

Paper erred in publishing photo

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," the editor should not have published the photo. Running the photo would have been 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 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 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.

TV station's were unethical

The situation in "Too Many Bodies, Too Much Blood: A Case Study of the Family Sensitive Newscast Movement" was handled in a poor manner. In this situation, a television station aired video of a murdered officer floating naked in a river. The wife of the officer became terribly upset over the telecast. According to Bill Silcock, the author of this case study, the Idaho Fish and Game Department called the news station to confirm a radio report that announced the "TV station's helicopter discovered the body." The Idaho Fish and Game Department wanted to warn the wife of the murdered officer.

The people involved in making the decision to air the video did not use good judgment. If they would have used H. Eugene Goodwin's ethical reasoning process,

they would not have used the video. Goodwin uses a set of seven questions in order to reason, ethically. One of the questions is “ Can I justify this to other people and the public?” ~~I don't believe~~ It is unlikely the employees of that station ~~can~~ could justify airing that graphic video.

The only argument for using the video would be to attain journalistic awards, which ~~they~~ the station did receive. An award is not worth the trauma the wife had to endure from watching such a newscast.

Another question Goodwin uses is “Who will be hurt and who will be helped?” Airing that video did not help anyone. Nothing was positively accomplished for anybody in televising the news clip. The station’s decision only portrays its absence of respect for family and friends of victims in the stories the station covers. It is apparent that those reporters and editors are only concerned with ratings. It is tremendously sad that a news station would sacrifice the respect and privacy of family and friends of victims purely for ratings. Another question Goodwin uses in his reasoning process is “Can I look in the mirror again?” The answer should be no, but apparently with the news station’s actions, ~~they don't~~ the staff there doesn't have any respect for the public.

Obviously the news station’s loyalties were tied to ratings and only ratings. The station had no loyalties to the victims’ loved ones in that it wasn’t even going to notify the wife of the victim of the newscast. The only reason the wife was informed of the video was due to the Idaho Fish and Game department calling the station.

At the very least, the station should have notified the wife before airing video rather than having her be informed by an outside group. If the station had used Ralph Potter’s “Potter Box,” it would have realized that the ethical principles and values far outweigh its loyalty to ratings.