available in the time crunch, what would you do?
The alternative photograph is proposed due to its symbolic reference to the violence, injuries and death in Boston. The inclusion of the American flag-symbol highlights the proximity of the bombing for the American readership. In terms of graphical nature, the alternative photograph implies the devastation to good effect while retaining a sense of editorial taste showing sensitivity towards the victims and their families, as well as the general public who may be adverse towards violent and graphic images.

However, if the management of NYDN is oriented towards readership and commercial success, the original unedited photograph should still be seriously considered as it generates a more visceral perspective of the Boston carnage that would pique the interest of potential readers.

Under the proposed guideline of editorial content, the editors may choose to utilise the same photograph but inform the readership that it has been edited for sensitivity issues. The usage of a pixelated block will serve as a discretionary measure without the need to manipulate the image beyond its original truth of perspective.

1 See Appendix for larger size and photo credit
2 See Appendix for larger size and photo credit
While it is important to maintain a code of ethics and standards in terms of truthful journalism, there is a need to balance the expectations of the photographer, editor, management and the general public.

Additionally, *NYDN* should publicly release its customised set of codes and standards so that the general public can be aware of, and be able to personally judge *NYDN’s* news content for truthfulness and accuracy.

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References


Appendix

**Photo Credits** John Tlumacki, The Boston Globe

*Original Photograph*

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**Photo Credits** John Tlumacki, The Boston Globe

*Alternative Photograph*
Generally a credible effort at exploring some of the key ethical dilemmas facing journalists in the era where technology increasingly allows lines to be blurred. Nice work, Vincent.