

Taste in Photojournalism: A Question of Ethics or Aesthetics?

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Photographer Garry Bryant, in his essay “Ten-Fifty P.I.: Emotion and the Photographer’s Role,” (1987) says his reaction over the years to a ten-fifty p.i. call—an accident with personal injury—had changed from one of thrill to one of wariness. He attributes the change to the drama he has witnessed at countless tragedies and the resulting hassles with crowds, police, and the reading public in obtaining and printing the photos.

Undoubtedly, John Harte of the Bakersfield Californian knows the feeling well. So does his editor, who after receiving the brunt of the public reaction to printing the photo that follows, says he has rethought his position on publishing photos of personal tragedy.

Photographer Harte took the photo after he responded to a call on the police scanner. He arrived at a lake northeast of Bakersfield, California, while divers were still searching for a drowning victim. After a few minutes, divers brought the lifeless body of five-year-old Edward Romero to the shore, where the boy’s distraught family was gathered. By this time, television crews had arrived on the scene. As the family members, in public view at the edge of the lake, began to grieve, all of the photojournalists and videographers had to decide whether and how they would shoot the story. The television crews opted out; they decided not to film the moment. Harte edged around the sheriff and, using a 24 mm lens and a motor drive, shot eight frames. Managing editor Robert Bentley was called into the offices of the Bakersfield Californian that Sunday evening to decide whether one of Harte’s gripping photos should run. He was persuaded that the photo would serve as a potential warning and help stem the high number of drownings in the county. The publication of the photo, which was also distributed by the Associated Press, generated more than five hundred protest letters and calls from throughout the nation but primarily from Bakersfield residents. The paper also lost about forty subscribers over its decision, most of whom returned (Stein 1986).

A week later, Bentley explained his decision in an editorial column. “Some claimed the Californian showed callous disrespect of the victim. Others felt the _photograph had forced their visual intrusion on what should have been a family’s private time of shock and grief. Most combined the dual protests” (Bentley 1986).

Bentley eventually decided that the photo should never have been published. He has said that by publishing the photo, he learned that journalists are seriously out of touch with their readers' sensibilities. "The reaction was too intense and widespread to just shrug it off and say we're just doing our job" (Stein 1986).

The picture was nominated for, but did not win, the Pulitzer prize. Editorial judgments about photographs ordinarily hinge on two kinds of standards, moral standards and standards of taste.

The most commonly recognized moral standards are those concerning privacy and those about inflicting additional harm on victims. These were the moral basis of response to Harte's picture.

Standards of taste are more difficult to identify and describe. No photographer or photo editor to my knowledge has identified what exactly we mean by "in bad taste." The closest they come is to note that people do not want bloody pictures (mangled bodies, or the uncovered dead, for example) at the breakfast table. Some find such pictures offensive at any time of day.

So what can we say about the ethics of taking and publishing aesthetically offensive photos?

First, we are more likely to agree on what is good (ethics) than on what is beautiful (aesthetics). The philosophers have long known that. Philosophers, whose function is inquiry into the good (ethics), the true (epistemology), and the beautiful (aesthetics), have been far more successful and helpful in uncovering standards for the true and the good than for the beautiful. Matters of taste seem far more subjective and idiosyncratic than do matters of morality and truth. Some of us admire Wagner and eschew Elvis.

Second, ethical judgments and aesthetic judgments are often closely related. The mushroom cloud from the atomic bomb, for example, has always appeared beautiful to me ever since I saw pictures of the cloud over Hiroshima. Those pictures led to moral rejoicing that the war was about over and that my father would soon be coming home from the Navy. For others the cloud is symbolic of human evil, power, and inhumanity. We tend to like aesthetic symbols of moral good, and we dislike symbols of moral evil.

Third, the decision to take news photos (and the decision to publish them) is ultimately moral and not aesthetic. Harte clearly intruded upon the family in Bakersfield, and that was a moral choice based on his pursuit of somebody's good. Bentley's decision to publish was a moral one: he hoped to prevent

others from drowning by running the picture as a warning. He was willing to risk aesthetic harm for moral gain.

Fourth, photo editors sometimes have a moral duty to readers to publish pictures many would regard as in bad taste. Few would object to a warning that saved a life even if the warning was aesthetically objectionable. The occasional moral duty to be aesthetically offensive rests upon the duty of accuracy, the duty not to deceive. The logic is this: in order to function in the world readers need an accurate image of that world, not one sanitized by well-meaning but misguided journalists. Where the world is bloody it is dishonest and deceptive to hide blood from readers. Aesthetically alarming pictures of starving children in Somalia brought action precisely because they showed ugly reality.

Fifth, photo editors have a moral duty not to publish aesthetically offensive pictures except when a significant moral purpose demands publication. The reason is that pictures can plant images in our minds that genuinely harm us. They can be haunting images that we cannot escape.

Morals and taste interrelate in interesting ways. The moral standard for photojournalism also seems clear: we have a moral obligation to others not to publish aesthetically offensive pictures except when publication is reasonably likely to advance some greater public good. Perhaps you can refine and improve that standard through your own critical analysis.

