Citizen or Professional: Exploring Heroic Moral Choice Motivations in Photojournalism

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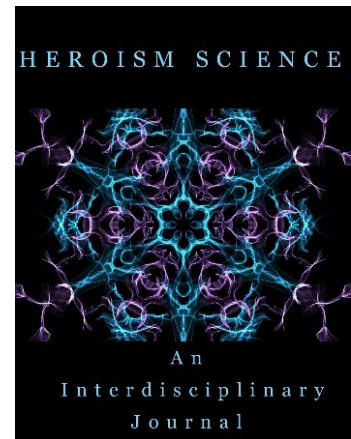
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ABSTRACT: Photojournalists make serious and often heroic split-second decisions when covering scenes. One of the dilemmas they might encounter is the choice between humanitarianism, which favors the subject in need, versus professionalism, which focuses on telling the story. This exploratory study aims to understand the moral decision-making situations encountered by professional photojournalists and how they process decisions in these situations. We interviewed nine professional photojournalists and surveyed the moral intensity of the situations they encountered. The results identified three types of situations where photojournalists encounter citizen vs. professional moral dilemmas. We found that most participants situationally prioritized the subject's needs and emotions in line with postconventional moral development, and preferred to act as concerned citizens rather than exclusively acting as committed professionals.

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1   AUTHOR NOTE

This article is dedicated to Dr. Paul Martin Lester (1953–2023) for his foundational work in photojournalism ethics.

2   INTRODUCTION

The image is familiar around the world and across generations: A young Kim Phuc running naked down a road in Vietnam with her brother and others, in pain from napalm burns. The Pulitzer Prize-winning image appeared on newspaper front pages a day after the 1972 attack and spawned worldwide anti-war protests. Less known, however, are the heroic moral choices made by Associated Press photojournalist Nick Ut after making his images that day. He described in an interview (Zhang, 2012):

> I had water, so I put water on her body. I then put my four cameras down on Highway One and began helping her. I borrowed a raincoat to cover her and then started carrying her. Her uncle said, "Please help the kids and take them to the hospital." I replied, "Yes, my car is right here." I put all the kids in my car right away…. The traffic was very bad from the village to the hospital. I kept telling the driver, "Hurry! Hurry!" When we finally got to the hospital, it was packed, with bodies, dying people, and the wounded everywhere. I ran inside to ask the nurses and the doctors to please help the kids, telling them about the napalm. After she saw them, she said, "Normal medicine cannot help. We cannot do anything." Then I showed her my media pass, and said, "If these kids die, you'll be in trouble tomorrow." Once they knew I was media, they carried Kim inside right away. (para. 35–39)

Ut's heroic actions demonstrate an ideal balance between the citizen and professional roles taken on by photojournalists. He risked his own life to photograph when able and worked strenuously to save the lives of others when needed. Although this is a well-documented and extreme example of the conflicting roles of citizen vs. professional encountered by photojournalists, it includes situations from photojournalist James Nachtwey attempting to stop a mob from killing a man during a riot in Indonesia while simultaneously photographing the attempt (Frei, 2001) to a pair of community journalists calling first responders to help a homeless woman freezing in a tent in 2022 (Doyle, 2022).

Conflicts like these are discussed among professionals, but often with dogmatic platitudes from polar points of view: concerned citizen first and always, or objective and uninvolved professionals always. This dichotomy is present not only in professional work but also in the training photojournalists are likely to receive. In *Photojournalism: The Professional's Approach,* a widely adopted English-language photojournalism textbook, author Ken Kobré (2004, 2008, 2017) presents this dichotomy of roles:

> The argument for professionalism often parallels the Utilitarian principle of ethics.… A photographer's job is to record the news, not to prevent it or to change it. Like an anthropologist observing a foreign culture, the photojournalist should look, record, but not disturb what is going on. The Good Samaritan argument, on the other hand, is absolutist: a photojournalist is, first and foremost, a human being. A photojournalist's primary responsibility is to the person needing immediate help. Journalism comes second. No one can measure the good a photo will do later, but you can see the immediate needs of the present. (Kobre, 2017, p. 414)

Kobré continues with a few examples of photojournalists who acted on behalf of their subjects' well-being or safety.

However, the arguably heroic moments when a photojournalist puts away their camera to provide immediate aid to a subject in need is a little-explored topic in photojournalism ethics, which focuses primarily on the decisions involved in making, publishing, and manipulation of images, representation of subjects and groups, and the meaning of objectivity. Important research attention has been given to the ethics of minimizing harm through photographs: aggravating grief, disrupting private or sensitive moments, and unnecessarily exposing subjects to public scrutiny, among others (Miller & Dahmen, 2020; Thomson, 2019). Although this exploratory study also encountered decisions of whether or not to make or publish a picture, our primary curiosity is moments when the photojournalist opted to become part of the story through active intervention. We seek through qualitative interviews a better understanding of the inevitable and ever-evolving need to balance roles that — as Ut's case above illustrates — can both require heroic action. We interviewed nine professional photojournalists, from young professionals to seasoned conflict veterans, to answer the questions:

- When have professional photojournalists encountered situations that require a rapid decision between their professional role and humanitarian action?

- How do they process these decisions in the heat of the moment?

Popular photojournalism textbooks such as Kobré's (2004, 2008, 2017) present examples of when photojournalists decided to act beyond their professional role. However, understanding oneself and having experience in making such decisions at a postconventional level of moral development (Kohlberg, 1981, 1984) is important for a profession that is likely to present a need to aid a fellow person. The results of these small-scale, in-depth interviews and a moral choice survey will inform a pedagogical simulation designed to put players into hypothetical situations that require making difficult decisions about how to serve this dual citizen/professional role. As Amend et al. (2012) note, novice journalists often feel unprepared for difficult ethical decisions. By understanding how moral development and moral intensity inform the decisions made by photojournalists and the consequences that follow, this study could provide resources and materials for educators to better prepare students and professionals for difficult, split-second decision-making.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 PHILOSOPHICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL TRADITIONS

Lester et al. (2022) point to six commonly cited philosophical frameworks that inform ethical choice in visual reporting: the golden rule, hedonism, the golden mean, the categorical imperative, utilitarianism, and the veil of ignorance. They provide frameworks for the understanding and evaluation of complex situations through the perspective of ethical philosophy and describe multiple evaluation rubrics designed to help in such decisions. Although these tools and frameworks are highly valuable and present a key element of learning how to react to these situations, we argue that the circumstances that require deciding whether to switch roles and help someone in need often unfold too quickly for cognitive evaluation methods alone. The decisions are complex, emotional, and made based upon lifelong moral development and experiential learning (Coleman & Wilkins, 2008).

Yung Soo Kim and collaborators apply a situational ethics framework with three characteristics as considerations in the decision of a photojournalist whether to act as a "good Samaritan" or a "dispassionate observer." These characteristics include the presence of other

helpers, the intention of the victim (whether they chose to be in the situation), and the possibility of intervention (whether it is physically possible or if it would lead to self-injury or death). In three of four papers (Kim, 2017; Kim & Kelly, 2010, 2013), this framework is applied to examine the public perception of the photojournalists' actions through surveys. A fourth (Kim & Chung, 2013) examines the actions of photojournalists directly but does so through case studies of two images that drew intense public scrutiny. Kim and Chung did not interview the photojournalists directly, however. Instead, they relied on public discourse, previously published interview quotes from the photojournalists, and commentary from pundits.

Intense public scrutiny, we argue, might lead to embattled answers from the photojournalists to questions asked by news media in the aftermath of the event. Extreme cases of this include the scrutiny received by Kevin Carter in Sudan (Marinovich & Silva, 2000) or R. Umar Abbasi following his image of a New York subway death (Memmott, 2012). Those answers are given when their careers and reputations are under immediate threat. Their published critics also stand to gain in reputation for harsh scrutiny of those actions.

In this present study, we rely on direct, confidential interviews with photojournalists who are in a better position to provide candid analysis of their actions. Confidentiality provides a safe space for photojournalists to share their experiences without public pressure. In addition, the decisions discussed here are also moral judgments, influenced by community and cultural development as much as they are by philosophical ethics frameworks. We employ theory from moral psychology to explore through an alternate lens how these split-second decisions are made and how photojournalists view them.

Current understandings of moral judgment and decision-making have been further informed by decades of research in psychology, and business ethics, with a wide and varied field of focus and scholarship (Bartels et al., 2015; Coleman & Wilkins, 2008; Craft, 2013). Scholars have suggested that most people – at least outside the bounds of staunchly committed philosophers – should be expected to exercise moral flexibility in their judgment and decision-making. This framework takes into account both the actor's characteristics, as well as the context in which a moral decision is made in a case-by-case model (Bartels et al., 2015).

This dynamic view of moral decision-making aligns with Kohlberg's theory of moral development. Kohlberg (1981, 1984) theorized that moral reasoning abilities and skills may

proceed across a type of developmental arch, as people could personally grow toward a higher order of moral thought throughout the course of their lives. He developed a three-stage conceptual understanding of moral development, which began with the *preconventional* stage, where actors were extrinsically motivated through sanctions, rewards, or punishment, to conform to rule-bound moral behavior. Second was the stage of *conventional* reasoning, where rules are internalized and respected for serving society and the greater good. Such a duty-bound actor is intrinsically motivated toward a certain schema of moral behavior favoring in-group interests. The third, and last, is the *postconventional* stage. This describes the pinnacle of moral development, where there is less mindfulness of rules and in-group stewardship, and more of a focus on higher-order, universally revered, human-focused principles.

Kohlberg's theories have been explained as schematic frameworks (Coleman & Wilkins, 2008). Schemas are basic, templated conceptions and knowledge, developed through learning or experience, that serve as guides for perception, interpretation, or problem-solving (VandenBos, 2013). Moral schemas, by extension, are schemas that influence how people recognize, categorize, and evaluate moral situations. These are developed over time from lived experience, learning and social interactions and are also able to evolve and change with time, continuing experience, and learning. Consistent with the Kohlbergian developmental framework, they typically evolve from a rudimentary moral schema (e.g., personal interest) to more complex and sophisticated mental models (e.g., social norms, and societal stewardship) later on (Narvaez & Bock, 2002). Lastly, tied to the developed moral thinking of Kohlberg's *postconventional* stage is the concept of *Moral Identity*. Consistent with Kohlberg's developmental framework, they typically evolve from a simple mental model of morality (e.g., personal interest) to more complex and sophisticated models (e.g., social norms, and societal stewardship) later on (Mechler & Thoma, 2013; Narvaez & Bock, 2002). Further, tied to the developed moral thinking of Kohlberg's postconventional stage is the concept of Moral Identity (Aquino et al., 2011; Aquino & Reed II, 2002; Peens & Louw, 2000). Moral Identity is described as a self-regulatory and motivational trait, where a person's moral character is a central and defining element of their self-concept. A highly principled sense of moral identity is posited to be a key factor in achieving the highest level of moral reasoning described by Kohlberg (Aquino & Reed II, 2002).

Consistent with the Kohlbergean developmental framework, they typically evolve from a simple mental model of morality (e.g., personal interest) to more complex and sophisticated models (e.g., social norms, and societal stewardship) later on (Mechler & Thoma, 2013; Narvaez & Bock, 2002). Further, tied to the developed moral thinking of Kohlberg's postconventional stage is the concept of Moral Identity (Aquino et al., 2011; Aquino & Reed Ii, 2002; Peens & Louw, 2000). Moral Identity is described as a self-regulatory and motivational trait, where a person's moral character is a central and defining element of their self-concept. A highly principled sense of moral identity is posited to be a key factor in achieving the highest level of moral reasoning described by Kohlberg (Aquino & Reed Ii, 2002).

Similarly, Rest (1986) developed a foundational four-step model to understand moral judgment based on awareness, judgment, intent, and behavior. In this original framework 1) a person identifies that there is a moral issue. Then, 2) they make a judgment about which action is morally correct in that situation. They then must 3) prioritize and resolve to place moral concerns above others and commit to moral intent. Last, 4) the person must respond with moral action, regardless of unease, obstacles, conflict, or other difficulties (Craft, 2013; Jones, 1991; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2013; Rest, 1986). However, this pattern of moral decision-making is often situational and issue-contingent. Jones (1991) proposed the concept of moral intensity as a way to understand how issue-specific factors may drive moral and ethical choices (Jones, 1991; Singhapakdi et al., 1996). Moral intensity is described as ''the extent of issue-related moral imperative in a situation,'' (Jones, 1991, p. 372). Considerations include:

1.   Magnitude of consequences – the amount of harm—or benefit—to stakeholders

2.   Social consensus – the degree of normative social agreement that an act is good or bad

3.   Probability of effect – the probability that the act will take place and will harm or benefit stakeholders

4.   Temporal immediacy – the imminence or length of time between the present and the act

5.   Proximity – the feeling of closeness (physical, social, or emotional) to stakeholders

6.   Concentration of effect – the strength of consequences for certain stakeholders

Moral intensity has become an important focus of research to understand how this concept might predict and influence moral judgment (Craft, 2013; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2013), including some work in gaming and simulations. Specifically, moral intensity factors have been built into immersive ethical training simulations used by the U.S. Navy (Sloane & Holmes, 2009). It is also used to understand differences in perception of a moral situation and to recognize harmful actions between experienced and inexperienced disaster responders (Wahyudin & Hasegawa, 2015). It has been observed to mediate effects (via the magnitude of consequences) in cheating decisions by game players (Wu & Chen, 2018).

4 Methodology

To answer the research questions, we adopted semi-structured in-depth interviews with follow-up surveys to learn about the related experiences of professional journalists and their moral decisions. The protocol of this research was approved by the university's institutional review board.

4.1 Participants

A purposive sample of professional photojournalists was recruited via the professional connections of two of the researchers of this paper, both of whom are former photojournalists. The screening criteria include two key qualifications: (a) a minimum of two years of professional experience; and (b) have encountered situations requiring making tough moral/ethical decisions. In our selection process, we strived to form a diverse participant pool, including a broad range of working experience and demographic backgrounds to gather diverse narratives. In total, nine professional journalists who met our criteria were interviewed. Table 1 lists the demographic information of the participants for this study.

Table 1

| *Demographic Information of Participants* | | | | Years of |
Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Professional Experience
Participant A	Female	White or Caucasian	24	About 4 years

Participant B	Male	White or Caucasian	38	About 8 years
Participant C	Female	Asian	36	About 2 years
Participant D	Male	American Indian/Native American or Alaska Native	33	About 2 years
Participant E	Female	White or Caucasian	49	About 20 years
Participant F	Male	Black or African American	50	About 10 years
Participant G	Male	White or Caucasian	68	About 39 years
Participant H	Female	White or Caucasian	N/A	About 18 years
Participant I	Male	Asian	44	About 15 years

4.2 DATA COLLECTION METHOD

4.2.1 Semi-structured interview

The interview included 11 questions and open-ended follow-ups. We asked participants to describe specific situations where they had to decide between professionalism and humanitarianism (e.g., "In your career, have you ever found yourself in a situation when you needed to decide whether to photograph or to help the subject of the photo?"). We also asked them to explain the reasons that led to the decision and their decision-making process (e.g., "Have you ever not made a picture — even one that would be great — For any reason?"). Each interview lasted from 40 to 50 minutes. Two participants were interviewed in-person and seven participants were interviewed online via Zoom.

4.2.2 Demographic and follow-up exploratory survey

Following the interview, a demographic and exploratory questionnaire was distributed to participants, via online survey software (*Qualtrics XM*, 2023). The survey begins with a single exploratory item to determine the recognition of a moral situation, and six exploratory items to measure the degree of moral intensity (adapted from Singhapakdi et al., 1996). For each of the exploratory items, participants responded to single-sentence statements with responses of agreement (7-point Likert, "Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree").

4.3   Data Analysis

We analyzed preliminary interview data using thematic analysis. The analysis followed the procedure suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): 1) familiarizing with the data and developing initial codes; 2) coding the data; 3) searching for potential themes; 4) defining and naming themes; and 5) producing a thematic report. Thematic analysis software (*NVivo 12*, 2023) was used to code the interview transcripts and identify themes for the two research questions. For the survey, we provided descriptive results to summarize the data, and nonparametric tests appropriate for small sample sizes (e.g. Friedman).

5   Results

Q1: When have professional photojournalists encountered situations that require a rapid decision between their professional role and a personal or humanitarian action?

Table 2

Ethical Situations encountered by the photojournalists

When	Moral Dilemma	Codes	Number of Codes	Quotes from Interview
		Basic needs	3	"There was a student who had been kicked out of his house, and was really in need of just like basic… needs… like basic food. and clothing needs"
		Imminent threat to life or wellbeing	5	"There was a car that had gotten stuck … under the

Encounter situations where the subjects need direct or immediate help.	When the subjects are in need of help, a photographer has to balance if, when, and how much to help them and how to complete the reporting task in order to inform the public (professionalism).			overpass. I had my cameras and I also helped push that car out of the water. I would always make the picture first and then I would help."
		Dire situation	3	"So there was a boy that I've photographed for about a year and a half…. he was also one of dying, which I had no role in at all. I mean, it was a total medical thing. Or I couldn't have done anything that could have helped the situation in any way"
Subjects were in grief	When scenes elicit the empathetic concerns of the photographer for the subjects, the photographer decides whether to show empathy to the person(s) by providing emotional	Grief and Emotional Status	4	"I want to do more, like I wish I could spend more time with this family."

	support or focus on the reporting.			
The action of the photographer may lead to negative impacts	The humanitarian side of a photographer might be concerned that the act of photographing might cause an emotional disturbance, change the dynamics of a scene, bring about negative impacts on the subjects, or against the willingness of the subjects. However, this sensitivity might conflict with the photojournalist's professional task to tell the story and inform the wider public.	Negative Impact	4	"The photojournalist side of me said, you need to take this picture and tell this story. But the human side of me said, you can't break that space."

Theme 1: Encounter situations where the subjects need direct or immediate help

When photographers encounter situations where the photo subjects are in difficult situations, the photographers might face the dilemma of whether to intervene and help the subjects, focus solely on photographing, or do both. Depending on the urgency level of the situation or type of threats to the subjects the dilemma faced by the photographer may vary and can be summarized into three categories: "basic needs" situations, "imminent threat to life or well-being" situations, and "dire" situations.

First, "basic needs" situations refer to situations where subjects need resources and support to make a living. This often occurs when covering individuals who are homeless or facing financial hardships. For instance, one participant mentioned,

> I was working on the story at [a local high school]. There was a student who had been kicked out of his house and was really in need of…like basic needs… like basic food and clothing.

In such situations, one participant felt that photographing the subjects might not address the immediate needs of the subjects compared to providing them with the resources directly, as described by the participant, "You know he needed that (resources) more than he needed me photographing him." At the same time, another participant shared the concern that offering financial support in advance might compromise the objectivity of the report: "We need someone who is willing to share their story. If you pay, then subjects will do whatever we ask them to do," the interviewee noted to illustrate how payment will likely alter the actions of the subject. The second type of situation, "imminent threat to life or well-being" situations, involves subjects facing a direct threat to their lives or well-being due to natural disasters, war, violence, or alcohol or drug abuse. Several participants shared stories where the subjects were in danger and needed immediate help. Otherwise, the subjects might lose their life. Photojournalists need to decide whether to save the subjects or take the photo. For instance, one participant described a situation where he had to decide whether to save people in a flood or cover the scene,

> Detroit [is a] major flooding area. There was a car that had gotten stuck …
> under the overpass. I had my camera….

Another participant described her experience of covering a scene where a teenager was in a coma and lying on the street due to an alcoholic overdose. As she described,

> He, the boy, would have probably suffocated. He was vomiting. His upper
> respiratory (air)ways were blocked…

The third type of situation, "dire" situation, refers to situations where the subjects are facing death and cannot be saved. This typically occurs when the subjects have diseases or conditions that cannot be cured. In such cases, photojournalists witness the last moment of the subject. Since most photojournalists we interviewed had developed relationships with the subjects, such emotional attachment posed additional challenges when reporting:

> One of the little children came upstairs and screamed to her dad: "She's
> dying." And I'm standing at the doorway and the dad ran to the steps and he
> looked back and saw me. I said: "Can I come in?" And he said, "yes, you've
> been with us." But I remember, it was that I had the relationship [with the
> family].

Among those three types of situations, we found that certain factors (e.g., social pressure, personal safety, and emotional connection with the subjects) might intensify the

moral dilemma and significantly impact the decision-making process of photojournalists. One photojournalist shared a story of covering a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, North Carolina. He saw an older white nationalist who yelled at counter-protesters and was beaten severely by them. Although the subject was a white nationalist who initiated the fight, the research participant still felt empathy toward this fellow human. As described by the participant: "While that man probably deserved to get his ass kicked for what he was yelling to people — very hurtful things — You're still a human being…" However, the personal safety perceptions of the participant made it difficult to intervene and save the subject. "But if I would have stepped in and said, don't do that, they easily could have taken me as someone from the far right, which I'm not." The counter-protesters could have turned their vengeance on the photographer. "I will never forget the sound of that. That's his skull, which I assume was cracking. That could have been mine if I would have stepped in."

Theme 2: Subjects in grief

Several participants expressed the moral challenges associated with covering scenes where the subjects experienced deep sadness and grief. Situating in such scenes, photojournalists tend to be empathetic to the tragic experiences of the subjects. Some photographers may feel compelled to provide emotional support and care to the distressed subjects while others believe they should maintain professionalism, remaining fair and neutral.

For instance, a young photographer interviewed was assigned to cover a family who lost their son in a shooting. Their son was found to be an innocent bystander who wasn't the target of the shooting. In the courtroom, the photographer was sitting very close to the family. When the court showed the video of their son being killed, family members became emotionally stricken. This situation created a moral dilemma for the young photographer — her empathy with the family made her feel that she needed to comfort them with a physical hug rather than simply observe and record.

Theme 3: The action of the photographer may lead to negative impacts

Four participants encountered an ethical dilemma where the photographic action may disturb the scene or negatively impact the subjects. For instance, a participant shared a story when he was tasked to interview American activist Rosa Parks, who was visiting a hospitalized student injured in a bus accident. There was a moment when Ms. Parks and

others were praying for the injured student. The participant struggled with whether he should take the photo or respect the solemnity of the scene and minimize his impact on it. As he described,

> I realized that I was the only journalist who actually had access in the hospital. And, Mrs. Parks eventually came down and, I remember in my mind, this was a Pulitzer Prize picture and they started praying and I couldn't lift the camera to shoot. …to actually take that picture would have destroyed that interaction of Mrs. Parks coming to pray with this family.

For this participant, the humanitarian side raised his concern that photographing might disturb the natural interaction among the subjects and alter the scene's atmosphere. Taking the photo could cause moral discomfort for the participant. On the other hand, this participant faced the professional pressure of being a photojournalist whose primary responsibility lies in capturing and conveying stories. Particularly, when he recognized the value of this photo to his career, as described by the participant — "this is a Pulitzer Prize picture", the moral dilemma became intensified.

In another case, a participant shared a dilemma where the subjects asked him to not publish the photos as the subjects expressed concerns about the potential safety issue caused by the exposure of their identities through photos. As described by the participant:

> And then the father took me aside, and he was like, "would you mind not using those? Because people in Venezuela know who we are, and there's a chance that they could see these, and it would cause, you know, issues for us."

Q2: HOW DO THEY PROCESS THESE DECISIONS IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT?
Table 3

Results for Research Question 2

How?	Codes	Number of Codes	Quotes from Interview

Capture photos for social good and/or career impact.	Impact	4	I held this mindset of 'People need to see these photographs. People need to see what's happening here'.
Show empathy first	Emotional/Financial/Physical Support	6	"I need to be a human before doing my job, like, be somebody who listens and empathizes and can help in some way."
Evaluate the impact on photographic subjects and reduce negative impact	Reduce negative impact	4	"I couldn't lift the camera to shoot. Taking that picture would have destroyed that interaction of Ms. Parks coming to pray with this family…"

Theme 1. Capture photos for social good and/or career impact

When covering scenes involving natural disasters or life-threatening situations, some participants in the study prioritized photographing the scene and capturing photos that produce potential social impact. For instance, one participant described her experience of covering victims of a hurricane:

> When I was at the convention center and just photographing, I held this mindset of 'People need to see these photographs. People need to see what's happening here.' I was so focused on that "people need to see these stories"… but now I think, "Okay, I could have probably put this person in my car and taken them to get medical help."

When reflecting upon their decisions, several participants felt that they should focus more on the subjects. At the same time, they both agreed that some factors led them to emphasize professionalism. First, some life-threatening situations are out of the control of photojournalists; they either lack the ability or resources to help. As one participant said, "Of course, at the time, it was very confusing about where you could even take people. Because all of the medical facilities — most of them were flooded."

Second, in such situations, photojournalists were so shocked by the scene that they acted on their instinct as a photojournalist to complete the task and capture valuable photos: I did cover a police-involved shooting. I'd never cover something that intense. I think I was really on autopilot. In hindsight, I would have been more sensitive with the neighbors, like talking with them. At the moment, you're just like, everything's all heightened. I've got to get the best pictures and get good pictures, and the editor wants them. Everyone wants that ASAP.

Theme 2. Show empathy first

When confronted with dilemmas involving subjects experiencing grief or emotional distress, a few photojournalists interviewed decided to provide subjects with emotional support. For instance, the young photojournalist in the courtroom covering the family who lost their son decided to comfort the family despite being aware that her decision would potentially negatively impact her career: "At this point, I was like, I don't care what's going on. I want to spend time with these people." And "I need to be a human before doing my job, like, be somebody who listens and empathizes and can help in some way."

This is also true for some participants when they encounter situations where subjects need living or financial support. "I took the student to Walmart. Just buy him toilet paper and food some basic stuff he needed. And I did that probably at least a couple of times. But I just decided I wasn't going to photograph him anymore. You know he needed that, more than he needed me photographing him…"

However, one participant who decided to support a subject in need also expressed concerns about her decision. It could breach industry ethical norms or damage her career: "I was worried about a $20 bus ticket [bought for the subject]. [laughs] But I think I was nervous because I'm a freelancer. I have no protection. I was worried. If my editor knew, then they'd be like 'That's not ethical.'"

Theme 3. Evaluate the impact on the photographic subjects and reduce negative impact.

A few participants decided to not photograph to reduce any scene disturbance and minimize any adverse consequences. For instance, the participant covered Ms. Parks and others who were praying for the injured student decided not to photograph such an important scene due to his concern that his photographing action might disturb the interaction between the subjects: couldn't lift the camera to shoot. [To] take that picture would have destroyed

> that interaction of Ms. Parks coming to pray with this family…my personal
> ethics was to always try to show the human element of a person… [The
> professional side of me said:] "you need to take this picture and tell this
> story." But the human side of me said, "you can't break that space."

In another case, the photographer who covered border-crossing immigrants chose not to publish photos he had taken after learning that the dissemination of those photos could endanger the subjects:

> And then the father took me aside, and he was like, "would you mind not using those?
> Because people in Venezuela know who we are, and there's a chance that they could
> see these, and it would cause, you know, issues for us." I said, "Yeah, of course, you
> know I won't publish them, or I won't file them." But we were both a little
> disappointed by that, because, you know, it was a good story. But to me, the safety of
> the person in the photo is the most important thing, and so I respected that.

We found that all participants interviewed respected the reluctance of subjects to have photos published even if the events unfolded in a public place or official permission was provided.

Q.2.1. Survey Exploratory Measures

Although exploratory survey results are preliminary and, so far, from too small of a sample size (*N*=9) to determine meaningful findings, we identify emerging trends for future investigation. For example, statistical analysis revealed that responses to exploratory items tended to cluster around centered distributions. The first item, which assessed whether photographers recognized ethical dilemmas, yielded a mean of 5.10 (*SD*=2.02), indicating a general acknowledgment of such dilemmas. We calculated an index of moral intensity (*M*=4.76, *SD*=2.02) based on averaged construct responses (see Table 4). We observed an emerging yet distinct bimodal distribution for Social Consensus (Modes: 2, 4), with clear clusters indicating either disagreement or a neutral response to the statement "Most people would agree that the photographer's action is wrong." Employing the Friedman test, a non-parametric analysis suitable for small samples, no significant variations were observed in the

averages for moral intensity constructs, X^2 (5)=6.881, *n.s.*, with Social Consensus and Proximity measures obtaining the lowest scores.

Table 4

Means table for Moral Intensity survey items

Moral Intensity Construct / Statement	*n*	*M*	*SD*
Magnitude of Consequence / "The overall harm (if any) done as a result of the photographer's action would be very small."	9	3.89	1.73
Social Consensus / "Most people would agree that the photographer's action is wrong."	9	3.33	1.56
Probability of Effect / "There is a very small likelihood that the photographer's action will actually cause any harm."	9	4.13	1.69
Temporal Immediacy / "The photographer's action will not cause any harm in an immediate future."	9	4.56	1.34
Proximity / "If the photographer is a personal friend of the [victim], the action is wrong."	9	3.33	1.05
Concentration of Effect / "The photographer's action will harm very few people (if any)."	9	4.44	1.71

6 Discussion

The preliminary results so far reveal three types of moral dilemma scenes requiring photojournalists to make decisions between humanitarianism and professionalism: 1) situations where the subjects need(s) help, such as "basic needs" situations, "imminent threat to life or well-being" situations, or dire situations; 2) situations with subjects in grief; 3) situations where the action of the photojournalist may lead to potential scene disturbance. We found that the factors that intensify the moral dilemmas of photojournalists in those situations come from pressure from both the subjects and the profession.

Subjects facing various challenges or threats may need immediate emotional, financial, or physical support. Whereas publishing their stories might have long-term prosocial outcomes, such as Nick Ut's *Napalm Girl* photo arguably had, the photographic act alone will not provide immediate benefits or solve their pressing problems. Photographing them may also infringe upon their privacy, disrupt their normal activities or interactions, and even endanger their safety if published.

The humanitarian or heroic side of the photojournalists we interviewed inspires them to take action (e.g., save the subjects). Meanwhile, they also face various pressures that make it difficult to intervene: They bear the career responsibility to cover the scene objectively, ensuring that their documentation remains neutral and truthful. They felt the necessity of fulfilling the tasks assigned by their editors, as meeting professional obligations is crucial for career advancement and job security. They might also want to make a social impact through their photographs, using their work as a means of raising awareness and producing impactful social change. Intervening in the scene and saving the participants might cost them valuable pictures. Additionally, some external pressures, such as social norms, their relationship with the subjects, or their personal safety, may lead them to focus on covering the scene or remain neutral rather than intervene to help the subjects.

The participants we interviewed tend to empathize with the subjects: they determine that they should act benevolently; they prioritize the subject's needs and emotions. They preferred to act as concerned citizens rather than exclusively acting as committed professionals when encountering similar moral decision-making situations. This postconventional decision-making response was present in all of our interviewees, including one with the least professional experience. This implies that these decisions are based on comprehensive moral development rather than specific professional ethics. However, we noticed that when

confronted with situations that are beyond their control, possess a significant public interest, or produce deep social impact, photojournalists might be more likely to cover the scene and capture the stories without intervention, reflecting characteristics outlined by Kim, et al. (Kim, 2017; Kim & Chung, 2013; Kim & Kelly, 2010, 2013).

6.1 CURRENT LIMITATIONS

A larger sample is needed before results from the structured survey designed to evaluate moral intensity can present valuable or actionable information. However, the authors remain interested in developing an understanding of how moral intensity interacts with the ethical actions of photojournalists. The nascent bimodal profile of Social Consensus results was intriguing and is worth more focused examination. If the bimodality persists in further testing, an exploration of why would open a new research opportunity. As yet unanswered is the question of when professional photojournalists demonstrate moral flexibility by opting to not intervene, aid, or demonstrate empathy for a subject. For example, would these same participants continue to photograph a problematic moment involving the presumed perpetrator of a crime, a politician, celebrity, or another person who, through their actions, chooses to put themself in the public eye? — "the intent of the subject" as identified by Kim (2017). What role does the perception of victimhood play in the photojournalist's choice of action? As this exploratory study continues, we will add participants and examine these questions further.

6.2 CONCLUSION

Like nearly all participants in this study, Nick Ut demonstrated the actions of the postconventional stage of moral development. A hypothetically preconventional-stage Nick Ut, motivated by the rewards of making a great image, might have also been intimidated by the social authority of medical personnel and found himself unable to cajole them into caring for Kim Phuc. Instead, he sought postconventional moral balance by making the picture, then securing safety and medical care for young napalm victim Kim before providing his image to the world. A hypothetically conventional-stage Nachtwey in Indonesia might have opted not to interrupt the murder in front of him while enacting internalized rules of noninterference and impartial reporting to educate the greater society about the political situation there. Instead, he carefully balanced the needs of the man in front of him with the social impact the photographs would make and did so at great risk to his own safety.

Young journalists have long been taught the complex ethical judgments of the profession. These include confounding and historically polar dogmas (Goodwin & Smith, 1994, p. 327), from a professional insistence on impartiality and non-intervention (Doyle, 2022), to a more recent citizen-first value of aid when needed (Kobre, 2017, p. 414). Both poles can produce heroic action, from risking life and limb in order to publish unimpeachably objective evidence of horror to selflessly setting aside potential professional achievement in order to help someone in need. This exploratory study hints that no matter what stage of their career, photojournalists might rely on lifelong moral development to find a more situational and fluid approach to answering the dilemmas that confront long-time professionals. The preliminary results of this study indicate that postconventional morality, in which a focus on higher-order, universally revered, human-focused principles could supersede the objectivity and nonintervention dogmas of the photojournalism profession.

"She calls me 'Uncle Nick,'" Ut said of Kim, who now lives in Canada. "After the picture, I went to see her all the time. She's like my family. I call her once a week. She sometimes says, 'He bothers me too much!' She's just joking. She tells me, 'Uncle Nick, I love you.' We're like family now. I call her all the time." (Zhang, 2012, para. 64–65)

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8   CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.