Dynamics of death images in Israeli press

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On March 11, 2011, two Palestinians from Awarta invaded the Jewish settlement of Itamar in the West Bank, and killed five members of the Fogel family – three children and their parents – while they were asleep. This attack, which was later named the “Itamar massacre”, was shocking in its brutality. The killing of almost an entire family in their sleep, including the killing of a three-month-old infant, Hadas, outraged the public in Israel. The killing – that took place on a Friday – was the leading story in Sunday’s newspaper, overpowered the other major story of that day – the earthquake and tsunami in Japan (Shargal 2011a). The butchered bodies of the Fogel family were documented by a local photographer and a public debate on whether to publish these images began (Sofer 2011; Somfalvi 2011; Zitun 2011). The controversy was between those who thought that circulating these images around the world violates the human dignity of the dead and scorns their death and between those who thought that such images can serve as an effective tool for the Israeli Hasbara (Israel’ public diplomacy) against the Palestinians. Israel’s Minister of Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs, Yuli Edelstein, said that “only these ghastly images can show the world what and who the State of Israel has to deal with”, and other officials said that releasing the photos from Itamar “would force the international community to come face to face with the cruelty of Palestinian terrorism” (Magnezi 2011). On the other side of the debate there were people like MK Isaac Herzog who said that “The decision to publish the photos conveys panic and it dishonours the mourning over the dead” (Zitun 2011).

All the news organisations in Israel refused to distribute the images of the dead Fogel family (Tausig 2011), asserting that such images violate the human dignity of the victims and do not follow the code of decency the news organisations all adopt in relation to gory death images (this will be discussed later in more detail). However, Hasbara experts, together with the Minister of Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs insisted on disseminating the images around the world, and the images were distributed to international news.
organisation. These organisations refused to publish the images – not because of their gruesomeness, but because the images were digitally blurred by the Israeli government before their dissemination. As these organisations do not publish manipulated images, the images were not published (Hasson 2011). The images were eventually distributed via social networks, but not by any established news organisation.

The refusal to print the gory images of the slain Fogel family follows a practice of Israeli news organisation to self-censor disturbing images. And yet, a look at the Israeli newspapers in October 2011, seven months after the Itamar massacre, implies that the self-censorship is not always in play. On October 21st, images of the mutilated body of Muammar Gaddafi were the leading images of the newspapers (Oren 2011; Shargal 2011b). These gory images were printed prominently and with no concealment or blurring. The caution and sensitivity in relation to the images of the Fogel family vanished, giving way to explicit images of a mutilated corpse. What, then, makes some death images fit to print when other images are kept away from public display? What are the journalistic and ethical considerations in relation to such images? What can or do the different practices for publishing death images teach us regarding questions of identity and human dignity? These are the questions this paper aims to address.

This paper begins with the ways in which western culture deals with death and its representation. The discussion then focuses on the tensions around death images in news reports. Next, the paper explores the dilemmas the Israeli press face when reporting death events – mainly terror attacks that take place in city centres. Findings from a quantitative content analysis are introduced and discussed in order to shed light on the journalistic practices in covering death events and the meaning these practices entail regarding questions of journalism ethics, identity and power relations between Israel and its “others”.

**Death and Western culture**

The occurrence of death breaks the daily routine and activates a series of social and religious rituals to cope with the lost lives. These rituals are symbolic manifestations that reflect society’s prevailing values (Gennep 1960; Huntington and Metcalf 1991; Seale 1998). The symbolic engagement with death encapsulates the beliefs and perceptions society holds in relation to its identity and how it is situated within a broader social order (Seale 1998; Seaton 2005). This includes production and consumption of death representations in order to reaffirm society’s values. The use of death images as an enactment of symbolic power is not new. The spectacle of death has a long history and it is usually embedded with social and political meaning. Images of death and dying have served political purposes throughout history, utilising the thoughts and feelings that the imagery of death evokes. Going back to the Greek tragedies and the Roman games, through Christian images of suffering and along a history of public killing, the spectacle of death has been utilised to reinforce the social order (Seaton 2005; see also Sontag 2003).

In contemporary Western culture, most of our engagement with death is mediated (Gorer 1965; Walter, Littlewood, and Pickering 1995). Most of the people die away from home – in hospitals and hospices – but death is still present in our lives as it invades our homes and private sphere through the media from every television screen, computer monitor and newspaper when the media brings stories of wars, murders, illnesses and other
calamities. Some of these representations of death are fictional and entertaining, like in action movies and police television series (Foltyn 2008); others are depictions of non-fictional events. Usually, the representations of death in news reports are informative, but they also bear political meaning and feed into broader narrative and more fundamental understanding of our lives as social beings (Seaton 2005). As death images speak to our deepest fears, such representations can elicit very strong feelings and fierce emotions, and different political actors are actively involved in managing the circulation of such images – making them available or unavailable – based on potential to support or undermine political causes (Aday 2005; Butler 2009; Griffin 2010; Thompson 2005; Zelizer 2010).

**The use of death images in news reports**

The debate around the circulation of death images after the Itamar massacre resonates with an on-going discussion about the involvement of governments and administrations in utilising death images for political ends. This discussion teaches us that death images can be used as a weapon in a political struggle. However, not all mortal images are the result of governmental involvement that strives to utilise these images to enhance their propaganda goals. Death is a newsworthy subject, and it meets the criteria to become a news story (Hanusch 2010; Harcup and O’Neill 2001; Seaton 2005). As death occurs on a daily basis, most of the time, the media show images displaying dead bodies as part of an on-going routine of reporting on the happening in the world. Differently put, the occurrence is a breakdown of the “order”, but the reports on it are quite ordinary. These reports include stories on wars, terror attacks, car accidents, natural disasters, plane crashes and murders (see table 1). As media consumers, most of our encounter with death images is routine and mundane, and yet, as will be shown later, this encounter is a result of a well-thought practice that manifests prevailing values of identity, dignity and decency.

The history of death images in journalism is dated to the first days of photojournalism (Aday 2005; Brothers 1996; Hanusch 2010; Seaton 2005; Sontag 2003; Zelizer 2010). Illustrations of death and suffering were published in newspapers from the very beginning, even before photography was introduced to journalism. Later, when the use of photography became more prevalent, photojournalism gradually developed as a profession until it became a common practice in the 1930s (Brennen and Hardt 1999; Brothers 1996; Zelizer 1995; Zelizer 2006). The use of photography facilitated the journalistic claim for truth, and the photographic account bolstered positioning of journalists as eye-witnesses of the events they reported on. This was the case in the journalists daily practice, and moreover in the case when reporting on major news events like wars (Taylor 1998; Zelizer 2010). In fact, the first major death event that was reported in real time by photojournalists was the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), and this event marked the beginning of printing photographs of dead bodies in the press (Brothers 1996).

From the journalistic point of view, the photographic documentation of wars was intended to render the events in an accurate fashion. The production of the photographic image and its quality facilitated the mediation of the events as real and authentic. The photographic images rendered the spectacular happening to the readers in ways that words could not match. It enabled the readers to see for themselves what was going on,
and since “seeing is believing” this practice also enhanced the authority of the journalists to provide an objective and accurate account of the events (Zelizer 2006; Zelizer 2010). As death stories are newsworthy, and as these stories take place almost every day, the media covers such stories on a daily basis (Hanusch 2010). How the media renders death stories bears cultural and political importance regardless of whether the death story is the result of a political conflict. The mundane, every day encounter with death and death stories is part of a daily media ritual that reinforces the values of society and reaffirms the ties between its members. It is a persisting process of symbolic exchange that establishes the safety zones for the media consumers and cultivates their sense of belonging to a certain community and order (Carey 1989; see also Silverstone 2006). Thus, it is not only the reports on wars and conflicts and other major news events that are important. It is also the everyday, banal reports that facilitate the way we understand the world.

Hence, when we examine the mediation of death by news reports, we need to study this text not only as a transmission of information, but also as processes that manifest and maintain the core values of society (see also Hanusch, p. 4). The mediation of death, and in particular the management of its visibility, can teach us something about the identity of a given society and how it perceives itself in light of the events that take place in the world. What, then, can we learn about the Israeli society if we study the ways in which its newspapers depict death? Given the on-going Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the routinisation of terror attacks in Israeli cities, what can we learn about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict if we examine it from the perspective of the representation of death?

**The tensions and contestations around images of death**

If we understand the management of the visibility of death as reflecting social values, then first we need to examine the contesting values in relation to the visibility of death. A public or violent death raises the question, as to what is the right way to mediate it to the greater public. The core question in this regard is whether to present death imagery as is, or to conceal or disguise it in one way or another and so to mitigate the horror. The different answers to this question encompass a tension between conflicting values and contestations amongst different agents.

**The public’s right to know**

A death event is noteworthy and newsworthy and it is within the public’s right to know: The public has the right to know that life is in danger; it is entitled to know if somebody neglected to protect others’ lives; and it is entitled to know the cost of the actions that the government carries out on its behalf. But what is the visual value of a report on death events? According to Azoulay (2008), “the familiar slogan regarding ‘the public’s right to see’ only partially expresses what is at stake and is thus a mistaken and misleading formulation. It is not simply the right to see, but the right to enact photography free of governmental power, and even against it” (Azoulay 2008:105). In other words, photography, as a means of documenting reality, bears the potential for citizens to document governmental wrongs and to act against them. A violent death is a deprivation of life and documenting it is an act of solidarity among fellow citizens.
The public’s right to know can also be discussed in terms of witnessing as an ethical stance. Witnessing others in their misfortune brings with it the claim to acknowledge their deprived security and to act upon their suffering. Witnessing the pain of others “requires us (the spectators) to take responsibility for our part in the process, one way or another” (Silverstone 2006: 27). This brings into consideration the question of the public’s right not to know. Can we as spectators turn a blind eye to the catastrophes in the world? Can the media turn away from such events? Is it moral to ignore the suffering of others? Do we need to bear witness to their misfortune? If the reality is devastating, should the media mitigate it? And if so, when and why?

Alongside the question of whether or not to report death events is the question of “how?” More specifically, how explicit should the death image be? What are the ethical considerations that need to be taken into account when presenting death images? On the one hand, the public should be well informed of events that take place, no matter how appalling they are. Sometimes the reality is so gruesome that words cannot convey its horror. We need to witness reality in order to be able to comprehend it. Journalism has a duty to bring the reality “out there” into our living rooms and it should do so as well as possible. On the other hand, is there a real value in gruesome images? Do they fulfil the duty of informing the public? Do we need to see the spilled blood? Do we need to witness the mutilated bodies and the body parts? This brings the issue of human dignity into play.

**Human dignity and privacy**

The public’s right to know, to obtain information of reality as is, might be in conflict, thus, with other values like human dignity and respect towards the dead. Presenting images of dead bodies without the consent of the dead or their next of kin might be considered a violation of their human dignity. The public presentation of a person’s photograph without the person’s consent might harm his or her privacy (Gross, Katz, and Ruby 1991). Accordingly, some believe that the fact that a violent death occurred in public is an insufficient justification for violating the victim’s human dignity. Newton (2001) argues that “even though photojournalists have the legal right to document the human condition in all its despair... they should use discretion...” (Newton 2000:71), and Wischmann (1987) argues against occasions when "one has the misfortune to die in public" and his or her “privacy rights evaporate, superseded by that slippery public right to know". She believes that “everyone should be entitled to the privacy of his or her own death” (p. 68). Azoulay (2008) also agrees that photographing injured or dead civilians might harm their privacy and human dignity, but she argues that revealing renunciation by their government supersedes it.

Public discussions that have taken place in many countries have debated the proper perspective of death presentation and how explicit the image should be, trying to balance between the role of the press to report the event (and the public’s right to know) on the one hand, and the respect towards the dead and the public’s emotions regarding the images on the other hand. Guidelines have been written to provide journalists with the tools to perform their tasks as required and to overcome the disputes (Hanusch 2010; Zelizer 2010). These guidelines have yielded norms that govern the representation of death in the West (see also Campbell 2004). What are the norms and regulations in Israel? The rest of the paper addresses that question.
The public debate over death reports in Israel

The dispute between journalistic duties and the public interest and the privacy and dignity of the dead, over the proper coverage of death events is enhanced in Israel, due to the dominance of Jewish culture and the relatively high number of violent deaths that occurred in the midst of civilian population. According to Jewish tradition, visual presentation of the dead in public is forbidden, and it is customary to cover and not openly display the body in public (Lamm 1969). Such showing is considered as a scorning of human dignity. The second character of death cases in Israel is the relatively high number of violent mass death cases that took place in city centres. Unlike many other western countries that encounter violent mass death events mainly during military campaigns, violent mass death cases in Israel are much more “civic” – they took place not in remote battle fields, but in the middle of towns, in coffee shops and on street corners. As table 1 shows, 23.7% of the photographed death stories in Israeli press between 1987 and 2008 were reports of terror attacks. These scenes are not subject to the scrutiny of military censorship, and therefore the journalists bear the professional and the moral responsibility for the circulation of images from such scenes. They are the gatekeepers. This led the journalists in Israel to adopt self-regulation codes when covering death events (see also Morse 2009).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause of death</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terror attack</td>
<td>136 (23.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>115 (20.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War</td>
<td>96 (16.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car accident</td>
<td>49 (8.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural death</td>
<td>30 (5.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police related death</td>
<td>24 (4.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disaster</td>
<td>22 (3.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide</td>
<td>18 (3.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accident</td>
<td>18 (3.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>67 (11.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>575 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Frequency and percentage of reports accompanied by images of death bodies in Yedioth Aharonoth between December 1987 and December 2008 by cause of death (n=575)**
What is, then, the proper way to cover death events? To begin answering this question, let us go back to the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, to the Israeli reality of suicide bombers in the town centres and to the public debate about the proper way to cover such events. The first major suicide bomb took place in 1994 in Dizengoff Street at the centre of Tel Aviv. Twenty two people were killed after a terrorist exploded on a bus near “Dizengoff Centre” shopping mall. The event was covered live on the public national TV station, Channel 1, and also on the then-new commercial Channel 2. Israel’s most popular newspaper, Yedioth Aharonoth (“Latest News”, in Hebrew), issued a second edition at 9:00 A.M., most of it composed of pictures. The images that emerged from the scene were horrific and included bleeding bodies and body parts. Viewers protested against the display of horror photographs on television (Rosenblum 1994) and a public discussion arose.

On one side of the debate were journalists, who argued that the media should present reality as is and that by self-censoring the reports the journalist do not fill their duty: “despite the horror... the photogenic politeness undermines the raison d’être of television. The elementary duty of a documentary camera is to bring exactly what happened there” wrote one journalist after a suicide attack in Jerusalem in 1995 (Zandberg 1995). Another journalist wrote a few years later, after another suicide attack in Haifa, that the report should “bring the disaster back into the living rooms. Suicide bombers' attacks are the current disaster of Israeli society, and the Israeli public must be kept informed. It is the media’s duty to document a disaster as is and not to report a lighter version of the events that is easier to digest” (Alfer 2003). On the other hand, there were voices that argued that explicit coverage causes unnecessary panic amongst the viewers and also violates the human dignity of the victims. “Satisfying the public’s right to know does not mean an endless live report from the scene. Repeatedly airing the ritual of lining the covered corpses against the wall has nothing to do with reporting. Those footages do not add any new information. It is, nonetheless, pornography and dishonouring the victims of the disaster. Even in their death due to a terror attack in the centre of town, people’s privacy and decency should be respected”, argued one scholar with regard to the live coverage of terror attacks by the Israeli television channels (Zertal 1996). Asa Kasher, a prominent Israeli philosopher argued that “it is not within the public’s right to know how this and that looks, when he or she is bleeding” (in Levy-Barzilai 2005: 337).

The public discussion on the appropriate manner to cover violent events during the 1990s resulted in some amendments to the Rules of Journalistic Ethics in Israel (Rules of Journalistic Ethics 2008). The ethical guidelines advise journalists to balance the public’s interest to know about the unfolding events with the casualties’ privacy and the feelings of their next of kin. Dr Yuval Karniel, the head of the ethics committee of the Israel Broadcasting Authority, who was a member of Israel Press Council and The Second Authority for Television and Radio’s ethics committees, told me in an interview:

“The reality is clear to everybody. When you have a terror attack in the centre of town, of course the facts need to be delivered. But more than that – bringing images of body parts, spilt blood on the street, recognition of people – it is not only violation of privacy and human dignity. That’s pornography” (Karniel 2009).

And so, practically, the main guidelines to the coverage of death events were to avoid graphic and gory images, to prefer long shots over close ups, and to not include images that can identify the depicted person. To what extend did the Israeli press adhered these
guidelines? Did they follow them strictly or selectively? Let us take a look at the findings. But first, let me discuss briefly the methodology in use.

**Methodology**

22 The following findings are the result of quantitative visual content analysis (Bell 2001). The sample is composed of images that accompanied news stories of death cases. The sampled images are images depicting dead bodies – uncovered, covered or in coffins. The time span for this study is between December 1987 (the outbreak of the first Palestinian intifada) and the end of 2008. This is a time when terror attacks were frequent and took place in civil settings rather than in remote battle fields.

23 Two images were randomly selected for each month from Israel’s most popular newspaper at that time – Yedioth Aharonoth. The images were then coded according to relevant parameters following the discussion above – the display of concealment of the dead body, the closeness and openness of the shot and the identifiability of the deceased.

24 The following tables show the findings from the time after the terror attack near Dizengoff Centre (October 1994) until December 2008. The analysis focuses on the coverage of death events after the public and journalistic discussion on that matter took place. Therefore, the analysis shows how the press in Israel coped with the deadly reality and whether or not the newspapers complied with the regulations they formulated for themselves.

**Findings**

25 The first guideline to be examined was the display of unmitigated death images. The guidelines in relation to reporting on death events in visual terms advised not to confront the viewers and readers with explicit images of death. This was based on the assumption that such images are the utter indexical representation of death, whereas covered bodies or coffins are mitigated iconic images of death. This is also based on the prevailing norms in Jewish custom not to openly display the dead since the display of such images violates the human dignity of the dead and harms the feelings of the dead’s next of kin.

26 When examining the display of uncovered bodies [table 2], the analysis shows that in the years after the Dizengoff Centre terror attack (October 1994) and the discussion it entailed, 78.1% of the corpse’s images that accompanied death related stories depicted covered corpses, i.e. corpses covered by sheets or shrouds, coffins and corpses that were digitally blurred before being printed. Only 21.9% of the images were images that showed dead bodies with no concealment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Display of the corpse</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uncovered body</td>
<td>82 (21.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covered body</td>
<td>208 (55.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The second guideline to be examined was the closeness and openness of the shot, i.e. the space occupied by the corpse in the photographic frame, and more specifically, the space occupied by the face of the dead person in the frame. This photographic technique brings the readers closer to the corpse or keeps them away from it. Needless to say that the closer the frame, the more it encloses details of the corpse and its shape.

Table 3 shows that the use of close-ups was scarce. Only 2.4% of the images depicting dead bodies used close-up or medium close shots (images focusing on the upper torso and head). The vast majority of the images – 97.6% – used medium shots (26.1%) or long shots (71.5%). In other words, the guideline advising to prefer long shots over close-ups was followed meticulously.

The third guideline to be examined was the ability of the readers to identify the dead person in the photograph. Given the sensitivity of such images to the deceased’s next of kin, and given the questions regarding the respect towards the dead that were discussed earlier, this guideline aims to protect the human dignity of the deceased and to respect the feelings of his or her next of kin. Table 4 shows that this guideline was generally followed, as 86.9% of the images were images in which the deceased was not identifiable.
However, as we could see in the three tables above, the guidelines were not always followed, and there were some occasions when images that were not in line with the guidelines were still published. When and why, then, where these regulations breached? Coming from the ritual approach to communication (Carey 1989), this study presumes that there is a meaning not only to what the press report, but also to how they do so. The hypothesis of this study was that the Israeli media put in play different practices when covering death events, based on the identity of the dead. Therefore, another set of analyses was conducted, this time controlling for the identity of the dead.

As table 5 shows, the display of uncovered bodies was more common when the dead were not Israelis. In fact, more than half the images depicting dead Palestinians (56.3%) were images of uncovered corpses. 41.5% of the images depicting dead that are not Israelis and not Palestinians were also images of uncovered corpses. This is compared with only 6.9% of uncovered corpses of dead Israelis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Display of the corpse</th>
<th>Israeli</th>
<th>Palestinian</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uncovered body</td>
<td>16 (6.9%)</td>
<td>27 (56.3%)</td>
<td>39 (41.5%)</td>
<td>82 (21.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covered body</td>
<td>173 (74.2%)</td>
<td>8 (16.7%)</td>
<td>27 (28.7%)</td>
<td>208 (55.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body in coffin</td>
<td>39 (16.7%)</td>
<td>2 (4.2%)</td>
<td>19 (20.2%)</td>
<td>60 (16.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digitally blurred body</td>
<td>5 (2.1%)</td>
<td>11 (22.9%)</td>
<td>9 (9.6%)</td>
<td>24 (6.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>233 (100.0%)</td>
<td>48 (100.0%)</td>
<td>94 (100.0%)</td>
<td>374 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-Square = 136.329, P < .001.

When examining the openness or closeness of the photographic frame, the analysis reveals that the use of close-ups and medium close shots was almost never in use when the dead were Israelis (0.4%) [Table 6]. However, 10.4% of the images depicting dead Palestinians were of that kind, and 39.6% were medium shots. Only 50% of the cases depicting dead Palestinians were in line with the guideline advising to use long shots (compared with nearly 75% when the dead were non-Palestinians).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shot in use</th>
<th>Israeli</th>
<th>Palestinian</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Close-up/Medium close shot</td>
<td>1 (0.4%)</td>
<td>5 (10.4%)</td>
<td>3 (3.2%)</td>
<td>9 (2.4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lastly, when examining the ability to identify the dead in the photograph, the analysis shows that dead Israelis were almost never identifiable (98.3%), whereas the dead Palestinians were identifiable in 43.8% of the cases [table 7]. Drawing on the significance of this visual trope and its relation to human dignity and the respect toward the dead, we can find a clear distinction between the ways in which the Israeli press treated Israelis, Palestinians and others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identifiablity</th>
<th>Israeli</th>
<th>Palestinian</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The person in the photograph is identifiable</td>
<td>4 (1.7%)</td>
<td>21 (43.8%)</td>
<td>24 (25.5%)</td>
<td>49 (13.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The person in the photograph is not identifiable</td>
<td>229 (98.3%)</td>
<td>27 (56.3%)</td>
<td>70 (74.5%)</td>
<td>326 (86.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>233 (100.0%)</td>
<td>48 (100.0%)</td>
<td>94 (100.0%)</td>
<td>375 (100.0%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-Square = 79.064, P < .001.

**SHOT IN USE BY NATIONAL AFFILIATION**

The findings show that the self-regulation that the Israeli press formulated for covering death events in visual terms were followed in most of the cases. The main principles of protecting the human dignity of the dead and respecting the feelings of their next of kin were generally kept. In most cases, the Israeli press used images depicting dead people in a way that did not violate the dead’s right for privacy, and preferred to use images that conveyed the deadly reality while keeping the report decent and preventing it from turning into a sensational spectacle. Only about 20% of the images accompanying reports of death events showed uncovered corpses; the use of close-ups and medium close shots was scarce; and in less than 15% of the cases the dead person was identifiable. This practice balances the public’s right to know and the respect towards the dead.

However, as the findings also indicate, the coverage of death events was not uniform, and the identity of the dead played a significant role in the way the Israeli press reported on...
the event and treated the dead. The principles designed to protect the human dignity of the dead were strictly kept when the dead were Israelis. Yet, when the dead were not Israeli – and more specifically, when they were Palestinians – the common practice was completely different. In these cases, it seems that the discussion regarding the proper way to cover death events was forgotten and the principles for covering such events evaporated. Almost 6 out of 10 images of dead Palestinian depicted uncovered bodies; photographs of dead Palestinians were taken from a closer perspective, using long shots only in 50% of the cases (compared with about 75% when the dead were not Palestinians); and in almost half the photographs depicting dead Palestinians the dead were identifiable.

The fact that the Israeli press maintain two practices for covering death events is telling in many respects. It shows that death and its imageries are still a prevailing theme in organising societies and reflecting upon questions of identity and solidarity. The two practices discussed here also show how the representation of death establishes hierarchies of lives – some groups are treated in a respectful manner while other groups are introduced in less respectful ways. The human dignity of some is well protected, while the human dignity of others is more easily violated. By managing the visibility of death, the Israeli press uses the representation of death as a mechanism for demarcating the boundaries of respect and decency, and by that demarcating the boundaries of “the human”.

Conclusions

The death of a person is a unique event, but the journalistic report of people’s deaths is routine. Wars, terror attacks, car accidents, natural disasters and the death of public figures occur on a daily basis in different places around the globe. Those events are reported by the media because they break the natural order and stability of daily life, and we as a society find it important to deal with and explain these happenings.

The cultural approach to communication (Carey 1989), argues that communication is not merely a transmission of information, but also a process of constructing and reaffirming mutual beliefs and dominant social values. Cultural actions are projections of ideals and social norms that compose the basis of our society. The discussion here focused its scrutiny on the journalistic practices related to death events, in order to better understand the role of the media in processing death and its reflection on issues of the value of life, social solidarity and identity. The analysis offered here delineates the different practices that are employed when reporting death events by the Israeli media.

The norms that apply to the presentation of death delineate different group memberships, with Israeli media routinely distinguishes “us” (Israelis) from non-Israelis – Palestinians or others. The need to protect the readers from the horror photographs arises only when it comes to Israeli victims. The Israeli media protects the human dignity of members of Israeli society, but it tends to violate the human dignity of “others”. Given the on-going conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, the findings show how by employing different visual tropes, the Israeli media construct hierarchies of life and death for the Israelis and the Palestinians – the former are worthy of human dignity and the latter are not.
Since the data collection for this study has ended, the Israeli parliament (The Knesset) has amended its Privacy Protection Act (section 2(4A)) (Privacy Protection Act 2011). The amendment aimed to address the norms governing the coverage of death events by the Israeli press. The discussion in the parliament dealt with the same issues that were introduced here earlier. The minutes of the discussions indicate that the Israeli legislators do not trust the press to regulate itself, and therefore advocated the amendment of the act. And yet, as discussion around circulation of the images of the dead Fogel family shows, sometime it is the ministers and legislators that are more eager to publish gory images and the journalist need to restrain them.

To conclude, the production and circulation of death images reflect political contestation and cultural values. The Israeli reality forced the journalists to formulate a code of conduct that prefers implicit death images over explicit images. Yet, national identity shapes the ways in which death is covered. Different actors are actively involved in managing the visibility of death, and the emergence of digital means makes it more challenging to control the circulation of death images. In this arena, journalists no longer have the monopoly, as technology develops and legislators interfere.

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NOTES

1. In Israel there is no Saturday edition to the newspapers.
2. This approach is very different form the American approach until 2009 – whereas the Israeli approach is to show the dead and discuss the death toll as part of a self-victimizing discourse, the Americans considered the reports of the death toll in visual terms as jeopardizing the war efforts and its legitimacy.
3. The original statement was in Hebrew, and I made some correction to the quote stated. The article in Hebrew can be found here: http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4041874,00.html.
4. The Crimean War was the first photographed war, but the photographs from the battle field were not distributed in the newspapers in real time (Sontag 2003; see also Aday 2005).
5. I leave the discussion of the question whether the dead have rights in the legal sense, for another time.
6. Elsewhere I have showed how the Israeli media construe different regimes of pity – one for Palestinians and another one for Israelis – even when the circumstances of death are similar (Morse 2013).

ABSTRACTS

This paper focuses on the journalistic discourse on the representation of death in news reports and the production of death images by the media. The violent reality of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict forced the Israeli press to self-regulate the circulation of death images in news reports. The paper considers the dilemma of Israeli journalists: how to deal with the conflict between the need to report newsworthy death events without violating the respect towards the dead?
Analysis of the journalistic discourse around key death events maps the competing values that this issue brings. In addition, analysis of photographs from 21 years of reporting death events in Israeli newspapers traces the changes in the depiction of death along the years, and delineates the norms regulating Israeli media coverage over time. This paper argues that the norms that apply to the representation of death delineate different group membership, with Israeli media routinely distinguishing “us” (Israelis) from the “Others” (Palestinians and non-Israelis).

Cette présentation analyse le discours journalistique de la représentation de la mort dans les reportages, et la production d’images de mort par les médias. La violente réalité du conflit israélo-palestinien force la presse israélienne à une auto-régulation de la circulation des images de mort. D’où un dilemme du journaliste : comment traiter du conflit, entre le besoin de rapporter des événements de mort ayant valeur journalistique, et celui de respecter le mort ? Analyse d’événements-clef de ce type permet de cartographier les valeurs qui s’affrontent ici. De plus, l’analyse des photographie de morts sur 21 années de reportages dans les journaux israéliens permet de retracer les changements dans la représentation de la mort, et celui des normes qui régulent la couverture médiatique, sur le long terme. La présentation soutient, que les normes appliquées varient selon l’appartenance au groupe, les médias israéliens distinguant de façon routinière le “nous” (Israéliens) des “autres” (Palestiniens et non-Israéliens).

INDEX

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