Photographers are being called on to stop showing protesters' faces. Should they?

For many, the argument is about rights vs. responsibilities.

Demonstrators kneel in a moment of silence outside the Long Beach Police Department on Sunday, May 31, 2020, in Long Beach during a protest over the death of George Floyd. (AP Photo/Ashley Landis)

By: Eliana Miller and Nicole Asbury

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Photographs of protests are everywhere, from the news to your social media feed. But there's a growing movement that calls for journalists and citizens to blur or not show protesters' faces.

So what should visual journalists do?

Legally, there's no question — when protesters are in public spaces engaged in newsworthy activity, visual journalists are well within their rights to document them. But protesters fear potential retaliation when images become public.

Donna De Cesare, a University of Texas professor, spent 20 years weighing these concerns while working as a freelance visual journalist focusing on Latin America.

"The public has a right to know; we have a right to go out and take the pictures. But we also have to think about how our work impacts people's lives," she said. In Medellin, Colombia, she photographed in areas with gang and paramilitary violence. "People are very sensitive there, too. The media usually can't get pictures."

Her solution was to photograph her subjects using angles and positions where faces were obscured.

"I think when we're making the image selections, we have to have these conversations. Is this something that could harm someone?" she said. "You don't really know that much about the backstory of that person ... that's why I think it is really important that we think about ways of making images that are powerful and show the reality ... but that also sometimes do protect people's identities."

She said that the "tremendous sensitivity" over rights vs. responsibilities indicates the need to converse.

"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?"

Montinique Monroe, a 27-year-old freelance photojournalist based in Austin, Texas, started photographing protests Friday. In the course of her reporting, she's taken some photos that have clearly shown some demonstrators' faces, but withheld sharing them on social media.

"My issue is that we're capturing people who may not know that we're capturing these images," Monroe said. "A lot of these people who are protesting don't know where these images may end up."

The FBI issued a request June 1 for any photos of potential looters or vandals during protests, which has prompted some visual journalists, including Tara Pixley, to ask, "Why would we make it easier for police surveillance to identify people at protests?"

Pixley is a professor of visual journalism at Loyola Marymount University as well as a co-founder and board member of Authority Collective, an organization dedicated to empowering marginalized artists working in photography, film and virtual reality and augmented reality industries. AC's board published a statement about do no harm photography and suggested that photographers protect subjects' identities "by focusing on masked participants or using wider compositions."

But as long as a journalist's feet are planted in a place that is lawful to stand, a journalist is entitled to photograph or videotape anything they want, even closeups of faces, said Frank LoMonte, the director of the University of Florida's Brechner Center for Freedom of Information.

"The short answer under U.S. law is that there is no such thing as being private in public," LoMonte said. "If you are marching down the street or sunbathing in the park, you waive any expectation that what you're doing is a private activity. That is doubly so when the activity is newsworthy."

Protesting is a newsworthy act, often done to provoke conversation and incite change.

“If you’re protesting as a means of expressing a particular idea, the press is out there to tell that story,” said Akili Ramsess, executive director of the National Press Photographers Association. “For us as photographers, we want the human connection. The whole purpose of demonstrations and civil disobedience is to put a human face on the issue and the best way to do that is to connect people to each other’s humanity.”

Journalists should balance minimizing harm while sharing images that are within the public’s right to know, said Lynn Walsh, the Society of Professional Journalists’ ethics chair. Reporters who cover ongoing protests should take the time to understand the demographics of the group involved — like whether they are mostly underage individuals or if they’re in one of the communities being impacted by the issue.

While traditionally the most powerful photos can be close-ups of people in pain or emotions, Walsh said reporters should consider whether it’s the best image to show.

“I don’t think the answer is to stop taking photos or videos. I think the answer is to do it responsibly, fairly and respectfully,” Walsh said. “While these images can be powerful, we have to remember that these are people in them and their emotions are happening in real time.”

One method includes seeking out subjects to ask for their names and to let them know where the visuals will be shared.

At protests, Pixley of AC actively asks for permission to document individuals. She even provides them with contact information should they change their mind.

“In this particular moment of protests and accusations of looting and violence, where there is so much surveillance and a threat of continued surveillance and police targeting, I feel like consent is paramount and must be a part — an immediate and central part — of the work that I’m doing in documenting this event,” Pixley said.

Similarly, Nina Berman, a documentary photographer and professor of journalism at the Columbia Journalism School, said journalists need to understand the deeper context of a protest if they're going to be informed storytellers. Berman has only encountered protesters who are uncomfortable being photographed at demonstrations around issues of immigration, when undocumented individuals are present, and she's sensitive to their requests.

"It's human courtesy to comply when someone asks that their photo not be taken," Berman said. "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."

Poynter senior faculty Al Tompkins said that the whole point of a public demonstration is just that — it's a place to demonstrate outrage, support or opposition publicly.

"There are all kinds of ways to privately demonstrate — you can contribute money to causes, you can write letters, you can make phone calls," he said. "But this is a public demonstration and it's such an important part of our culture that we actually protected in the Constitution in the First Amendment."

He said one thing protesters and police have in common is wanting to be shown in a good light.

"On the one hand, (protesters) want us there to document the story, except when it's not convenient. Police want us there to document the story of their compassion, of their professionalism, except when it's not convenient, except when they're beating somebody.

"You can't have it both ways."

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Further reading:

- No, Photojournalists Aren't Advocating the Blurring of Faces at Protests (PhotoShelter Blog)
- Yunghi Kim: "Is agreeing NOT to show a person's face against the ethics of journalism?" (PhotoShelter Blog)
- The Story Behind the Photograph of Protesters Outside of Trump Tower That Resonated Around the World (Time)
- Documenting a Protest Has Never Been More Challenging (Reading the Pictures)
- Letter from the editor: The IDS will minimize the use of protesters' faces (IDS News)

This article was updated to note that Tara Pixley is also a professor at Loyola Marymount University.

Tags: George Floyd, Photojournalism, Protests

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