Seeing dead people: Exploring visuals of dead bodies in the media

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Violent events are an every day feature for the media in South Africa. However, media can report on these events in various ways. The Media Monitoring Project explores ethical considerations which should guide the use visuals to report on horrific events. In particular, this update will be looking at visuals used of dead bodies. Alternative representations of the dead are then suggested.

This update will first look at the various ethical considerations behind showing gruesome pictures or videos. Further, it will analyse the images used in media during the month June in 2008.

Why gruesome imagery?

Shield the general public of reality or not?

It may be argued that certain horrific visuals are necessary in order to report the reality of violent events, such as the xenophobic violence. In deciding to display certain visuals, the editor must balance 'the right of the public to know (which is connected with the right to see) and the right to be shielded from too much reality' (Taylor 1998)[1]. The media have a duty to inform the public on what is going on, through both words and imagery; however, who determines whether a picture is suitable for publication?

In fact there are no laws stating that you are not allowed to publish picture of a dead body. However, the South African Press Code, to which most print media subscribe, states that:

> "Due care and responsibility shall be exercised by the press with regard to the presentation of brutality, violence and atrocities."[2]

The SABC news guidelines are more specific: "As a rule, intrusive visuals of the dead should not be broadcast unless the story demands it"[3]

Media makers have the freedom (and responsibility) to decide this for themselves. According to Hudson (1992) journalistic gatekeepers ranged between two extremes, from the traditional/objective journalist, who sees his role as a neutral gatherer and transmitter of information, to the participant/interpretive journalist, who is not objective, but instead interprets the information gathered subjectively before

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[1] Taylor, J. 1998. "Body Horror: Photojournalism, catastrophe and war". Manchester University Press: Manchester.
[2] See http://www.presscouncil.org.za/pages/south-african-press-code.php
[3] See SABC policy on news, available online at www.sabc.co.za

showing this information to the general public. Hudson (1992) argued that journalists from the first category were more likely to show graphical violent images:

> "The fact that some journalists claim to be holding a mirror to the world while others consider themselves qualified (even duty-bound) to organize, synthesize, and interpret the world for the audience did manifest itself in their decisions for airing or excluding the graphically violent material presented on the television screen. One 30-year television news veteran responded to the presented dilemma this way: "We have a responsibility to protect the viewer from violence." (Hudson 1992)[4]

Therefore it seems that every journalist (or sub-editor) has to think about the news angle they want to pursue when considering using gruesome imagery, which corresponds in how they perceive news reportage should be done.

Privacy and dignity

The decision about whether or not to use gruesome imagery is ultimately up to the editor. Decisions should be weighed up according to respect for the deceased or injured persons' dignity and the potential trauma of family and friends. This need to be balanced against the news value of the image and decisions about whether the image is necessary to underscore the seriousness of an issue. For instance, one image can say much more about a war than statistics ever will as it brings the war closer to the reader.

Although journalists and media houses should consider whether they want their readers and viewers – and non-target readers including children – to be exposed to gruesome imagery or not, another aspect that should be taken into consideration is the privacy and dignity of the deceased person, as well as that of his or her relatives.

When the media show a gruesome picture of a person, that person's relatives (and friends) may also be confronted with this imagery on top of the trauma of their loss, should the person die. Further trauma can easily avoided through the choice of images, remembering that such visuals can continue to haunt the bereaved for years. Children can also be significantly affected, by watching the news and reading the newspapers in which gruesome visuals appear. In particular, imagery that is placed on the front page of a newspaper can be very intrusive. A child does not even have to read the paper, but can see the gruesome imagery while the newspaper is lying around, or displayed in the shops.

However, there is an argument for using images, according to Taylor "Views about horror, and to what extent it may be put on show, differ according to time and place' (Taylor 1998, p. 78). For instance, Taylor argues, that press seldom print photographs where relatives of the deceased may see it. So, pictures of foreigners

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[4] Hudson, T.J. 1992. "Consonance in depiction of violent material in television news" University of Oklahoma: Oklahoma.

are more likely than pictures of locals (ibid, p. 79). South African media has a history of showing violent events with graphic images (Ullman 2005)[5]. However, considering the already violent society in South Africa, serious questions can be asked on whether exposing the general public to even more gruesome imagery is a wise decision. It can be argued that the gruesome images in an already violent society influence the public and even create a chance that someone may be inspired to repetition and emulation (Berger 2008)[6].

Analysing the media

During June 2008 several media have been consulted in order to investigate whether they were showing gruesome imagery. Below there will be an analysis of the television news and the written press during the monitoring period.

Television news

Both SABC 3 and e.tv primetime news showed visuals of deceased people in a dignified manner. Several times body bags were shown, or there were visuals of coffins in which deceased people were to be buried. However, none of the deceased people themselves were shown. This way, the general public is informed that people died during certain accidents, disasters and crime, but the privacy and dignity of the deceased people concerned were taken into account, as well as protecting the general public from too graphic gruesome imagery.

Press

Most of the newspapers did not show any imagery of deceased people. Some newspapers, such as the *City Press*, did show a coffin (City Press, 01/06/08, p. 16), but not gruesome imagery. However, three newspapers did show a few pictures of dead bodies, namely *Beeld*, *The Citizen* and the *Daily Sun*, which are discussed below.

Media monitored:
- Beeld;
- Business Day;
- City Press;
- Daily Sun;
- e.tv primetime news;
- Mail & Guardian;
- SABC 3 primetime news;
- Saturday Star;
- Sowetan;
- Sunday Independent;
- Sunday Sun;
- Sunday Times;
- Sunday World;
- The Citizen;
- The Star; and,
- The Weekender.

Box 1.1.

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[5] Ullman, C. 2005. "Black Peril, White Fear: Representations of Violence and Race in South Africa's English Press, 1976-2002, and Their Influence on Public Opinion
[6] Berger, G. 2008 "Imaging the violence and imaging our media without it" Column for the Mail & Guardian. Also available online at http://www.mg.co.za/article/2008-05-28-imaging-the-violence-and-imagining-our-media-without-it

Beeld
MMP's experience suggests that *Beeld* does show injured people, but seldom deceased. However, during the monitoring period two pictures did display dead bodies.

One picture of a dead body accompanied the article 'Swart naweek op paaie eis 11 mense; 34 beseer' *Black weekend on the roads claims11 people and with 34 injured* (*Beeld*, 02/06/08, p. 4). The picture shows the scene where a car crash happened and it shows, from a distance, all the paramedics that are trying to help the injured people. The picture is taken from such an angle that nobody can be identified, and the privacy and dignity of the deceased and injured people on the picture is guaranteed.

Another picture includes dead bodies, accompanied the article 'Japanner jag met vragmotor in skare in, steek 7 dood' *Japanese man drives vehicle into crowd, stabs 7 to death* (*Beeld*, 10/06/08, p. 7). This picture shows bystanders helping the injured and dead people that have been stabbed in Tokyo. Although the picture is quite gruesome, by showing the blood surrounding the bodies that lie on the ground, this picture also does not show the bodies in such a way that they can be identified. However, the picture is not very dignified either, which seems to back-up Taylor's argument (1998) that gruesome imagery of deceased non-nationals is more often shown, compared to gruesome imagery of deceased nationals.

The Citizen
During the monitoring period, *The Citizen,* did show gruesome imagery, but usually only of non-nationals on the international pages. For instance they have publicised a picture of a grieving resident in Baquba, Iraq for his father, and the picture reveals the deceased father's hands and part of his body (*The Citizen*, 25/06/08, p. 16). The picture is taken in a dignified way of the father, but showing his son grieving for his father is a lot less dignified.

Another picture published on the international pages shows a man mourning over the body of his relative, who has been killed by a suicide bomb (also in Baquba). The relative has passed away and the grisly image shows a detailed picture of the head, covered in blood (*The Citizen*, 23/06/08, p. 10). This could be again an example of how editors feel more confident showing gruesome imagery of non-nationals.

The Citizen also published a picture during the monitoring period that shows a dead body of a South African national. The picture shows a dead man covered up with a blanket, but the picture does focus on a policeman in the front, which makes the dead man in the background blurred (*The Citizen*, 18/06/08, p. 6). Because of the way the picture is taken, the dead body is unidentifiable and shown in a quite respectable manner.

Daily Sun

The *Daily Sun* showed a greater amount of dead people of dead bodies compared to the other newspapers. During the monitoring period four images revealed deceased South African nationals. Two of these imageries were on the front page accompanying the articles: 'Bloodbath! Three die as HIV+ lover goes crazy'[7] (*Daily Sun*, 17/06/08, p. 1) and 'Gone to God! And her body lies in church spread out like a cross!' (*Daily Sun*, 18/06/08, p. 1). The two other images appeared on the second page, accompanying the articles 'Driver shot – cop bust!' (*Daily Sun*, 02/06/08, p. 2) and 'Fiery Justice!' (*Daily Sun*, 10/06/08, p. 2).

All four pictures are shown in relation to crime. Three dead bodies are shown that accompanied the article titled 'Bloodbath! Three die as HIV+ lover goes crazy', the deceased people are identifiable, shown at the location where two were murdered and the third committed suicide. In this full-colour image, the bodies are surrounded by blood. The accompanying article reveals that two of the deceased people are the parents of a 14 year old boy, quite probably further tramatised by this image in South Africa's biggest daily. Not only can the pictures be considered too grisly for the people who cannot consent to seeing these images, as they are on the front page, and children who have a special right to protection. The pictures are definitely too gruesome for relatives who may struggle to shake this image as they remember the deceased[8].

The other three images of dead people shown by the *Daily Sun* during the monitoring period, did not clearly show the identity of the deceased person in the picture, however, the identity of the deceased people in the pictures were all revealed in the accompanying article. Further, none of the three bodies were covered up (enough) to protect the dignity of the deceased and their family. All three images showed at least some body parts. Also, it seems that none of the three pictures were necessary in order to inform the public of the past events, instead it seems the pictures were used in order to sensationalise. The fact that all four images were either on the first or the second page of the newspaper, gives credibility to the explanation that the images' use is merely sensational.

Other options

Images are essential components of both print and broadcast media, they express more than mere words can say. Gruesome images may make a point that a less grisly image may not. But due consideration should be given to the affect of the image on the audience, the family of the deceased and children who may see it. Other, less grisly alternatives may make a better emotional link to the audience.

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[7] It is debatable, and an issue for discussion elsewhere, whether the HIV status of the person is relevant to the article. The arbitrary mentioning of the terms seems out of step with the good work that *Daily Sun* do in providing information about the infection.
[8] Also see the MADOAT MAD written on this article
http://www.getmad.co.za/tabid/277/ctl/ArticleView/mid/398/articleId/136/Ethical-codes-concerning-children-HIV-and-photography-violated.aspx)

Some issues that every media practitioner should be taking into consideration before publishing a picture that can be considered gruesome. Firstly, there are children who can also read the papers and watch the television news; especially a front page image is easily seen by a child, even when it is not reading the newspaper itself. It is every South African's duty to protect the rights of our children. Secondly, the dignity and privacy of the deceased person should be taken into account, as well as the privacy of his or her relatives. Thirdly, South Africa's violent past should be taken into account, fuelling the violence with even more violent images in the papers and on the news can inspire others to copy.

Evocative images that touch the audience need not be gruesome, in fact it could be argued that the South African media audience is desensitised to violence and violent images. Images that protect the identity of the dead while showing the loss of life can be even more poignant. Creative photography and use of images can assist the audience in establishing an emotional link with the story.
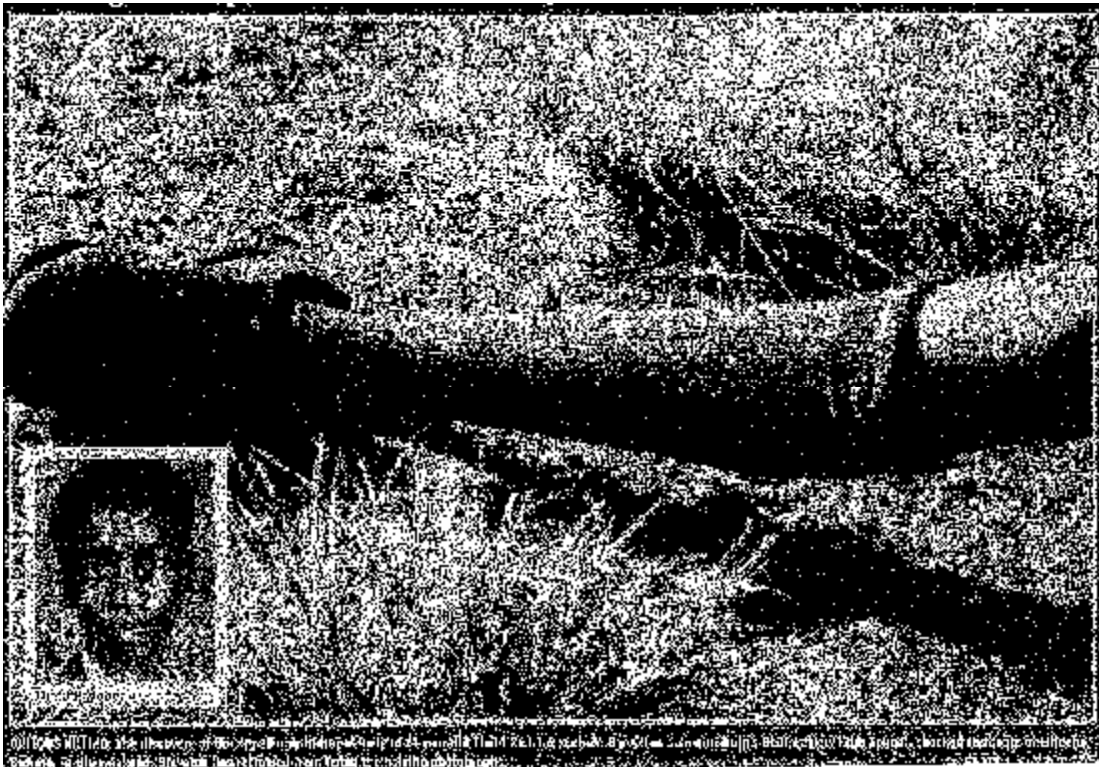
An example of this is an image used in the Sowetan 5 February 2007, p1 (shown above). The picture was illustrated by a picture of the leg of the young victim. The reader gets a sense of the loss of life without the full horror of the violence done to her. In fact, the image reflects her youth and the tragedy of her death at her young age. The image also was moving and so makes a lasting impression on the reader.

An editor or sub-editor can encourage better photography, more artistic in nature by using and encouraging the taking of more creative photographs. Photographers

and journalists can also consider other options for images in order to create that emotional link with their audience. And in doing so, produce more ethical work.

Conclusion

Choices about the showing of dead bodies in the media underline the complexities faced by journalists in considering issues of human rights. While analysing the South African media during the month of June 2008, it seems that most media houses do abide by codes of good practice, in not showing undignified images of deceased people. However, there remains room for improvement in some newspapers.