

Showing Due Care – Coverage of the Soccer Disaster

The death of 43 people at a soccer match on Wednesday this week has by and large been dealt with, with due sensitivity to those killed. To the media's credit, while the majority of Gauteng-based newspapers had their front pages dominated by images of dead bodies the bodies were not, thankfully, identifiable and in every instance there were stories (often more than one, and often several images of the aftermath) that contextualised the deaths and attempted to represent the tragedy. Last nights' television news bulletins continued to be dominated by the event with a number of items on both e-tv and SABC 3 news focusing on different aspects. Sadly the coverage on the SABC bordered on being gratuitous.

While the SABC was clearly making every attempt to bring home the seriousness and the trauma of the situation the value and necessity of some of the images and one of the items, must be questioned.

In an item that sought to detail the series of events that lead to the deaths, viewers were shown paramedics administering an electric shock to a man to try and restart his heart. Although the images were brief, the man's face was clearly visible. Considering the plethora of images, that have dominated the media, and the focus of the item, the value and necessity of showing that man needs to be questioned. Such images are not only disturbing for viewers but also rob the victim of his dignity.

The following item dealt with the aftermath of relatives having to go and identify the bodies of their friends and relatives. The item was introduced by the newsreader saying, "There were emotional scenes at Johannesburg's morgue." At least three relatives were shown, emerging from the morgue, having just identified family members. In each instance there was a clear attempt made by the members or their friends/family to shield their faces from the media glare. In one instance close-up images of a man, named and then identified as having just found out that his wife had been killed, were shown. The man attempted to hide his face. Viewers were then shown the man breaking down in tears and in a fit of grief attempting to break free from the people who were supporting him. The mans pain and anguished cries were clearly audible adding to the scene being not only invasive but also disturbing and traumatic for viewers. At no stage were any warnings given.

The SABC Editorial Code of Conduct states, "We shall respect the legitimate rights to privacy of individuals and shall do nothing which entails intrusion into private grief and distress unless justified by overriding consideration of public interest." It states also, "We shall take due care and be sensitive in the presentation of brutality, violence, atrocities and personal grief." The aforementioned items on SABC news arguably contravened both these clauses.

It may be argued, that the use of the images was justified by the attempt to show the extreme distress of the tragedy. While this argument may have some validity it must be challenged. Firstly, the item needs to be placed in the context of the bulletin which had been clearly focused on the tragedy, with each of the items dealing with different aspects. In addition to this, the following item dealt with the death of one of the supporters, and this was followed by a list of the victims who had been identified. Secondly it needs to be questioned as to whether there was an "overriding public interest" to show those images. Indeed, quite plainly is the fact that the rights to privacy of the family and friends of the victims were invaded. Also considering the attempts made by them in the footage shown to avoid the cameras, it seems unlikely that they were asked if they would mind being shown. The question remains as to how it was in the "overriding public interest" to show such deeply personal and traumatic moments?

The majority of media (some with greater sensitivity than others) made concerted attempts to represent the tragedy, damage and loss, and the other items on SABC 3 managed to powerfully convey similar feelings and news. The newsreader on SABC 3 started the new bulletin saying, "...as the nation mourns," which clearly demonstrated the gravity of the situation. It must be stressed that while the nation mourns, those who did lose family members and relatives have the right to privacy and dignity and should be afforded the space and respect to mourn their loss.

MMP, 13 April 2001