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Anonymous dissent: Protest, privacy, and photographic surveillance in digital media

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Abstract

Protesters in recent years have been making a somewhat novel demand: they are asking journalists to blur their faces in news coverage of public demonstrations. This article investigates this demand to explore how new surveillance technologies and the political economy of media are complicating the ethics of visual journalism. Reviewing 26 articles from news outlets, trade publications, and blogs published between May 2020 and October 2024 that discussed protesters' demand, the study considers three themes: visibility and surveillance in digital media; the ethical contradictions that visual journalists navigate while documenting dissent; and the relationships among journalists, movements, and political-economic power structures. The article contrasts Enlightenment ideals with an ethic of care to understand journalists' views on transparency and truth, concluding that the uneven power dynamics among protesters, journalists and the state raise important questions about the documentation, preservation and circulation of dissent.

Keywords

Ethics, facial recognition technology, privacy, protest, surveillance, visual journalism

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During the 2020 uprisings for racial justice and continuing through the pro-Palestine encampments in 2024, protesters have been making a somewhat novel demand: they are asking journalists to blur their faces in news coverage. They are making the demand for two primary reasons: first, protesters have faced significant reprisals from employers, academic institutions and the state for participating in these demonstrations; second, advanced surveillance techniques, specifically facial recognition technology, are increasingly being used by law enforcement and private actors to target political dissidents, compromising activists' safety and changing their expectation of privacy in public spaces.

In light of these risks, global protest movements have started using various tactics to shield their identities. In Hong Kong and Mexico, for example, protesters have used umbrellas, masks, and other protective gear to conceal their faces in public (Bratich, 2007; Smith, 2019). Activists have also developed open-source software to help them avoid digital detection (Perry, 2020). Signal, a messaging app that uses end-to-end encryption, recently introduced a blurring feature that allows users to add a "fuzzy trace" over any part of an image. Other apps can scrub the metadata associated with an image file: the location and time it was taken, the camera model and settings, and other descriptive keywords.

While these tactics offer protesters added privacy and protect them from authoritarian regimes committed to silencing dissent, they can complicate journalists' efforts to gather verifiable sources of information. Journalists, though, have long used their own methods to protect their sources' identities, arguing that anonymity is sometimes necessary to protect people in vulnerable situations: survivors of sexual violence, people with non-permanent immigration status and whistleblowers (Duffy, 2014; Wulfemeyer, 1983). Print journalists offer anonymity by quoting unnamed officials and allowing sources to speak "off the record" or "on background." Visual journalists use silhouettes, shadows and foreground objects to hide people's faces. Accepting protesters' demand for blurring, however, extends anonymous sourcing to public spaces, where people have no expectation of privacy and where journalists are not legally obligated to gain the consent of people being photographed (Godden, 2020). Extending anonymous sourcing to public spaces also makes it difficult for viewers to verify journalists' sources, which could affect journalists' credibility (Swain, 1978).

By analyzing published news articles, blogs and trade publications that discussed protesters' demand for anonymity, this study reviews how journalists are responding to these developments, reassessing their reporting methods and reevaluating their ethical responsibilities.

Fields of practice, surveillance technologies, and visual ethics

Social movements and journalists are increasingly balancing the benefits and risks of privacy and publicity. To understand how both groups prioritize privacy while also seeking to enhance their visibility, we review literature on metajournalistic discourse, surveillance studies and the ethics of visual journalism. This framework views journalism as a socio-political project that is discursively shaped and imbued with power dynamics. It also recognizes how the political economy of media affects the production and circulation of dissent and photographic surveillance.

Metajournalistic discourse

Although the field of journalism is legally protected in many parts of the world, its boundaries of practice are porous. Metajournalistic discourse is one way journalists establish and maintain their professional field: marking some practices as legitimate while negating others. Because the discursive struggles over journalistic practice and professional identity increasingly occur across numerous sites—social media, podcasts and blogs—long-standing professional norms and newsroom routines are more vulnerable to critique.

Carlson (2016) defined metajournalistic discourse as "the means through which journalistic practices, norms, and institutions come to be legitimated or contested" (p. 353). It can include news about journalism, awards programs, newsroom policies, and trade journals, among other things. It can be expressed by journalists, scholars and educators, media analysts, and a variety of other social actors. Analyzing the discursive contests over the field treats news as a construction, not a mirror, of events (Carlson, 2017; Tuchman, 1978). It acknowledges that the field changes over time, is highly contextual, and consists of various social relationships (Carlson, 2016). This approach extends Zelizer's (1993) argument that journalism is an "interpretive community" that operates through "shared discourse and collective interpretations of key public events" (p. 219).

Visual journalism operates within a wider field of practice characterized by its own specialized discourse. Visual journalists have historically been marginalized in newsrooms, taking a back seat to faulty assumptions about the epistemic power of camera technologies (Bock et al., 2017; Lowrey, 2002; Zelizer, 2005). Visual journalists also spend more time in the field witnessing events than their word-based colleagues (Bock, 2021). As an embodied practice, visual journalism is physically demanding and poses unique risks (Chapnick, 1994). In the United States, many visual journalists follow the National Press Photographers Association's code of ethics, which augments, rather than supplants, those of the Society of Professional Journalists and the Online News Association (NPPA.org, n.d.; Online News Association, n.d.; Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), n.d.). Across all three sets of guidelines, practitioners are expected to be truthful, transparent and respectful of their subjects' rights. ONA expects members to consider the "emotional state and safety of contributors" and be mindful of the dangers of interacting with sources online (Online News Association, n.d.). The Society of Professional Journalists' code has an entire section called "minimize harm" (SPJ, n.d.), and the NPPA code includes admonitions to show care for news subjects and colleagues alike, with tenets such as "Give special consideration to vulnerable subjects . . ." and maintain the "highest standards of behavior in all professional interactions" (NPPA.org, n.d.). Avoiding harm is a central concern for visual journalistic ethics.

Whether or not ethical principles are encoded into formal lists, they are part of the broader discourse that shapes the field. The debate over whether to blur protesters' faces thus poses a contradiction: protesters' desire for privacy is at odds with journalists' desire for transparency and truth. To resolve this tension, we review next the portrayal of social movements in the news media and the targeted state surveillance of US activists,

specifically Black Americans. As these histories show, the new vulnerabilities that immigrants and non-white protesters are currently facing are connected to a legacy of criminalizing and punishing dissent.

Visibility and surveillance

Social movements have long had complicated relationships with the news media (Gitlin, 1980; Koopmans, 2004). Movements demonstrate in the streets to enhance their visibility and place their issues on the public agenda. Journalists' propensity for spectacle and sensationalism, however, often obscures the underlying issues motivating movements (Brown and Mourão, 2021). According to several studies, journalists delegitimize and marginalize protests against anti-Black racism more than movements for immigrants' rights, environmental justice and public health (Brown and Harlow, 2019; Brown et al., 2019). Repeated misrepresentations in the news media are one reason activists are less willing to be filmed by journalists. Another is activists' evolving media practices—using smartphones and social media to document and broadcast their issues—which allow them to avoid mainstream media's editorial filters and communicate directly with publics (Canella, 2017; Hau and Savage, 2022).

In addition to inaccurate portrayals in the news media, many activists have developed a heightened awareness of the surveillance techniques deployed against them by law enforcement. Simone Browne (2015) developed the concept "dark surveillance" to explain the history of state surveillance against Black and Indigenous people in the United States. Referring to 18th century lantern laws in New York City that required Black and Indigenous people to carry lights at night if they were not accompanied by a white person, Browne showed how racialized subjects in the US have for centuries faced increased risks for simply existing in public spaces.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Counter Intelligence Program, COINTELPRO, is a more recent example of targeted state surveillance against Black Americans engaged in dissent (Churchill and Vander Wall, 2002). These covert and often-illegal operations targeted organizers of the 1960s Civil Rights and Black Power movements. One COINTELPRO memorandum included a "Racial Intelligence Section," detailing how government informants were to infiltrate the Black Panther Party to gain intelligence. The goal, according to the memo, was to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities of black nationalists" (Blackstock, 1988: 30). Because the Black Panther Party was viewed as a threat to US national security, the information gathered about the group was used to prosecute and jail leaders of the movement.

While most journalists contend that people in public spaces have no expectation of privacy, technological advances in recent years have expanded dramatically the state's ability to conduct dark surveillance: law enforcement agents film public demonstrations; closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras monitor public streets; and drones and helicopters patrol public spaces from the air, tracking the GPS coordinates of attendees' cell phones and recording visual evidence.

Activists meanwhile are livestreaming protests online and documenting their interactions with law enforcement using smartphones and other wearable technologies. While videos of police violence have gone viral on social media, catalyzing movements for

racial justice and placing police violence under increased scrutiny, the platforms on which these images circulate are coded with racial inequities (Wilson and Serisier, 2010). Social media feeds, healthcare systems and judicial sentencing programs have all been shown to contain algorithmic biases—replicating the disparities that racialized people in the US have faced for centuries (Benjamin, 2019a, 2019b). As police film protesters and activists hold up their phones to record their own testimony, they are creating a "spiral of surveillance enmeshed within layers of neutralization" (Gillham and Noakes, 2008: 171).

Perhaps the most invasive surveillance technique to be developed in recent years is facial recognition software. Although its exact usage by law enforcement is unclear, reports have shown that law enforcement agencies are using these tools to identify people suspected of engaging in criminal activity (Marin, 2024). A 2020 investigation by the *New York Times* detailed how Clearview AI scraped billions of images from YouTube, Facebook, Venmo, and other websites, in violation of their terms of service, and used them to build a database of user profiles (Hill, 2020). Although Clearview will not disclose its list of clients, it has been used by more than 600 law enforcement agencies. The sophisticated surveillance apparatus of the state, combined with the rapid circulation of images online, is changing how much control people have over their likeness—leading many activists to question whether journalists are documenting or surveilling public life.

Enlightenment ideals and an ethic of care

The ethical standards of journalism favor openness, transparency and facticity. In the United States, professional standards are rooted in the First Amendment, a document influenced by Enlightenment philosophers such as Locke, Rousseau and Hobbes (McDowell and O'Neill, 2006). The Enlightenment stressed individual rights, rationalism and empiricism, and offered a view of society that argued human beings are capable of pursuing their own happiness. This philosophy disrupted prevailing religious doctrine that demanded people obey spiritual entities or monarchs who claimed connections with God (Bristow, 2023). It was also limited to the understanding of the time that white men were the only ones in need of rational humanism, which is how it was possible for the slaveholding Thomas Jefferson to write that ". . . all men are created equal," in the Declaration of Independence.

Objectivity, which emerged out of Enlightenment ideals, became a guiding journalistic principle in the 1890s—a period of tremendous scientific advancements, medical breakthroughs, and environmental discoveries (Schudson, 1981). As researchers and scientists increasingly relied on empiricism and the scientific method to test their hypotheses and study the world, a "fact-value" dichotomy arose, which said that facts—and, by extension, "the truth"—emerge from value-free experiments and observations (Muñoz-Torres, 2012). Advances in printing technologies were also occurring at the time, creating opportunities for publishers to reach new markets. Many newsrooms, hoping that detached reporting and dispassionate writing would help them reach the broadest possible audience, embraced empiricism (Schudson, 1981).

When photography emerged in the early 1800s, journalists were reluctant. Some questioned how photographic evidence would complicate newsroom standards

and compromise their ability to represent reality (Schwartz, 1999). Digital photography further complicated things in the 1980s: with the widespread adoption of computer editing software, photojournalists were again asked to reassess acceptable forms of documentary evidence and manipulation (Newton, 2000; Savedoff, 1997).

Twentieth century critiques of Enlightenment values, influenced by the Civil Rights, gay rights and women's movements, argued that scientific inquiry must also consider power dynamics, social justice, and broader socio-political systems. Power analyses complicate rational empiricism and objectivity by interrogating data collection, the interpretation of results, and the positionality among researchers and participants. Ethnographic filmmakers have long debated the relationships they have with people represented in their films (Shrum et al., 2005). Some filmmakers prefer an observational approach, using wide and medium angles and minimal editing to give viewers the impression that events are depicted exactly as they happened, without outside interference from the photographer; others use a more participatory approach, arguing that open communication and collaboration benefit filmmakers, their stories, and their subjects (Rouch, 2003).

A feminist ethic of care attempts to resolve these tensions, maintaining that interconnectedness is essential for ethical decision-making (Wilkins and Painter, 2018). Gilligan (1993) developed an ethic of care after interviewing hundreds of women about abortion. Emphasizing the obligations that human beings have to one another, she wrote: "This ethic, which reflects a cumulative knowledge of human relationships, revolves around a central insight, that self and other are interdependent" (p. 74). An ethic of care thus considers mutual obligation over individual rights and reason, the needs of the self in relation to others, and relationship-building over adherence to individually held moral precepts (McLaren, 2002). In Gilligan's words,

> The ethic of care guides us in acting carefully in the human world and highlights the costs of carelessness. It is grounded less in moral precepts than in psychological wisdom, underscoring the costs of not paying attention, not listening, being absent rather than present, not responding with integrity and respect. (Gilligan, 1993: 103)

Feminist scholar Virginia Held explains that "Care ethics . . . [focus] on relations between persons, on such relations as trust, mutual responsiveness, and shared consideration. It employs a concept of the person as relational and historically situated" (Held, 2005: 133). Care ethics help journalists contend with what Durham (2024) called the "embodied vulnerabilities" of marginalized people: women in misogynistic cultures, LGBTQIA individuals, or racialized people and immigrants who are abused by the state. Understanding embodied vulnerabilities, Durham argues, helps media practitioners navigate concerns about visibility, voyeurism, and the spectacle of violence.

Many contemporary debates over journalism—including how to responsibly and accurately document dissent—contrast an ethic of care with Enlightenment ideals. Confronted with politicians who willfully lie and an American public that increasingly mistrusts institutions, including government, the news media, and higher education, journalists are facing existential questions (Deane, 2024). Some argue that keeping a distance from sources will help journalists maintain their credibility and avoid perceived

conflicts of interest (Boudana, 2016). Others reject neutrality, arguing that more openness and collaboration among newsrooms and the public will improve journalists' reporting and rebuild trust in news (Koliska et al., 2023; Nelson, 2021; Ojala, 2021).

Protesters' demand for anonymity exposes a centuries-old philosophical schism in journalism. By asking journalists to adjust their lens and manipulate visual evidence, protesters are forcing journalists to reconsider transparency and truthfulness in the digital age. With this in mind, our study poses the following question:

RQ. How are new surveillance technologies and the political economy of digital media complicating journalists' ability to document dissent?

Method

We conducted a textual analysis of metajournalistic discourse about protesters' demand to blur their faces in news coverage. This allowed us to interrogate how an interpretive community implicitly and explicitly sets its boundaries of practice (Fairclough, 2003). While analyzing metajournalistic discourse aspires to "modest empirical goals," it can shed light on the ways in which journalists' practices and ethics are discursively shaped and contested (Vos and Singer, 2016: 149). These discursive contests, which occur across numerous sites, represent the struggle over journalists' legitimacy and epistemic authority (Vos and Moore, 2020).

We collected all published articles from news outlets, trade publications, and blogs that discussed blurring peoples' faces in news coverage from May 2020 to October 2024. We searched Google News and Nexis Uni for English-language articles using keywords: "protest," "protesters," "blur," "faces," and "facial blur." Keywords were entered individually and in various combinations to find relevant articles. In total, 26 articles were analyzed, a sample that is consistent with previous studies (Berkowitz, 2000; Ferrucci, 2019) (Table 1). While most of the articles refer to blurring protesters' faces, some discussed the use of blurring in other instances: during natural disasters and wars, or to protect the identity of children. We included these articles to understand more broadly visual journalists' views about anonymity and protecting their sources. Only two articles from non-US publications were found, so our analysis primarily reflects a debate among US journalists. As with all qualitative studies, the findings do not represent the views of all global news workers; rather they offer initial insights about what is going on within US journalism culture today.

Because no one person or publication shapes the field of journalism, individuals and outlets are not identified by name. Anonymizing the data gives each quote the same explanatory weight and focuses our analysis on the discourse as a whole (Vos and Thomas, 2019).

We utilized a three-step process to analyze the articles (Emerson et al., 2011). First, we read the articles and took notes about our initial observations. Second, we performed another complete reading of the data to identify emergent themes or patterns. After concurring on the themes, step 3 involved another thorough read of the data, with our themes and patterns in mind, and ultimately categorizing the data by theme.

Table 1. Publications included in the analysis.

Publication	Number of articles
Authority Collective	1
Blogger	1
Business Recorder (Pakistan)	1
Buzzfeed News	1
Center for Media Engagement	1
Columbus Dispatch	1
Document Journal	1
Impact News Service	1
The Lantern	1
The Independent (UK)	1
Media Diversity Institute	1
Center on Privacy & Technology at Georgetown Law (Medium)	1
Nieman Reports	1
National Press Photographers Association	1
National Public Radio	1
PetaPixel	1
PhotoShelter	1
Poynter	2
Student Press Law Center	1
TechRound	1
The New Yorker	1
Variety	2
Wired	2
Witness	1
Total	**26**

Findings

Our analysis identified three primary themes: (1) visibility and surveillance in digital media; (2) the ethical contradictions that visual journalists navigate while documenting dissent; and (3) the relationships among journalists, movements and political-economic power structures. The findings demonstrate how new surveillance technologies and the political economy of media are disrupting the visibility of movements and the circulation of dissent.

Visibility and surveillance

The tension between protesters' expectations of privacy and journalists' desire to record public space appeared in various ways. Several articles discussed the need to preserve accurate historical records and respect the risks that protesters take. One photo editor said: "Nonviolent protest is a deliberately and proudly public act—people stepping out before their neighbors to take a stand. While there are plenty of abuses, being

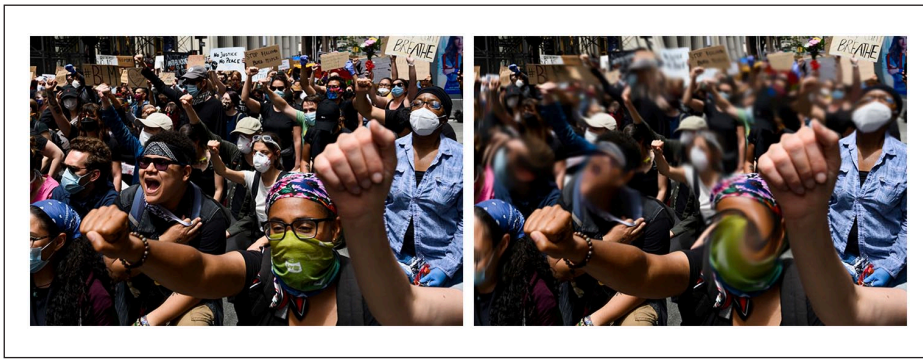

Figure 1. Side-by-side comparison of a blurring technique. From the *Document Journal* article reviewed in the sample.

photographed at a rally is not in itself normally a danger to a protester." Videos, photos and social media, some argued, spread awareness about movements and assist activists' pursuit of progress.

In contrast, several articles noted the interconnections between photography and surveillance. One article said the "visual politics of photojournalism are, and have always been, deeply embedded in carceral systems of control." The piece detailed how many early photographers worked for slave owners and depicted enslaved people in disparaging and dehumanizing ways. Others documented liberatory and emancipatory visions of society. These photographers were not objective, the piece argued; rather, they shaped "the visual culture of American enslavement by staging photographic visions (and social fictions) of racial hierarchy." The competing approaches show how photographers focus their lens in different directions, redirecting the public's attention and challenging viewers to witness society from unexpected angles.

Racial hierarchy is salient for contemporary visual journalists, according to the discourse, as photojournalists consider how new surveillance technologies are being used to surveil and police the public. While photographers have long emphasized their intent as the only thing that matters, modern surveillance technologies, such as facial recognition technology, are forcing them to reevaluate how the circulation of images online affects their original intentions.

While some were sympathetic to protesters' demand for anonymity, they acknowledged the limitations of facial blur. One article noted that even if you blur someone's face, images often contain other identifying details, such as clothing, tattoos, or location markers, making it difficult to completely shield a person's identity (Figure 1). One photo editor said that while blurring may slow police efforts to identify protesters, it will not stop them completely, due to US police agencies' sophisticated surveillance apparatuses—developed in collaboration with private tech firms. In this environment, a photo editor said, news visuals are a "drop in the bucket." Another photo editor with a major US newspaper said that masks do not always shield protesters' identities, noting how facial recognition software scans people's eyes to find a match. He said law

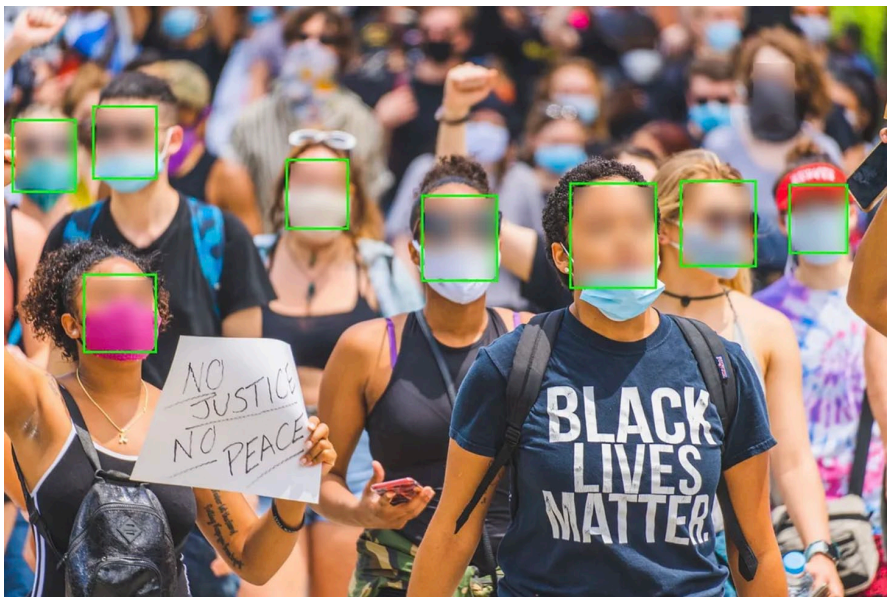

Figure 2. Illustration of photo blurring with facial recognition boxes placed on protesters' faces. Appeared in Medium article reviewed in the sample.

enforcement agencies' surveillance capabilities remain largely a black box, making it difficult for journalists to know whether their images are being used as training data in police databases.

Some argued that the tension between visibility and surveillance could be viewed as journalistic bias. One photographer noted that if everyone's faces are blurred, "does it imply that everyone is doing something illegal?" Peaceful protesters and those destroying property, he argued, could be given equal weight in news coverage if both are unidentifiable, altering how publics view and understand the movement, its aims and participants.

Visual journalists, according to one article, must critically evaluate where requests for anonymity are coming from: public officials asking journalists to obscure their faces is censorship intended to silence critical coverage, while requests from protesters reflect a legitimate concern about safety. One journalist said: "People who fail to recognize imbalance and inequity are most often those who stand to benefit from it."

Some noted that it is crucial for visual journalists to recognize the context in which they are working. Safety varies from place to place—repressive regimes and authoritarian governments are more likely to persecute people engaged in dissent (Figure 2). One article noted: "However, in the US and many other democracies, there's less of a direct threat." As federal and local authorities in the United States increasingly criminalize dissent, labeling more acts of nonviolent resistance "terrorism," journalists and protesters must reassess the threats they face in Western liberal democracies.

Ethical fissures and competing responsibilities

The second theme we identified is the debate over the ethics of visual journalism. Truthfulness was a central concern for many journalists who rejected blurring. One photo editor said, "Journalists' job is to convey reality," and blurring is a form of "photo manipulation" that obscures the truth. Another journalist noted that blurring "is a form of censorship of the free and independent press." Journalistic independence, another said, is "at the heart of the issue." Truthful representations of reality, many argued, propel social change. Documentary photography "establish[es] accountability" and creates an accurate historical record. One photo editor said that the demand is coming from a small but vocal group of people online "who don't understand journalism ethics," an example of how journalists distinguish themselves as trained professionals with specialized knowledge.

Several journalists rejected protesters' demand for blurring by making a legal argument, echoing the rights tradition of Enlightenment ethics. As press freedoms erode, one journalist said, blurring becomes another impingement on free expression and journalists' First Amendment rights. Another cited the 1995 Supreme Court decision in *McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission*, which found that an Ohio law prohibiting anonymous campaign literature was unconstitutional. The Court ruled 7-2 that people have the right to remain anonymous in public expressions, writing that anonymity "is not a pernicious, fraudulent practice, but an honorable tradition of advocacy and of dissent."

As synthetic media and AI-generated content become more prominent online, several expressed concern that blurring will create more room for "faking and lying," which could harm the veracity of journalists' work. Visuals are essential, one person said, for "storytelling in the digital environment . . . Photos and videos are the most powerful tool in the storyteller's toolkit." While social media platforms are indeed designed for visual content, it was unclear whether this comment referred to making highly-resonant images that will affect change, or to generating online metrics and traffic. Advances with in-camera editing and instant publishing is also causing problems, one journalist noted. Because journalists work under deadline pressure and prioritize speed and exclusivity, they do not always have time to discuss the ethics of recording and editing with their peers and the public. As staff photographer positions have been cut in recent decades, many visual journalists work as freelancers, meaning they have limited opportunities to discuss ethics and standards with their colleagues.

Gaining consent was mentioned repeatedly by visual journalists attempting to balance their professional responsibilities as a journalist with their responsibilities to the people depicted in their images. One article noted that a distinction must be made between "photojournalism as witnessing and photojournalism as extraction." However, as one filmmaker cautioned, "I think if you're making films about people who are vulnerable, their consent isn't necessarily enough." She said, "The question for me became how much due diligence should I do before I can breathe easy and let go." One journalist said that blurring faces in news coverage speaks to a broader conversation about "whose likenesses may, with or without their consent, be circulated." When photojournalism is a collective process, one article said, "informed consent and mutual respect are normalized."

A number of photojournalists in the sample said their primary mission is to record the human experience. Without faces, one said, "it becomes a gathering of the faceless. A gathering of the nameless." Visual journalists that held this view argued that faces are essential for conveying the emotions of the moment. As one journalist said,

> Blurring faces can erase the power of that work, as would selecting only images that do not contain identifiable faces. Protesters faces communicate a range of emotions—joy, anger, sorrow. Without those emotions, the story would be incomplete and inadequate . . . The journalists' job is to convey reality.

Visual journalists who rejected blurring stressed the importance of having an accurate historical record. Citing images from the 1960s Civil Rights movement in the United States, one journalist asked, "What would these iconic, galvanizing images become if you couldn't look into the eyes of the oppressed and feel what they were feeling?" (Figure 3). Some acknowledged the moral ambiguity of the debate. On one hand, the request is censorship, "a redaction of really important historical documents." However, she said, "I would, of course, never forgive myself if we ran a photograph that later endangered someone's life." Another said that even though blurring faces is antithetical to political voice and visibility, "Human life and dignity must always be the paramount concern of documentarians."

Few things set professional visual journalists apart from amateurs and eyewitnesses more than their ethical standards. The establishment of the National Press Photographers Association and its original code of ethics helped to elevate photojournalists' work, both within news organizations and society at large (Cookman, 1985; Lester, 1991). Ethical standards, though, evolve. In 2017, the NPPA added an additional tenet against workplace harassment (Nicholls, 2017), so it is possible, given social and political crises, and dramatic changes in image technologies, that ethical standards may be revised again. The third theme describes such a possibility.

Power and embodied vulnerabilities

Much has changed for the practice of visual journalism since the NPPA's first ethical code in 1949, and the changes are not only technological (Cookman, 1985). The social world is dramatically different, as a look at the men who founded the association, all white men, reminds us. Visual journalism has both been part of the solution, as noted by those citing the marches of the 1960s, and part of the problem, as documented by decades of critical research on social movements and the news media (Chan and Lee, 1984; Culver and McLeod, 2023; Gitlin, 1980; Kilgo, 2021). The discourse about face blurring reflects a growing awareness among visual journalists that their work can reinforce social inequalities.

This shift is illustrated by photojournalists who justified their work on the belief that participants *want* coverage. It is not clear this is still a safe assumption. As one writer on the face-blur controversy noted, "Ultimately, it is a journalist's duty to minimize harm to their source—a level of harm that even some journalists are unaware exists." Many protesters no longer trust media organizations to accurately tell their

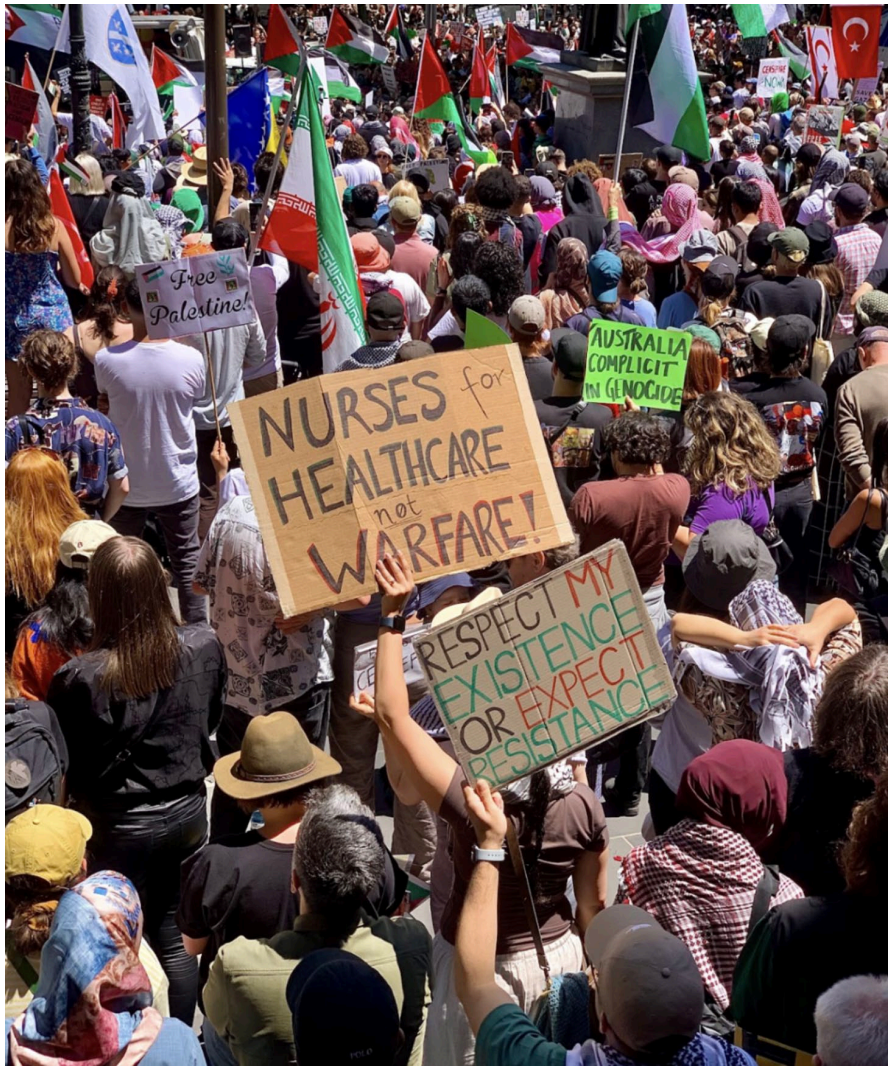

Figure 3. Journalists can provide anonymity by photographing protesters from different angles. Suggestion shown in the Digital Rights Watch article reviewed in the sample.

story (Chan and Lee, 1984; Culver and McLeod, 2023; Kilgo, 2021). One article in the sample recalled a 2015 comment from an activist, who said, "Any protest that we organize, we would rather that mainstream media is not there, to be perfectly honest." Several articles in the corpus included laments from photojournalists frustrated by harassment and hostility from protesters.

The divide between journalists who sympathize with protesters' insistence that they "do no harm," and those who see their visual coverage as harmless (if not helpful) to democracy seems to reflect a divide within the profession. Arguments for protecting protesters' identities were often tied to long-simmering racial injustices, while those defending the right to record public space invoked long-standing journalistic principles and legal rights, a traditionally "objective" stance. The notion that "objectivity" means ignoring structural oppressions, or what Bonilla-Silva (2021) named "color-blind racism," is one reason critics are calling for more diverse media hiring (Mellinger, 2013). As a community leader quoted in the sample said, "Objectivity was a concept invented by white privileged men that continues to maintain white supremacist structures."

The clash over face blurring is an offshoot of larger questions in journalism regarding the role of power, and whose power should define what is worthy of coverage. Yet while journalism often intends to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable," it historically has been slow to hire women and people of color, especially in leadership positions (Mellinger, 2013). Despite the fact that a majority of undergraduate and graduate photojournalism students are female, only 24% of top newsroom editors globally are women (Arguedas et al., 2024); and one analysis of photo credits in major news outlets found that only 15–20% of the images were credited to women photographers (Zalcman, 2019).

To navigate the contradictions of consent and practice an ethic of care, one person argued that visual journalists should develop "humanistic practices." Photojournalists and filmmakers should reposition their lenses and change the stories being told about protests, going beyond simply showing protests and instead connecting more deeply with movement organizers. This forces journalists to create "new lines of dialogue with the communities they chronicle." Such calls are inspired in part by an increased awareness of journalism's role in perpetuating injustice. Interestingly, this "racial reckoning" in journalism has been inspired by visual evidence published on social media—the very medium that is also creating new embodied vulnerabilities.

While some photojournalists in the sample approved of face-blurring, others emphasized the imperative to "do no harm." Two of the most vociferously pro-blur articles in the corpus were from the tech-press; and one of the strongest arguments in favor of anonymity did *not* call for face-blurring. Instead, it sought to balance truthfulness, independence and humanistic care with relational solutions. One documentary photographer said: "We do have the right (to photograph), and we should. But do we aggressively assert our right to do something when we ourselves don't really know what some of the ramifications are?"

Another writer argued that face-blurring is anti-human, and that building relationships with subjects was the best practice:

> Take your pictures, attempt to grab names—this is Journalism 101—spark conversations with your subjects, understand even more about an issue that you might not have been well educated in before, and come away with the buy-in of the people that you photographed.

Others proposed another solution: selecting photographs for publication without a clear view of protesters' faces. "It's clear that photographers don't want to thoughtlessly publish photos of unwilling subjects," an editor said (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Illustration of facial blur created for *New York Magazine* article reviewed in this sample.

Another article focused on the fact that visual journalists have traditionally granted consideration to other vulnerable groups, like children and unhoused people. Similarly, under current circumstances, protesters might also need protection. "It's human courtesy to comply when someone asks that their photo not be taken," said one photographer, "the only time that I deny that request is if it's a person in authority who is trying to censor me as opposed to a person who may be in a vulnerable situation. There's a difference." This point, that different people may need different treatment, is central to care ethics. In contrast with a one-size-fits-all rights model, in which everyone is assumed to have the same social status, an ethic of care addresses situations in which matters of inequality, oppression and injustice are central.

Discussion and conclusion

Protesters' fears about their identities circulating online have been realized. US law enforcement and private vigilante groups have used facial recognition technology to identify people who participated in the 2024 pro-Palestine encampments (Geller, 2025). Surveillance regimes not only target people who participate in protests and express unfavorable opinions, they also create a culture of fear and intimidation in which people self-censor and preemptively suppress controversial views to avoid punishment. The debate over anonymizing dissent poses serious questions about journalistic independence, truthfulness, transparency and human rights.

Journalists are encouraged to act independently, to be truthful and transparent with the public, and to create images that convey the full range of human experiences. While these principles are central to the debate about blurring protesters' faces, none adequately address activists' concerns about the expanding US surveillance state. There is a need to reexamine long-standing ethical principles, rooted in the analog era, now that high-resolution records circulate instantaneously within global databases outside of public accountability. Although journalists have long granted anonymity to protect sources in vulnerable situations, digitization is limiting the control news organizations have over image contextualization. Sophisticated surveillance tools, deployed in hyper-mediated communication systems, are forcing journalists to rethink the methods they use to document, preserve, and disseminate dissent.

Reason would suggest that visual journalists ought to practice their craft as usual, within their First Amendment right to photograph what is publicly visible. This would serve a rational public's interests and enable reasoned debate about the issues being protested. Under the assumptions of rationalistic/Enlightenment ethics, police would respect protesters' right to assemble and publics would make reasoned decisions. Yet nothing about the current political climate is rational. While recent lawsuits charging police with unnecessary use of violence have prevailed in court (Wolfe and Shakil, 2022), legislatures across the United States are passing laws criminalizing dissent—making it illegal to block "critical infrastructure," such as roads and bridges, and in some cases making it illegal to wear masks in public (Federman, 2024). Journalists are grappling with this new reality, struggling over how to document the truth, protect activists' privacy and preserve the right to dissent. Because journalistic practices rooted in individualism and rationality have failed many communities, protesters are demanding that visual journalists rethink their ethical frameworks and recognize the uneven power dynamics among journalists, movements, and the state.

We are living in an era that Durham labeled an "ongoing crisis of embodied vulnerability" (Durham, 2024: 292). Durham's call for scholars to theorize embodiment, materiality, and vulnerability mirrors the Authority Collective's demand that visual journalists "do no harm" when covering protests (Do No Harm: Photographing Police Brutality Protests, 2020). Injustice and inequality are not new. Black American's grievances about police abuse existed well before smartphones. What has changed with video evidence of George Floyd, Sandra Bland, Walter Scott, and many others' deaths is that more white people, and more journalists, have been forced to grapple with visual evidence of that abuse. The same technologies that inspired the Black Lives Matter and pro-Palestine

movements are also being weaponized to suppress dissent. The debate over face blurring reflects a growing understanding, among journalists and activists, about the expanding applications of visual evidence.

Visual journalists may be better positioned than some of their colleagues to reevaluate newsroom ethics. They are just as physically vulnerable during demonstrations as protesters, and indeed, many were seriously injured during the BLM protests in 2020 (Douglas, 2020; Treisman, 2024). Enlightenment values intended to protect individual rights do not reflect the real experiences of millions of oppressed peoples. The historically rigid rights-based model of ethics is cracking under the weight of political persecution and authoritarianism. A renewed conversation about what it means to "minimize harm" is needed. An ethic of care considers requests for anonymity, the distinction between subjectivity and truthfulness, and the power of each stakeholder during the process of creating and sharing an image—activist, photographer, editor, publisher, and viewer. Applying these precepts does not negate traditional photo ethics; rather, they expand the responsibilities of those who seek to document dissent while also attempting to minimize harm.

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