

# What is lost if photos are pulled to save subject's pain?

Imagine if the world had never seen that [photo of a young Mary Ann Vecchio](#) screaming out in raw emotional pain over the body of Jeffrey Miller, shot dead moments earlier by National Guardsmen at Kent State University in 1970.

Student journalist John Filo's iconic, Pulitzer-winning photo arguably helped hasten the end of the Vietnam War.

The protest at Kent State on May 4, 1970, was just one of many protests around the country as President Richard Nixon appeared to be moving the war into Cambodia. But the senseless killing of four protesters and the visceral anguish that gushes from Vecchio's pleading face in that photo were among the forces that helped crystalize Americans' opposition to prolonging the losing battle in Vietnam that had cost so many lives.

David Crosby showed Neil Young the photo and within weeks Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young's *Ohio* anti-war anthem was climbing to No. 14 on the charts: *"Tin soldiers and Nixon coming. We're finally on our own. This summer I heard the drumming. Four dead in Ohio."*

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Young told VH1 it was Filo's compelling photo of Vecchio that inspired the song: "That girl leaning over the other kid in a pool of blood, and a look of, 'Whaaa? What? How could this

have happened?’ You know it’s shock ... grief,” Young said.

“It’s up to historians to decide whether it helped end the war,” said [Jerry Lewis](#), professor emeritus of sociology at Kent State who dodged bullets that day as a young professor. “It helped bring awareness to the tragedy of the war because Kent State is Middle America.”

The photo also “ruined” Vecchio’s life, she said for many years – though in recent years she has come to appreciate the role her image played in ending the war.



Students protest at Northwestern University on Nov. 5. (Photo by Ignacio Calderon)

Protesters at Northwestern University convinced The Daily Northwestern to take down photos and pull names off quotes because they felt the Daily’s coverage of a protest against former Attorney General Jeff Sessions earlier this month invaded their privacy.

“Some protesters found photos posted to reporters’ Twitter

accounts retraumatizing and invasive,” the Daily’s editors wrote in their extraordinary apology. “Those photos have since been taken down.”

The [capitulation](#) by student journalists studying at one of the premiere journalism schools in the United States has provoked a backlash from working journalists who found the self-censorship anathema to everything they learned in journalism school and practiced in the field.

“This was happening in a public space – this wasn’t a private little thing, right? So, what’s the issue?” asked John Filo, the student photo-journalist whose picture has come to symbolize the tragedy of the Kent State shootings. “This flabbergasts me. It’s in a public spot. Hey, ‘Were you there?’ That was part of the reporting. In journalism today, we play these games: ‘alternative facts.’ What really bothers me is Northwestern has such a great journalism school.”

After winning the Pulitzer Prize for his photo of Vecchio, [Filo](#) went on to a photo-journalism career that took him to the Associated Press, Sports Illustrated, the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Baltimore Evening Sun, Newsweek and CBS, where he now is vice president of East Coast photography on the corporate side.

Vecchio had a much rougher time after the photo’s publication.

A 14-year-old runaway from Florida, Vecchio sold her story to a reporter for the price of a bus ticket to California. But her father recognized her in the photo and had authorities detain her and send her back to their less-than-ideal home in Florida. She ended up in a juvenile home.

Whether reuniting a 14-year-old runaway with her family is “ruining” her life is in the eye of the beholder, but just imagine had the technology been there in 1970 for Vecchio to tweet a message to then-journalism-student Filo to take down that “trauma porn” photo that would change her life.

That photo arguably changed the course of American history. It helped bring into focus the costs of the Vietnam War. The War killed 58,000 American soldiers and wounded 150,000. More than 3 million Vietnamese soldiers and civilians were killed. The war cost the United States \$1 trillion in today's dollars.

The picture was worth a thousand words. But Filo has had 49 years to think about how his photo affected Vecchio's life.

"Initially she said the photo ruined her life," Filo said. "I felt bad for a long time."

Vecchio married, moved to Nevada, and waved off reporters who sought her out. Only in the last two decades has she started attending the commemorations at Kent State and speaking about her role.

"I feel sorry for her because she's asked to explain the power of the picture and she can't explain it – very few people can," said Lewis, who has attended the commemorations with her.

Filo has shared the stage with Vecchio at those commemorations and their relationship is good now, he says.

"It wasn't until 25 years later was able to talk to her," Filo said. "The last time we spoke, she understood it had to be done."

"We didn't do anything wrong. Just voicing our opinions on this lawn," Vecchio told attendees in a 2007 commemoration. "It's been very emotional every time I come back. I can't forget. I don't want you to forget."

Would Filo have done anything differently?

No.

"The question I get asked a lot is: 'Would you have presented that photo if it was your brother? Your mother?' And the

answer is Yes. If I was a journalist, I can't hold that photo back. That was part of the reporting. 'Would you offer that to the world again?' Yes. As a photographer, I take on the responsibility for the newspaper or whoever I am reporting for, reporting what I witnessed. Every time you go out, you try to make the best photo ever. I don't think you're there to take the biggest historical moment – that's for history to decide."

*Abdon Pallasch serves as Director of Communications for Illinois State Comptroller Susana Mendoza and is publisher of the Comptroller's Fiscal Focus magazine. A graduate of Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, he was the Chicago Sun-Times' Political Reporter and also wrote for The Chicago Tribune, The Tampa Tribune and Chicago Lawyer magazine.*