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The bloody massacre in Bangladesh quickly covered over the memory of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, the assassination of Allende drowned out the groans of Bangladesh, the war in the Sinai Desert made people forget Allende, the Cambodian massacre made people forget Sinai and so on and so forth, until ultimately everyone lets everything be forgotten.

Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

We discovered that the camera was never a filter through which we were protected from the worst of what we witnessed. Quite the opposite. The images were burnt on our minds as well as our films.

Greg Marinovich, photographer

Reporting tragedies is necessarily intrusive. However, Dunblane was different. As one journalist said, it was the 'first tragedy . . . in which the usual black jokes which act as a kind of safety valve . . . were suspended' (Linklater cited in IPI (International Press Institute) report, 1996: 27). On 13 March 1996 a gunman had walked into the primary school in the Scottish town of Dunblane and shot dead sixteen small children and their teacher. He then shot himself.

On the first day, the reporters didn't approach the bereaved parents. On the second day they did, with the exception of Scotland's *Sun* which forbade its reporters from doing so. As the week wore on, standards slipped. A woman was rung at two in the morning by a reporter checking a lead in a rival paper; long-lens cameras were used to take photographs of grieving relatives; there were some angry scenes between locals and journalists. In the end, the broadcasters pulled out from coverage of the funerals. The BBC asked itself later whether it had been the right decision. 'Some of the American broadcasters were amazed that we could pull out before the most heart-rending pictures had even been put on tape, let alone broadcast' (Unsworth cited in IPI report, 1996: 20). An ITN journalist said: 'The joint decision to leave Dunblane physically and not cover the funerals was without precedent. . . . A policy of withdrawing from news because the participants in a situation may be upset by our presence makes me very uneasy' (Thomson cited in IPI (International Press Institute) report, 1996: 23). It is not a criteria usually applied. British broadcast organizations have always shown Northern Ireland funerals, often against the wishes of the bereaved families.

Richard Tait of Independent Television News (ITN) drew three lessons from the Dunblane coverage: i. Assign experienced reporters to this kind of story; ii. The priority must be to inform; you can't create a make-believe world in which people don't cry; iii. Listen to the community you're working in (see IPI report, 1996: 33). Another ITN journalist drew a more sceptical conclusion. She said,

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Four days later, more than a hundred young people died in a fire in the Philippines. The news programmes here showed not only the inside of the burnt out disco, but relatives weeping outside the hospitals . . . no-one complained [there were 150 complaints about the ITN's shots of grieving Dunblane relatives]. It seems that showing grief on television is OK, so long as the grieving people live far away. (Burns cited in IPI report, 1996: 4)

Reporting suffering is fraught with difficulties. Journalists must deal with it daily: accidents, deaths, suicides, murders, war. They have to speak to bereaved parents, parents whose children have been murdered, died in an accident or a terrorist bomb. They also have to witness suffering: a child dying from starvation or the carnage in the wake of the NATO attack on a civilian convoy. Reporters must speak and write about, film or photograph these events.

How should journalists report suffering? Is it true that 'watching and reading about suffering . . . has become a form of entertainment' (Moeller, 1999: 34)? Do the reporter's professional ideals of independence and detachment exclude the possibility of compassion in reporting? 'Everyone knows that good reporters are hard', says Randall, 'Cynical, cold, calculating and maybe even a little cruel. The sort of people who can look a corpse in the eye – and smile' (2006: 122). He tells a story about one man with such a reputation, Ben Hecht, reporter with the *Chicago Daily News*. One day he was sitting in court reporting on the trial of a man who had murdered his entire family. As the judge sentenced him to death, the man sprang forward and plunged a butcher's knife into the judge's heart. All the reporters including Hecht froze, except one man from the rival paper who carried on scribbling. Hecht recounted later what happened:

None of us in the courtroom had the presence of mind to write a single word, paralysed as we were by the attack. Yet here was this guy from the *Inter-Ocean*, who had nerves of steel, who had never paused in doing his job. I just had to find out what he had written.' Hecht ran after the copyboy, caught him by the arm, and grabbed the pages. On them, written over and over again in a shaky hand, were the words: 'The judge has been stabbed, the judge has been stabbed. . .' (cited in Randall, 2000: 122)

Being a good reporter is not being emptied of humanity.

## SUFFERING, COMPASSION AND PITY

The experience of suffering and pain is intimate, personal. It is something that we cannot communicate. As Arendt says, 'great bodily pain, is at the same time the most private and least communicable of all [experience]' (1958: 50–1). Suffering is a further refinement of pain, known by beings who are aware of what they experience. Babies may cry in pain but their suffering is less than that experienced by adults. Knowledge, memory and anticipation of pain all contribute to the experience of suffering.

Our reaction to suffering is often to feel a kind of embarrassment: we want to comfort or turn away. To stand and stare, to expose the person who suffers to

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the public gaze, is refined cruelty. The Romans realized this: they reserved crucifixion as a form of execution for non-Romans; the exposure of the dying criminal to the gaze of others was considered particularly humiliating.

In the best of people suffering will prompt feelings of pity, mercy or compassion. The word 'pity' in English has become associated with condescension. Someone who pities does not suffer. Compassion, on the other hand, is directed to specific suffering human beings. It is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'the feeling or emotion, when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another, and by the desire to relieve it; pity that inclines one to spare or to succour.' Aquinas uses the term *misericordia* (literally to have a 'merciful heart') to name the virtue which is the capacity for grief and sorrow at another's distress that moves us to supply what they need. It is not simply the feeling of sorrow. As MacIntyre explains, 'Sentiment, unguided by reason, becomes sentimentality and sentimentality is a sign of moral failure' (1999: 124).

The archetypal display of *misericordia*, mercy or compassion, is found in the New Testament story of the Good Samaritan which Jesus tells in response to the question 'And who is my neighbour?'<sup>1</sup> A man is attacked by robbers, and left wounded and bleeding on the road. Two other men – a priest and a Levite – pass him by. The man who stops, takes him to a nearby inn and pays for him to be treated is a Samaritan. It is as if a Palestinian today were to stop and help an Israeli Jew. This is the essence of the *virtue* of *misericordia* as opposed to a *feeling* of compassion. We are moved to act not because of any 'interest' or family link to the person who suffers but simply because he or she is a fellow human being.

Lack of compassion can be at the heart of some of the more unsavoury journalistic practices. 'Pack journalism', the 'ambush' interview of someone who has no experience of reporters, invasions of privacy and other dubious methods lend support to Conservative politician, Alan Clark's, observation that 'there is no such thing as mercy in the media' (1999: 286). But reporters and editors without a spark of mercy have forgotten why they are in the business in the first place. The thrill of the hunt has replaced the fundamental interest and curiosity about other human beings which is what makes journalism worth doing.

## COVERAGE OF SUFFERING

How do journalists decide what material it is appropriate to show or publish? Newsrooms receive all kinds of gory footage. The picture of the calcinated Iraqi soldier on the road out of Kuwait City was one of the emblematic images of the Gulf War and one of the first to show that people had actually died. The *Observer* newspaper received the photograph and, unlike most of its competitors, decided to publish it (3 March, 1991). After much debate about its suitability for the front-page, it was eventually decided to put it on an inside page so as not to upset the readers' breakfast. The journalists responsible for this decision now believe they should have made the riskier decision of publishing it on the front-page (Trelford, 2000).

The sequences of images of the two planes crashing into the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001 will be seared into the memories of all those who saw them in the newspapers and on their screens. They were replayed over and over again. Not, however, on the American ABC network. Its president felt their effect was so depressing for the American people that they should not be repeatedly used in news reports.

The images of people throwing themselves off the doomed towers from hundreds of feet up sent 'a collective shudder' around *The Guardian* newsroom. But the paper's picture editor, Danny John, had no doubt that one of these images should be used. He explained, 'Some pictures we see cannot be published because of their truly horrific nature.' But in this case the person 'caught by the photographer in those few frames was not identifiable and, while it was inevitably upsetting to some readers, we believed it was not our job to sanitize or censor the awful circumstances in which these innocent victims found themselves' (2001: G2).

In 1999 NATO mistakenly bombed a refugees' convoy leaving Kosovo. The regional paper in the area of Spain where I was staying ran a shocking front-page photograph showing a dismembered victim. It was an image which would never have been used in a British paper. When I asked a Spanish journalist what criteria would have been used to judge whether to publish the picture, he said the criterion was distance. As the dead were foreigners, the image was considered acceptable. It was the application of the principle cited by the American newsman that: 'One dead fireman in Brooklyn is worth five English bobbies, who are worth 50 Arabs, who are worth 500 Africans' (cited in Moeller, 1999: 22).

Coverage of suffering is clearly influenced by cultural factors. Death may be less of a taboo in Spain than in Britain.<sup>2</sup> However, the fact that such a shocking picture would not have been shown of a Spanish victim shows that some kind of moral sense is at work.<sup>3</sup> I'll examine below what considerations do and might apply in the different circumstances of war, disaster and domestic tragedy.

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### Natural and man-made disasters

Britain's greatest sporting tragedy was to show reporting of suffering at its worst. Ninety-five Liverpool football fans were crushed to death at the Sheffield Hillsborough stadium in April 1989, largely due to the inadequacies of crowd control measures. It was the FA Cup semi-final and the stadium was full of journalists and sports photographers. They recorded the tragedy as it unfolded before them, taking thousands of pictures, 'many of which showed such harrowing detail of death and suffering it was almost an impossible editorial decision to decide which could actually be printed' (Chippindale and Horrie, 1999: 332).

On the national tabloids, concern for the victims and their families was swept aside in the rush to get the pictures out and meet competitive pressures. Even though, for the first few days there was no way of knowing whether those

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shown crushed or lying on the pitch were alive or dead, the photographs were published anyway. The *Mirror*'s colour pictures showed in painful detail the faces of the dying (Chippindale and Horrie, 1999: 335). These images provoked a storm of protest in Liverpool but did nothing to dent newspaper sales. On the other hand, the *Sun*'s notorious headline 'THE TRUTH', detailing alleged appalling behaviour by Liverpool fans, brought down the wrath of Merseyside on Kelvin MacKenzie and a boycott of the paper.

The editor's rush to judgement, his one-sided portrait of the behaviour of Liverpool in which three front-page subheadings declared, 'Some fans picked the pockets of victims. Some fans urinated on the brave cops. Some fans beat up PC giving kiss of life' was the triumph of prejudice and sensationalism over good reporting. Chippindale and Horrie later concluded that 'there was no evidence of any kind to support them, and none was ever to be produced' (1999, 346).

The reporting of the Paddington train crash in which 30 people died in October 1999 showed how matters had improved. Newspaper reporters made a group decision to wait on the other side of the street from where the relatives of victims were staying.<sup>4</sup> Editors agonized over which pictures to publish: '. . . the *Guardian*'s front-page picture showed two women, their faces buried in their hands, near the crash site. Four other papers chose similar pictures for page one but *The Guardian*'s was closely cropped in order, says Rusbridger [*Guardian* editor], to minimize the chances of identification. It was used because it was considered symbolic of people's suffering' (Greenslade, 1999).

As media commentator, Roy Greenslade, put it, 'it's fair to say that, during disasters, the media does see itself as performing a public service' (1999).<sup>5</sup> News organizations must gather and broadcast or publish information as quickly and accurately as possible, often in situations of great confusion and distress. To do so reporters have to deal with bereaved relatives. Despite criticism of ghoulish or vulpine journalists, this is a necessary if delicate part of a reporter's job. 'For every snub at a grief-stricken household', wrote Greenslade, 'there are five others who open their doors and offer tea, opening their hearts to the stranger with a notebook' (1999).

National tragedies resonate. Foreign tragedies don't necessarily. News of African famines can provoke a 'been there, done that' attitude. 'Formulaic coverage of similar types of crises,' writes Moeller, 'makes us feel that we really have seen this story before. We've seen the same pictures, heard about the same victims, heroes and villains, read the same morality play' (Moeller, 1999: 13). As in war reporting of far and distant lands, the challenge for the reporter is to engage the audience. Given the probable logistical difficulties of getting to where a foreign tragedy is unfolding, the mere fact that the reporter is there at all is a triumph. The next question is how to make the editors and the public care about the story. Associated Press's Tom Kent says it depends on how you write it: 'Have you ever picked up the *New Yorker*,' he asks 'and found a page and a half about how ball bearings are made, which you'd never read, but it's so well done you're reading it? That's what we have to do with foreign news' (cited in Moeller, 1999: 23).

In 1984 against all the odds, the BBC team of reporter Michael Buerk and cameraman Mohammed Amin got into Ethiopia. What they saw there were

scenes of unimaginable suffering, thousands upon thousands of people dying of hunger with no hope of help. Their ten-minute report showed the reality of famine – the rows of corpses, the death of a three year old in her mother’s arms, and Buerk’s commentary:

Dawn, and as the sun breaks though the piercing chill of night on the plain outside Korem it lights up a biblical famine, now, in the 20th century. This place, say workers here, is the closest thing to hell on earth. Thousands of wasted people are coming here for help. Many find only death. They flood in every day from villages hundreds of miles away, dulled by hunger, driven beyond the point of desperation. . . . 15,000 children here now – suffering, confused, lost. . . . Death is all around. A child or an adult dies every 20 minutes. Korem, an insignificant town, has become a place of grief. . . . (cited in Moeller, 1999: 111)

This report sparked a huge international response. Its measured tones and understated yet emotional response to the tragedy of the Ethiopian famine made westerners care about Africans. ‘The magnitude of the suffering had helped create the impact’, observes Moeller, ‘but it was the quality of the images that made the scenes so arresting’. For Americans unused to British news styles, the slower pace of Amin’s camera-work allowed its audience to form strong impressions. ‘It was as if each clip was an award-winning still photo,’ said William Lord, executive producer of ABC’s *World News Tonight*’ (1999: 117).

Good reporting connects, and avoids cliché. This was what Amin and Buerk had managed. The challenge would be to repeat the achievement in covering future African famines, Asian floods or Latin American earthquakes. The ‘compassion fatigue’ of newsrooms and audiences is not easily combated. However, the BBC team showed that sober, accurate reporting is a *sine qua non* for journalism which can stir people’s hearts.

## War

War reporting has been the occasion of some of the finest journalistic work ever produced, and the worst.<sup>6</sup> As we saw in Chapter four, it tests to the limit the reporter’s commitment to truth telling. Where one’s own country is engaged in conflict, reporters often expect and are expected to contribute to the objective of winning the war.

Showing enemy casualties, especially where they contradict the narrative of a humanely prosecuted war, is discouraged. The BBC’s heavily censored images of the civilian Iraqi casualties from NATO’s bombing of the Al Amiriya shelter, earned it the sobriquet ‘Baghdad Broadcasting Corporation’ from sectors of the print media: *The Sun* newspaper described it as ‘the enemy within’ and the *Daily Telegraph* refused to publish any pictures of the incident to avoid giving succour to Saddam Hussein.<sup>7</sup> Carruthers concluded that ‘elements of the British and American media – and their publics – are *less* willing for dissent to be aired, or potentially damaging images of suffering to be screened’ (italics in original; 2000: 157). During the Gulf War reporters were forbidden from filming or

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photographing soldiers ‘in agony or severe shock’ or ‘patients suffering from severe disfigurement’ (Taylor, 1992: 35). Where wars are fought on our behalf by our soldiers, we prefer not to know the details of pain and death and, on the whole, the media prefers not to tell us.

What about wars and conflicts in distant lands? Here the rule appears to be that the more remote and distinct from us the people who suffer, the greater the willingness to show images of their suffering. We accept images of bloated corpses floating down rivers or bodies being loaded unceremoniously onto the back of lorries if it is Rwanda. Not if it is Canada. The reporting of the war in the former Yugoslavia showed some of the horrors of the conflict but for former BBC correspondent Martin Bell, not nearly enough:

What we do not show is what happens at the other end – the killing, the maiming, the wounding, and the suffering, the irredeemable waste of young lives, which is what war is . . . [television] prettifies and sanitizes. Taken over the months and years of a conflict, it promotes the idea of warfare as a costfree enterprise, not even shocking anymore but almost an acceptable means of settling differences. (1998: 105)

More important, however, than what is shown is how and in what context it is given to us. As BBC reporter, Fergal Keane, wrote about coverage of the Hutu massacres of Tutsis in Rwanda in the 1990s:

Much of the coverage of Rwanda in the early days neglected the part that power and money had played in the calculations of those who launched the genocide. Where television is concerned, African news is generally only big news where it involves lots of dead bodies. The higher the mound, the greater the possibility that the world will, however, send its camera teams and correspondents. (1996: 7)

What could we make of the horrific images without any sense of the humanity of the victims or the reality of their lives? Genocide in Rwanda, where ‘in one hundred days up to one million people were hacked, shot, strangled, clubbed and burned to death’ (Keane, 1996: 29), became part of a narrative of the ‘dark continent’, ‘the horror, the horror’ of the closing lines of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.<sup>8</sup>

Showing the suffering of war can be a kind of visual pornography and contempt for the humanity of those who suffer, if there is no moral engagement. But for reporters herein lies the dilemma. It is true that, ‘The spectator of suffering cannot speak about what he has seen in objectivist terms. . . . It would be considered “indecent” or “inhuman” to give a purely factual description of a hanging say, or of victims of a famine’ (Boltanski, 1999: 24–5). However, should the reporter become an advocate? This is what Bell seems to suggest.<sup>9</sup> But surely more powerful than advocacy is the power of the journalist to bear witness. Bearing witness with integrity and compassion will speak for itself, as did much of Martin Bell’s own reporting of Bosnia.

## DOMESTIC TRAGEDY

Most journalists will probably not report a war. Most will report on a suicide, crime or accident. They will be asked to get family details, a photograph of the victim, quotes from the victim's family. They will have to report court proceedings; children might be involved. On these occasions, more than any other, the reporter's sensitivity and good judgement will be called upon. Families might be unwilling to talk, information may be difficult to come by and a hard-pressed journalist might be tempted to apply inappropriate pressure to obtain what he or she needs. Or, where the story is particularly newsworthy – a celebrity suicide, a child's murder, a vicious rape – the temptation might be to include painful detail which can only immeasurably increase the suffering of the victim's family and feed our morbid curiosity. Some of these areas – crime reporting, for example – are hedged round with legal constraints on what may be published or broadcast. Reporters are, for instance, forbidden from identifying alleged offenders or witnesses at youth courts if they are under the age of 18.

The PCC's code covers some of these areas too (see Box 8.1). It has particularly stringent requirements to avoid identification of children in sex cases who appear as victims, witnesses or defendants (see Clause 7).<sup>10</sup> Similarly, it advises against identifying victims of sexual assault except where there is justification and it is legal to do so (see Clause 12). Clause 10 on reporting of crime requires the press to avoid identifying friends or relatives of alleged criminals without their consent and to pay particular regard to the vulnerability of children who are witnesses or victims of crime. However, Clauses 7 and 10 are subject to a public interest exemption. The broadcast industry has similar guidelines.

These guidelines have arisen out of mistaken and damaging practice. They show that, despite the rhetoric, editors and reporters accept the need for compassionate practice. The need for compassionate practice is also recognized in Clause 5 of the code dealing with intrusion into grief or shock. It calls for sympathy and discretion. This means not behaving like the reporter who, having already imposed on a grieving family whose child had choked to death on a Christmas tree decoration, was then told by his editor to phone back to check on its colour (Goodwin, 1995: 259). Or running a story about someone who is dying simply because he is a relative of a well-known politician. The *Mirror's* story headlined 'Lilley's nephew dying of Aids' was censured by the PCC in 1995 for invasion of privacy (Report 29, 1995). It also means knowing how to behave sensibly in unexpected circumstances. The *Daily Record* reporter who went to a family's home whose daughter was missing and 'blurted out' the news that a body had been found 'could have spared the family's feelings simply by acting in accord with common sense when she realized they did not know that a body had been found' (Report 37, 1997: 23).

Most of the time reporters seem to get it right.<sup>11</sup> Columnist Magnus Linklater was asked to prepare a feature on the restoration of capital punishment. His research involved interviewing relatives of murder victims. He was surprised by the cordial reception he received. '... some of those I talked to even had fond memories of the traumatic period when their front gates had been besieged by

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the waiting press. One woman, whose sister had been brutally strangled, showed me a Christmas card she had kept from the *Daily Express* reporter who had covered the story' (cited in IPI report, 1996: 27).

### BOX 8.1 PCC Code: protecting the vulnerable

#### Clause 5 Intrusion into grief or shock

In cases involving grief or shock, enquiries must be carried out and approaches made with sympathy and discretion. Publication must be handled sensitively at such times, but this should not be interpreted as restricting the right to report judicial proceedings.

#### Clause 10 Innocent relatives and friends

The press must avoid identifying relatives or friends of persons convicted or accused of crime without their consent.

## PICTURE POWER

Pictures are immeasurably more powerful than words. One of the reasons James Bulger's murder was so etched into Britain's conscience was that we have the video footage of him being led away by his murderers. Pictures pose difficulties for those who take them and those who must decide whether to use them.

### Taking pictures

What are suitable subjects for pictures? Why did so many viewers complain about images of grieving relatives at Dunblane? What makes us feel uneasy about focusing on pictures and the bereaved, the dying and the dead? The BBC *Style Guide* provides specific advice to its reporters and editors on the kind of images to be shown and to be avoided:

We do not want to cause distress by dwelling unnecessarily on graphic detail, in words or pictures. In television, we do not linger needlessly on pain and suffering, keeping shots short and angles wide; we do not zoom in to shots of blood, but pull away in deference to the victim. We should be particularly mindful of the distress we will cause if we show identifiable pictures of dead or injured people before their relatives have been contacted. (p. 12)

In a small American town, a photographer happened to be present at a tragic incident. His photograph captures the moment just after a tractor tyre exploded at a petrol station killing the station operator and his son. The father lies dead and so does his son, almost naked, his clothes blown off by the force of

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the blast. The photograph captures the moment when the wife and mother of the boy arrives and appears to look straight into the camera with a horrified, anguished expression. Was he right to take the picture? These are hard decisions to make. Often responses are instinctive and it is hard to criticize a photographer for reacting professionally to a dramatic incident. Perhaps the real question is whether the image should have been published, an issue to which I will return.

In 1993 freelance South African photographer, Kevin Carter, took a photograph of a Sudanese toddler too weak to continue the short distance that remained to a feeding centre; behind her was a watching vulture. It won him a Pulitzer prize. Two months' later he committed suicide. A friend and fellow photographer wrote later:

Questions about Kevin's ethics and his humanity were beginning to be asked more frequently: the pressure on him was building. The strain was all the greater because Kevin had his own doubts about his actions during that hot day in Ayod, and wrestled with them almost every day.

Kevin told Nancy Lee, the *Times*' picture editor, that he was sure the girl had made it to the feeding station. But Lee, like many others, felt uncomfortable; if Kevin was that close to the feeding station and the child was on the ground, why had he not gone there and got help? What do you do in cases like this? What is the obligation of any news professional in the face of tragedy in front of them?

I don't know: I have a humanistic feeling about it and a journalistic feeling about it. If something terrible is about to happen and you can stop it, if you can do something to help once you've done your job, why wouldn't you? It bothered me as a person. He could have done it, it would have cost him nothing. She would have weighed something like 10lb. He could have picked her up and carried her there (. . .). (Marinovich, 2000: 55)

This view would not be shared by all reporters, some of whom believe that their first duty is to observe and report the news not to try and change it. In Chapter four I referred to the incident in which two Buddhist monks burnt themselves to death on the streets of Saigon in what appeared to be a protest against the war in Vietnam. Two AP reporters took pictures of the whole event, images which were shown across the world. One later explained that he could perhaps have 'prevented the immolation by rushing at the monk and kicking the gasoline away if I'd had my wits about me. As a human being I wanted to; as a reporter I couldn't' (Arnett, 1994: 119). The AP man's response reveals the breakdown of moral sense. If it had been his son he would probably have rushed to save him. His inaction showed more about a lack of *miser cordia* than the triumph of professionalism. Photojournalists interviewed in the United States had different views to Arnett. One said, 'You're a member of the human race first and a journalist second' and another, 'The picture is in the paper only one day and I have to live with myself every day' (Goodwin, 1995: 314).

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### Selecting pictures

As deputy editor of the *Daily Express* in the early 1960s, Bob Edwards, had to decide whether to use a picture or not:

One evening Ted Pickering and I were on the backbench when the picture editor brought us dramatic, exclusive photographs of four maids leaping to their deaths from a burning hotel in Rome. In each case their nighties had lifted, revealing their naked bodies. . . . Neither of us had the stomach to ask the picture retoucher to paint in panties or extend the nighties. Without any discussion we turned the pictures down. Sure enough, it appeared suitably altered in the *Daily Mail* with the hypocritical claim that it was being published as a warning against fire. (1989: 100)

Publication of the picture of the son and father lying dead after the explosion of a tyre and the shocked wife staring into the camera was justified on similar grounds; namely, that it showed the danger of this kind of accident. It is a brutal image, snatched at the moment of most terrible grief. A woman who was filmed reacting hysterically to the news that her daughter had died in an air crash later described her feeling that she had been 'visually raped' by the media. Publication or broadcast of these pictures seems hard to justify, especially when reporters are told not to interview those who are in shock.

Broadcast and photographic images of suffering can convert us into spectators, passive consumers of other people's tragedies at best, and vulture-like voyeurs at worst. However, it is also true that images of accidents, natural disasters, wars or crimes can be a call to action. The sinking of the *Herald of Free Enterprise* ferry in 1986 with the loss of 193 passengers brought about improved ferry safety. Handguns were banned as the result of Dunblane. Images which 'connect' us to those who suffer, make their suffering real, is what makes them acceptable.

### 'ONLY CONNECT'

Most people would agree that information about human suffering is acceptable; it depends how it is presented. Good news is not generally news. When the BBC's Martyn Lewis tried to promote this idea he was laughed out of court. When a political party tried to set up a paper on these lines, it was a failure. As American journalist Tom Palmer put it: 'Media moguls have long known that suffering, rather than good news, sells. People being killed is definitely a good, objective criteria for whether a story is important. And innocent people being killed is better' (cited in Moeller, 1999: 34).

Telling stories, informing about suffering tells us the truth about human life. We can't live in a make-believe world where no-one cries. Bad things happen. People suffer. We want to know about such things because in a certain way they can reassure us. They are the out-of-the-ordinary, they are strange which is why they are reported. But what are the parameters for such news? Where do we find the measure for what might be appropriate or not?

Information about suffering is not *simply* about transmitting data; it is about creating an emotional link between you and the person who suffers to engender compassion. This was the secret of the Italian film *Life is Beautiful* (1998). It didn't show the usual visual cliché of piles of emaciated bodies to depict the Nazi atrocities against the Jews, but was a touching story about a Jewish Italian family caught up in a nightmare world.

The challenge for journalists is to capture the intimate, incomparable character of the person affected or the tragedy which has occurred. Of course the limits of time and space can make this impossible. A local paper might just be able to include news in brief stating '50 killed in Indian bus accident'. However, where it is possible to give time to a story, images or words which impose, steal intimacy or caricature, or rob the person of their dignity make the journalist appear a person without scruples. That is perhaps what is at the root of people's unease at images of torn bodies, grieving mothers or heaps of corpses. This is why famed photographer Donald McCullen was set upon by the Lebanese woman whose grief he had just photographed. Think of how we feel when a person starts to cry. The person loses control even of their appearance. We feel it is a violation of someone's intimacy to be there. We see vulnerability, defencelessness. And it demands our utmost respect.

Similarly for reporters. They must be professional enough to deal with the story – it's no good if they dissolve into tears themselves. However, the story will be better told if the reporter is able to capture the personal dimension of the tragedy, if the context is a sense of the worth of the human being. Otherwise why should we give a damn that a hundred people have died in a bus accident in Burundi?

Compassionate reporting will mean that journalists and news executives would take into account a number of very practical issues. They would make sure:

- Not to be led by technology. If not hasty, ill-judged decisions can be made. A Spanish television news programme showed the blown-up gobbets of human flesh with the excuse that as the stories were coming in direct off the wires, there was no time to editorialize. However, as the BBC *Producer Guidelines* say:

It's inevitable that the images of a disaster are painful for those personally involved and perhaps for other spectators too. But we shouldn't lower our standards about what it is appropriate to show because of the volume of material we have available or because of the speed with which we receive, transmit and edit it.

- To minimize the inevitable intrusion by organizing pools. Not only the news itself has an ethical dimension but the means used to obtain it. Pools can be a good way of avoiding some of the intrusion of a pack of reporters covering an event. Journalists must be sensitive to their impact, particularly TV crews which are especially intrusive. Over three hundred journalists descended on the small town of Dunblane as well as numerous overseas reporters.

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- To be sensitive about interviews. Journalists should be moderate in the way interviews are requested and in how they're done. They shouldn't interview or try to interview anyone in a state of shock. They shouldn't try to do an interview without the person's permission and they should always explain clearly the rules of the game. It may well be the first time that the person in question has done an interview.
- To be careful in publishing or broadcasting distressing material. Taking care, for example, in showing material about on-going situations – kidnappings, for example – which could be painful for the family. Or about information on anniversaries by contacting those involved. Or announcing to the audience that painful or shocking images are going to be shown.
- Assign experienced staff to the story. For Dunblane, ITN assigned a senior editorial manager to view pictures as they came in to ensure policies and standards were observed. On the whole they were.
- Let the humanity of the reporter come through: tragedies can't be reported as though they were a village fete. For the reporter this means showing a sense of feeling without abandoning the story.

## NOTES

1 Luke 10; 30–37.

2 When the Spanish parent company of *Hola!* brought out its English edition, *Hello!* it followed the same diet of celebrity features, deaths, marriages etc. It soon found, however, that the English audience found its coverage of funerals, with pictures of coffins and crying relatives, distasteful. Such coverage was subsequently reduced.

3 More respectful coverage of national tragedies has also been true in Britain, as we saw in the reporting of Dunblane. Bob Edwards, former editor of the *Daily Express*, relates how his paper published a photograph of a train crash victim in the early 1960s: 'Until then newspapers never published pictures of bodies in domestic disasters like this, though foreign plane crashes abroad were regarded as fair game' (1989: 102). Television had changed things.

4 Broadcast journalists failed to do this and, as is often the case, were far more intrusive than their print colleagues.

5 The broadcasters are quite clear about the public service they provide in reporting disasters. See *BBC Style Guide* and *Producers Guidelines*.

6 See Carey's *Faber Book of Reportage* (1989) for examples of some of the best and Knightly, *The First Casualty* (2000) for examples of the worst.

7 The BBC's Michael Buerk warned viewers that 'Many of the pictures coming from Baghdad of burned civilian bodies are considered too dreadful to show you' (cited in Taylor, 1992: 191). Subsequent audience research found that 57 per cent thought the BBC was right to show the sanitized images, while 23 per cent thought it was wrong for the story to have been covered at all (Morrison, 1992).

8 Christopher Hitchen has written in *Vanity Fair* that all reporting of Africa is a pastiche of Waugh's *Scoop* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

9 Bell argued that more explicit coverage of the horrors of Bosnia was necessary. He believed that this would help prompt a more vigorous western response to the conflict. In fact, as Carruthers suggests, 'Former Yugoslavia offers the best illustration of the absence of an automatic link between media images of suffering and decisive intervention to alleviate it' (2000: 213).

## DEATH, DISEASE AND DESTRUCTION

10 The PCC issued specific advice in 1993 on the use of photographs which might lead to identification of victims of sexual assault or of children under the age of 16 involved in any way (Report No. 21).

11 The number of complaints to the PCC on these issues is relatively small. In 1999 they constituted 5.8 per cent of the total number of complaints made to the PCC (Annual Review, 1999).