

VISUAL ETHICAL ANALYSIS: COVERAGE OF THE YAZIDI WOMEN ENSLAVEMENT CASES IN IRAQ

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a review and mapping of the academic literature of journalists' coverage of the ISIS militant group attack on the Yazidi community in 2014 and the Yazidi women survivors. It explicitly discusses the ethicality of a video broadcasted by Al-Iraqiya news of a Yazidi woman confronting her kidnapper and sexual abuser. The paper analyzes the video through both a visual ethical analysis, where the video is analyzed frame by frame, and an ethical analysis with respect to previous ethical approaches. The study concludes that the broadcast of the confrontation was unethical as it discounted both the code of ethics and the ethical duties and values of a journalist. Overall, the paper believes that the Yazidi women's media coverage was unethical, subjective, and disrespectful, and undermining towards the Yazidi survivors.

Keywords: Yazidi, Women, Al-Iraqiya, ISIS, Kant, Bentham, Mill, Iraq, Abu Humam, Ashwaq Hamid.

INTRODUCTION

On August 3, 2014, the unelected self-proclaimed Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS) militant group targeted Sinjar, a district in the Nineveh Governorate of Iraq. It attacked the Yazidis, abducting approximately 6386 Yazidi women, men, and children, in addition to murdering thousands and evacuating the citizens from their ancestral grounds (Foster & Minwalla, 2018). The militants proceeded to sell and enslave women and girls, as young as nine years old, subjecting them to acts of sexual violence and rape. Multiple reports of the event were published internationally from 2014-2019, all of which began commotion in war-crime journalism (Carrié, 2018). In 2015 and 2016, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria. The United States

Holocaust Memorial Museum and The United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria both released reports stating that ISIS was conducting crimes against humanity and war crimes, in addition to committing genocide through their assaults on the Yazidi (Cetorelli & Ashraph, 2019). The militant group's dissatisfaction with the minority group's separate religion is assumed to be one reason behind its assaults (Bynum & McDonnell, 2018; Carrié, 2018). This was not ISIS's first attack on the minority group, as they had previous accounts of murdering and enslaving Yazidis since their takeover of the region. However, this specific account produced multiple criticisms on the journalistic ethicality of the coverage of the Yazidi women's affected by the event (Al-Amili, 2020). While many women were captured, few managed to escape the militant group's confinement, yet we're faced with journalists "looking for a story" (Aipperspach, 2018). This study aims to provide a review and mapping of the academic literature of journalists' coverage of the Yazidi women, mainly discussing the ethicality of one video produced by the Al-Iraqiya news channel through a visual ethical analysis of the video.

Background

Many news outlets reached out to cover the event and report it, several of which were outside sources who had no access to the Yazidi women's testimonies and were not within the territories of where it took place. While 66% of the news reported on the matter were of journalists outside of Iraq, only 33% were from the region, where the Yazidi women themselves comprehensively wrote only 16% of them on their experiences during their imprisonment (Sarac, 2020). The highest number of reports regarding the genocide were published between the years 2015 and 2016, most of which were covered in 2016, 2 years following the beginning of the incident, since in 2014, most Iraqi territories were still under the rule of ISIS, restricting the media from reaching and covering the matter (Sarac, 2020). The reports' focus was mainly on the sexual violence and enslavement the Yazidi females had gone through and less on the crimes placed against the males and the factors that led to the conflict (Foster & Minwalla, 2018). During the event, news outlets such as Mail Online and The Independent reported the incident from international perspectives on the matter. Despite the journalistic efforts of gathering information about the experiences from the women themselves, a great deal of evidence was sourced from Iraqi locals and Iraqi officials as well, taking word from a third party that did not take part in the enslavement case, considering the involvement in the rule of ISIS on the region (Sarac, 2020). The approach of both Western and Arabic media had a role in representing the case differently. For instance, according to the study by Garni Mansour, Western media outlets referred to the Yazidi women as "victims," focusing only on the descriptive details of the sexual assaults that happened and disregarding

their traumatic experiences, where he described the approach as "reducing them to their sexual violence experiences" (2020). He also brought out the linguistics in which they used to narrate the attack by sticking to stereotypical forms of narration where the Yazidi women were portrayed as victims in need of the West to help and rescue them West the "saviors" in this situation. On the other hand, in Mansour's study, he addresses how the Arabic media had a prioritized focus on separating Islam from the actions of ISIS, addressing the issue to exclude themselves from the blame of being part of the culture. Moreover, while addressing the Yazidi women's state, the Arabic media described the women as "survivors" rather than victims that have a future to look forward to rather than being subject to abuse and trauma trapped in the same story for long (2020). In addition to political involvement in covering the case, at the time of the attack, the Kurdistan Democratic Party, who were mainly in control of the area, and two major Kurdish media organizations, one of which were loyal to the Kurdish party, had an influence on depicting the narrative. A 2019 study conducted an analysis on media outlets Rudaw and the Kurdish News Network, in which, after analyzing over 222 stories regarding the genocide, concluded that the Kurdish media had shown a strong bias to the political party they support in their coverage of the events (Hama, 2019). This raises the question of whether the media's coverage of the Yazidi women is objective and reflective of their experiences.

Furthermore, journalists were criticized for their "unethical" practices during their interviews with the Yazidi women (Carrié, 2018). A 2018 study that conducted 90 interviews on Yazidi women that had encountered journalists stated that they were pressured to reveal the traumatic stories they did not want to recall (Foster & Minwalla, 2018). 85% of the Yazidi women stated that besides being compelled, the journalists were not properly considerate of their privacy and failed to conceal their identities (Foster & Minwalla, 2018; Carrié, 2018). Sherizaan Minwalla, co-author of the 2018 study titled "Voices of Yazidi women: Perceptions of journalistic practices in the reporting on ISIS sexual violence," stated in a podcast that upon watching the coverage, she saw that the Yazidi women who had escaped from the militant group were fully shown, identities ultimately revealed, with no blurring placed, understanding that journalists would be further criticized for such revelations (Bynum & McDonnell, 2018). The disclosure of identities has inflicted harm on the victims, as Minwalla reveals that one of the Yazidi women interviewed, who had previously escaped after ten months of imprisonment at ISIS, was captured once again for a whole year after the militant group identified her on the news (Bynum & McDonnell, 2018), which raises the question on whether the coverage of the Yazidi women and the revelation of their identities count in favor of the subject in terms of providing justice. These acts have called out media outlets and journalists for their

unethical practices in covering humanitarian catastrophes, criticizing them for “getting the story and leaving,” abandoning the victims with their suffering, calling out a need for a new code of ethics (Giovanni, 2020). It is essential to recognize and analyze the coverage of media towards the Yazidi women, as to understand their true intentions when covering such sensitive topics and the ways they bring about the victims through the ethical analysis of the video published by the Al-Iraqiya news channel in which we conclude whether the production of the video was an ethical act towards the subjects involved and the audience.

Case Study

Iraqi broadcasting news channel Al-Iraqiya was criticized after publishing a video where a Yazidi victim, Ashwaq Hajji Hamid, confronted ISIS member Abu Humam. The latter had previously sexually violated her at only 14 years old, where amidst the confrontation, the woman collapsed (Chamas, 2019). The story all begins back on August 3, 2014, when Hamid, after being kidnapped by the ISIS militant group at the age of 14 and taken to Syria, was sold to Abu Humam as a "sex slave" for \$100 (Bisset & Doucet, 2018). Hamid managed to escape on October 22, 2014, fleeing to Germany with her mother and brother after being continuously raped and beaten by Abu Humam. But the story doesn't end there, as she ran into Abu Humam in Germany 2 years later as she was walking by the supermarket Stuttgart, an event she did not see coming (Kara, 2019). She had tried to report him to the German authorities, but they were unable to capture him as he had been registered as a refugee in the country. She ran into him again in 2018, reporting once again to the authorities, but no avail. According to Mail Online, "It is unclear how Abu Humam came to be detained and imprisoned in Iraq, though German authorities had promised to investigate after Ashwaq revealed she had met him in Germany," indicating that there might be a purpose behind his capture, the confrontation being one of them (Kara, 2019). A year later, in 2019, after Abu Humam was captured, the Iraqi national intelligence team recorded a confrontation between Hamid and Abu Hammam, broadcasted on Al-Iraqiya TV, where Hamid replayed all the tragic memories he had caused her, asking him why he had done such actions (Chamas, 2019). And while Abu Humam said nothing but shed a tear during the confrontation, he revealed to the Al-Iraqiya that "She did not want it so I beat her to make her agree to the rape," contradicting his actions in the video. The video ended with Hamid collapsing, bringing about re-publications of the event and multiple ethical concerns (Chamas, 2019).

Ethical Concerns

This broadcast was censured for “staging” the event and risking the wellbeing of the

victim who had to recall her traumatic experience and confront the sexual predator where many of those who work with survivors of such crimes were “appalled by the obvious disregard for the survivor’s wellbeing” (Marczak, 2019). The confrontation was also attacked by traumatic experts for not considering the psychological risks of the event, in addition to highlighting the inability of the media to take responsibility for their entertainment-prioritized actions, further revealing that rather than focusing on justice for the Yazidi women, they are prioritizing the traumatic experiences for a good story. Media outlets who had republished the broadcast, particularly UK’s Mirror, accompanied the story with the headline “Girl held as sex slave at 14 confronts sobbing ISIS rapist on live TV,” considered “sensationalist and offensive” to the topic discussed. (Boyd, 2019; Marczak, 2019).

Visual Ethical Analysis

The visual ethical analysis model is produced to properly analyze the confrontation, in which we aim to provide the intentions of the team filming the confrontation by specifying the frames and comparing them to the conventions of production. In our analysis, we dissect four frames from the video as they are the prominent frames that relay the meaning behind the broadcasted video.

Table 1. Visual Ethical Analysis

Time stamp	Frame and Camera Analysis	Ethical Impact and Intention
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00:00:05	According to the rule of thirds (Mai et al., 2011), both subjects were placed in positions of eye level on opposite ends of the frame, making it easy for the audience to identify the main subjects, Abu Humam and Ashwaq Hajji Hamid, in the narrative. However, the placement of Hamid on the right side, and heavier side, of the frame closer to the center, emphasized the focus on her and her story. Meanwhile Abu Humam was placed on the left side of the frame attracting less attention from the audience. In addition, the frame was made unbalanced due to the subjects' placement, making the content seem more nerveing and unsettling to the audience, emphasizing once more on the sensitivity of the matter discussed.	Choosing to place Hamid at the right center position in the frame was a way of focusing the audience's view on her rather than the rest of the objects and subjects in frame, emphasizing that the main "character" in this narrative is her. This placement draws the attention to Hamid as the viewer first looks at the frame making her more vulnerable and sympathetic to the audience. The placement of Abu Humam on the left side of the frame, minimizes his importance in the audience's eyes, making it natural that the audience has to focus on what Hamid has to say more than Abu Humam. The asymmetrical frame plays a vital role of removing all sense of comfort in the confrontation, yet again highlighting the importance and vulnerability of it. The main intention behind this frame is to show that Hamid wanted this confrontation and was ready for it, despite whether or not she was on board with the idea.
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00:00:14	Once again Hamid was placed in the right side corner of the frame in a close up shot of her, leaving a lot of negative space in the remainder of the frame. Her shot was also taken from a low angle making her look large and even more important in the narrative of the frame (Baranowski & Hecht, 2017).	The close up of Hamid was purposely aimed to showcase a detailed image of her face and give the audience an intimate moment with the subject. Allowing for close one-on-one examination of the emotions portrayed through the confrontation. The camera angle showed Hamid at a vulnerable position allowing the audience to sympathize with her more. The negative space in the frame was to exclude all objects that could have been in the frame to draw all the attention to Hamid and not distract the audience with anything else placed. The aim for this frame was to convince the audience that this was the justice that Hamid has been waiting for, although it was visible through the emotions on her face the discomfort she was feeling.
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00:01:16	Abu Humam is now the only character in this frame, however the angle is a side profile where the audience members are perceived as bystanders or watchers (Baranowski & Hecht, 2017).	The general purpose of framing Abu Humam from a side view angle was to portray him as trapped in the situation and relaying emotions like insecurity, embarrassment, and humiliation in a closed frame with not a lot of space around him. It helps the audience not sympathize with him and look down on him in this frame. This specific frame is intended to make the audience detest Abu Humam, and yet again make them believe that justice is being served to Yazidi survivors by confrontation.
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00:01:32	The final frame is the same frame as the first one, a medium long shot of both subjects within the frame. However, after Hamid collapsed, she went out of frame, leaving only Abu Humam and the presenter in an asymmetrical and unbalanced frame, and ending the broadcast immediately.	When Hamid collapsed out of frame, the asymmetry took role in creating an even more disturbed feel for the viewers now that they are left with only Abu Humam in the frame and the center of attention. Thus, creating an unbalance in the subjects represented and the importance of each of them according to placement. There was no intention of her falling out of frame because it meddled with the placement of each subject to represent their importance, and the ending of the video further proves that. Nonetheless, when Hamid had collapsed, it suggested to the audience that she was not well prepared or “rehearsed” for the confrontation to take place, and hinted that she was not comfortable and that this was not the justice she sought against Abu Humam.
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Using the analysis above, we pointed out the prominent frames in the video and analyzed each based on the general cinematic frame and composition evaluation. Then using the identified frame evaluations, we conducted reasoning behind the meaning of the framing and position of each “subject” in each frame to understand the meaning and the message intended to deliver. Upon understanding each frame’s composition, we then analyzed the ethical impact behind each position and frame and in what way did the framing and composition contribute to the deliverance of the narrative, also deducing the intention of emotion displayed by the filming team. After conducting the visual ethical analysis, we conclude that most of the frames were placed strategically to offer a sensational and entertaining broadcast, unaware of the psychological impact on the victim, as she collapses out of frame, and that the subjects in the broadcast were somewhat instructed, as Abu Humam remains silent throughout, not offered the chance to speak, while Hamid continues to talk to show the public the severity of the situation and gain an audience.

Ethical Analysis: Potter Box

The unethicity of the case begins with the facts, following the Potter Box. The “staging” of the confrontation between the Yazidi woman and her sexual abuser showcased the lack of accountability and care the media outlet had for the woman, as she publicly collapsed during the confrontation, further revealing their profit-driven goals that do not provide any justice to the matter at hand (Marczak, 2020). Furthermore, the event was not the first time Hamid had met her abused after her kidnapping, and rather she had ran into him previously in Germany, both in 2016 and 2018 before the broadcast in 2019 (Kara, 2019). In addition to the fact that Abu Humam, prior to the confrontation, had admitted Al-Iraqiya that he had beaten and raped her, with no apologetic remarks provided (Chamas, 2019). “Taking these facts into consideration, we must begin by emphasizing the harmful effects and the negligence of the nonmaleficence and respect ethical duties that the media produced through their coverage of the Yazidi women. According to the Ethical Guidelines of Journalists by the UNGG, journalists must minimize harm by “showing compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage.” and “using heightened sensitivity when dealing with survivors of gender-based violence, other vulnerable groups and sources or subjects who are inexperienced or unable to give consent” (UNGG, 2016). Yet opposingly, lack of compassion was produced during Al-Iraqiya’s broadcast of the confrontation between the survivor and the violator, as Hamid was quick to collapse, her wellbeing not adequately considered, exposing her to psychological risks, and showcasing insensitivity on her behalf (Marczak, 2019).

In addition, a report conducted in 2014 showed the media's dismissing of the United

Nations Global Protection Cluster Guidelines in ethical reporting by exposing the women's identities, resulting in high risks of their privacy and protection, and leading to recaptures of the women who managed to escape. Claiming that exposure of these women's identities and information would bring more awareness and aid to the matter while in contrast it defied the purpose and was described in a 2020 study as "hypocrisy of protectionism" (Minwalla et al., 2020). In this case, the revelation of Hamid's identity, even if with consent, places her under extreme harm, especially considering the fact that she is speaking with a member correlated to the militant group, in which the group could be triggered to follow and cause more harm to Hamid, affecting her and her family more than the captured Abu Humam, who has nothing to lose. This can be observed as Hamid's brother revealed that since the broadcast, their relatives are in danger of getting captured by the militant group and have been taking shifts at night in fear of being kidnapped by ISIS. This showcases the extreme need for the media platform and the intelligence services to step up, take responsibility, and be held accountable for Hamid and her family, another ethical duty they have breached (Marczak, 2019).

Moreover, both the Iraqi national intelligence team and Al-Iraqiya TV were not transparent in their broadcasting of the video. Rather than informing the audience of Hamid and Abu Humam's previous encounters in Germany, they presented it as if it was the first time she had met him, which was both inaccurate and not apparent, disregarding both ethical duties of transparency and non-maleficence. Not to mention that if we were to analyze Abu Humam's statements towards Al-Iraqiya and his actions in the video, it seems that he was somewhat coerced to be apologetic, as he was not previously (Chamas, 2019). All of these pieces of evidence prove that Al-Iraqiya was neither accurate nor transparent, and defy, the ethical approach that is Kant's categorical imperative, which regards the ethicality of an action based on its impartiality and universal application (Patterson et al., 2019), in which Al-Iraqiya TV performed both an action that would not be commended universally, and was very partial in terms of the media wanting to get a good story. They also defy his approach in the sense that Kant advised to not "deceive a trusting audience with manipulated reality and do not offend an unsuspecting audience with your gritty reality," however in Al-Iraqiya's case, they twisted the reality of the confrontation by presenting the victim as if it was her first encounter after her traumatic experience with Abu Humam.

The video, appearing to be beneficial towards the Yazidi women, provides no help for them, as while the victim did confront her tormentor, she eventually collapsed, exposing her to a high risk of psychological damage due to her trauma, similar to what had occurred to the other women when interviewed by journalists (Hylton,

2018). The same can be said about the Yazidi community, as while the audience might feel like a chapter has been closed, it has not, and there have remained multiple women imprisoned by ISIS, providing no justice towards the minority group, especially considering that Iraq's laws are not in support of the victim, and have been called out to be amended, especially their rape, anti-trafficking and genocide law. Also, Rashed Shani Baqi, a Yazidi community member who resided in Australia, further proved that the broadcast would provide no beneficence by stating that "TV justice is not real justice, just a movie," supporting its unethicity. Thus, which overall defies the Bentham and Mill ethical approach and can also be deemed unethical. The Bentham and Mill approach in consequentialist ethics emphasizes that the outcome determines the ethicality of an action it provides, stating that "that the greatest happiness of the greatest number should be the determining principle of human action" (Patterson et al., 2019). However, in the broadcast's case, the only benefiting party would be the media outlet, as they are gaining an audience through this confrontation, and rather more harm is exposed to the Yazidi women, especially Hamid and her family, deeming the video unethical to share (Marczak, 2019).

Highlighting these unethical principles and values that the video has followed, it is crucial to recognize the conflicting loyalties that Al-Iraqiya media has faced during their broadcast, in the sense that the first loyalty lies to the community, in terms of providing the truth and benefiting the society, intending to "build a fair and compassionate environment that promotes the common good" (Patterson et al., 2019). The second loyalty lies to their profession and their organization, in a sense where they would prioritize their own and work on what gets them a good story and builds their status. Looking at the situation, it is clear that rather than being compassionate to the subjects when covering a traumatic story and providing accurate information on the matter, Al-Iraqiya had overlooked the victim's wellbeing. They hid essential information of the story, such as the fact that Hamid had encountered her tormentor previously (Kara, 2019), and provided sensational content to their large audience, garnering great attention from other media outlets worldwide. This concludes that Al-Iraqiya had chosen their loyalty to their organization, as they managed to produce an appealing but unethical video.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, this study firstly maps the literature of the Yazidi women's kidnappings and the media's coverage on the matter. The study then approaches and analyzes Al-Iraqiya TV's broadcasting of a Yazidi woman, Ashwaqq Hamid, confronting her abuser, ISIS member Abu Humam. The study analyzes the ethicality of the video through a visual ethical analysis and a general ethical analysis. The study concludes

that the broadcasting of the video was unethical due to its staged production, discovered through the visual ethical analysis, and its discounting of journalists' ethical guidelines and duties when covering such sensitive topics, in addition to prioritizing their own benefit over the wellbeing of the victim and the Yazidi community. The study recommends that media outlets beware of such breaches and aim to provide an objective platform where the voiceless can be voiced without bringing any psychological or general harm towards them. It is significant to highlight the coverage of the Yazidi women in general and the video specifically, as this has been going on for an extended period, since 2014, with journalists continuing to perform unethical coverage practices, undermining the Yazidi women's suffering. The study hopes that the Yazidi community eventually gets the right media coverage and justice and that journalists properly adhere to the journalism code of ethics and consider the consequences of discounting it to prevent such unethical cases from occurring.

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