



## **Images of Death in the Media: Journalism and the Ethics of Using the Dead**

The wonders of technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are less wonderful when looking into the eyes of a dead body on your handheld screen. Gruesome images can serve as a powerful journalistic tool to influence the emotions of viewers and inspire action, but they can also be disturbing for many viewers. Some argue that such shocking images shouldn't be used to increase attention to a story. Others claim only shocking images can be used to illustrate the intensity of an event, a vital part of moving and educating the public. Where do we draw the line regarding what is appropriate in publishing images capturing death?



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Historically, death images have had a controversial past in American journalism. For example, photos of horrific lynchings provide modern viewers with an accurate depiction of the normalization of brutal death for African Americans, with crowds of white townspeople surrounding the hangings with refreshments and a “picnic-like atmosphere” (Zuckerman, 2017). These events portray a lack of humanity; while African Americans are burned and dismembered, everyone else is merrymaking, as if they were at a neighborhood carnival. One could argue that photos speak louder than words in this case, as historical news reports describing the atrocities conveyed them as spectacles, but not to the extent of celebrations. For example, following a headline announcing the lynching of John Hartfield at 5 o'clock that afternoon, a sub-headline read “Thousands of People Are Flocking into Ellisville to Attend the Event.” Gruesome photos seem to be useful now, however, to understand the environment that encouraged these killings. Though it is recognized that these images are prone to disturb, many maintain that it is quite necessary to confront them in order to prevent anything of its kind in the future. While “there is no comfort in looking at this history—and little hope save the courage of those who survived it ... there may be no justice... until we stop looking away” (Zuckerman, 2017). This is the same reasoning that *60 Minutes* relied upon when they decided to show historical lynching photos in a segment produced by Oprah Winfrey on lynching and racist violence in America. Of course, the challenge is that these pictures might cause or invoke psychological harm among those related to the victims of lynching or those fearful of racist violence. There is also the possibility that airing such photos might cause enjoyment or encouragement among racist viewers; critics might remind us that many of these shocking photos were taken and celebrated in their day because they captured an event prized by violent racists.

Some of the most controversial imagery in the contemporary media comes from school massacres. While the mass shooting at Columbine High School in 1999 is certainly an unforgettable moment in our nation's history, current students continue their battle against



what they see as the causes of such tragedies. As part of the #MyLastShot campaign, students are encouraged to place a sticker on the back of their driver's license that indicates their desire to have photos of their bodies published in the event they are killed by gun violence, in a way similar to the marks indicating organ donor status (Baldacci & Andone, 2019). Campaign founder and Columbine student Kaylee Tyner said, "it's about bringing awareness to the actual violence, and to start conversations." She also referenced the impact the viral video of students hiding under their desks during the school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School had on her: "I remember seeing people on Twitter saying it was so horrible... but what I was thinking was, no, that's the reality of a mass shooting." While such school shootings are comparatively rare, they are clearly horrible. The #MyLastShot campaign represents an attempt to get individuals to agree in advance to use shocking imagery of their death to showcase these horrors to others. If one is killed, the hope is that the image of their dead body might bring about a better understanding of the problem of school shootings, and perhaps move readers to action. Even if one is not killed in a school shooting, agreeing to the conditions of the #MyLastShot campaign still illustrates a willingness to do something that many perceive as shocking, and thereby functions as a plea for heightened attention to issues such as school shootings and gun control measures. At the same time, viewing the photos and videos of school shootings may be so traumatizing to others as to make children afraid of attending school, and for that matter, make parents afraid of sending them. Most children will not be directly affected by a school shooting. How much fear and imagery is needed to motivate the right amount of concern and action on the part of readers?

The #MyLastShot campaign leverages consent before one becomes a victim of violent crime. Not all newsworthy images involve subjects that could give such consent in advance. In cases where subjects of photographs cannot give consent for the use of their images or likenesses in news stories, lines begin to blur separating the newsworthy from the private. The National Press Photographers Association's Code of Ethics states "intrude on private moments of grief only when the public has an overriding and justifiable need to see" (Code of Ethics). Determining when this "need to see" is applicable, however, is the difficult part of death photography. This is especially true when covering wars and other violent conflicts. The photo of Alan Kurdi, a two-year-old Syrian refugee whose dead body washed up on the Turkish coast after attempting to flee to Europe, overwhelmed the world with despair. Many believed the photo was vital in understanding the terrors of the refugee crisis, while others were disgusted at the exhibition made of his body throughout the media. Kurdi did not—or possibly could not, given his status as a child—consent to such a use of his corpse for news purposes. Regardless, the powerful image of Kurdi caused change; the British prime minister was so moved by it that the United Kingdom began to accept more refugees (Walsh & Time Photo, 2015). Yet Peter Bouckaert of Human Rights Watch, who was the initial distributor of the photo, said "when I see the image now on people's social media profiles, I contact them and I ask them to take it down. I think it is important that we give Alan Kurdi back his privacy and his dignity. It's important to let this little boy rest now."



Images of death tell a certain truth, but their reception often differs based upon the intention behind their use and the meanings imputed by their viewers. It isn't uncommon for photojournalists to be accused of non-journalistic advocacy in their most shocking photographs. For many, though, the only message being conveyed through a shocking image of death is the truth, one that happens to hit us harder than most other written stories. But telling a shocking truth does not exhaust all that journalists owe their subjects and readers. When can images of death be used in a way that respects the deceased and contributes to a potentially laudatory social goal of the journalist conveying this information?

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What are the different sorts of images of death mentioned in this case, and what differentiates each type?
2. Under what conditions, if any, is it acceptable to photograph the dead for news purposes?
3. What responsibility do journalists and news organizations have to the deceased? How does one respect an individual who no longer is alive?
4. If journalism is meant to inform on important public issues, could a shocking photograph be *too* moving? When does powerful photojournalism shade into unethical manipulation?
5. What ethical obligations do photojournalists owe their readers? Do these considerations change when violence or other human agents are involved?

### **Further Information:**

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