Images of Horror From Fallujah

'The transparency of angst and indecision about the Fallujah images have been good for journalism.'

By David D. Perlmutter and Lesa Hatley Major

On March 31, 2004, Iraqi terrorists, throwing grenades, killed four American civilian contractors who were driving through the city of Fallujah, Iraq. A quickly swelling crowd of civilians then beat the burned bodies (with anything in hand, including shoes), dragged them through the streets, and hung two of them from a nearby Euphrates River bridge. Many onlookers and participants danced with joy and chanted anti-American slogans.

The horror was caught on camera. Within hours, Fallujah video footage and photographs were made available to the world’s newspapers, magazines and television newscasters. Almost as quickly, in nearly every U.S. newsroom, a debate on whether and how to handle these images began. "It was one of the toughest calls I've ever had to make," wrote Ellen Soeteber, editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

The basic questions, whether one edited a small-town daily or a network newscast, were:

- What pictures should we use, where and why?
- Which ones should we not use and why not?
- Should we digitally edit those we use to reduce their "horror" quotient?
- For print editors, should pictures go on an inside page or the front page?
- How should we caption and contextualize what we are showing?

Importantly, the process of addressing these quandaries was not kept secret or restricted to insiders: Many news outlets editorialized their reasons for using one image rather than another, and media columnists and commentators throughout the country expressed their views about these decisions on air or in print. In many of their columns and stories, they quoted editors and producers about why they made the decisions they did, and several of these explanations appear below. And readers and viewers responded. Papers and broadcasters received thousands of letters, e-mails and phone calls. And it is almost certain that no journalism class escaped discussion of the ethics and professional codes affecting the editors' decisions about using these grisly news photos.

The public ferment—in many cases, furor—about the photographs was no less divided. Many publications extended their usual letters' section to accommodate the large number of letters and the range of opinions voiced in them. And editors listened. U.S. News & World Report, which published the "burned bodies" picture, received letters such as one from the wife of a military person serving in Iraq, who wrote, "You may feel inclined to report these happenings, but the photos were not necessary." She said she was "appalled and disgusted by the photos of the horrendous act." A Marine who served at Iwo Jima called the use of the photograph "blatant sensationalism." Another reader, saying the magazine "went too far," ripped the pages out and returned them with a message, "Please consider carefully how much gore and carnage your readers need to see to get the full scope of war and human suffering." In the face of such negative criticism, Brian Duffy, the editor, replied: "Our intention was not to
Decisions About Images

What Americans saw from Fallujah was determined by their news source. [See table showing Fallujah photos used by American newspapers on page 73.] The New York Times ran on its front page The Associated Press (AP) photo (Contractors Hanging on Bridge) in color, which included the clearly visible bodies with celebrating Iraqis in the foreground. The Times's executive editor, Bill Keller, said of this decision: "You can't shy away from the news, and the news in this case is the indignities visited upon the victims and the jubilation of the crowd. At the same time you have to be mindful of the pain these pictures would cause to families and the potential revulsion of readers, and children, who are exposed to this over their breakfast table." The Washington Post ran a cropped version on page A11 of the Ali Jasim (Reuters) photo with a smiling boy in the foreground. [See photo on page 71.] Len Downie, the paper's executive editor, stated: "We owed readers photographic as well as print reporting about what took place. We chose photos that actually were on the less graphic end of available photos."

For regional papers as well, the predicament was as palpable. The Palm Beach Post ran the AP photo (Contractors Hanging on Bridge) on its front page. John Bartosek, the paper's managing editor, claimed, "We selected that photograph, after a lot of thought and discussion, because it's a powerful news image of a dramatic, horrific and brutal day in Iraq." In contrast, Richard Tapscott, managing editor of The Des Moines Register, noted, "The photograph (Contractors Hanging on Bridge) is detailed enough that you can see the bodies hanging from the bridge and that they are charred." The Register chose to run the photo on the inside in black and white.

For the major television networks, decisions were visible in the editing. Not one network newscast showed the most graphic images, at least initially, without cropping, blurring or using long shots of the gruesome details. CNN spokesman Matt Furman explained: "We told the story throughout most of the day using wide-angle images of the cars burning, without what we would describe as graphic images. We held off until 7 p.m. [Wednesday] for the explicit reason of giving officials the opportunity to notify next of kin." Steve Capus, executive producer at NBC Nightly News, argued, "Quite honestly, it doesn't need to be seen in full in order to convey the horrors of this despicable act." Fox News Channel limited its images to shots of the burning vehicles in which the contractors had been riding and to footage of joyous crowds in Fallujah. Bill Shine, Fox's vice president of production, said, "We made the call that it [footage of the charred bodies] was too graphic in nature to put on our air."

Foreign responses were as varied. Britain's Channel 4 showed blurred images of bodies being dragged through the street, but offered clear shots of the corpses hanging from the bridge. Yet normally unabashed Al Jazeera showed only fuzzy footage of burned bodies. And, of course, unedited collections of images were available to look at on some Web sites.

Showing Images of War

For photojournalism, the decision-making dilemmas prompted by the Fallujah images are as old as war photography itself. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in an Atlantic Monthly essay in August 1863 of his reaction to photographs of the dead from the bloody Civil War battle of Antietam: "Let him who wishes to know what war is look at this series of illustrations." Yet Holmes, whose son served in the Union Army, felt the pictures were too powerful to witness more than once: "[It was] so nearly like visiting the battlefield to look over these views, that all the emo-
U.S. Newspapers Decide Which Images of the Fallujah Killings to Publish

Cheering Iraqis with burning SUV. Photo by Karim Sahib/AFP/ Getty Images.

Contractors hanging on bridge. Photo by Khalid Mohammed/ The Associated Press.

Man in white shirt in front of burning SUV. Photo by Abdel Kader Saadi/The Associated Press.

Akron Beacon Journal
Anchorage Daily News (cropped)
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
The Boston Globe
Chicago Sun-Times
The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer (cropped)
The Columbus Dispatch
Daily News of Los Angeles
The Dallas Morning News
Fort Worth (Tex.) Star-Telegram
Houston Chronicle
Newsday
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
The (Portland) Oregonian
The Sacramento Bee
San Jose Mercury News

The (Baltimore) Sun
The Buffalo News
The Charlotte (N.C.) Observer
Chicago Tribune
Daily Herald (Ill.)
The Des Moines Register
Detroit Free Press
The Hartford Courant
New York Post
The New York Times
The Palm Beach Post
The Philadelphia Inquirer
St. Louis Post-Dispatch
St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times
The San Diego Union-Tribune
The Tampa Tribune

Asbury Park Press
The Beaumont Enterprise (Tex.)
Courier News (N.J.)
The Des Moines Register
The Dothan Eagle (Ala.)
The Greenville News (S.C.)
The Honolulu Advertiser
The Idaho Statesman
Las Vegas Review-Journal

Seattle Post-Intelligencer
The Seattle Times
The Star-Ledger (N.J.)
The Times-Picayune
The Washington Times

This information was compiled by David Perlmutter and Lesa Hatley Major.
tions excited by the actual sight of the stained and sordid scene, strewed with rags and wrecks, came back to us, and we buried them in the recesses of our cabinet as we would have buried the mutilated remains of the dead they too vividly represented.

For today’s editors, the parameters of this debate revolved around the concerns Holmes wrote about more than 140 years ago. On one hand, there is the photographs’ news value—their content as it relates to current public policy or public affairs issues. This is set against the images’ sensationalism—with their disturbing images of death or violence. When photographers capture gruesome images—whether it be of mutilated civilians in the Japanese rape of Nanjing, a self-immolated Vietnamese monk, a street execution in Saigon, the charred bodies of Iraqi children killed by a U.S. bomb while in their air raid shelter in the first Gulf War, or a dead Marine in this Iraq War—journalists and the public wonder what should be shown, how it should be shown, and why.

Certainly, the pictures from Fallujah are relevant to the public debate about the Iraq War, touching as they do on both the reasons why the United States went to war and the wisdom of its present course. After all, the Iraqis rejoicing at the abuse of these Americans are people whom U.S. forces were allegedly sent to Iraq to liberate. If French citizens were dancing over the bodies of dead G.I.’s in France in 1944, the image would be similarly upsetting but it would never have been published, except by the Third Reich. The Fallujah images are also related to the debate about other issues involved with the Iraq situation—such as whether the U.S. military is stretched too thin as many quasi-military tasks are subcontracted, and the reality that civil contractors are risking death to help the Iraqis but are also earning high pay for their risks. Then there are the questions that arise from what was not in these pictures. Where were the American military while these mob actions were taking place? In short, the pictures, it can be argued, are most definitely news.

But was this news value only able to be expressed in its grisliest detail? To show horror solely for its shock value is akin to being a pornographer of war. Most editors who did not run the grimmest images cited the “breakfast table” test and “next of kin” rationale. Newspapers and television newscasters are, after all, mass marketers: Anybody can be watching at any time—including toddlers and the families of the dead. As one editor put it, “People watching [network news or reading the morning paper] with their children do not expect to be surprised.” The Dallas Morning News editorialized, “We didn’t think it was appropriate to show bodies on Page One.” Many papers and networks deliberately cautioned readers or viewers about what they might see.

There are other contextual issues. Veterans and military historians could point out that such images are a part of every war. Is it problematic to show ghastliness and imply it is evidence against this particular war? Consider that in World War II, most Americans never saw pictures of American combat deaths in the papers or newsreels. Home-front audiences had to go to a Warner Brothers movie to see a G.I. get killed at Omaha Beach, Monte Casino, or Iwo Jima. And even then, as infantry combat veteran and cultural critic Paul Fussell complained, many Hollywood images of death in the war were “Disneyfied.” No blood, no guts, just heroics.

Generals and editors during World War II—the last major war involving American troops that resulted in an unequivocal victory—assumed that the public did not want to see images of war’s horrors and that, indeed, the war effort would be undermined by their daily display. Would American victories, like the Normandy invasion, have been viewed differently if the American public had been shown thousands of dead G.I.’s carpeting the beaches? Perhaps it is just as important to provide readers with historical, as well as political, context to war images.

In all, the transparency of angst and indecision about the Fallujah images have been good for journalism. One reason why public esteem for and faith in the fairness, accuracy and honesty of journalism is so low is the public’s feeling that news professionals are not “people.” That is, as the late columnist Mike Royko once accused, those who go into news these days are no longer working-class folks who can write, but rather upper middle-class products of top universities—elites who are just like politicians or lobbyists. This claim is no doubt true: In our combined 40 years of teaching journalism and working in the field, we’ve met only a handful of reporters (or journalism teachers) who were war combat veterans. The star system is another sign to the public that reporters are not qualified to be populist tribunes.

Yet many people don’t appreciate that journalism is a messy process, not a conspiracy. When editors and reporters make public their gut-wrenching debates about what is news, their humanity is revealed, even more so when they admit error. Readers and viewers get the opportunity to listen in as editors say, with sincerity, how much they care about the reactions and opinions of those they serve. For the public then to be included in the ongoing discussion and feel their voice matters makes the news delivery process appear neither inaccessible nor inflexible. Because of the Fallujah debate, bus drivers, insurance salespeople, and firefighters heard and saw that journalists, like everybody else, face tough decisions in their jobs and struggle through them with a similar reliance on professional codes, ethical constraints, and thoughtful uncertainty.

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