

News Literacy Instructors: This will provide background if you decide to use the Drowning Victim photo for a discussion board in your recitation on the ethics of using the picture of the boy in the body bag.



A FAMILY'S TRAGEDY BECOMES PUBLIC

One of the best ways for an editor to learn if readers have grown callused and insensitive is to take note of the calls and letters produced after the printing of a controversial image. When an image offends, an editor knows of it quickly. It is almost reassuring, then, to learn that photographs still have the power to offend readers-particularly an image of a drowned child with distraught family members standing over the body.

The editors of the Bakersfield *Californian*, an 80,000-circulation newspaper, heard loud and clear the anger of readers over a remarkable photograph. The paper received 500 letters, 400 phone calls, 80 subscription cancellations, and

one bomb threat. Such a reader reaction is extraordinary given the paper's size. National columnist Bob Greene (cited in Gordon, 1986) wrote, "The picture should never have been published; in a way I hope you can understand, it was pornography." For Greene the picture, "epitomized . . . everything that is wrong about what we in this business do" (p. 19).

The controversy at the *Californian* was reminiscent of other disturbing photographs that are printed from time to time and objected to by the nation's newspaper readers. Stan Forman, then with the Boston *Herald-American*, captured a tragic moment with his 135mm lens. A woman and her young niece are frozen by the fast shutter speed in a fall from a faulty fire escape's metal platform. The woman was killed, while the child was saved because she landed on her aunt's body. One critic said the picture was a "tasteless breach of privacy" ("Tasteless breach," 1986, p. 27).

Maria Rosas of the *Miami Herald* made a self-admitted shocking photograph of a lifeless, nude Haitian man from a group of 33 who were drowned while trying to reach the safety of Florida. Callers characterized the picture as "vulgar, racist and sensationalistic" ("Readers object," 1982, p. 2). Nudity, the fact that the picture was in color, and that it was used large on the front page were contributing factors in the protest. From a helicopter's overhead perspective, George Wedding made a striking photograph of the body of 11-year-old Andy Karr lying face-up in the back of an ash-filled pickup truck, a victim of Mt. St. Helen's powerful force (see Student Workbook for this photograph). Readers called the image "callous, insensitive, gross, cruel, tacky, in very poor taste, barbaric, unimaginable, and repulsive" (Gordon, 1980, p. 25). With all three pictures, editors most likely justified them with the Categorical Imperative philosophy-the

image described the tragic event like no combination of words ever could. **Text Added, October, 2004:** [But utilitarianism could also be evoked by editors since the images educated the public about unsafe fire escapes that should be inspected, dramatically told the results of living conditions in Haiti that led to such desperate acts, and clearly showed the tragic results if the public failed to heed warnings from governmental officials.] With all three pictures, readers more often objected to them with the Golden Rule philosophy-the images contributed to the victim's family grief or upset readers who would rather not see such tragic events.

With a caption head titled, "A family's anguish," there is no doubt that John Harte's photograph of young, lifeless, 5-year-old, Edward Romero, halfway zippered in a dark, plastic body bag with family members crying and a bystander awkwardly reaching for one of the survivors, is a powerful and disturbing image. Under the outstretched arms and objections from a deputy sheriff, Harte made the picture with a 24mm lens from about 5 feet away. Harte admitted that the family scene was a "get-at-any-cost picture" and the most dramatic moment he had ever photographed. For Harte, his motivation was probably the Categorical Imperative philosophy-a dramatic, human tragedy should always be the subject of pictures.

After a discussion with Harte's weekend duty editor and the managing editor, Robert Bentley, who was called in to make a decision on the photograph, the editors ran the picture on an inside page agreeing with Harte's Categorical Imperative philosophy. Bentley also employed the Utilitarian approach. One other young boy had drowned on the same day. Clearly the swimming area was a dangerous spot that the editors felt the public needed to know about with Harte's dramatic image (Gordon, 1986).

A storm of protest from readers immediately followed and Bentley changed his position. In a column titled, "What should give way when news values collide with reader sensibilities?" Bentley admitted, "We make mistakes-and this clearly was a big one." Wrote Bentley, "The damage done to the memory of the late Edward Romero . . . and to the offended sensitivities of *Californian* readers cannot be undone. It can only be followed by sincere apologies and deep company-wide introspection" (Gordon, 1986, p. 19). Bentley now advocated the Golden Rule philosophy, shared by a majority of his readers, to justify his changed position. Not all the letters were negative, however. Connie Hoppe wrote:

I was horrified [by Harte's photograph], but I felt the item was newsworthy.... that picture was real-maybe a little more real to me because my own 21/2-year-old son drowned. . . . If maybe just one parent saw that picture of the grieving family and drowning victim and has taken more precautions around pool and beach areas because of it, then that picture may have saved another child's life. (Gordon, 1986, p. 23)

Bill Hodge (1989) reported that in the 2 months prior to the boy's death, 14 people had drowned. In the month following the controversy, only 2 drowned. The newspaper and the photographer had to take the wrath of an angry readership who either did not want to be faced with a real tragedy of life or they sincerely were concerned about the rights to privacy for the Romero family. Whatever the rationale, lives were probably saved by the newspaper's coverage.

Ethics Codes Arguments

Ethical conduct may be guided by codes established by newspapers and professional organizations, but ethical codes cannot anticipate every situation. Consequently, the language of codes is hopeful, yet vague. For example, the "Code of Ethics" that all members of the NPPA must sign does not specifically mention gruesome situations (see Appendix A). The ethics code does contain phrases such as photographers "should at all times maintain the highest standards of ethical conduct," photojournalism "is worthy of the very best thought and effort," and members should "maintain high standards of ethical conduct."

Some would argue that codes should be ambiguous. Elliott-Boyle (1985-1986) wrote that "codes can provide working journalists with statements of minimums and perceived ideals" (p. 25). When a journalist uses highly questionable practices that are outside standard behavior, the offending reporter can be held accountable.

Others argue, however, that ethics codes should be less idealistic and more specific particularly with regards to the "exploitation of grief." In his 1986 article, George Padgett (1985-1986) asserted that vague ethical codes and brief textbook treatment of photojournalism ethical issues do not adequately provide guidelines for dealing with pictures of grieving victims. Without such guidelines, he wrote, regulation by the courts may classify grief pictures as invasions of privacy. "The problem should be addressed," wrote Padgett, "while it is still an ethical rather than a legal issue" (p. 56).

Conditions That Cause a Reader Firestorm

When confronting situations and photographs of accident and tragedy victims, journalists are torn between the right to tell the story and the right NOT to tell the story. Arguments by well meaning professional journalists can be made for and against the taking and publishing or the not taking and not publishing of almost any photograph. Curtis MacDougall (1971) in his visually graphic book, *News Pictures Fit to Print . . . Or Are They?* argued that news pictures sometimes need to be offensive in order to better educate the public. He wrote, "If it were in the public interest to offend good taste, I would offend good taste" (p. vii). The problem comes, of course, when journalists disagree on what is in the public's interest.

From the examples just given, it can be generalized that readers are more likely to object to a controversial picture if:

- * it was taken by a staff photographer,
- * it comes from a local story,
- * the image is printed in color,
- * the image is printed in a morning paper,
- * the image is printed on the front page,
- * it has no story accompaniment,
- * it shows people overcome with grief,
- * it shows the victim's body,
- * the body is physically traumatized,
- * the victim is a child, and
- * nudity is involved.

If five or more of these conditions apply, editors should prepare themselves for reader reactions before the firestorm hits. Staff photographers and writers should be selected to help answer phone calls and letters. Editors should prepare notes for a column that justifies the decision. As many letters to the editor and telephone transcripts as possible should be printed. Readers may not agree, but most will respect the decision if the response to the controversy is prompt and the justification is consistent.

Michael Josephson, president of the Josephson Institute for the Advancement of Ethics, has suggested that editors and ombudsmen write "early warning notes" to readers that a controversial story is about to be printed. The note could describe the reasoning that led editors to print a controversial picture. Such a practice might head-off public misunderstanding about the intent of printing an image that may be graphically violent or intense. Public Editor Kerry Sipe of the Virginia-Pilot and Ledger-Star wrote a column on the same day a child-abuse story ran. The paper only received one call from a reader who said the story should not have run. "If he had not written his column, Sipe said, he was sure that he would have received many more" (Cunningham, 1989, p. 10).

To better understand what is the right course of action, a journalist should be familiar with the trends prevalent in newspapers and magazines, know what the readers think is acceptable for publication, and have a strong, personal ethical background.

Professional organizations and the literature that is produced by them give journalists a good idea of where photojournalism has been and where it is likely to head.

Discussions with a newspaper's ombudsman or editor, who receive many of the complaints, will help to determine the aspects of photographic coverage and publication most objectionable to readers. Guest lectures or formalized town meetings by journalists with concerned citizens will create a dialogue with readers that will help determine the acceptance level of controversial images.

Finally, personal reflection will help balance the sometimes conflicting goals of publishing the news while being sensitive to the feelings of subjects and readers. A photographer's personal ethics are influenced by many factors: family and religious upbringing, educational opportunities, professional associations, career goals, day-to-day experiences, and co-workers.

Nora Ephron (1978) in her book, *Scribble Scribble Notes on the Media*, devoted a chapter to a description and reaction to Stan Forman's fire escape tragedy. Ephron concluded that "I recognize that printing pictures of corpses raises all sorts of problems about taste and titillation and sensationalism; the fact is, however, that people die. Death happens to be one of life's main events. And it is irresponsible and more than that, inaccurate-for newspapers to fail to show it . . ." (p. 61).

A photojournalist's mission is to report all the news objectively, fairly, and accurately. The profession can only improve in quality and stature if photographers are mindful of those they see in their viewfinders and those they seldom see, their readers. Decisions, however, should be guided, never ruled, by readers.