

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Dealing with graphic content is a moral minefield for journalists

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Covering atrocity on August 12 2014. Daily Mirror, The Times, The Sun.

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Even for a world accustomed to news reports of conflict and disaster, the past three months seem to be unprecedented for the frequency of horrific events. From the continuing tragedies in Syria, to the kidnapping of Nigerian schoolgirls by Boko Haram, to the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Very recently, we've seen the Israeli government's assault on civilians in Gaza and now there are the terrible accounts of atrocities committed by the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq.

These events have once again demonstrated that the maxim "man's inhumanity to man" continues to apply in what seems to be an enduringly violent world. And our news media offers us graphic evidence of this inhumanity.

The Mail Online invites us to watch a video showing a mass execution carried out by IS in Iraq. The Independent gives us the opportunity to watch "disturbing video footage" purporting to show the moment a whole neighbourhood in Gaza is flattened by Israeli air strikes.

Then, we were shown appalling evidence of how violence and hatred corrupts the young. Newspapers around the world reproduced the tweet believed to have been sent by Australian terrorist Khaled Sharrouf, fighting in Syria. It depicts a boy, thought to be Sharrouf's son, holding aloft a severed head. Though the boy's eyes are blacked out and we cannot see the severed head, the photograph is both shocking and chilling.

Difficult decisions

The obvious question is: should such images appear in the mainstream media? This is something picture editors and news editors contemplate every single day. When we are prone to criticise the coverage we get it would be right to consider the constraints under which journalists operate.

Roger Tooth, the Guardian's head of photography has written of the images coming out of Gaza and Ukraine:

Conflict-weary picture editors have shed tears and wondered aloud if counselling might be needed as they have shifted through thousands of pictures provided by the photo agencies' all-seeing lenses.

Indeed, it is now widely recognised that journalists who deal with so much of this graphic content can suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, as a result. It's been argued that the use of more graphic material in mainstream media is at least partly due to the rise of social media. As Julie Posetti rightly points out:

Journalists and traditional news publishers are no longer the primary information gatekeepers of public discourse; neither are they able to impose their professional publication standards and ethics on social media users and bloggers.

But audiences do still rely on conventional media to make sense of world events and to provide analysis where social media cannot. In this sense, the responsibility of the traditional media is great. As Tooth writes:

It's all out there on the internet or on your timeline. All I can do is try to help keep the Guardian's coverage as humane and decent as possible.

Plus, the photos that are chosen to represent conflicts play an important role in making the public aware of the realities of wars that their governments are involved in, or are contemplating getting involved in. If certain images are not included by journalists – such as that of an Iraqi man burned alive in the first Gulf War – this can perhaps inadvertently influence how opinions are formed.

Differences of opinion

When it comes to images of war and terrorism in general, there are two main arguments. On one hand, the brutality and horror of warfare must be conveyed. On the other, some images are just too gruesome and too graphic for public consumption, and they only provide images for other fanatics to replicate.

The death of Colonel Gaddafi in 2011 provoked this type of debate. Then, most front pages showed close up pictures of a physically crushed man, bloodied and beaten, at the very end of his life. The Mirror showed a lifeless corpse with the headline: "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

Responding to the fact that the BBC and ITV decided to run grainy footage of Gaddafi's last moments, Igor Toronyi-Lalic wrote in *The Telegraph*:

Ignore the fact that the last, the death of Gaddafi, was deserved. Barbarity was still the result. The sort of barbarity that we mock our medieval ancestors for. Yet there it is: death, murder and suffering open to all at one scroll and click. And, judging by the prominence of the clips on sites around the world, we were lapping it up as much as any 14th-century peasant.

For Mark Lawson the worry was the risk of “the development of a culture of death porn.”

For me, as a simple moral position, Gaddafi merits as much privacy in his final extremities as did his victims in the Lockerbie bombing, a germane example from the past of a time when the media by common consent suppressed horrific images in the cause of taste and privacy.

Jonathan Jones in the *Guardian* was of a different view. For him, this was war as it should be seen by all:

For once, with the death of Gaddafi, we have seen the face of war, washed in blood, bathed in cruelty. The horrible and haunting pictures of his last moments and his public exhibition simply show us, for once, what the wars of our time and all times look like. If we don't like what we see we must stop this foolish pretence that war, however 'just', can ever be anything but a brutal mess. If we were more properly conscious of what war really means we might have a different perspective on our nation's involvement in them.

Whether or not a news organisation is right to use graphic material is a matter of opinion. But what this article has hopefully illustrated is that in certain cases the decisions to print or broadcast are taken with care and with a genuine desire to “do the right thing”.

The mainstream media, if we can speak so generally, has its multitude of failings. But let's not forget that when dealing with upsetting and harrowing imagery, journalists do not exist in a vacuum, unencumbered by the moral uncertainties that we all face.

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