

## Photojournalism: Ethics or Aesthetics?

Getting the most dramatic photo or an equally dramatic story is important in journalism. But how far should a publication go to achieve the best emotional effect, be it through a story or photograph? Should a family's right to grieve privately be violated because it is considered newsworthy? These are the type of questions asked in this case study.

Photographer John Harte of the Bakersfield Californian took photos of 5-year-old Edward Romero, whose drowned body had just been recovered from a lake. The published photo showed family members grieving over Edward's body.

The issue is whether the Californian should have published that photo.

Based on Judeo-Christian ethics, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," [Writer defines philosophies to make it clear to me s/he understands them.] the editor should not have published the photo. Running the photo ~~would have been~~ was disrespectful to the family and ~~would have~~ put them through unnecessary harm and pain.

The editor and the photographer should have put themselves in the family's position and evaluated the situation from their perspective. No good could have come from publishing the photo.

The Golden Mean ~~principal~~ principle would take a better, more balanced approach to the tragedy. Aristotle's philosophy says that virtue lies at the mean, or middle, of two extremes. The editor could have run a picture that wasn't as invasive as this particular photograph. The paper could have used a picture of the family hugging each other or crying in each other's arms without showing the victim's lifeless body. Even though those pictures wouldn't be as powerful, they would still convey compelling emotions.

The editor could have also borrowed from Roy Peter Clark asked himself 1) how he would feel if this photo were about his family, 2) what good would publication do, and 3) what does the reader need to know. The responses to the first and third questions would have warned him against publishing the photo.

If the editor were to base his decision on the Utilitarian principle, the photo wouldn't have been run. This is because Utilitarianism believes in weighing the harm against the

good, and this picture wouldn't have a positive effect on the readers. They would only be reminded of how gruesome the boy's death was. It would in no way enrich their lives.

On the other hand, pictures like the ones shown on television after the World Trade Center was attacked would have been appropriate for publication because they depicted a tragedy that touched many people's lives, and that was why they ~~was~~ **were** broadcast on TV. Audiences got to see all those disturbing images because as Americans, they were directly affected. Those images were also informative because they gave audiences a better illustration to what was going on.

The managing editor of the Bakersfield Californian defended his decision to run the picture based on the fact that he thought the picture could serve as a potential warning to families about the dangers at the lake. But he later decided that the photo should have never been published and realized that journalists are not in touch with their readers' sensibilities.

One photograph could convey different, yet strong emotions. As the saying goes, "A picture says a thousand words." But editors are faced with tough decisions every day on

whether a certain picture should run because some readers might take offense to it. As in this case, most readers protested ~~to~~ **the decision to publish** the photograph because it captured a very private moment. They believed that the family should have been left alone to mourn privately the loss of their son. Aesthetically?? offensive photographs should only be published if it was absolutely necessary.

Unlike the images from the terrorist attacks, this photo was not necessary.

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The ethical issues in this case study involve the grieving family's right to privacy vs. the newspaper's right to publish a gruesome **photo of a dead child**.

The case revolves around Bakersfield Californian photographer John Harte, who took photographs of a 5-year-old drowning victim and his grieving family.

The ethical question here is whether the paper should have published the photo. The Principle of Utility (Utilitarianism), is the ethical principle that seeks the greatest good

for the greatest number of people. Robert Bentley, managing editor of the paper at that time, felt that with the number of drowning victims in the area, to run a picture of this emotional impact would be a painful and lasting reminder on the community. Using the Principle of Utility, he felt that even though the picture would offend the family and several community members, it would serve a greater good for a greater number of people. People would remember how devastating this was, therefore, be more attentive to their own children.

The ethical issue also falls under the Communitarianism, where one's obligations to the community are more important than that of the individuals. If the community ~~was~~ not ~~experiencing~~ **had not experienced** a large number of drowning, then ethics and logic would dictate to not print the picture. The end would not justify the means.

Bentley did take an extreme amount of heat for what he did, and did later regretted running the photo. Was the reason he would later change his mind from his own conscience, or was he persuaded by angry readers canceling their papers?

The bottom line is the editor had a justifiable reason to print the photo. Was the situation newsworthy, and did the picture need to run in order to prove its point? Yes to both. As much grief as that family was experiencing at that time, the possibility to alert others of the danger at the lake would have been missed if Harte did not take the photo, and Bentley choose to not print it.