

Images of humanitarian crises: Ethical implications

by Gilbert Holleufer

With the long-heralded advent of the information age, the upheaval caused by the proliferation of visual technologies in a society dominated by the media is forcing the entire spectrum of what used to be called “the press” to redefine itself, to reassess its professional code of ethics and to devise new working methods. Only by examining the role played by images in the global flow of information — especially their relationship to the written word — can we fully grasp what is at stake. Our world view is increasingly shaped by the images, televised or in print, to which the public is constantly exposed. Indeed, so great is their power that one can say, along with many analysts, that they are beginning to replace reality: only what has been authenticated, certified and validated by being photographed or filmed and shown on television really exists. As these images bombard us from all sides, everything that has not been seen captured on film is reduced to oblivion. What makes the power of images so irresistible?

Images impart values. They attract or repel. They appeal to our imagination, play on our feelings and rouse us from our complacency: in other words, images *stir our conscience* because they purport to show us, in the raw, the unadorned, indisputable reality of things as they are. That is television’s great ambition, that is its purpose; and that is what prompted Régis Debray to say that “television is fond of humanitarian stories since they are both human interest stories and moral tales”. Over the years, images of humanitarian action have invaded the media and fired people’s imagination. They are standard fare on TV news programmes and have

Original: French.

pride of place in newspapers and magazines. Humanitarian work is probably the field most rife with the contrasts that make for powerful images: stark reality and the moral cause to which it gives rise; tragedy and the charitable response to it; evil and the good deeds accomplished to combat it.

The presentation of facts and the moral response to them are now so closely interrelated that all those who provide images of humanitarian action — whether media professionals or humanitarian organizations themselves — share a heavy burden of responsibility. For what moral justification can be found for broadcasting, night after night, all too summary newswashes showing throngs of starving people, piles of corpses and seemingly endless scenes of horror? And what justification can be found for showing certain scenes rather than others? Finally, is any serious attempt made to explain what is shown? It would seem that the legitimate moral questions which pictures of human tragedy raise for television viewers or readers too often receive unsatisfactory answers. The media increasingly confine themselves to covering — the word, with its sense of covering up, is appropriate — humanitarian crises and situations of armed conflict in all too superficial a way: by concentrating on visual shock effects, they only scratch the surface of the problems raised. As for humanitarian organizations, the competition which they face on the “humanitarian market” encourages a deplorable tendency to appeal to people’s emotions and to publicize and promote their own activities. Visual portrayals of victims and acts of atrocity are thus seen as a means of boosting the image of humanitarian organizations. Eventually, distracted by the goals they pursue, the purveyors of such images forget that they depict real human beings and that respect must be shown for the dignity of the “subject” which is offered up for public scrutiny.

Three disturbing tendencies, ranging from the general to the specific, reflect the ethical challenge posed by the media’s exploitation of images showing human suffering:

- *The selectiveness of news coverage.* What gives the media the right to focus attention on one situation rather than on another? Why is the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina constantly in the limelight, and not the conflicts which are ravaging Afghanistan, Angola and Cambodia? Why did the news agencies, which complain that their budgets do not allow them to cover the whole world, devote huge sums, and in some cases their entire resources, to reporting on the Gulf War? This is where the harmful effects of competition between news agencies can be felt; where the choices made by the most powerful can be seen to determine the direction taken by all the others.

- *Ever-faster reporting.* The tyranny of real time and the technical feats of live broadcasting have an accelerating effect that leads to an “information overload”: so many live images flood the television screens that our minds are saturated by them and we end up by not caring. Real time reporting has a perverse effect, too, in that it precludes any in-depth interpretation: events are shown either too soon or too late, but in any case there is no room for analysis, no time to gain perspective. How, then, can things be rationally understood? How can politicians make decisions when everything happening everywhere is constantly — and instantly — before their eyes? Under this avalanche of live images, there is no time for analysing events, or for the type of investigative journalism for which the Watergate reporters became famous. What benefit did CNN’s millions of viewers derive from the live ruminations of Peter Arnett as he filmed and commented on what he saw from the window of his hotel in Baghdad during the Gulf War? We are inundated with live images! But what information do they convey? Is it really all too complicated for the general public, as is sometimes claimed? The most important thing, it seems, is to offer people images to help them visualize rather than understand. The means have become the end. Such a failure to provide any form of interpretation or insight will end up by making an appalling stereotype seem natural, that of humanity divided into two groups treated unequally by fate: on the one hand all those who are suffering, and are inevitably victimized by “savages”, and on the other hand all those who are not. The more fortunate among us derive a sense of security from being shown an evil that only affects others, and to which humanitarian assistance, which soothes our conscience, is the providential solution. Such a fatalistic world view, combined with such a stereotypical conception of humanitarian action, leads to a general abdication of responsibility: how many times have we heard people say, speaking of Somalia or the former Yugoslavia, that those who live there “have constantly been fighting among themselves and always will”?
- *News voyeurism.* Should every image be shown — and can everything be visually conveyed? The use of shocking images has long been criticized, and the unease about showing them has grown as never before since 1985, when, as everyone recalls, the slow death of Omayra Sanchez, a little girl trapped in the mud, was broadcast minute by agonizing minute on television. Reporters and photographers, spurred on by the logic of real time and the pursuit of sensational stories, too easily give in to the temptation to outdo one another in portraying scenes of horror. What respect is shown for human dignity

when suffering is depicted without its cause being explained? Or when people who are valiantly struggling for survival in the midst of complex crises are presented as dazed shadows of themselves, condemned to live in filth, irretrievably lost and entirely dependent on humanitarian aid? In portraying these people's suffering, photographers use all their skills of composition to enhance it, to make it more "artistic". Recently, a New York publisher expressed admiration for a photographer whose pictures, taken in Rwanda, achieved their aesthetic effect by suggesting a relationship between death, suffering and filth. Underpinning these clichés, this cult of visibility in and for itself, is an *obscenity* that tramples on human dignity.

The huge challenge posed by these three very questionable tendencies calls for a concerted, ethical response:

News selectiveness must be countered with *a moral code of visual portrayal*, in other words an attitude which, based on a global analysis of humanitarian needs in the world, would make it possible to establish priorities according to other criteria than audience ratings and traditional political and other vested interests; an attitude which, in this age of global communications, would prompt the media to redefine their task and to report on events in all parts of the world (in Bosnia-Herzegovina, of course, but also in Kurdistan, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Angola), thereby maintaining an overall balance instead of simply showing disconnected fragments of reality.

The tyranny of real time must be countered with *a moral code of slower-paced reporting* that is conducive to reflection. Instead of dispatching images as fast as possible, time must be taken to explain, to give a balanced picture by showing different points of view, so that images are no longer used to cut costs but once again serve their ultimate purpose of providing information.

Finally, the alarming drift towards obscenity in depicting the victims of humanitarian crises must be countered with *a moral code to uphold human dignity*. Trapped as they are in complex and cruel situations, these people nevertheless remain human beings: their suffering must certainly be shown, but with decency, and with respect for their privacy. These men and women are not mute symbols of suffering: they are thinking, sentient individuals who have their own lives, their own hopes, and are often the first and foremost partners of humanitarian agencies. They must be allowed to speak up; the often formidable efforts which they have made to help themselves must be shown, along with the joy they take in life whenever they manage to find a moment's respite; so must the courage

and dignity with which they accept their suffering and face the dangers that threaten them.

This is a tall order, and one that calls for intense dialogue between media professionals and humanitarian organizations. More and more often it is these organizations, whose experience is essential for meeting the ethical challenge just described, that draw up guidelines stating how images should be used and information conveyed.

When wanton acts of violence are committed, nothing is worse than the failure to investigate and report on what has happened and to obtain images that can be used to alert public opinion. Even so, it is questionable whether any image is better than no image at all. It is high time to revive the noble tradition of photo journalism as it was practised in the past — a tradition in which the use of images is well-nigh inseparable from the art of commentary, analysis and narrative discourse. Images, used alone, blindfold our intelligence; and when we attempt to dissociate images and speech, imagination and reasoning, we are playing the sorcerer's apprentice: in order to *act*, man has always needed both.

Gilbert Holleufer

Advisor

Communication, Research and Development

Office of the Director General