Public Abstract

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Balancing Immediacy and Sensationalism Against the Role of the Journalist in the Case of Nodar Kumartashvili

This single case study examined the ethical decision making process involved in the decision to publish or withhold disturbing images of Nodar Kumartashvili's fatal luge accident during the 2010 Olympics. Interviewing a variety of editors directly involved in the decision offers insight into the formal and informal processes, policies and procedures, and variables that influence the decisions at these organizations across both print and online publications. On the whole, the data suggests that the decision to publish disturbing imagery is complex regardless of platform. Each event, each set of photographs, each instance is contextual and individual with no black and white answer. Without hard, fast rules, the ethical decision making process requires an investment of time, not only in the short term to discuss immediate decisions, but also in the long term to lay a foundation of compounded newsroom experiences to guide that conversation. While the pressure to be the first to publish a story in the 24 hour news cycle certainly increases the urgency at which these conversations transpire, the variables for each medium remain remarkably similar. The complexity is learning to balance immediacy and sensationalism against the role of the journalist in a 24 hour news cycle.