

Relying on stock photo agencies to meet visual needs is far more economical than hiring photographers. The economically savvy editor, then, is likely not familiar with each photo's backstory. However, the way in which a photo is contextualized can alter its narrative. For example, each of these images from [this year's G7 Summit](#) centers on a different world leader, and, thus, tells a different story from the others.

The language editors and journalists use can also shape how readers interpret images: Editors can alter the meanings of the photographs they choose simply by attaching them to narratives that—regardless of their actual relevance to the images—may influence how audiences interpret them. However, as editors and authors covering human rights issues—integral to which is the self-determination of the folks being written about—whether the subjects in the photographs we select have consented is need-to-know information.

Often, in attempting to document reality, photographers straddle the lines of ethics. Some journalists have characterized condemnations of exploitative photojournalism as “self-righteous” or “useless.” Take, for example, Richard B. Woodward's 2014 [article](#) on disaster photography in which he asks: “Were the Alabama farmers in the Depression-era photographs of Walker Evans helpless and ‘exploited’?...Is no news better than bad news?”

In a 2005 [interview](#) with *Fortune*, one of the children of the farming families photographed by Evans revealed that he and his family indeed felt exploited by Evans's presence on their farm, saying he thought Evans made them look “ignorant.” While this singular account might not represent each subject's feelings about being photographed by Evans, it is certainly a viewpoint worth considering in the discussion about ethical photojournalism.

Ceasing documentation of “disaster” or other human rights issues is not the solution to the conundrum of maintaining ethics in photojournalism. As Woodward notes, the age of smartphones has ushered in a critical development in documentary photography: No longer do the stories of human rights violations and resistance require \$40,000-camera-wielding interlopers to be told. From [Black Lives Matter](#) to the [Syrian conflict](#), folks on the frontlines are documenting, in real-time, their experiences with government-sanctioned resistance.

That folks from within these movements are documenting their experiences represents a significant shift from a long-standing cultural tradition of upholding [colonial ideals](#) in documentary photography. Despite its continued tradition of capturing folks engaged in political and economic struggle, the craft has a long-standing history of racism.

From its inception, the profile of the documentary photographer was overwhelmingly [white and male](#). The photographer's goal in capturing colonized folks on camera was often to illustrate their inferiority to people of European descent. Although this goal—like other overtly racist practices—has modernly fallen out of favor with the masses, today, even well-meaning photographers often precipitate unintended consequences for their subjects.

Take, for example, the images of “[looters](#)” that are proliferated by media outlets after major civil, economic, or political upheavals in the U.S. Since Hurricane Katrina in 2005, media outlets have repeatedly failed to interrogate the phenomenon of “looting” within the context of the large-scale

crises within which the term is often applied. These folks are portrayed as opportunistic and thieving, and they are almost [always Black](#)—thus reinforcing racialized stereotypes of Black Americans as lazy and criminal.

The harmful effects of documentary photography aren't limited to the reinforcement of [negative stereotypes](#): In some cases, subjects experience immediate consequences such as termination from their jobs and even criminal prosecution. For example, in 2014, Edward Crawford was the subject of one of the Ferguson protests' most emblematic images. Crawford was photographed throwing a burning gas canister and was charged with assault and interfering with a police officer. Though police reported that Crawford [died by suicide in 2017](#), his family, friends, and fellow protesters maintain that he wouldn't have taken his own life.

Photos taken within the context of traditional warzones can result in similarly dire consequences for their subjects. Action-oriented images—like [this one](#) of a woman confronting an Israeli soldier—attract readers due to their high intensity. While some folks within the Palestinian conflict, such as seventeen-year-old [Ahed Tamimi](#) and her family, have willingly stepped into the spotlight by documenting their own resistance efforts, others, though just as committed to Palestinian sovereignty, might not want to be singled out by photojournalistic efforts.

In Tamimi's case, the documentation of her protest resulted in her being fined and sentenced to eight months in prison. While Palestinian activists knowingly put themselves in harm's way when they protest Israeli settlement, their choices to demonstrate hardly translate into their volunteering to have their faces plastered across the internet, thus making them sitting ducks for retaliation from the Israeli government.