
HOW TO TELL A STORY

Susan Llewelyn Leach

One Indian columnist calls the coverage of tsunami a "corpse show." What happened to the restraint and sensitivity shown in the aftermath of 9/11? asks Ashok Malik in the national daily Indian Express. Other critics talk of "disaster porn" and point out that such images deprive the grieving of their privacy and the dead of their dignity.

As media coverage of the Asian tsunami slowly recedes from the front pages and the network news, the stark images linger: soldiers throwing bodies into mass graves, babies lined up in a morgue, excavators clawing the dead from piles of debris, a mother sitting by her lifeless child, her head thrown back in agony.

Haunting in their intensity, the images and news footage of the largest natural disaster in decades have helped fuel a massive outpouring of aid and individual donations - and also a wave of criticism.

Natural disasters, manmade calamities, and wars all produce imagery that can shock and sometimes offend. Yet how the media communicate the magnitude of an event depends heavily on who the audience is and how far they are from the unfolding drama.

So can a tragedy on the scale of the tsunami - with 150,000 dead, and counting - be conveyed to an audience a world away without graphic images of death?

"As horrific as the photos are, the danger - particularly with the Western public - is of being able to turn away from poor, brown-skinned people and their suffering," says Kelly McBride, ethics group leader at the Poynter Institute, a journalism school in St. Petersburg, Fla.

"So you have to err on the side of showing them more rather than less," showing them photos that are "outside normal parameters."

At the same time, she says, the media are obligated to minimise the harm. "Perhaps you don't show bodies that are identifiable, perhaps you don't show the most graphic images."

That ethical imperative was given broad interpretation in the tsunami's aftermath. Networks awash in footage that could have come from disaster movies were sometimes accused of double standards and broadcasting gratuitous gore, even as their ratings soared.

"In death, there should be no hierarchy," Jeremy Seabrook of *The Guardian* wrote Dec. 31. "But even as Sri Lankans wandered in

numb disbelief through the corpses, British TV viewers were being warned that scenes they were about to witness might distress them."

The *New York Times* got heat from readers for a huge front-page photo Dec. 28 of a grief-stricken mother crouched beside rows of tiny children, all dead. Daniel Okrent, in his public editor's column, said many readers called it "exploitative," "disrespectful," and "unduly graphic." The managing editor responded that it was "an indescribably painful photograph, but one that was in all ways commensurate to the event."

In the first 24 hours, before the extent of the tragedy was known, coverage was more subdued. The images became more vivid only as the immensity of the tragedy became apparent and news outlets felt an urgency to communicate the enormity of what had happened, analysts say.

Yet that line between exploitation and depiction of reality can be a hair's breadth of opinion.

Public outcry

What creates public outcry is people's belief that the media are using images as a marketing ploy - to get attention, entice them to buy the paper, or stop them from changing channels, says Susan Moeller, professor of media and international affairs at the University of Maryland.

"Even when the public is distressed by difficult images," she says, "if that news outlet is transparent about its reasons for running those pictures ... there has generally been very little outcry and protest, and often support for that ethical decision."

"And sometimes the most graphic images are not the ones of those who died, argues McBride, but of those who lived. "That's what people find the most intrusive," she says, recalling a widely used photograph of a middle-aged man in agony as his child lies before him. "What's disturbing about that picture is not the dead body."

What's disturbing is the horrific grief that he's going through. It's an intensely private moment."

One significant factor in determining how the media use images of death is the proximity of the event. "If something is geographically distant and psychologically distant as well - [with] no close emotional ties to the area - then the home media is a lot more likely to use graphic images," says Professor Moeller.

Coverage of the Madrid bombing last year bears that out. The US media were much more explicit in depictions than the Europeans were, she says. "British papers and TV, for example, were just about as reticent as the American media had been in 9/11," she says. "In other words, they really didn't show body parts."

In a reverse case, coverage of the twin towers' collapse often got more stark play outside the US. Most Americans identified with the people in those towers, explains Jim Naureckas, editor of Extra, a journal of media criticism put out by FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting). They didn't need to see more than discreet images of death to understand the carnage, he says.

"If you were in another country where people who live in New York might be an abstraction, then seeing the actual person jumping out the window might have brought you closer to the event." In that vein, Ashok Malik's criticism of the networks' "Maniacal Grisly Tour" was fair to a point, says McBride.

The difference from 9/11 is scale: 150,000 deaths versus 3,000, where most of the bodies were incinerated. "If you're talking about just death and suffering alone, the tsunami wins. It merits more coverage," McBride says.

Hierarchy

In addition, one-third of the tsunami victims were children. The ethical imperative of bringing the tragedy home is greater when children are involved, Moeller says. It's what she refers to as the "hierarchy of innocence" - a hierarchy of people we are supposed to care about.

We care about children more than we care about adults, she says; we care about pregnant women more than middle-aged ones; women more than men. But at the top are children.

"Inasmuch as this is not only a tragedy about 150,000 dead and villages lost and economies fragmented, but it's a story about families, a story about children," Moeller says. "I think that particularly has made it important for the media to bring the story home to us."

Coverage of natural disasters can seem straightforward, however, compared with that of wars, where politics often trumps ethical

standards. While tsunami victims dominated the news, some blogs and letters to the editor noted that 100,000 civilians and 1,300 US soldiers had been killed in Iraq. Yet few of those dead appeared in the media.

The reason is simple. The media would be labeled unpatriotic and accused of undermining the war effort, Mr. Naureckas says. "You can't put a picture of a US soldier killed in action in a US newspaper," he says. "It would be considered a terrible affront."

The standards for war coverage also shift according to whose war it is. Early in the invasion of Iraq, Iraqi forces put American POWs and dead soldiers on public display.

The US government declared it a war crime, citing the Geneva Convention. When Saddam Hussein's sons were killed and their corpses displayed by the US military, much of the media praised the move.

"[In one case], showing off dead bodies was considered something so brutal that only a monstrous dictator would do it," Naureckas says. "In the other case, it was shown as something that was a shrewd PR tactic."

If the war wasn't ours the coverage would be different, concurs McBride, who says "There is a serious timidity among the press in America right now to challenge the administration on its policy in Iraq."

Not to show the wider breadth of war's cost is a mistake, Moeller adds. She offers the case of Ali Abbas, a 12-year-old Iraqi who lost his entire family and both his arms when a US rocket hit their house. The boy, who went to London for treatment, got extensive press coverage in Europe and became the poster child of sorts for the British Boy Scouts. In the US, his name is barely known.

"There was a choice that US news editors and producers had to make," Moeller says. "Are you going to show at the time what we thought was a heroic rescue of a blond American soldier [Jessica Lynch], or are you going to show the collateral damage, the injured civilian child, of our bombing policies?"

"In the midst of the war," she says, "it was apparently an easy decision." ■

Susan Llewelyn Leach, is a staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*