EDITING FOR TASTE IN A 24-HOUR NEWS CYCLE: BALANCING IMMEDIACY AND SENSATIONALISM AGAINST THE ROLE OF THE JOURNALIST IN THE CASE OF NODAR KUMARITASHVILI

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by
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EDITING FOR TASTE IN A 24-HOUR NEWS CYCLE: BALANCING IMMEDIACY AND SENSATIONALISM AGAINST THE ROLE OF THE JOURNALIST IN THE CASE OF NODAR KUMARITASHVILI

presented by Kristen DiFate,

a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Dr. Mary Beth Marrs
These people live again in print
as intensely as when their images were captured[...].

— Ansel Adams
This thesis would not be possible without the unwavering support of Dr. Keith Greenwood whose unmatched patience, quarter-past-midnight mentoring and insightful advice guided me through countless false starts and frustratingly long stalls in order to craft an intelligible and cohesive document to share with my committee and the academic community at large. I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Stephanie Craft, not only for graciously agreeing to be part of my thesis committee, but also for allowing me to stumble down the rabbit hole of academic research that led me to the Kratzer and Kratzer article *How Newspapers Decided To Run Disturbing 9/11 Photos* that triggered my unrealized — and now unrelenting — fervor for visual ethics. Furthermore, this work would not be possible without the added support of the remaining members of my thesis committee, Dr. Charles Davis and Dr. Mary Beth Marrs, both of whom enthusiastically agreed to take a chance on this research and on me. To all of you, thank you for your support, your trust and your unending patience.

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ABSTRACT

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.
Chapter One
Introduction

Ahead of the major networks and even local media outlets, roving iReporters captured the first images of the devastating Interstate 35 bridge collapse in Minneapolis in August 2007. Eleven months later, “Tweets” alerted the world to a 5.4-magnitude earthquake in Los Angeles, beating Associated Press reports to the Internet by nine minutes. Iranian citizens broadcast what journalists could not during their election protests in June 2009. Two years later an IT consultant inadvertently “live-tweeted” the U.S. raid on Osama bin Laden. While President Obama inked his announcement to the nation, the news of bin Laden’s death — leaked by former chief of staff Keith Urbahn — spread rapidly across Twitter. The trending topic pressured White House and Pentagon sources to confirm the accuracy of the social media speculation to news organizations well in advance of the president’s formal address. Recent major news events such as these showcase the power of new media.

Yet, in the same breath, there are fresh examples of the dichotomous and, at times, perilous nature of the 24-hour news cycle in an age of electronic information. On February 12, 2010, Georgian luger Nodar Kumaritashvili was fatally injured on the Whistler Sliding Center in Vancouver, Canada, during his second of two training runs for the 2010 Winter Olympics. Kumaritashvili lost control going into the final 270-degree turn and was thrown off his luge and over the sidewall of the track,
slamming into an unprotected steel pillar at 89.2 mph. While worldwide media coverage of the event was limited, Agence-France Press photographer Peter Parks captured Kumaritashvili’s final moments on the track in five frames (Figures 1–6). Parks (Figures 7–12) and Associated Press photographers Michael Sohn (Figure 13–14) and Ricardo Mazalan (Figure 15) captured several additional frames showing medical personnel performing cardio-pulmonary resuscitation and inserting a plastic tube into Kumaritashvili’s bloody mouth immediately following the crash; and Gero Breloer captured a large video screen in the finish area of the Alpine skiing venue showing the accident (Figure 16). Kumaritashvili was later airlifted to Whistler hospital where he died of his injuries. Before news of his death surfaced, the photographs had been transmitted, edited and disseminated by wire services like Associated Press and Getty Images and subsequently published by a number of media outlets. Editors had engaged in, and concluded, their decision to disseminate and publish the shocking photographs before Kumaritashvili’s conclusion was written.

The dramatic still images rushed online and repetitious broadcast of the gruesome video ignited outrage across the nation. Callers complained to broadcast networks and Twitter was aflame with anger (Bauder, 2010). The Associated Press responded to the outrage saying, “News organizations frequently weigh the imperative of depicting the reality of the world they cover with the concerns about whether images would be too disturbing for the public. In this case, the networks warned viewers and used the video” (Bauder, 2010). Despite the warnings, The
Associated Press example affirms NBC and other networks were criticized heavily not only by readers but also other journalists for repeatedly broadcasting the gruesome footage. Editor and graphic designer Charles Apple (2010), for example, authored a blog post criticizing media outlets for using the horrifying images on Page One:

...this isn’t like all those picture from Haiti last month, where the photos of dead bodies helped us understand the unspeakable horror and scope of the disaster. Repeated viewing of Friday’s training accident on the luge track just seemed a little... gratuitous. We know the man smacked into a concrete column. Do we really need to see it again to understand the story?

Again, even though Kumaritashvili died soon after being airlifted to Whistler hospital, under the push-to-publish pressure of the 24-hour news cycle, many of the decisions to publish shocking photographs of his fatal and gruesome accident occurred well in advance of his demise.

Over the last ten years, technology has developed at lightning speeds. Online journalism has become the third live news medium, competing with radio and television to be first to report (Kautsky and Widholm, 2008). In 2011, “The State of the News Media” reported that for the first time Americans consumed more news online (46 percent) than in print newspapers (40 percent), though local television news remained the most popular platform (50 percent). The 2012 report declared “the digital revolution entered a new era” (Mitchell, 2012) and the 2013 report showed that the proliferation of digital devices increased traffic to the top 25 news
sites by 7.2 percent, clearly showing that Americans consume more news digitally via smartphone, tablet, laptop or desktop computer than print newspapers (Mitchell, 2013).

Despite the Internet revolution, media researchers still predominantly focus on the print edition (Kim and Weaver, 2002). “The empirical data might be collected from electronic databases, but as such it still represents the print versions of newspaper text, seen as ‘the only thing available’” (Kautsky and Widholm, 2008, p. 86). Indeed, the mono-linear format of content creation for print journalism is markedly easier to study than online journalism because the print edition travels in one direction — from reporter to editor to final publication — meaning there is only one static product to consider. On the other hand, the online news landscape allows content to be published, edited, revised, and republished again (Kauttsky and Widholm, 2008) as a story develops. This poly-linear ebb and flow of content creation poses a problem to researchers because, as Karlsson suggested, the same news article may exist in “up to 20 different versions” (as cited in Kautsky and Widholm, 2008, p. 82).

However, this concentration on the printed product isn’t unique to academic analysis. In recent history, even professional publications reflect more often on the print publication than the digital counterpart. For example, in December 2012, a NYC Subway train struck 52-year-old Ki-Suck Han after he was pushed into the tracks at the 49th Street station. A photo on the front page of the New York Post (2012) showed Han trying to pull himself onto the platform as the Q train
approached. The headline read: “Pushed on the subway track, this man is about to die,” and “DOOMED.” In a City Room (2012) blog post, the nytimes.com questioned the decision to publish the image on the front page. In closing, the author posed a question to readers: “The image is undeniably vivid. But should it have been published?” It received 156 reader comments for and against publication, some short and pointed — “It should be illegal to publish a picture of a man that is about to die” (Ashley, 2012), and “Shame on any/all news organizations that displayed this trash” (Michael, 2012) — others more contemplative, encouraging a debate:

Should this photo have been published? With that headline no. The fact that it shows the last few minutes of a man’s life before he dies is both tragic and a bit insensitive to the family members. Could a story have been printed? That’s up to the Post. Now I am not familiar with laws or anything concerning things of this nature but I’m sure a debate could be started about it” (Steph, 2012).

In another corner of the Internet, University of Pennsylvania senior Joe Pinsker penned a guest blog post on forbes.com (2012) that deconstructed the ethics of publishing the image of Han as he had done for a final exam in a nonfiction writing class. After dissecting the issue with his classmates, Pinsker wrote:

[The class agreed] it wasn’t that the photo should not have been published, but rather that the photo should not have been published in that manner. Most of us thought that with a more tasteful presentation — one that honored Han’s life and paid diligence to the terror of the situation — this
photograph could have justifiably been printed. Some even argued that we have an obligation to look at it, because it forces us to question the motivations of ourselves and our society.

His conclusion simply stated, “Maybe, certain photographs demand that we ask these questions.”

More recently, during the 2013 Boston Marathon, bombs exploded near the finish line killing three people and injuring 170. Horrific photographs of injured runners and blood-soaked sidewalks ran as front-page news across the nation, greeting innocent passersby in the newsstand and rolled up in string on front porches. As in previous instances, reader response was mixed (Haughney, 2013; Bailon, 2013):

One Facebook commenter wrote, “It would be nice if I could shield my kindergartners from seeing this in the [newspaper] box on the corner. Thanks, anyway.”

Another wrote, “This is national news and a national tragedy. Stop complaining about graphic photos. People need to be aware of the severity of this awful situation.” (as cited in Bailon, 2013, p. 1)

Professional publications like the nytimes.com (Haughney, 2013) and St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Bailon, 2013) responded to outraged readers. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch defended its decision to publish a photograph of injured people in a bloody street scene captured moments after the bombing on the front page of the print edition:
The Post-Dispatch front page today marks a grim reality and was edited carefully. We respect others who feel the imagery crossed the line. We want readers to understand the weight our editors gave such a decision and that they do so only in rare occasions.

The street scenes in Boston evoke a chilling reality. Our motivation was to inform and convey the frightening impact of what can happen anywhere in America, not some remote place whose distance gives us personal security.

The blood and helplessness of the front-page image might be too much for some readers. But the message to the public must be fully absorbed and understood. That is what motivated our editors. (Bailon, 2013)

The nytimes.com neither defended nor sought forgiveness for its decision. Rather, the editors pieced together three journalistic perspectives on the debate in a more cohesive story about the controversy over altering the photograph to protect a victim. Regardless, in either editorial the focus was on the printed publication.

Continued focus on the printed product both in academic and professional publications creates a void in digital media analysis, which begs attention. That void parallels another void in journalism research, which is that of imagery. Zelizer contends, “Images have not been easily incorporated into much of the existing research on journalism” (p. 3). Instead, existing research focuses on the written word, placing imagery in a subordinate role:
Adopting the sentiments of most journalists, complementary research strands on news production, content, and effect have tended to position news images in a supportive role to words, where the verbal record underpinning journalists’ authority as arbiters of the real world takes precedence over its visual counterpart. (Zelizer, 2010, p. 3)

Surprisingly, few studies have explored the ethics or the decision-making process of publishing disturbing imagery. In fact, according to Peterson and Spratt, “Almost all the gatekeeping and decision-making literature focuses on the text, or the news story as a whole, not on individual visual images” (2011, p. 10). Even fewer studies have focused on the dissemination of disturbing imagery in a culture of continuously fresh news. Given the rapid shift in the American media diet, detailed, objective examination of this trend represents a worthwhile endeavor (Keith, Silcock & Schwalbe, 2006) centered on a single overarching question: How has the ethical decision-making process evolved in regards to publishing and distributing disturbing imagery across media platforms?

This study will explore publication decisions across print and online news platforms using Nodar Kumartashvili’s fatal luge accident during the 2010 Olympics as an example. Interviewing key decision-makers directly involved in the final image selection offers some insight into the formal and informal processes, policies and procedures, and variables that influence the decisions at these organizations. As a result, a picture should begin to emerge of how editors weigh whether to publish or
withhold disturbing images on different platforms and the ethical implications of the practices.

The literature reviewed in the following chapter will establish a theoretical foundation for this study and explore prior research related to the ethics of publishing graphic and disturbing photographs in news, including discussion of pertinent and applicable case studies. This review of the literature will reveal a void in the research focused on publishing disturbing imagery across new media platforms that rely on speed, immediacy and continuous content creation. Through the established theoretical framework, this study aims to address that void by examining the decision-making process of publishing and disturbing imagery across media platforms. The theory and prior research will lead to the presentation of formal research questions to be addressed in this study.

Chapter three will outline the qualitative research method used to collect data for this study including how it was implemented and its appropriateness for this research topic and the purpose of this research. This chapter will describe the case study, establish operational definitions, explain both the purposeful criterion-based sampling procedures and snowball selection of subjects, and detail the semi-structured interview method used as well as the researchers implementation process.

The fourth chapter will present the information gathered from each interview with a key decision-maker involved in the decision to publish or withhold the disturbing images addressed in this study, and pull together themes and
patterns that emerged during these interviews in order to address the specific research questions.

In the final chapter, the discussion of results will present conclusions that can be drawn from the study placing this research in context with existing literature. It will also outline the theoretical and practical implications, detail the limitations of the study and make suggestions for future research.
Chapter Two
Review Of The Literature

The Traditional Role of the Journalist

The Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947) asserts that the American people are entitled to a press that provides them a holistic representation of their society mindful to fair presentation that allows people to make informed decisions necessary to direct their government and their lives. The news media fulfills this obligation by ensuring accuracy, balance, checks, democratic accountability and editorial separation that allows people, through logic and reason, to make decisions that direct their government and their lives. Entman defines this as the ideal goal of traditional journalism: to make power accountable by keeping citizens informed of what the government is doing and how it affects them (2005).

Although this is the ideal goal of traditional journalism, Entman (2005) acknowledges that fluctuations exist in adherence to that goal, and media survives along a sliding scale from “core democratizing functions of news” (p. 49) to pure entertainment. While the contents of individual media outlets ebb and flow from network to network and program to program, Entman acknowledges that, amidst pressure from advertisers and the diminished amount of accountability in news, a shift toward soft news and infotainment has emerged, reshaping the definition of news. In an age of Internet immediacy and reality television, a preoccupation with
ratings and sensationalism has reduced the substance and depth of reporting, thereby diminishing the potential for democratic impact (Entman, 2005).

In traversing the scale between the democratizing function of news and pure entertainment, Bogart (2000) introduces the idea of the journalist as a juggler — someone who must capture the audience and convey information through a balancing act of entertainment and news. This balancing act is most evident in television journalism, which exists in the realm of entertainment where there is a constant need to capture and maintain audience interest. Bogart points to several methods used by news media to manufacture an environment that is ruled by ratings: elevating news anchors to celebrities, having cameras present to entice action and reaction, reenacting events from a unique and contrived perspective, and forced significance.

Nonetheless, some sensational stories have the power to unveil deeper context and deserve more extensive explanation. A prime example is the death and subsequent media deification of Neda Agha-Soltan. In June 2009, amidst the Iranian presidential election demonstrations in Tehran, which were not initially reported by the state-controlled Iranian media, a single, shaky cell phone video emerged. The forty-second video captured 26-year-old philosophy student Neda Agha-Soltan falling to the pavement after being shot in the chest while watching the demonstrations. As people rushed to assist her, her frightened face turned toward the camera and blood trickled from her mouth.
The video, first emailed to an Iranian asylum seeker in the Netherlands, spread quickly to news networks, YouTube and Facebook. “For a mediated environment hungry for pictures of the Iranian protests, the video’s informational value was beyond doubt, and nearly every U.S. news organization ran some visual treatment of the story” (Zelizer, p. 10).

Early reports revealed only shocking images and video; then her name emerged followed by details of her life and her final day. While the initial breaking news served as a barebones bulletin of facts, subsequent stories revealed the greater context of both the demonstrations and the election in finely tuned descriptions and in-depth analysis. Within hours, Neda became a symbol of freedom of expression and human rights. Her name became the rallying cry of Iranian protesters and her face a symbol of the anti-government movement (NYTimes.com, p. 1). “...[T]he photo, instrumental in capturing public attention, took on a role larger than that associated with a simple news picture of a topical and breaking news event” (Zelizer, p. 10).

Both Bogart (2000) and Carey (1986) contend that only avid, steady news consumers see these kinds of news stories unfold and possess the historical context with which to understand, interpret and act upon them as issues in the world around us. Carey (1986) explains that the conventions of objective daily journalism offer the Who, What, When, and Where but not the How or Why. These latter two questions are implied in veiled descriptors only avid consumers would catch. For them, context emerges from a well-rounded palate of breaking news, follow ups,
news analysis, interpretation and background as well as critical commentary and editorials, television coverage, documentary and docudrama, newsweeklies, journals of opinion and book-length journalism. When these fragmented sources come together from a variety of media platforms, the audience integrates them into a whole in order to decipher the How and Why. Carey (1986) calls this the journalism curriculum.

Editors as Gatekeepers

Each element of the journalism curriculum is crafted by a series of decisions made as a news story travels from reporter to editor and finally reaches the reader. In 1947, social psychologist Kurt Lewin described this channel of communication as a gatekeeping process. Along the channel, each story passes through a series of gates. The number of gates varies depending on the organization and the story, but each gate is governed by a series of impartial rules or by “gate keepers.” In a news organization, editors are gatekeepers, acting either independently or in a group to make decisions about whether to transmit or withhold each story, but each story must pass through one gate in order to reach the next.

To understand how gatekeepers make decisions and “operate their ‘gate’,” Lewin’s assistant, David Manning White (1950), studied “Mr. Gates,” a wire editor at a non-metropolitan newspaper. For one week, Mr. Gates saved every wire story that came to him from three wire services. He made notes on each rejected story, recording his reasons for withholding each one. White found that most of Mr. Gates’
decisions were highly subjective, based largely on value judgments, and Mr. Gates’ own attitudes about what is newsworthy. Years later, Snider (1967) replicated this study using the same Mr. Gates. While his results supported White’s initial findings, they also suggested that the stories now passing through Mr. Gates’ gate represented a better balance of news topics. In 2000, Bissell conducted a similar study of photographic content at a mid-size Northeastern newspaper. Through photo-editing observations and interviews with photographic news staff about their reasons for accepting or rejecting each photograph, this study not only supported the subjectivity of each gatekeeping decision, it also suggested that each photograph published was the product of not just one gatekeeper, but a chain of gatekeepers.

Stemple (1985) later applied gatekeeping theory to the study of morning newspapers and television broadcasts to examine the extent to which the selection of stories overlapped. He found that while news organizations agreed to what topics were of interest, there was little overlap in actual story selection.

As Lewin (1947) originally suggested, individuals are not always responsible for these decisions. Often times, impartial rules or newsroom demands and limitations govern which stories are published (Altheide, 1976; Bantz, McCorkle, & Blade, 1980; Turk, 1985). Other times, especially in broadcast newsrooms, groups of gatekeepers control the final gate to publication (Epstein, 1973; Tuchman, 1978). This group dynamic often leads to unpredictable conclusions about what content should be transmitted or withheld. Berkowitz (1990) found that group publication decisions relied less on the five traditional, textbook news values — prominence,
proximity, timeliness, currency, impact, human interest, and oddity — and more on individual instinct.

In this review of the literature, countless studies emerged examining the decision-making process of traditional news organizations and journalism, from the original gatekeeping theories of the 1950s to the present. However, over the last ten years technology has developed at lightning speeds driving online journalism to become the third live news medium, competing with radio and television to be first to report (Kautsky and Widholm, 2008). In a diffusion study of 180 Midwest college students, Kanihan and Gale (2001) found that 44 percent heard about the 9/11 attacks from television, while only two percent received the information from the Internet. Stemple and Hargrove (2003) supported this finding noting that 91 percent of survey respondents identified television as their primary source of information about the attacks, 67 percent cited newspapers and a mere 37 percent said the Internet was a useful source as the event unfolded. However, as the media landscape shifts, the roles of various media change (Stemple and Hargrove, 2003). In fact, the 2011 State of the News Media reported that for the first time Americans consumed more news online (46 percent) than in print newspapers (40 percent), and local television news was the most popular platform at 50 percent. The 2012 and 2013 reports showed that the gap widened as digital (the revised category name for the combination of online and mobile device access) news consumption grew (17.2 percent the first year followed by 7.2 percent the next), print newspaper consumption declined (4 percent the first year followed by 0.2 percent the next),
and local television grew (1 percent the first year) and then declined (6.5 percent the following year) suggesting that, while local television still leads news consumption, more Americans consume news digitally via smartphone, tablet, laptop or desktop computer than print newspapers.

One study that addresses this shift to the new news landscape contends that journalists' power to limit what passes through the gate has diminished in the modern information society. “The Internet defies the whole notion of a "gate" and challenges the idea that journalists (or anyone else) can or should limit what passes through it” (Singer, 2006, p. 265). Technology delivers information on demand and allows audiences to effortlessly personalize their media consumption by selecting and discarding information from an increasingly splintered array of media conduits. “At the same time, the sheer quantity of information online, along with its wildly varying quality, reinforces the need for someone to sort it out as well as to lend it credibility and, ideally, utility” (p. 265).

Despite the Internet revolution, media researchers still predominantly focus on the traditional printed product (Tae Kim & Weaver, 2002). “The empirical data might be collected from electronic databases, but as such it still represents the print versions of newspaper text, seen as ‘the only thing available’” (Kautsky and Widholm, 2008, p. 86). With the State of the News Media reporting the rise of digital news consumption year after year, it becomes a critical medium for researchers to explore. In addition to this void in digital media analysis, “almost all the gatekeeping and decision-making literature focuses on the text, or the news story as a whole, not
on individual visual images” (Peterson & Spratt, 2011, p. 10). This gap should also be addressed.

**The Photographic Family: Photographers and their Editors**

A photojournalist’s role in the newsgathering continuum is to capture — in still photograph or video — what Henri Cartier-Bresson calls ‘decisive moments’ — those elusive moments in which “real-world elements come together in an aesthetically appealing frame to represent the most significant or engaging moment of an event or other newsworthy activity” (Cartier-Bresson, 1952). To accomplish this harrowing mission, videographers capture 30 frames per second and photographers “[work] in time increments as fast as 1/5000th of a second and may make hundreds or even thousands of photographs in the course of covering one event or story” (Newton & Williams, 2010, p. 342).

In the pursuit of these moments, both photographers and videographers may be challenged by the first of two ethical quandaries of photojournalism: Continue shooting or recognize privacy and decency and silence the camera. It is a photojournalist’s job to get the storytelling picture (Brown, 1987). However, “Truth-telling may sometimes conflict with the journalists’ duty to be compassionate and respectful to the wounded, the dead, and their families” (Silcock, Schwalbe & Keith, 2008, p. 47). In an effort to fulfill their role-related duty to tell the truth, the propensity is to “shoot through the action” in order to capture that one, decisive moment surrounded by the moments leading up to it.
The second ethical quandary of photojournalism rests on the shoulders of the photo editor: To publish or not to publish? According to Wischmann, “The right to photograph does not necessarily mean all photographs should be published” (1987), and so the decision to publish or withhold a photograph rests on the shoulders of the photo editor, or chain of photo editors (Bissell, 2000). They’re responsible for determining the storytelling capacity of each photograph as it aligns with the vision and objectives of the media outlet. Does the photograph represent the most storytelling moment of a newsworthy event? Often only the photographer — with his or her proximity to the activity — knows the answer. However, the picture editor is the intermediary between the photograph and the publication, and “there is no guarantee that the will of the photographer, who is often geographically distant from decision making, will be honored” (Zelizer, p. 61).

Wischmann (1987) “[does] not accept the defense that photojournalists simply take photographs and editors decide what to print.” She maintains, “All journalists have an ethical obligation to edit their own work to make it reflect their understanding of, and experience with, an event” (p. 71). After all, “[the] editor is the gatekeeper but the photojournalist is the path leading to that gate” (Hartley, 1983, p. 304).

Still, each image captured at high speed is only one moment in a series of events. “It would be impossible to evaluate every decision to fire the shutter to capture rays of light reflected from a person or scene” (Newton & Williams, 2010, p. 342). A photo editor must act as the final gatekeeper, addressing — with more
clarity and reflection — each frame and its relation to the story and the audience. These and other difficult decisions are at the heart of journalism ethics.

**Written Rules: Existing Codes of Ethics**

While there are no set rules in journalism to govern the delicate process of editing disturbing images of violence and tragedy, codes of ethics have emerged as a moral philosophy for guidance from which consistent decisions can be made (Husselbee & Adams, 1996). While no code can address every situation a journalist may face, they establish standard values that guide decisions.

Keith, et al. (2006) analyzed 47 U.S. ethics codes adopted or proposed by news organizations, media corporations, and news outlets for photojournalism ethics and image-related themes. Their study found that of the 35 codes that discussed images, five photo-related themes emerged: Photographers should not be deceptive with their identity; images should be accurate, complete, contextualized and fair; manipulation of imagery is deceptive; staging scenes is deceptive; and tragedy and violence call for extra care. While their results suggest the focus on imagery is impressive, the numbers are deceptive. Their research concluded that, more often than not, codes mentioning photographers and photography did so only in passing as a “group that the code covers or to whom some rule applies” (p. 252). They also found that none of the codes analyzed considered how photographs read across platforms. For example, whether violent or tragic imagery “deemed
inappropriate for print might be appropriate for use online, where Web surfers must seek out the news” (p. 255).

In total, Keith, et al. (2006) found only nine ethical codes that offered guidelines for images of violence and tragedy — three professional organizations, one television news operation, and five newspapers, with only one major metropolitan daily. One professional organization, The Society of Professional Journalists, addresses disturbing imagery beneath the subhead Minimize Harm: “[b]e sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief” (SPJ, 1996). Another, the National Press Photographers Association, specifically addresses victims and grief: “Treat all subjects with respect and dignity. Give special consideration to vulnerable subjects and compassion to victims of crime or tragedy. Intrude on private moments of grief only when the public has an overriding and justifiable need to see” (NPPA, 2010). Ancillary to this study, it’s worth noting that The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) Statement of Principles doesn’t directly address photographers — or reporters, or any other newsroom job title — and it skirts the issue of approaching or reporting tragedy and grief. Rather, it suggests on the whole that “[j]ournalists should respect the rights of people involved in the news, observe the common standards of decency and stand accountable to the public for the fairness and accuracy of their news reports” (ASNE, 1975).
Journalism Ethics, In Theory

These codes of ethics codify an organization’s established principles into a foundation for consistent decision-making to be used when two moral obligations collide. However, “The most difficult ethical dilemmas occur when two conflicts arise between two “right” moral obligations. Thus, ethics often involves the balancing of competing rights when there is no “correct” answer” (Day, 2006, p3.). This balancing act frequently pits the role-related responsibilities of a profession against the potential of causing unjust harm (Day 2006; Lester, 2010). The nurse who discomforts her patient to administer medicine weighs the physical pain of the needle prick against the benefit of the treatment. A teacher who assigns a failing grade weighs the reputational harm of lowering of a student’s GPA against the benefit of an education. As Lester notes, “doing your job and not causing unjust harm [is] called the ‘ethics mantra’” (2010).

As previously mentioned, the traditional role of the journalist is to provide a holistic, fair representation of society that allows the public to make informed decisions. Often times, this responsibility to serve the public results in making choices that may cause harm (Elliott and Ozar, 2010). Black, Steele & Barney (1999) define this moral dilemma as one which:

...places the duty of journalists to disseminate functional information that may be of significant instructional value to a mass audience in direct conflict with a duty to refrain from inflicting unnecessary harm to those who have already suffered significant emotional distress. (p. 210).
For example, when Elaine Miller Holstein was confronted with the picture of her son Jeffrey Miller’s body sprawled out on the ground at Kent State University after being shot by a National Guardsman, she cried. “[That] picture — particularly at the beginning — but even now — has always hit me like a blow on the head” (Wischmann, p. 68). Repeatedly seeing the image of her dead son compounded and reinforced her grief. Similarly, when the Associated Press published a photograph of Lance Cpl. Joshua M. Bernard who’d been hit by a rocket-propelled grenade serving in Afghanistan, Bernard’s father believed it was “disrespectful to his son’s memory” (Associated Press, 2009). In both examples, journalists were challenged to weigh their role-related responsibilities against the possibility of causing harm. “Media practitioners are responsible for the impact of their work, even if there is no intention on the part of the practitioner or on the part of the industry to cause harm” (Elliot, 2011, p. 10).

In both of these examples, the victim’s family was affected by a news organization’s decision to disseminate information in order to keep the public informed. However, this represents only one of a number of claimant groups that can be affected by the actions of a journalist. Additional claimant groups include readers and viewers; sources; editors; victims; the friends and families of victims; and publishers and owners (Bivins, 2009).

In cases where “the intended action is among the role-related responsibilities of journalists, [and] the intended action of the practitioner [will] cause potential emotional, physical, financial, or reputational harm” (Elliott and Ozar, 2010, p. 19)
to any of its claimant groups, it becomes necessary to determine if causing harm is justified. As noted, harm comes in a variety of forms. For example, Elaine Miller Holstein was consumed with sadness each time she unexpectedly faced the image of her son laying on the ground at Kent State (Wischmann, 1997). This is considered indirect emotional harm. Another form of harm is physical. In 1997, the paparazzi’s pursuit of Princess Diana caused the physically dangerous situation that led to the fatal car accident in the Pont de l’Alma tunnel (BBC, 2008). The hurried pursuit placed the princess and her companions in direct potential physical harm. In addition to these two types of harm, there is also financial harm and reputational harm. If a news organization were to publish the names of politicians who engaged in corruption, this could cause either of these types of harm, or both. Ultimately, however harm is defined, without adequate justification, an action that causes emotional, physical, financial, or reputational harm is unethical (Lester, 2011).

This study will define harm as the unintentional harm caused to an unsuspecting person seeing a potentially disturbing image online or in a newsstand.

Systematic Analysis

To help journalists reason through difficult ethical decisions that carry the potential of causing harm, academics offer a number of systems developed from and guided by the value statements outlined in the codes of ethics. Elliott and Ozar (2010) suggest journalists use systematic moral analysis (SMA) to determine whether associated harms are ethically justified. This process first identifies all
available courses of action, then examines each alternative based on the following three questions:

1. Does the action fulfill one of the journalist’s role-related responsibilities?

2. Will the action cause potential emotional, physical, financial, or reputational harm?

3. Is causing this harm justified? (p. 23)

Once these questions have been answered, decisions are placed in one of four categories: 1) ethically prohibited, 2) ethically required, 3) ethically permitted, or 4) ethically ideal. Finally, the best alternative is selected.

This method, as Lester (2010) points out, is permissive. “With only one category that bans an action by a journalist outright, [...] it would be an extraordinary case in which a journalist’s action is prohibited under Elliott and Ozar’s standards” (p. 352).

Thomas Bivins (2009) offers another more detailed SMA checklist for ethical decision-making. The seven-step process begins by defining the ethical issue or problem. It then moves on to examining any immediate facts that have an impact on the decision; identifying claimants and your obligations to them; listing alternative courses of action including the best- and worst-case scenarios, who might be harmed, and if any rule or principle would invalidate the alternative; and finally considering ethical guidelines and whether they support or reject any suggested alternatives. Once a course of action is selected based on the preceding in-depth
analysis, Bivins suggests “[defending] the decision in the form of a letter addresses to your most adamant detractor” (p. 106).

When dealing specifically with imagery, Newton and Williams argue for a holistic approach that integrates rational analysis with intuitive reaction by pairing SMA — specifically Elliott and Ozar’s SMA — with Williams’ Personal Impact Assessment (PIA). Williams developed PIA as a method “to draw nonconscious responses to media images into conscious awareness” in order to “inform ethical media use and practice” (p. 343). The goal of PIA is to work quickly through the process, maximizing intuitive responses.

The process begins by looking at the frame. Then:

• List key visual elements in the frame.
• Review the list, jotting down three or four words that each key elements evokes.
• Review the associative words, selecting one for each of the key words.
• Make a new list of the selected associative words.
• Think about each associative word, allow a word describing a part of your self to emerge. Write it down.
• Using your third list of words, write a short essay describing your response to the image. (p. 343-4)

The difficulty is applying any of these lengthy ethical decision-making processes into actionable procedures useful in operational newsrooms functioning on deadline. Newton and Williams admit that it would be difficult for journalists to
conduct either PIA or SMA for every image considered for publication but they believe that the repeated practice of these methods “will help develop more balanced, ethically sound, and effective journalism practices” (p. 347).

**Unwritten Rules: Translating Codes into Policy and Procedure**

The challenge is to translate general ethical codes into concrete policies and procedures. Wischmann (1987) suspects “[…] it would prove impossible to construct rules that will protect the innocent victims while still providing photojournalists the leeway to make the necessary quick decisions involved in spot new photography” (p. 72), but suggests photojournalists ask some basic questions before making the decision to publish potentially disturbing imagery. First:

Could they, would they live with the photograph on their wall? If they knew the subject, would they have taken the picture? Would they feel comfortable meeting with the victims or their loved ones? Would they hesitate if they had to ask the subject for a model release?” (p. 73).

Next, the photojournalist should ask two questions about the journalistic role of a published photograph: 1) Does the photograph tell us something we need to know? And 2) Is the photograph likely to add to the public debate — or possibly divert it? (p. 73). Brown (1987) adds 1) Does the photograph tell the story like no word can? And 2) Does it have an important message that might save lives? (p. 77). These foundational questions address standard issues of day-to-day photo editing and publication, but editing decisions become more complex when violence and tragedy
are involved. In these more delicate situations of gruesome or graphic photographs, O’Brien (1993) found that few papers reported having firm policies governing the decision-making process. In fact, one editor at the St. Petersburg Times said, “We thought we had all these rules [...]. We discovered that the only rule we have is that we don’t have a rule” (as cited in O’Brien, 1993, p. 79).

Rather than rules, some editors use tests to make these difficult decisions. One test editors use is called the “breakfast test,” which suggests that any photograph that may ruin a reader’s breakfast should be withheld from publication (Kratzer & Kratzer, 2003; Peterson & Spratt, 2005). Evelyn Holtzhausen, as quoted by O’Dowd (1996), explains, “There’s a subtle line between where a picture has impact and where it becomes a marmalade dropper. That is ‘somebody reading this story with such a degree of interest that the marmalade drops off their toast.’” Parsons and Smith (1988) point to a common “pattern of practice” for dealing with images of death and dying: stop short of the moment of death, especially in cases where the death is bloody or gruesome. Zelizer (2010) refers to these types of photographs — ones that depict individuals facing imminent death — as “about-to-die” images. She comments that “images of impending death and their invocation of the ‘as if’ are used by news organizations to cover the ‘as is’” (p. 29) and that they are often less graphic and less offensive. However, some researchers suggest that crossing this line between “palatable” and “marmalade dropper” is acceptable if the event’s overarching social or political importance outweighs the values it violates (Hulteng, 1985; O’Brien, 1993).
In making these decisions, photo editors walk a tightrope between the choice to “[report] certain information because it is in the public interest, or [withhold] it or [tone] it down out of respect for the sensibilities of the audience” (Foreman, 2009, p. 254). These choices are highly dependent upon the audience of the publication. What one editor in a major metropolitan area decides is acceptable to run, an editor in a rural area may deem inappropriate for the audience. However, in an Internet-enabled, digitally networked world, all media organizations with online editions create news stories that are simultaneously local and international (Keith, Schwalbe & Silcock, 2006), meaning a photo insensitively published on one news organization’s website has the potential to harm victims worldwide. In the struggle to find an answer for how to approach these decisions, many editors focus on several reoccurring issues: “reader response, victims’ privacy and the ability of the photographs to communicate the story of the day” (Kratzer & Kratzer, 2003, p. 34).

While Keith, et al. (2006) found substantial portions of newsroom codes suggest thought-provoking questions to foster newsroom discussions aimed at deriving answers, Husselbee & Adams (1996) suggest a comprehensive, detailed set of questions to consider specifically when making the decision to publish a disturbing image. Their list hinges on determining the instructional value of an image. The instructional value is “the ability of the image, by its compelling nature, to warn others of imminent harm or danger” (p. 46). This list was written based on small-town news audiences, but can be applied to any market:
1. Does this image reflect significant instructional value? How might its publication prevent harm to readers? Is an image necessary to illustrate the instructional value of the story?

2. Is it possible to present the image in such a way that it reflects its instructional value without inflicting undue emotional distress on readers or on the families of victims?

3. Does the image truly qualify as news of instructional value? Or is it the result of a “news event,” staged for its shock value?

4. Should disclosure play a role in this case? Would explanation of the reasoning process that preceded publication help to diffuse the controversy?

(p. 46)

Black, Steele and Barney’s (1999) ten-question checklist for photojournalists supports this list and adds: “What is the motivation for publishing the photo or using the video image? Are there any alternative ways to present the information to minimize harm while still telling the story in a clear way?” (p. 207).

Both lists advocate for editorial disclosure: “Will we be able to justify our actions? Would disclosure of our reasoning process that preceded publication help diffuse controversy and misunderstanding” (Black, Steele & Barney, 1999, p. 207)?

While current research points to no single rule governing these difficult decisions, and although the vernacular varies, there is an overlapping common core of considerations among the strategies and decision-making checklists. These include the ability of the photograph to fulfill a journalist’s role-related
responsibility to serve the public; the ability of the photograph to communicate the story of the day; harm to claimants and stakeholders; alternatives courses of action; and the ability to justify the decision.

Editing Dilemmas

The debate for and against publishing graphic content and disturbing imagery is hardly new. Existing studies typically pit two positions against each other: Sensationalism versus the role of the journalist. The “use of high impact images often provokes allegations of sensationalism and lack of consideration for the families of victims, and while these are serious considerations, they must be weighted against the role of the journalist in society” (Black, Steele & Barney, 1999, p. 210). Existing research examines arguments from both sides. For example:

Photo editors were torn when faced with gruesome photographs of Chris Hani, secretary-general of the South African Communist Party, gunned down in his driveway on April 10, 1993. His head lay on the pavement in a pool of blood, his tongue hanging out with the bullet hole visible in his jaw. Most editors of South African newspapers agreed that the face was too graphic to show and opted to run photos taken from more palatable angles (O'Dowd, 1999). Despite potential controversy, two newspapers ran Hani’s face on the front page, surrounded by blood. One editor, Charles Mogale of City Press, ran the photo based on its shock value, defending the decision by saying, “The news value of this event overrode any unwritten rules about bodies on the front page,” (as quoted in O'Dowd, 1996, p. 3).
Photographer Tladi Khuele agreed, feeling it was important for readers to immediately recognize Hani in order to grasp the true magnitude of the situation. As a result, the photograph became a tool of social justice (O'Dowd, 1996). Withholding it would have diluted the impact of the event.

Three years earlier on the other side of Johannesburg, a freelance photographer documented the brutal killing of a man believed to be a Zulu spy. Photographs showed him being stoned, bludgeoned, stabbed and set on fire by African National Congress sympathizers. O'Brien examined 57 U.S. and Canadian newspapers for the reasons they decided to publish the brutal images. She found that 24 newspapers ran images of the victim being stabbed or burned, 17 showed a less gruesome image, and 16 chose not to run the photographs. Several editors used the distance test to make their decision, but as a means to different ends. Two editors said they were less likely to use photos of bodies from within the newspaper’s circulation area “in deference to victims’ families” (p. 79). However, one editor took an opposing stance saying that a violent photo is more likely to run if it is local because it has a “more immediate impact on our readership” (p. 79). Other editors agreed that the “breakfast test” was one factor in their decision-making process, but rarely a determining factor (O’Brien, 1993).

On May 4, 1970, John Filo captured a Pulitzer Prize winning image of a screaming 14-year-old girl, Mary Ann Vecchio, kneeling over the body of Jeffrey Miller, a 20-year-old student at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. Wischmann (1987), a close friend of Miller’s mother, argues against restricting the right to
photograph spot news events like these but suggests that not all images need to be published.

All journalists have an ethical obligation to edit their own work to make it reflect their understanding of, and experience with, an event. Photojournalists have the added obligation of deciding whether or not their photographs add anything to public understanding, especially when those photographs are intrusive. (p. 71)

In Miller’s case, Wischmann points out the ambiguity of the image — the location is vague, the National Guard is absent, and the cause of death is unknown. The ambiguity of the photograph contributes nothing to the public understanding of the story. The photograph is of a girl screaming over a body. In cases like this, Wischmann suggests photojournalists ask themselves some questions about taste, potential harm to victims and their loved ones, as well as the storytelling ability of the photograph. The answers to these questions may reveal that the photojournalist’s role-related obligation to provide an accurate, honest, multidimensional presentation of the story “may require publication of other than the ‘best’ photograph” (p. 68).

Wischmann also suggests, “When one has the misfortune to die in public, privacy rights evaporate, superseded by that slippery public right to know” (p. 68). As other researchers suggest, the public has a right to know when the death is one of a public figure.
On January 22, 1987, news directors grappled with this dilemma when Pennsylvania State Treasure R. Budd Dwyer shot himself to death at a news conference in front of a dozen reporters and camera crews. In 1986, Dwyer was convicted of accepting a bribe from a California accounting firm competing for a multimillion-dollar contract to calculate the repayment owed to Pennsylvania government workers found to have overpaid federal taxes in the early 1980s. The day before sentencing for mail fraud, racketeering and perjury, Dwyer called a press conference in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to provide an update on the situation. Mid-speech, he pulled a .357 Magnum handgun from a large manila envelope, placed it in his mouth and pulled the trigger (Parsons and Smith, 1988).

Parsons and Smith (1988) interviewed news directors responsible for making decisions about the footage of Dwyer’s suicide. They found that most news directors had little difficulty making the choice to edit the tape. They cited necessity and taste as the primary factors in their decision not to include the moment of death in their broadcast. Eighteen out of 20 news stations in Pennsylvania arrived at this same editing decision quickly and without much introspection. One television station ran no footage, commenting that “the pictures did not add any more to the story than what the copy did” (p. 89). Another station, WHTM in Harrisburg, made the opposite decision and ran the moment of death at noon, six and eleven, a decision made based on the hyper-local nature of the news and the “importance and public position of the person involved” (p. 90). Two additional stations, WPXI and WPVI, ran the moment of death in their afternoon broadcast but reedited the
footage to remove the suicide for the evening broadcast. After running the initial footage, WPXI News Director Mike Sechrist ordered it be eliminated from evening newscasts stating that running it had been a mistake (p. 90). Pomeroy (1987) found that WPVI News Director Ned Warwick, on the other hand, defended the decision to run the suicide at noon saying it was “based on the belief that Dwyer was ‘an important public official’” (as quoted in Parsons & Smith, 1988, p. 90). Even so, WPVI chose to eliminate the footage from evening broadcasts explaining “repetition would make it more gruesome,” (Parsons & Smith, 1988, p. 90).

The morning of September 11, 2001, in the wake of the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington D.C., editors again struggled with the decision whether to publish or withhold hundreds of disturbing images of the terrorist attacks. The disaster dominated all media channels as the nation grappled with the magnitude of the event. Images of people jumping or falling from the upper floors of the World Trade Center towers poured into newsrooms, many of which originated from citizens and non-journalists.

Kratzer and Kratzer (2003) interviewed photo editors at 22 newspapers across the United States who struggled with the decision about whether to publish or withhold disturbing images of people falling from the burning World Trade Center. In interviews, they asked editors to recall the decision-making process of Sept. 11 and 12, 2001. Their research revealed that the decision was complex and, in the majority of newsrooms, the debate revolved around three key questions: 1) How will readers respond to the images? 2) Does publishing the photo violate the
victims’ privacy? 3) Does the photograph communicate the story in a way that words cannot?

Despite editor’s concern with victims’ privacy and the potential response of readers, editors chose to publish images based on their ability to add depth to the enormity of the story in a way that words could not. One Midwest editor told Kratzer and Kratzer, “The horror of the event and the magnitude just demanded that you get that across in a very forceful and powerful way” (p. 41). News editors went to great lengths to protect the identity of the victims who were published to minimize potential controversy. However, in the aftermath, they found that readers reached out to newspapers not out of outrage, but for closure. “Readers didn’t contact the newspapers to complain, but to ask for copies of the photographs to be enlarged so that they could try to determine the identity of the victims to see if they were their missing loved ones” (Kratzer & Kratzer, p. 42).

Editor Earl Mauker of the South Florida Sun-Sentinel came across a sensitivity problem in 2004 when news broke that a group of American contract workers were attacked in Iraq and their bodies were strung up on display from a bridge over the Euphrates River. Wire photographs were sent of varying levels of graphic content. Some large market newspapers chose to run images showing the dead bodies on their front pages, and other used the same photographs but put them inside the paper (Mauker, 2004). While editors at the Sun-Sentinel felt it was important to show the audience what happened in the incident, the ultimate decision was to give a written account of the scene but not use the most
controversial of the images. Mauker wrote about the dilemma in his “Ask the Editor” column:

“As journalists, sometimes our first inclination is to put it all out there and let the readers experience it full force. But, as editors, we have a responsibility to consider the sensitivities that such disturbing images may have on those who would prefer not to have them land on the breakfast table” (p. 1).

Hartley (1983) examined this difference by comparing the reactions of photojournalists and the public in judging hypothetical ethical dilemmas facing press photographers. He found that in 17 of the 19 cases they disagreed significantly. More often than not, photographers are more willing to photograph graphic content and disturbing images than the public can stomach. A more recent analysis of the column “You be the Editor” published in *The Montreal Gazette* supported these findings (Raudsepp, 1999). The annual feature presented readers with 10 ethical dilemmas, each with two solutions, and invited them to comment. The researcher concluded:

Editors through training and experience, are much more motivated to preserve what they perceive to be professional and institutional standards and values. Readers generally lacking such background are more disposed to allow human sympathies and sensitivities to guide their decisions. In both instances, it would seem that both would benefit from increased awareness of each other’s sensitivities and motivations (p. 53–54).
In order to address this, many news organizations supplement disturbing imagery or graphic content with editorial commentary recounting and unveiling the ethical decision-making process that occurred behind closed doors. Foreman (2009) explains:

Newspapers sometimes have sought to explain in a caption or an editor's note why they used a photograph that they expect many readers to find offensive. Those who favor this technique say that explaining the decision is a matter of accountability to the audience. (p. 346)

One such case began in Afghanistan in August 2009. Julie Jacobson, an Associated Press photographer embedded with U.S. forces, was crouched behind a short, thick, mud brick wall when a barrage of rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) and gunfire broke out around her. Taliban fighters ambushed the Marine patrol she accompanied. Ten yards in front of her, Lance Cpl. Joshua M. Bernard was hit with an RPG. He lay in front of her, one of his legs was gone, the other hanging on by skin. Several Marines came to his aid. Jacobson photographed the scene and transmitted the images to the AP photo desk.

Bernard was later evacuated and airlifted to Camp Leatherneck, where he died of a blood clot in his heart during surgery. He was the 19th American to die in a particularly bloody month where marine, solider and seamen causalities totaled 51 (Associated Press, 2009).

According the ground rules of media engagement:
Causalities may be covered by embedded media as long as the service member’s identity and unit identification is protected from disclosure until OASD-PA (Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs) has officially released the name (as quote by Associated Press, 2009).

Additionally:

Media who witness the deaths and injuries of coalition service members will not disclose – through video, photos, written or verbal description — the identities of the individuals until the nation has made appropriate notification to the next of kin (NATO, 2009, p. 5).

In this case, those rules bought the AP 10 days to decide how to handle the photographs.

Among other things, these ground rules of media engagement are designed to protect operational security and the lives of the Marines that host embedded media (AP, 2009). The “governing concerns” of the rules regarding coverage for “wounded, injured, and ill personnel” are “patient welfare, patient privacy and next of kin/family considerations” (NATO, 2009, p. 5). This allowed the AP time to develop a systematic approach, a rare luxury in breaking news situations.

During this time, an AP reporter met with Bernard’s parents, showing them the images. Bernard’s father opposed publishing the photograph depicting his mortally wounded son both then and in a follow up telephone call to the AP days before the photograph’s publication. According to the AP, he said, “it was disrespectful to his son’s memory” (Associated Press, 2009).
After significant editorial deliberation, the AP decided Jacobson’s image “conveys the grimness of war and the sacrifice of the young men and women fighting it” (Associated Press, 2009) and would be disseminated. After the Marine’s burial, the AP distributed the image as part of a photo package accompanied by a news story recounting the battle, excerpts from Jacobson’s journal, and an article about the AP’s decision to distribute the photo. In the article, AP senior managing editor John Daniszewski defended the decision saying, “We understand Mr. Bernard’s anguish. We believe this image is part of the history of this war.” The package was transmitted with a warning: “EDS NOTE: GRAPHIC CONTENT.”

The responses varied among news organizations that received the package: The (Wheeling, W. Va.) Intelligencer ran the photo with an accompanying editorial that defended the decision to publish. The Buffalo News ran the photo on page four of the print edition. Both Akron Beacon-Journal and St. Petersburg Times ran the photo online. The Washington Post elected to publish the photo online alongside an article noting they had decided not to publish the image in the print edition. Arizona Republic, The Washington Times, Orlando Sentinel, and Indenvertimes did not run the photo at all but ran others in the series. Finally, the Portland Press Herald website stated simply, “We believe that running the photo would be in poor taste and have chosen not to run it” (as cited in Dunlap, 2010).

Undoubtedly, the debate for and against publishing disturbing imagery isn’t new and hasn’t faded over time. The number of existing academic case studies and the frequency of professional articles written regarding the topic reflect its
importance in research. Considering the rise in digital-device media consumption, researchers’ continued focus on the traditional printed product creates an inconsistent reflection of the new news landscape, an imbalance that should be addressed.

In traditional print media, gatekeeping editors competed with only one deadline — the print deadline — allowing editors time to more fully vet information and be more judicious about the content they publish and how before sending the newspaper to print. In the race to stay relevant over the last decade, many print publications have evolved into dual-platform news organizations, ones that abide not only by the stable, once-a-day print deadline, but also the constant push-to-publish deadline of the 24-hour, online breaking news cycle. In response to this evolution, it is critical to examine how the ethical decision-making process of publishing disturbing imagery in news has developed in order to address the differences inherent in each medium. Therefore, this study will apply gatekeeping theory to both online and print editors to gain insight into the decision-making process involved in the decision to publish or withhold disturbing images of Georgian luger Nodar Kumaritashvili’s fatal luge accident during the 2010 Olympic Games. In doing so, it will address the following research questions:

RQ1: What organizational policies and procedures exist to guide the ethical decision-making process for publishing disturbing imagery?

RQ2: What newsroom processes were involved in the decision to publish or withhold images of Nodar Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident?
RQ3: How did internal or external codes of ethics influence the ethical decision-making process to publish or withhold disturbing images of Nodar Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident?

RQ4: What variables influenced the decision to publish or withhold disturbing images of Nodar Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident?
Chapter Three
Methodology

This single case study used in-depth, semi-structured interviews with key decision-makers to examine the ethical decision-making process involved in the decision to publish or withhold disturbing images of Nodar Kumaritashvili’s fatal luge accident during the 2010 Olympics across three news organizations; Chicago Tribune, St. Louis Post-Dispatch and National Public Radio (NPR). As Silverman (2004) suggests, a case study purposefully examines one case in depth in order to provide insight into an issue. “The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Patton, p. 169). In this case, the study explored the similarities and differences between the decision to publish disturbing images in online and print publications.

Images

On February 12, 2010, Georgian luger Nodar Kumaritashvili was fatally injured on the Whistler Sliding Center in Vancouver, Canada, during his second of two training runs for the 2010 Winter Olympics. Kumaritashvili lost control going into the final 270-degree turn and was thrown off his luge and over the sidewall of the track, slamming into an unprotected steel pillar at 89.2 mph. Within moments of the
accident, on-site medical personnel were at the athlete’s side performing cardio-pulmonary resuscitation and inserting a plastic breathing tube into his bloody mouth. Photographers and videographers captured the gruesome scene before he was loaded into a helicopter and airlifted to Whistler hospital where he later died of his injuries.

While worldwide media coverage of the event was limited — in the United States, NBC held the primary television broadcast rights and the Associated Press sent 120 reporters, photographers, videographers and editors to cover the event — photos and video of the tragic practice run were captured, disseminated and published across print, broadcast and online media. Captured images spanned Kumaritashvili’s entire practice run. From the athlete’s focused face at the starting line through to his empty sled resting on the track after he’d been ejected, photographers and videographers followed his descent from beginning to end including the impact and subsequent resuscitation attempts.

**Operational Definitions**

While many photographs disseminated by the Associated Press and Getty Images and made available for publication were not emotionally upsetting depictions of Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident, this study narrowed its focus. Here, the term *disturbing images* refers to photographs that document Kumaritashvili facing imminent death as his airborne body traveled over the sidewalk of the track (Figures 1–6) — ones Zelizer (2010) might refer to as “about-to-die” images — as well as the
bloodied resuscitation attempt immediately following the impact (Figures 7–15). This includes the work of four photographers: Agence-France Press photographer Peter Parks documented the crash (Figures 1–6) and subsequent rescue efforts (Figures 7–12); Associated Press photographers Michael Sohn (Figure 13–14) and Ricardo Mazalan (Figure 15) also captured frames of resuscitation efforts; and Gero Breloer captured a large video screen in the finish area of the Alpine skiing venue showing the crash (Figure 16). In an online database search, these were the only still photographs of the accident disseminated through the Associated Press and Getty Images and subsequently made available for publication.

**Sampling**

To discover which newspapers published these images, the researcher conducted an archival search of online news organizations and articles. Yin (1994) suggests using an archival record search in sampling because archived records are stable and reviewable. However, as we move into the digital landscape, archival records become more unreliable, especially in this outlier case. Within hours of Kumaritashvili’s accident, the International Olympic Committee requested — and successfully persuaded — Google to remove videos from YouTube on the grounds that it violated their copyright. This move prompted several news organizations to remove published online content and links (Bondy and Vinton, 2010). As a result, an archival search is limited to available archives and, therefore, not a comprehensive search of all published images of Kumartashvili’s fatal accident.
A preliminary search of online archives revealed a number of qualifying organizations that met the first of two predetermined criteria in this purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002): Those that published disturbing images of Nodar Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident online and/or in print. This search also revealed a blog post by Orange County Register page editor Charles Apple entitled Did we REALLY need to put the luge accident on A1 today? (2010), which was particularly helpful in identifying newspapers that had published photographs of the accident in print because it included over a dozen images of newspaper fronts covering the accident. The initial search resulted in 16 prospective organizations. Again, this was not a comprehensive search of all published images of Kumaritashvili, but a search of available sources.

The researcher made every effort to contact all qualifying news organizations identified in the archival search via phone and/or email and request an interview with someone at the organization who had been involved in making the decision to publish or withhold images of Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident. However, due to extent of time that elapsed between the event and the research, many of these organizations did not meet the second criterion: Those who still employed key-decision makers who were involved in the decision to publish or withhold those images. Organizations meeting only one of the two criteria were eliminated from the study, leaving 6 qualifying organizations. The researcher made every effort to interview a key decision-maker at the remaining 6 organizations.
The sample also aimed to include a diversity of media platforms to compare online and print decision-making processes and specifically targeted dual-platform newsrooms. However, in the process of conducting the interviews, two participants lost their jobs at the news organization before participating in the interview and became unreachable, which further narrowed the pool of qualifying participants to 4. One additional potential subject was unreachable, reducing the number of participants to 3. Nevertheless, as Stokes suggests “[i]t is quite possible to conduct excellent research using a smaller number of interviewees” if the target population for sampling is small, as the percentage will be a large portion of the total (Stokes, 2003, p. 117).

As a result, the following three news organizations were examined in this study: the Chicago Tribune, St. Louis Post-Dispatch and NPR. These news organizations represent a diversity of media platforms and backgrounds. All three newsrooms are dual-platform organizations, two of which publish both online and print content, the third predominantly publishes radio content but has evolved in the digital era to publish an online product as well.

**Interview Subject Selection**

At each of the three news organizations, one key decision-maker involved in the decision to publish or withhold disturbing images of Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident was interviewed. In print newsrooms, these decision-makers typically hold titles like photo editor, picture editor, photo chief, director or assistant director of
photography. In online newsrooms, these positions are commonly listed as online editor or home page editor. However, in dual-platform news organizations there is little to no correlation between the management style and workflow of the print and online product (Zavoina & Reichert, 2000). In fact, in a 2000 survey of photo editors and web directors, two dual-platform management models emerged. In the majority of newsrooms, the online publication used resources from the print counterpart with no collaboration or direction for coverage. In fewer newsrooms, the online and print publications worked hand-in-hand, sharing resources and coordinating coverage. Needless to say, these key decision-makers often hold a variety of titles and belong to different management teams making them difficult to identify by title alone.

As a result, snowball sampling was use to identify interview subjects for this study based on their experience with, and involvement in, the decision to publish photos of Kumaritashvili’s accident rather than their formal titles, which varied from newsroom to newsroom. This approach for locating “information-rich key informants” (Patton, p. 176) often begins by asking a number of people, “Who should I talk to?” In this study, preceding the interview, the participants were asked if they were involved in the decision and if they could recall the editing decisions made that day. All participants considered for the study responded affirmatively. The fourteen respondents who answered otherwise were thanked for their time and asked if they knew of someone who fit the criteria that would be willing to participate in the study. “By asking a number of people who else to talk with, the
snowball gets bigger and bigger as you accumulate new information-rich cases” (Patton, p. 176). The resulting participants held the following positions: the Associate Managing Editor for Photography (AMEP) at the Chicago Tribune, the Supervising Senior Producer for Multimedia (SSPM) at NPR, and the Deputy Managing Editor (DME) at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

In addition to title variation, the journalism background and experience of the subjects also varied across news organizations. Both the AMEP at the Chicago Tribune and the SSPM at NPR were former photojournalists, while the DMP at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch came from a background of reporting. All three subjects had spent over two decades in journalism, one subject — the DMP at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch — over three decades.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary research approach and were conducted over the telephone. As Yin (1994) suggests, interviews are an insightful, targeted format easily focused on the topic of interest, in this case, the decision to publish or withhold disturbing images of Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident. At the onset of the interview, each participant was assured anonymity in order to obtain candid responses. Each participant was then asked a series of open-ended questions guided by a prepared list of predetermined themes. This format allowed both the researcher and the participant to explore answers in greater detail. One of the greatest strengths of this format is its
flexibility; the organic exchange allows the researcher to probe more deeply and the interviewee to elaborate on ideas that they feel are important (Berger, 1998; Whyte, 1982). The script began with questions about the subjects’ background, experience, current position and roles and responsibilities at the organization. It then led to questions regarding the decision-making process of publishing or withholding disturbing photographs. These questions included:

1. What internal or external code of ethics does your organization follow, if any? How do they address photography and/or photo editing decisions?
2. What formal policies and procedures does your organization have in place to address publishing disturbing imagery?
3. How did your organization approach publishing images of Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident in print? Who was involved in this decision? What variables were discussed?
4. How did your organization approach publishing images of Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident online? Who was involved in this decision? What variables were discussed?
5. In reflection, how do you feel about the decision to publish or withhold images of Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident? What, if anything, would you have done differently?

These interviews were recorded to provide the fullest representation of responses (Whyte, 1982) and fully transcribed to analyze results, drawing parallels and highlighting differences between the decision-making process of publishing
disturbing images online and in print. These results were then placed in context with prior research in order to add to the evolution of the ethical decision-making process of publishing disturbing imagery in news.
Chapter Four
Findings

The ethical decision-making process involved in the decision to publish or withhold disturbing images of Nodar Kumaritashvili’s fatal luge crash during the 2010 Olympics varied across three newsrooms: Chicago Tribune, St. Louis Post-Dispatch and NPR. In each, a variety of codes, policies and procedures existed to guide the decision-making process; an array of editors were consulted; a range of variables were considered; and a number of voices were heard. But, while the vernacular changed, the overarching conversations addressed consistent considerations and themes.

Existing Organizational Policies and Procedures

All subjects interviewed agreed that difficult photo editing decisions commonly occur in newsrooms. From suicide bombings in the Middle East to Weiner Gate, they happen every day. “There’s a lot of horrible things in the world that are photographed. Now, with the ubiquitous digital camera, there’s no escaping images of all kinds of stuff,” remarked the Associate Managing Editor of Photography (AMEP) at the Chicago Tribune.1 The prevalence of these decisions propels organizations to create policies and procedures to guide future decisions, some systems more formal than others. The first research question aimed to

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1 All quotes attributed to the Associate Managing Editor of Photography (AMEP) at the Chicago Tribune are from the personal interview conducted 06/09/2011.
understand these existing structures. It asked, "What organizational policies and procedures exist to guide the ethical decision-making process for publishing disturbing imagery?"

Representatives from two of the organizations interviewed agreed that they had existing policies or procedures in place to guide the ethical decision-making process to publish disturbing imagery, one more systematic than the other. The third organization did not have existing policies or procedures in place. However, despite varying opinions on the level of formality, all three editors agreed that the decision-making process is more dependent on contextual conversations than on a formal set of rules. According to the AMEP at the Chicago Tribune, “[a rule] would handcuff us, and then something like 9/11 would come along and we’d have to break all the rules anyway.” As a result, conversation is the foundation of the ethical decision-making process in each of the three newsrooms.

At the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the existing procedure governing the ethical decision-making process for publishing disturbing imagery in the print edition is for an editor — a photo editor or a wire editor, empowered to make decisions — to bring a selection of photos to a group to discuss. This group typically includes the photo editor, the wire editor and the front-page editor. If the photos are something that might incite “a strong reader reaction,” the news editor would also become part of the conversation. According to the Deputy Managing Editor (DME), this is because, “[I don’t] want him taking the brunt of reader rebellion over a photo choice.
Typically, any image that runs in the print edition also runs with the article on stltoday.com. However, when considering which images to publish online, this newsroom may also include the online news editor in the conversation. Each of these participants exists as a part of the same team and, in fact, sits in the same room.

Photo editors at the Chicago Tribune have to “see it all to make the call,” so they see every picture that’s available on any given topic before making decisions about what to show in the daily, eleven o’clock editors meeting. When describing the typical content of this first set of images, the AMEP explained, “On a more controversial [event], we’ll show more pictures. [...] You have to give [the editors] a range of pictures that make them go through the whole range of emotions that are there.” After discussing the photos with this group of editors, they present another slideshow at the 3:30 daily editors meeting, vetting the images again in order to make the final decision at deadline based on what they’ve seen. According to the AMEP:

Sometimes we have to go back and say these are all too hard to take, too gory, too gross, too horrific. Sometimes we’ll go back and say they’re not horrific enough. Let’s do a harder edit. It all depends on the discussions that we’ve been having all day.

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2 All quotes attributed to the Deputy Managing Editor (DME) at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch are from the personal interview conducted 06/06/2012.
Occasionally, like in the instance of Fallujah or 9/11, these conversations last all day. “Sometimes we over think, people might say, but I think it’s good to hear as many voices as we have among us to make those decisions,” explained the AMEP.

At the time of the Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident, when it came to deciding what to publish on chicagotribune.com, a small, separate group of online editors were brought into the larger conversation. Occasionally the two sets of editors may have had differing opinions based on unique considerations for each medium — issues like how many clicks does a story get — but the two groups would talk through each point answering the question, “At what cost?” This dynamic has since changed. According to the AMEP, “Now in our structure, the editor is in charge of all the content for both the print and online editions. The editor of the paper is the content — the journalism guy — for both,” so “the content comes out of one group.” Nevertheless, the pressure of immediacy often prompts quick decisions to publish content online in an effort to be the first with the news. And, since the online product is more malleable than print, the AMEP explained, “if we get negative reactions or we don’t like the way it’s working for us, we might take it down.”

NPR doesn’t have a standard procedure to guide the ethical decision-making process for publishing disturbing imagery but relies heavily on staff experience and each other. According to the Supervising Senior Producer for Multimedia (SSPM) at NPR:

The first phase is using our gut and relying on our experiences [to flag material]. The second phase is always asking an opinion of someone other
than yourself to get a second or something third or fourth set of eyes on a particular image or set of photos.\(^3\)

Generally, these other sets of eyes are other photo or multimedia editors, homepage editors or web producers. “The other thing is to ask outside of your immediate group so that you can really get another opinion that is hopefully less likely to be in line with what you would normally do,” the SSPM explained.

Typical questions asked across all three organizations can be classified into three categories: (1) the ability of the photograph to communicate the story (What is the newsworthiness of the image? Is it accurate? Does it convey the message we want to convey?); (2) harm to claimants and stakeholders (What is the impact of running this photo? Who is going to see it? Are kids going to see it? Who are the people who could be harmed by it? Is this event significant enough to push our readership into an emotionally disturbing place? Is this warranted by this event? Is it worth angering readers? Did the person die of the moment we’re showing or is he dead at the moment? Is there blood in the photo?); and (3) alternative courses of action (How can we best tell this story? Where should we run the photo? Can/should/does it need to be on the front page? Can we put it on an inside page with a jump on the story? Does it need a graphic warning? Can we avoid posting it to our site and instead just provide a link?)

These questions highlight several distinctions between the decisions to publish disturbing imagery online versus in print. While the two dual-platform

\(^3\) All quotes attributed to the Supervising Senior Producer for Multimedia (SSPM) at NPR are from the personal interview conducted 06/10/2011.
newsrooms, *Chicago Tribune* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, agree that they maintain the same standards across both the online and print publications, they do consider the differences inherent in each medium when making these decisions. The first difference has to do with accessibility and visibility — who might see these images, where and when? As the AMEP at the *Chicago Tribune* explained:

> The newspaper is out on the streets with that image visible to any passer-by, involuntarily perceived by the public. You may not choose to see that picture and if it’s sitting in the newsstand huge you’re going to see it anyway.

Therefore, “When you put [an image] on the front page of the newspaper and stick it in the newsstand [...] you have to be very careful about what you’re displaying.” On the other hand, he explained:

> Sometimes to get into a gallery, we may put a picture like the one we used on page one out on the front of the site. And then we would have you click to get to the others — a gallery of images, for example — and there we might be able to put some disclaimer or beware that there are some pictures here that might be disturbing to you and might depict death.

Which brings up the second difference: where print is limited to page size and count, the online publishing space is unlimited, allowing for a larger array of photos than the print edition. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* took a similar stance as the *Chicago Tribune* saying that they occasionally publish a photo online that they wouldn’t publish in print, but the DME of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* explained that they might
do so with a click through disclaimer warning, “Graphic material — photo could be upsetting.”

Over and over, each editor returned to the idea of having a contextual conversation. According to the AMEP at the Chicago Tribune:

Whenever we have images that have any kind of emotional impact or disturbing images — they’re not always just gory sometimes it’s just the colossal nature of an event — we have a more extended conversation about that to make sure that we’ve vetted out all of the possibilities.

Certain photos simply carry a message that words don’t, but context is key. According to the SSPM NPR, “We try to look at it holistically so it’s not just the photo, it’s the photo, it’s got a headline, there’s text, with at least an excerpt of the story [on the homepage].”

Ultimately, all three editors agreed that the complex ethical decision-making process involved in publishing disturbing imagery is rooted in contextual conversations. “We are thoughtful in those kinds of decisions, particularly when death is in the mix in some way,” explained the AMEP at the Chicago Tribune. The more those conversations occur, the easier they become. According to the SSPM at NPR, “That’s the point of having the discussion in the newsroom — the more you have them, the more you can identify the times when it’s necessary to seek other opinions from your colleagues.” He continued saying that frequently engaging in these conversations means:
[...] you start at a more advanced point in the conversation so you don’t necessarily have to lay the ground work of, ‘What are the things we need to consider?’ You understand some of that going in so you can have these conversations in a more efficient manner.

And finally, the DME at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch agreed, saying that his newsroom follows a formal process simply because “we’ve done it so many times.”

**Newsroom Processes**

As Olympic training photographs funneled into newsrooms on February 12, 2010, transmitted via wire services like Getty Images and the Associated Press, newsroom staff caught their first glimpse of the gruesome scene unfolding at the Whistler Sliding Center. Across the three newsrooms, conversations surrounding which images to publish varied in length — some last only ten minutes, others stretched out over two or three meetings — and unfolded in a variety of ways resulting in a range of solutions agreed upon by a variety of newsroom staff. The second research question aimed to identify, “What newsroom processes were involved in the decision to publish or withhold images of Nodar Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident?”

At the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the night picture editor viewed all of the wire images available, pulling a small selection of possible photo options that could run in the Saturday print edition. She debated between two images, one photo was the first frame in the crash series from Agence-France Press photographer Peter Parks
(Figure 1); the other was a photograph from a memorial set up for Kumaritashvili later in the day. This selection was discussed with the News Editor and the Deputy Managing Editor. The DME explained, “We empower [photo editors] to make judgments. [...in this case] she spared us from seeing the bloody shots.”

The night picture editor ultimately elected to publish the first frame in the crash series to accompany the article *Death casts pall over Olympics* (2010) by sports writer Vahe Gregorian. The article and images ran on the front page in combination with a larger photo of the opening ceremonies. The luge crash photo was the smaller of two Olympic photos that ran on page one, and it was positioned below the fold.

As per existing procedures, any image that runs in the print edition also runs with the article on *stltoday.com* with the approval of the online news editor. In this case, the online counterpart did not include the photograph. The DME suggested that perhaps this was the result of a technical error. Instead, the image ran on *stltoday.com* in combination with a blog post published in the Pictures section authored by the night picture editor. In the blog post, the night picture editor talks about her decision between the two photographs and what factors led to her final selection. At the end, she posed a question to the readers, “What do you think? Which picture would you have published?” (Cordle, 2010).

This procedure isn’t typical. “We don’t poll a lot,” explained the DME. “[Polls] are not to justify what we decided or seek criticism but just to get a conversation going on the blog.” The poll received only one response, which was in favor of using the other photo up for consideration.
NPR published the same Parks crash series photograph as the St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Figure 1) alongside two different stories on its website. In Georgian Luger Dies in Olympics Training Crash (Press, 2010), the photograph appears as the dominant image, placed higher on the page than the supporting photograph of Kumaritashvili sliding down the chute just before the crash. In this article, the image is visible when the reader lands on the article’s webpage. In Winter Olympics Open Amid Somber News (Berkes, 2010), the crash photo sits lower in on the page, visible only after a reader scrolls through the story. It is accompanied by two images of the opening ceremonies, one of which is the dominant image, placed at the beginning of the story and another placed below the crash photo near the end of the story. All images display at the same, small size.

When these images appeared in the NPR newsroom — a newsroom that relies heavily on staff experience to make decisions about publishing disturbing imagery — a small group of editors convened to talk through the options. This group included the Supervising Senior Producer for Multimedia, Assistant Managing Editor for Digital News, Managing Editor for Digital News, Supervising Editor for Digital News and the Homepage Editor on duty. According to the SSPM, these kinds of newsroom conversations occurred frequently in the time leading up to the 2010 Olympics, which enabled a quick conversation and swift conclusion. He explained:

That year in particular, [the luge accident] came just on the heels of a lot of the earthquake coverage out of Haiti so we had spent a fair amount of time debating some of these issues in terms of the photos that we were using from
Haiti. We had come down with a good understanding of the need for that because we actually had a few instances during our Haiti coverage where we had to have some pretty strong conversations about the types of photos we wanted to run and needed to run. So, when that story broke, and when the images started coming across the wire, we pretty much immediately convened a small meeting of some of the editors [...] to talk through what we wanted to do. [...] I think had a fairly comprehensive conversation but it really didn't take a lot of time in terms of getting us all on the same page.

As a result, the SSPM suggested that this particular conversation at NPR lasted ten minutes at most.

The *Chicago Tribune* also made a fairly quick decision regarding the images of Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident. The process began with the senior photo editor on duty evaluating all of the images that came across the wire. After making a first, loose edit, she presented a selection of photo options to the Associate Managing Editor of Photography, the Managing Editor, and the Editor. While this conversation occurred after both the routine, daily editors meetings in which image slideshows are typically evaluated, it still involved a more extended conversation than other, less potentially disturbing image-editing decisions. According to the AMEP, “Whenever we have images [of this magnitude], we have a more extended conversation about what to print to make sure that we’ve [...] made a decision knowledgably.” In this case, he described the selection of photos as dramatic but not
gory, therefore the decision “was easy because we didn’t think that any of the photos was too disturbing to not show.”

The Chicago Tribune published two photographs of the luge crash in the printed edition of the paper on Saturday, February 13, 2010. A single photo of the luge crash (Figure 4) ran small and below the fold on the front page accompanying the story, A grand opening, The games begin with an epic ceremony tinged with sadness over the death of a Georgian luger killed during training run (2010). The larger front-page photograph was a celebratory image of the opening ceremonies. The Tribune’s crash coverage continued in the sports section where, on page 8, another luge crash photograph (Figure 2) was paired with the article, A day to slow down and think, Tragedy takes safety issues with track to front burner by Candus Thomson (2010), as well as a diagram of the track at Whistler Sliding Center and an illustration explaining how the crash occurred. While both photographs were from the same crash sequence captured by Agence-France Press photographer Peter Parks, it should be noted that they capture different moments. The photo on the front-page documents the final moment before Kumaritashvili collides with an unprotected steel pillar, whereas the photo in the sports section shows an earlier moment where Kumaritashvili’s airborne body is seen traveling over the sidewall of the track.

At the time of the accident, when it came to making the decision about what to publish on chicagotribune.com, a small, separate group of online editors were brought into the larger conversation. In previous image editing decisions, the two
sets of editors have had differing opinions based on unique considerations for each medium. However, in the case of Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident, the AMEP could not recall any disputes or differing opinions between the print and online editors even though their photo selection differed greatly.

Ultimately, a senior photo editor made the call about what to publish on chicagotribune.com. Associated Press photographer Gero Breloer’s photograph of a large video screen in the finish area of the Alpine skiing venue showing the crash (Figure 16) ran in the Sports section along side the article As speed increases at Whistler’s track, so do concerns for safety (Bureau, 2010). This image, in addition to both images that appeared in the print edition, also appeared in the online News section as part of a twelve photograph gallery displayed in conjunction with the article announcing Kumaritashvili’s death (Wilson, 2010). The gallery also included four of Park's luge crash sequence photos (Figure 1-4), one of his resuscitation photographs (Figure 9), and several photos of Kumaritashvili descending the track prior to becoming airborne.4 This gallery displayed on chicagotribune.com without a graphic content warning.

No matter how long the conversation, which editors were involved in the debate, or what decision was reached, each newsroom followed a process established through years of similar conversations about the publishing disturbing imagery. The AMEP of the Chicago Tribune asserts, “We are thoughtful in those

4 It should be noted that, at the time of the event and the time of the interview, this gallery included twelve photographs, but has since been reduced to five. The reason for this is unknown.
kinds of decisions particularly when death is in the mix in some way,” a sentiment implied across all three news organizations.

**Internal and External Codes of Ethics**

While each organization had an existing code of ethics at the time of the 2010 Olympics, in all cases the existing code either did not address photography or did not address publishing potentially disturbing imagery. Without specific guidance, the third research question aimed to determine, “How did internal or external codes of ethics influence the ethical decision-making process to publish or withhold disturbing images of Nodar Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident?”

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* has a newsroom handbook with an ethics policy that includes things like racial identification, but it does not include a photography component. The DME did not point to any other external codes of ethics that influenced the decision to publish or withhold images of Kumartashvili’s fatal accident.

The code of ethics at the *Chicago Tribune* addresses photography — image manipulation and honesty — but not publishing potentially disturbing imagery. “We have [a code of ethics] where we talk about we won’t publish pictures that are altered, or in any way misleading, untruthful, and so on. But nothing like, ‘We won’t show dead bodies,’ or ‘We won’t show injured bloody people,’” explained the AMEP.

*NPR*, due to the nature of the organization — one rooted in radio — and its evolution into digital and visual media, had a different issue with its code of ethics.
According to the SSPM, “The current code of ethics was written before there was much photography or imagery at NPR, so there are not real specific references to either.” Even so, “[NPR] really tries to make decisions based on standard ethical considerations/photojournalism ethics. We look at some guidelines articulated by the folks at Poynter and Bob Steele in particular.”

The Ethics Guidelines for Poynter Publishing doesn’t necessarily address photography, either. In fact, it only mentions visual journalism once under the heading Accuracy: “[...] we value journalistic accuracy above creative impact in all forms of the journalism we provide — in photographs and design and sound and video clips as well as in articles” (Poynter, p. 1). As the SSPM at NPR points out:

[The Ethics Guidelines for Poynter Publishing] are very basic in the sense that they are things that really can apply to all types of journalism, but are [...] broken down into ten or so categories that are pretty easy to line up with whatever questions you have.

At the time of the interview, a task force at NPR was reviewing and recommending changes to the organization’s code of ethics. These changes will be addressed in the Discussion section.

Lacking codes of ethics that address visual journalism or “hard, fast rules” to rely on for direction, existing codes colored the conversation in broad strokes of suggested behavior but fell short in any substantial capacity to guide the ethical decision-making process in practice. Instead, each newsroom relied on context,
conversation and colleagues in order to make difficult decisions about publishing disturbing images of Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident.

**Debating the Decision**

Where codes don’t guide, dialogue does. In fact, the preamble to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* code of ethics makes clear that, “By putting our heads together, we usually can figure out how to do the right thing” (p. 1). In making ethical decisions about publishing disturbing images during any event, contextual conversation was an overarching theme among all three organizations. The debate about Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident was no different. The fourth research question aimed to understand, “What variables influenced the decision to publish or withhold disturbing images of Nodar Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident?”

Variables discussed in the real-time newsroom conversations about Kumaritashvili can be broken down into four categories: (1) the ability of the photograph to communicate the story; (2) harm to claimants and stakeholders; (3) alternative courses of action; and (4) observing the competition. These four categories of questions were consistent for both the online and print platform, but answers varied due to differences inherent in the medium.

On that day, the opening ceremonies dominated page-one news. But “the death — it indeed was the elephant in the room casting a pall over the whole opening ceremonies, so you had to take note of it,” explained the DME of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Their opening ceremonies article was titled *Opening ceremony tinged*
with sadness (2010). For them, like all three publications interviewed, the most prominent variable in the decision to publish potentially disturbing photographs was identifying the image that had the greatest ability to effectively communicate the story; finding a photo that was informative and representative of the event, but not gruesome.

The night photo editor at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch debated between the storytelling ability of two images, the first frame in the crash series from Agence-France Press photographer Peter Parks (Figure 1); or the photograph from a memorial set up for Kumaritashvili later in the day. In deliberating, she “felt it was hard to understand the dynamics of the crash without seeing the track” (Cordle, 2010), so she chose to publish the image that was more forensic, showing the logistics of where it happened, moments before impact. “Here’s a scene in which he died. And yes, you can envision in another split second there’s impact,” explained the DME. But they elected not to show that moment of impact.

NPR ran the same image because “it said what it needed to say about the accident happening and gave plenty of information,” explained the SSPM. He continued:

You pretty much know the what the outcome is and we didn’t feel like we needed to be that literal to say, ‘Here’s a picture of him hitting a post.’ Or, ‘Here’s a picture of him on the ground dying.’

Editors at NPR felt those images wouldn’t have provided any more information to the reader than the one taken a split second before impact. “It just didn’t feel like we
needed to go there in order for people to understand the story and to know what was going on.”

In order to “tell the story of what this guy went through,” the *Chicago Tribune* took advantage of the unique interactivity inherent in an online gallery, choosing to post a sequence of photographs rather than just one standalone image. The edited photo sequence told the story by combining several Peter Parks photos from the crash with photos from the subsequent rescue efforts. The AMEP explained, “You still have him on the luge in the first shot, which is good. I think it gives you the whole sequence.” The final photo in the gallery is one of Parks’ resuscitation photographs (Figure 9), which clearly shows Kumaritashvili’s bloody face. The DME contends, “With people coming to his aid, you bring back his dignity. It’s not just him lying there on his own, unattended.”

Another variable noted by all three publications was gauging the potential impact — or harm — of each image on claimants and stakeholders. All of the photos captured were dramatic and sensational; some were even gruesome or bloody. The SSPM at *NPR* noted that they had concern about the potential reader reaction to these and, as mentioned before, they felt that the gorier image didn’t necessarily provide any more information to the reader. “Conversely, it had the potential of doing more harm to the stakeholders. It could have turned off some viewers,” he explained. The photo they chose, an image taken immediately before impact, “got the point across pretty clearly without the need for it to be more graphic, more sensational.” The DME at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* echoed these feelings:
[The photo we published] is not upsetting. To show his neck being snapped would be a whole different conversation. And to show the body laying on the track afterwards would be a different conversation, too. We know he died, do we need to see his body laying there?

The AMEP at the *Chicago Tribune* recalls, “It was pretty dramatic stuff where he flew off the luge and we saw him up in an area above the chute that he obviously did not belong, and you can see him hit his head. It was a pretty strong group of images that we got. [...But] the one we published [on the front page] wasn’t gory.”

However, as mentioned before, the *Chicago Tribune*, did elect to publish one of Parks’ post-impact, resuscitation photos (Figure 9) in an online gallery. “We’re seeing a guy on a gurney here, so there’s some blood, but we didn’t use that on the cover,” explained the AMEP. This distinction highlights another prominent variable that influenced the decision to publish or withhold disturbing images of Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident across all three publications and platforms: alternative courses of action. Where and how should the image be published? Should the image be on the front page, on an inside page with a jump on the story, or buried in the sports section? How large should the image be printed? Should the image be printed in color or in black and white? Should it run online in a gallery and should that gallery be published with or without a graphic content warning? Should there be a supporting letter from the editor explaining the decision?

Editors at the *Chicago Tribune* believed the story in and of itself was page-one news because it was an important event, but they definitively agreed that they
wouldn’t publish a bloody photo of Kumaritashvili on a gurney on the front page of the print edition because of newsstand placement. The AMEP explained, “You may not choose to see that picture and if it’s sitting in a newsstand huge, you’re going to see it anyway.” As mentioned before, the dominant front-page photo seen on the newsstands was a celebratory image of the opening ceremonies, and a single photo of the luge crash (Figure 4) ran small and below the fold to accompany the story.

Again, in order to “tell the story of what this guy went through,” the *Chicago Tribune* published an online gallery of twelve photographs. The edited photo sequence included one of Parks’ resuscitation photographs showing people coming to Kumaritashvili’s aid (Figure 9). This photograph was one of two photographs in the Parks sequence that did not obscure Kumaritashvili’s bloody face with a hand or arm. The gallery appeared on chicagotribune.com without a graphic content warning, and this was the last image in the sequence. As mentioned before, the editors felt an image showing him surrounded by helping hands returned a sense of dignity to the injured athlete.

For *NPR*, the story was going to be the first thing a reader saw when they came to the website. “That’s something that the family could see if they came to the website,” explained the SSPM. So they opted for a less sensational photograph. But both *NPR* and *Chicago Tribune* took a holistic view of the entire story treatment. They believed that the photograph, in context with the headline, the caption, and the story itself, expressed the outcome without going the extra step to show a mangled, bloody or dead body.
The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* stepped farther outside of the story treatment and looked at a wider array of opportunities available in each medium. As mentioned before, Night Photo Editor Stephanie Cordle debated between two images. Upon final decision, she authored a blog post, published in the Pictures section, in which she talked about that decision, inviting readers into her process. At the end, she posed a question to the readers, “What do you think? Which picture would you have published” (Cordle, 2010)? This procedure isn’t typical, but the online platform gave the newspaper the additional space to explain a tough decision and the interactivity of the medium invited the readership into the process.

Stepping back even farther, two of the three publications mentioned that their photo editing decisions about Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident were also influenced not only by internal conversations but also by a holistic view of what was happening in the greater media landscape, including reader reactions to decisions made by competing publications. The SSMP at *NPR* noted that the *Wall Street Journal* had published a series of fairly gruesome photographs including bloody images of Kumaritashivili lying on the ground after he hit the post. The *Wall Street Journal* then rescinded the gallery later in the news cycle. The SSPM at *NPR* reflects on the decision and its impact on their process:

I think it was an indication that perhaps they reconsidered the news worthiness versus shock value of those photographs. [...] We pretty much knew right away that we did not want to go into that territory and we didn’t feel it was necessary because the nature of the story indicated that there had
been a pretty violent collision between this man and the post and he was dead. And, did we need to show that? Probably not.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch also noted that NBC’s broadcasting and subsequent oversaturation of the disturbing video of the fatal accident was a reason for withholding the more gruesome photographs. “The accident happened much earlier in the day and lots of people had seen the photos and video already,” Cordle wrote in her Pictures blog (stltoday.com, 2010). The DME added that the photo they published wasn’t “a gruesome photo by any means, unlike what television showed, which had that whole whiplash reaction.”

Ultimately, each organization agreed that they made the right decision about their photo selection. “No regrets,” said the AMEP at the Chicago Tribune. “I think we did it right. I think we were able to tell the story on the front page without being gross, in an almost dignified way.” The SSPM at NPR reiterated that sentiment; “I think the image that we used got the point across pretty clearly without the need for it to be more graphic, more sensational.” The DME at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch — who, again, had published the same photograph of Kumaritashvili’s crash as NPR — supported the decision by saying, “I look at this page and I’m fine with it. [The story] is about death and the photo taught me that and told a little supplemental information — here’s the scene of the death.”

The conversations across all three newsrooms were as unique as the organizations. In each, an array of editors were consulted, a range of questions asked and a number of voices heard. But, while the vernacular changed, the
overarching themes were rooted in the same four considerations: (1) the ability of
the photograph to communicate the story; (2) harm to claimants and stakeholders;
(3) alternative courses of action; and (4) observing the competition.

Reader Reaction

One interesting factor surfaced during the interviews that didn’t directly
pertain to the decision to publish or withhold images of Kumaritashvili’s fatal
accident. That is, not only did NPR and St. Louis Post-Dispatch both publish the same
photograph online, but also those two organizations were able to track reader
comments once the images were published, and they received very different
reactions.

As mentioned before, the night photo editor at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch
debated between two images: the first frame in the crash series from Agence-France
Press photographer Peter Parks (Figure 1) and an image of a memorial set up for
Kumaritashvili later in the day. After deliberating, she authored a blog post in the
Pictures section of stltoday.com in which she discussed that decision, inviting
readers into her process. At the end, she posed a question to the readers, “What do
you think? Which picture would you have published” (Cordle, 2010)?

Despite opening the door for dialog, the poll received only one response,
which was in favor of using the other image up for consideration. Stunned by the
lack of response, Steve Parker wrote an Editors’ Desk blog the next day, Post-
Dispatch’s photo of luge accident draws little reaction (2010). In the blog post, Parker
cites the criticism of NBC and other television networks seen across Twitter as one of his reasons for his amazement of the silence.

“At the time we had anonymous story commenting so people were free to say what they wanted and usually that feeds on itself,” the DME said in reflection. “So I’m surprised. I just don’t think it was seen as a controversial photo.”

*NPR*, however, published the same exact same photograph of Kumaritashvili’s airborne body traveling over the sidewall of the track and received over fifty comments, almost seventy-five percent of them regarding the decision to publish the photo. Several comments simply requested that *NPR* remove the photo out of respect for the family, “*NPR*, please remove the picture with this story. It is very insensitive to his family and friends. Put up a picture of him in happier times, for the sake of their memories” (Williams, 2010). Other readers question the placement. “I’m disturbed by this crash photo — there is no warning for me to look or not look” (Gee, 2010), declared one reader. “Leave it up. It is news. If you are disturbed by it, quit looking” (DeBris, 2010), responded another. One reader compared this gallery to one in another publication, “The *NY Times* ran a gallery/sequence of photos illustrating the accident — the first being a more dignified one. I thought this at least put the crash in context, once the viewer gets to the fateful photo” (Kenney, 2010). One reader even mentions the greater impact that the story and image have on the sport:

This picture tells you a lot about the sport, and the tragic circumstances leading into the Games, without being gruesome. High-speed sled and skiing
accidents are common, as are images of the same. Just because this particular accident resulted in death doesn’t mean the picture is inappropriate. Should the press never publish images of buildings burning or bombs exploding or cars and planes crashing because someone died? (Eratosthenes, 2010).

Despite the comments, NPR left the image untouched. According to the SSMP, “We have folks who will monitor [the comments] to make sure that they’re appropriate and not completely off point, but we try not to have our editorial decisions driven strictly by comments.”

According to the NPR Community Frequently Asked Questions, “Comments on story pages are automatically shut down after five days. [...] For the most part, we try our hardest not to close any comment thread before they close automatically. But sometimes when things get too heated and a conversation has become uncivil, we’ll shut the thread down.” Comments on this story were closed after two days with no explanation for the decision posted.

Again, these comments didn’t influence either organization’s decision to publish or withhold images, but the comments also didn’t influence any reactive action on the part of the organizations either, unlike NBC or the Wall Street Journal. The SSPM at NPR explains, “Part of an ethical decision making process is understanding that sometimes your decisions are not going to be what everybody would like [...] which doesn’t necessarily mean that you made the wrong decision.”
Chapter Five
Discussion

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 across three news organizations; *Chicago Tribune, St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *NPR*. Interviewing editors directly involved in the decision offers some 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, right-or-wrong 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 “get things out there” and 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.
According to the literature, a traditional news story travels from reporter to reader through a channel of communication (Lewin, 1947) regardless of platform. As a story travels, it passes through a series of gates guarded by gatekeepers — editors — acting independently or as a group to make decisions about whether or not to publish or withhold stories — or in this study, potentially disturbing imagery. In this case, the newsroom structure and formal titles of the gatekeepers responsible for publishing or withholding images of Nodar Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident varied from organization to organization without discernable consistency.

From the on-duty picture editor, to the associate managing editor of photography, and the homepage editor, each became a gatekeeper along the channel of communication. In performing their role, each gatekeeper came to the table with their own unique experience and expertise to contribute to the conversation and, ultimately, the final decision. This mixture of experiences ranged from decades entrenched in traditional print newsrooms to recently created online editor positions in evolving dual-platform newsrooms. At the Chicago Tribune, a small, separate group of online editors were brought into the larger conversation about images of Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident. The AMEP admitted that, in previous image editing decisions, these two sets of editors have had differing opinions based on unique considerations for each medium like, “How many clicks will a story get?” However, it’s worth noting that since the event, this newsroom has streamlined its structure, unifying both sets of editors and identifying one final gatekeeper for both the online and print publication. This change suggests an organizational shift in
what guides the decision-making process inside the newsroom from focusing on the unique considerations of each platform to the overarching core values and journalistic standard of the publication. Now, according to the AMEP at the Chicago Tribune "the editor of the paper is the content for both."

Traditionally, these kinds of gatekeepers dictated access to — and the availability of — stories. However, according to the literature, in the Internet age where everything is accessible at the click of a button, the power of any one journalist to control what passes through the gate to a specific audience is diminishing (Singer, 2006). While this is decidedly true, this study shows that editors, regardless of title, continue to make thoughtful decisions about news content despite pervasive access to it online. As the AMEP at the Chicago Tribune explained, "[We have] a reputation and we have a journalistic standard and it's tempting to break that for online, to get it out there fast," but "journalism is still journalism and sometimes there are other considerations that are added to the mix but we still have to be there with the journalism." This suggests that the role of a gatekeeper has not diminished but shifted. Once editors guarded the path of accessibility to a story or set of images. Now, they tender and care for the reputation and journalistic standard of the publication. The AMEP explains, “Sometimes we may rule a picture out […] and say the Chicago Tribune will not publish this picture on any platform. […] You can get that online, but not from us.”

Certainly, some sensational photos exist as pure entertainment; others have the power to unveil deeper context (Zelizer, 2010) and making this decision
exemplifies the balancing act of sensationalism and news that Bogart (2000) suggests turns the journalist into a juggler. In the case of Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident, the publication of crash photos were, as Zelizer says of photos from the 2009 Iranian protests, “instrumental in capturing public attention, [but took] on a role larger than that associated with a simple news picture of a topical and breaking news event.” Indeed, the story, as well as the outrage over the imagery, brought the safety of the luge track into question triggering Olympic officials to make modifications to the course.

Of course, while news organizations agreed that Kumaritashvili’s fatal luge accident was indeed news — the DME at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch referring to it as the elephant in the room casting a pall over the opening ceremonies — there were a number of photographs for editors to choose from, some more potentially disturbing than others, and the final image selection or treatment varied across newsrooms. This echoes Stemple’s (1985) finding that, while news organizations agreed to what topics were important, there was little overlap in actual story selection. Here, some organizations ran moment-before-impact photos below the fold on page-one; others buried moment-of-impact photos in the sports section. Online, resuscitation images ran in singles or galleries, some with explanation, others without. This reinforces Entman’s (2005) idea that journalistic standards survive on a sliding scale and fluctuations exist from newsroom to newsroom, even platform to platform. Ultimately, it’s up to the organization to establish the journalistic standard of the individual publication.
Codes of ethics have emerged as a moral philosophy to guide this process and aid journalists in consistent decision-making for these delicate situations (Husselbee & Adams, 1996). However, the literature suggests that existing codes of ethics pay little to no attention to photographers and photography. In fact, few codes offer guidelines or suggestions for dealing with images of violence and tragedy (Keith, et al., 2006). The case of Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident is no different. Here, the data consistently showed that existing newsroom codes of ethics fell short either by not addressing photography or not addressing the publication of potentially disturbing imagery. As a result, these codes colored the conversation in broad strokes of suggested behavior but fell short in any substantial capacity to guide the ethical decision-making process in practice, regardless of whether the conversation was about the online or print publication.

According to the SSPM at NPR, “A problem with a lot of codes of ethics is that they’re way too long and it’s hard to get folks to read it all the way through and to go back and apply them to a particular case.” He suggested a two-pronged solution, creating an overall code of ethics as well as “an actionable kind of guidelines that [journalists] can apply to reach the types of decisions that [the] organization supports.”

At the time of the data collection, a task force at NPR was, in fact, reviewing and recommending changes to its code of ethics. One recommendation that emerged from those conversations was the idea to split the code into two documents, “a
statement of guiding principles articulating the high-level values to which the organization aspires, and an accompanying handbook” (2012):

The art of ethical decision-making is as much about the way we make decisions as it is about what we decide. So the handbook should include not just rules about what NPR journalists do and don’t do, but more importantly, decision-making frameworks we can apply in different situations to guide us to a principled conclusion. It should describe processes, key questions, and real-world examples, and point journalists to where to go for more help. Where policies are specified, the handbook should clearly and succinctly outline the thinking behind them (NPR, p. 5).

The revised, 71-page code and guidebook created by NPR now mentions visual journalism in a number of capacities. “The images and graphics we use to help tell our stories assist us in our pursuit of the truth,” and “Be fair to the people in photos and honest with our viewers” (p. 16). There is a section on image manipulation, one on reposting images found online and ensuring the accuracy of infographics. The new code even has a section entitled, “Emotion is a powerful component of storytelling, wield it carefully” (p. 64) that discusses the delicate balance between genuine human storytelling and straightforward news reporting when reporting tragedy. However, it still does not directly address publishing potentially disturbing imagery.

Regardless, the handbook attempts to formalize the often-intuitive process of translating codes into policy and procedures as suggested by Wischmann (1987);
Brown (1987); Husselbee and Adams (1996); and Black, Steele and Barney (1999), or the systematic moral analysis (SMA) processes of Bivens (2009), and Elliott and Ozar (2010), all of which blueprint processes of reflexive consideration. While this study supports the existence of this type of thoughtful, deliberate newsroom conversations, in reality these conversations are, perhaps, less formulaic than researchers recommend due to the restraint of time. As Newton and Williams (2010) point out, executing lengthy SMA or Personal Impact Assessment (PIA) processes on every image considered for publication would be a difficult feat for working journalists. These formal processes require extended deliberation and reflection, which may be unreasonable for operational newsrooms functioning on a deadline, especially one of immediacy and the 24-hour news cycle.

However, even though practical application is unable to adhere precisely to theoretical suggestion, all three organizations agreed that a similar, but more contextual, conversation was the foundation for consistent decision-making. In this study, the real-time newsroom conversations across all three organizations were remarkably similar, guided by variables classified into four categories similar to those seen in the SMA practices outlined in the literature review. Those categories were: 1) the ability of the photograph to communicate the story; 2) harm to claimants and stakeholders; 3) alternative courses of action; and 4) observing the competition. However, in prior research regarding the decision to publish or withhold disturbing images of 9/11, the context of that situation revealed that their debates revolved around three key questions: 1) How will readers respond? 2) Does
publishing the photo violate the victims’ privacy? 3) Does the photograph communicate the story in a way that words cannot? While there is evident overlap in the considerations taken for both harm to claimants and stakeholders, and the storytelling ability of the photograph, the structure and frame of these questions hinged on the context of the situation rather than a list of questions outlined in a formal process, supporting this study’s finding that there is no hard, fast rule to guide these types of complex decisions.

It should be noted that in this study the decisions for both the print and online publication came out of one conversation and therefore the same variables were considered for both platforms and distinctions between the two were difficult to tease out. However, the considerations for two of the variables — claimants and stakeholders, and alternative courses of action — changed due to differences inherent in the platform. First, when considering claimants and stakeholders (the audience), both editors editing for print publications in this study were mindful not only of the newspaper reader but also the innocent person walking past the paper propped in a newsstand who would be involuntarily exposed to its content. “You may not choose to see that picture and if it’s sitting in the newsstand huge you’re going to see it anyway,” explained the AEMP at the Chicago Tribune. For both the Chicago Tribune and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, this was a determining factor in whether or not to publish potentially disturbing images of Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident on the front page. On the other hand, when these same editors considered the audience for the online publication, both suggested that the same potentially
disturbing image could be published on the website, placed deep in a photo gallery, preceded by a graphic content warning and perhaps buried beneath several mouse clicks.

This highlights the second changing variable between platforms: alternative courses of action (placement). When a newsroom considers publishing a potentially disturbing image on any platform, that decision must address not only image selection, but also placement — prominence, visibility, size, and access. In print, editors in this study debated placing a potentially disturbing image on page one or tucking it away on an inside page with a jump on the story, out of sight to unguarded eyes. Online, the editors debated similar courses of action: whether to use an image as a lead image in the article or tuck it away in a gallery, again, out of sight to unguarded eyes. While both courses of action accomplished the same goal, the online platform offered additional treatment elements like graphic content warnings or the creation of a more extensive photo gallery. While none of the organizations in this study applied graphic content warnings to their online galleries, one editor elected to write a supporting column explaining her photo editing decision and invited the readership into the conversation.

Regardless of result, the editors in this study repeatedly returned to the idea that the ethical decision making process of publishing potentially disturbing imagery in news is rooted in contextual newsroom conversations between colleagues, colored by codes but driven by experience, with no notable distinctions between platforms. Nonetheless, by routinely engaging in these difficult
conversations, informal policies and procedures have emerged in the organizations included in this study. This supports Newton and Williams’ (2010) belief that the repeated practice (in their case of SMA in combination with PIA, but here any discussion) will develop “more balanced ethically sound, and effective journalism practices” (p. 347). Indeed, the more the conversations occur, the more efficient they become. Simply put, “You start at a more advanced point in the conversation [...] so you can have these conversations in a more efficient manner,” explained the SSMP at NPR. And the case of Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident was no different. As the SSMP pointed out:

That year in particular, [the luge accident] came just on the heels of a lot of the earthquake coverage out of Haiti so we had spent a fair amount of time debating some of these issues. [...] So, when that story broke, and when the images started coming across the wire [...] it really didn’t take a lot of time in terms of getting us all on the same page.

However, starting at a more advanced point in the conversation may not always prove beneficial. Considering the context — the earthquake coverage in Haiti where editors were pressured to “scrub pictures” for disturbing content — none of the editors in this study felt that images of Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident were particularly sensational or that the decision was a difficult one to make. “I think this [decision] was easy because we didn’t find [...] any of the photos that was too disturbing to not show,” AMEP at Chicago Tribune. Rather, it was only a matter of deciding which photo captured the story most effectively. Despite that perception,
broadcast networks and print publications alike were heavily criticized for publishing the disturbing content not only by readers but also by other professional journalists. This highlights a potential disconnect between newsrooms and their audiences. It's possible that the repeated exposure to disturbing images coming across the wire from recent news events may have an effect on an editor’s ability to gauge an images potential impact on readers.

Nevertheless, the aggregation of contextual conversations over time creates a foundation of compounded newsroom experiences that guide future discussions and decisions about potentially disturbing imagery. Those conversations guide an organization to a principled conclusion rooted in the unique journalistic standard of the individual publication.

**Implications and Future Study**

It's important to note that many dual-platform newsrooms have evolved from traditional print newsrooms, which rest on decades of print publication experience to guide the ethical decision-making process. Historically, these print newsrooms obeyed only one deadline — the print deadline — allowing editors to be more judicious about the content they publish and how, based on the core values of the publication and the pressure of permanence. Journalists were often able to more thoroughly vet information and wait for stories to unfold more fully before sending the paper to press. While this is still true of the printed product, traditional print newsrooms have evolved over the last decade into dual-platform publications, ones
that function not only on a stable, once-a-day print deadline, but also on the constant push-to-publish, breaking news deadline expected by online readers. As these organizations enter the breaking news arena, the pressure to be first forces print journalists to adhere to unfamiliar standards more akin to that of broadcast media, balancing immediacy and sensationalism against the role of the journalist in a twenty-four hour news cycle.

Based on the conclusion that repeatedly engaging in contextual conversation is the key to creating informal policies and procedures for dealing with the publication of potentially disturbing imagery, and knowing that print newsrooms have only recently shifted to a more vigorous expectation for publishing content, perhaps policies and procedures that have evolved from age-old print newsrooms battling only one deadline are not ideal ones to follow. While editors in this study did not reference deadline pressure — or inexperience battling ceaseless deadline pressure — as a variable in the ethical decision-making process to publish or withhold potentially disturbing images, it would be a valuable issue to address in future research.

While this single case study addresses the initial ethical decision-making processes for publishing potentially disturbing imagery in news, it uncovers a number of other questions for future research. The AMEP at the Chicago Tribune suggested that publishing potentially disturbing imagery online lacks the repercussions inherent in the permanence of print publications, and therefore often prompts quick — and perhaps more impetuous — decisions to push content online
in breaking news situations knowing that those decisions can be reversed without delay. Since the online product is more malleable than print and can be changed at a moments notice. “If we get negative reactions or we don’t like the way it’s working for us, we might take it down,” explained the AMEP at the Chicago Tribune. Future research might look at the reactive process of retracting images from online publications in order to gain insight into the challenges of publishing under the pressure of immediacy and the criteria for reevaluating published content.

In addition, this case study examined the group decision-making process. As Berkowitz (1990) suggests, group publication decisions in local television news rely more on individual instinct than on the five traditional, textbook news values — prominence, proximity, timeliness, currency, impact, human interest, and oddity. Considering this difference in broadcast newsrooms, it is important for future research to examine the ethical decision-making process of an individual gatekeeper in a dual-platform newsroom to provide a means of comparison.

Additionally, an assessment of reader reactions to disturbing imagery published in online comment sections may be of value in determining how well the standards of a news organization align with the standards and expectations of their readership. As more and more news organizations move away from anonymous story commenting systems, the readership becomes more accessible for reflective feedback in order to gain insight. In the case of Kumartashivili’s fatal accident, two organizations published the same photo online — one with an editor’s note, the other without — and received definitively disparate reactions from their
readership. This could be the result of innumerable variables, but is worth further analysis.

It may also be important for research to address the impact that publishing disturbing imagery has on the family and friends of victims. Wischmann (1987) does this by weaving together her own angry reflection on the Pulitzer Prize winning photo of Jeffrey Miller’s body at Kent State with a personal communication from the victim’s mother, Elaine Miller Holstein. In it Wischmann says, “I’m not as charitable as Elaine. John Filo’s photograph makes me angry. I see it as an invasion of privacy — Jeff’s privacy, Elaine’s privacy and even my privacy. However, Elaine disagrees.” Kratzer and Kratzer touched on this as well. In the results of their research regarding the decision to publish or withhold disturbing images of 9/11, they found that, despite the enormous effort by editors to protect the identity of the victims who were published, “readers didn’t contact the newspaper to complain, but to ask for copies of the photographs to be enlarged so that they could try to determine the identity of the victims” (p. 42) in an effort to get closure. Examining the dichotomy of victims and relatives reactions is a topic worthy of further study.

Finally, considering the recent and substantial revisions to the NPR code of ethics, it’s perhaps time to review images in newsroom codes of ethics in an era of immediacy and how codes have been reshaped, refined and revised to address technology and visual journalism in the online news platform. In addition to reviewing print and online news organizations, it would be beneficial to extend this review to include broadcast media in an effort to identify any area where television
newsrooms have addressed immediacy in a way that traditional print newsrooms have yet to explore.

Limitations

As with any qualitative research, limitations exist. This single case study in particular was limited in the scope of data gathering due to the number of people available for — and willing to be — interviewed. Here, only one person was interviewed from each of the three organizations. However, as Stokes suggests “[i]t is quite possible to conduct excellent research using a smaller number of interviewees” if the target population for sampling is small, as the percentage will be a large portion of the total (Stokes, 2003, p. 117). In this case, there were relatively few news organizations that elected to publish disturbing images of Kumaritashvili’s fatal accident, most of which were major metropolitan dailies or national organizations. As with any research rooted in interviews, this study was also limited to the memories of the subjects. “Interviewing can never pin down with absolute certainty “what actually happened,” rather, when executed correctly, interviewing can only “achieve a fairly close approximation of reality” (Whyte, 1982, p. 117). In this case, the time that elapsed between the event and the interviews also hindered the informational recall of subjects. Also, while quantitative studies are not generalizable, case studies of single incidents are important because they suggest topics for future research and consideration. In this case, future research might seek to gain input about ethical decision-making processes from a larger group of people.
across more organizations. Using a different method like a survey might facilitate gathering responses from more people in a shorter time frame.
FIGURE 1. Georgian luge hopeful Nodar Kumaritashvili crashes during the men's Luge practise at the Whistler Sliding Centre, in preparation for the Vancouver Winter Olympics on February 12, 2010. Kumaritashvili suffered a horror crash after flying off the Olympic track during his second of two training runs, reports said. He was immediately placed on a stretcher before he was taken away in an ambulance while an air ambulance was also on its way, the Globe and Mail said. AFP PHOTO/Peter PARKS (Photo credit should read PETER PARKS/AFP/Getty Images)

FIGURE 2. Georgian luge hopeful Nodar Kumaritashvili crashes during the men's Luge practise at the Whistler Sliding Centre, in preparation for the Vancouver Winter Olympics on February 12, 2010. Kumaritashvili suffered a horror crash after flying off the Olympic track during his second of two training runs, reports said. He was immediately placed on a stretcher before he was taken away in an ambulance while an air ambulance was also on its way, the Globe and Mail said. AFP PHOTO/Peter PARKS (Photo credit should read PETER PARKS/AFP/Getty Images)
FIGURE 3. Georgian luge hopeful Nodar Kumaritashvili crashes during the men's Luge practise at the Whistler Sliding Centre, in preparation for the Vancouver Winter Olympics on February 12, 2010. Kumaritashvili suffered a horror crash after flying off the Olympic track during his second of two training runs, reports said. He was immediately placed on a stretcher before he was taken away in an ambulance while an air ambulance was also on its way, the Globe and Mail said. AFP PHOTO/Peter PARKS (Photo credit should read PETER PARKS/AFP/Getty Images)

FIGURE 4. Georgian luge hopeful Nodar Kumaritashvili crashes during the men's Luge practise at the Whistler Sliding Centre, in preparation for the Vancouver Winter Olympics on February 12, 2010. Kumaritashvili suffered a horror crash after flying off the Olympic track during his second of two training runs, reports said. He was immediately placed on a stretcher before he was taken away in an ambulance while an air ambulance was also on its way, the Globe and Mail said. AFP PHOTO/Peter PARKS (Photo credit should read PETER PARKS/AFP/Getty Images)
FIGURE 5. This combo picture shows (Clockwise from top L) Georgian luge hopeful Nodar Kumaritashvili crashing during the men's Luge practise at the Whistler Sliding Centre, in preparation for the Vancouver Winter Olympics on February 12, 2010. Kumaritashvili was killed in a horror crash in training at the Vancouver Winter Olympics after he was thrown from his sled at high-speed before smashing into a metal pillar. The 21-year-old Kumaritashvili suffered the crash during his second training run at one of the fastest points near the bottom of the track at the Whistler Sliding Centre on the final 270-degree turn. AFP PHOTO/Peter PARKS (Photo credit should read PETER PARKS/AFP/Getty Images)

FIGURE 6. This combo picture shows Georgian luge hopeful Nodar Kumaritashvili crashing during the men’s Luge practise at the Whistler Sliding Centre, in preparation for the Vancouver Winter Olympics on February 12, 2010. Kumaritashvili was killed in a horror crash in training at the Vancouver Winter Olympics after he was thrown from his sled at high-speed before smashing into a metal pillar. The 21-year-old Kumaritashvili suffered the crash during his second training run at one of the fastest points near the bottom of the track at the Whistler Sliding Centre on the final 270-degree turn. AFP PHOTO/Peter PARKS (Photo credit should read PETER PARKS/AFP/Getty Images)
FIGURE 7. Georgian luge hopeful Nodar Kumaritashvili is assisted by medical personnel after crashing during the men’s Luge practise at the Whistler Sliding Centre, in preparation for the Vancouver Winter Olympics on February 12, 2010. Muaritashvili suffered a horror crash after flying off the Olympic track during his second of two training runs, reports said. He was immediately placed on a stretcher before he was taken away in an ambulance while an air ambulance was also on its way, the Globe and Mail said. AFP PHOTO/Peter PARKS (Photo credit should read PETER PARKS/AFP/Getty Images)

FIGURE 8. Georgian luge hopeful Nodar Kumaritashvili is assisted by medical personnel after crashing during the men’s Luge practise at the Whistler Sliding Centre, in preparation for the Vancouver Winter Olympics on February 12, 2010. Muaritashvili suffered a horror crash after flying off the Olympic track during his second of two training runs, reports said. He was immediately placed on a stretcher before he was taken away in an ambulance while an air ambulance was also on its way, the Globe and Mail said. AFP PHOTO/Peter PARKS (Photo credit should read PETER PARKS/AFP/Getty Images)
FIGURE 9. Georgian luge hopeful Nodar Kumaritashvili (lower) is assisted by medical personnel after crashing during the men’s Luge practise at the Whistler Sliding Centre, in preparation for the Vancouver Winter Olympics on February 12, 2010. Muarbeitshvili suffered a horror crash after flying off the Olympic track during his second of two training runs, reports said. He was immediately placed on a stretcher before he was taken away in an ambulance while an air ambulance was also on its way, the Globe and Mail said. AFP PHOTO/Peter PARKS (Photo credit should read PETER PARKS/AFP/Getty Images)

FIGURE 10. Georgian luge hopeful Nodar Kumaritashvili (lower) is assisted by medical personnel after crashing during the men’s Luge practise at the Whistler Sliding Centre, in preparation for the Vancouver Winter Olympics on February 12, 2010. Muarbeitshvili suffered a horror crash after flying off the Olympic track during his second of two training runs, reports said. He was immediately placed on a stretcher before he was taken away in an ambulance while an air ambulance was also on its way, the Globe and Mail said. AFP PHOTO/Peter PARKS (Photo credit should read PETER PARKS/AFP/Getty Images)
FIGURE 11. Georgian luge hopeful Nodar Kumaritashvili (lower) is assisted by medical personnel after crashing during the men’s Luge practise at the Whistler Sliding Centre, in preparation for the Vancouver Winter Olympics on February 12, 2010. Muaritashvili suffered a horror crash after flying off the Olympic track during his second of two training runs, reports said. He was immediately placed on a stretcher before he was taken away in an ambulance while an air ambulance was also on its way, the Globe and Mail said. AFP PHOTO/Peter PARKS (Photo credit should read PETER PARKS/AFP/Getty Images)

FIGURE 12. Georgian luge hopeful Nodar Kumaritashvili (lower) is assisted by medical personnel after crashing during the men’s Luge practise at the Whistler Sliding Centre, in preparation for the Vancouver Winter Olympics on February 12, 2010. Muaritashvili suffered a horror crash after flying off the Olympic track during his second of two training runs, reports said. He was immediately placed on a stretcher before he was taken away in an ambulance while an air ambulance was also on its way, the Globe and Mail said. AFP PHOTO/Peter PARKS (Photo credit should read PETER PARKS/AFP/Getty Images)
FIGURE 13. Photo credit Associated Press/Michael Sohn

FIGURE 14. Photo credit Associated Press/Michael Sohn
FIGURE 15. Photo credit Associated Press/Ricardo Mazalan

FIGURE 16. A large video screen in the finish area of the Alpine skiing venue shows the crash of Nodar Kumaritashvili of Georgia during men's singles luge training at the Vancouver 2010 Olympics in Whistler, British Columbia. (AP photo by Gero Breloer)
Interview 1: Chicago Tribune, Assistant Managing Editor for Photography

Researcher: Before we start, can you tell me more about yourself and your role at the Chicago Tribune.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: I'm a former photojournalist and I would consider myself still a photojournalist but I'm basically the department head here and I've been with the Tribune for over 20 years. And I basically I'm the Associate Managing Editor for Photography if titles matter.

Researcher: Yes they do. So did you hold the same role during the 2010 Olympics.


Researcher: So you were the Associate Managing Editor for Photography?

Chicago Tribune AMEP: That's correct. Right. The department head here.

Researcher: The department head. Ok. And I think you oversee ummm... was it 2 Managing Editors?

Chicago Tribune AMEP: No. No Managing Editors. The Managing Editor is my boss. I oversee photo editors, senior photo editors. I oversee the director of photography and senior photo editors would be the next level below her. And then all the photographers and photojournalists and video editors and videographers and so on.

Researcher: Ok. Alright so the first thing I want to talk about is just umm... getting really to the crux of it in just the event in question. It was February 12, 2010. The luge accident. Were you involved in the actual photo editing decisions about the story.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: I was consulted. The editors edit and bring pictures to me daily. And I get the same IPs yea sort of.

Researcher: Ok. So I kinda want to talk. Oh I'm sorry.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: I guess I could say I was definitely involved in the decision.
Researcher: Right. Because they were probably all wire images that you guys got, right?

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Yes, exactly.

Researcher: Did you have any photographers up there?

Chicago Tribune AMEP: We did. And that’s a real good question about whether we had anything of that event. I might have to look at that. You could go ahead and continue questioning while you’re talking I'll do a search here to confirm what I just said.

Researcher: Ok, great. The first part I want to talk to you about, because like I said there are two parts of this — there’s the print process as well as the online process. And the first part I want to talk about is the print process. I’m actually waiting to get the microfiche if you can actually believe that of the Chicago Tribune from February 13th. So are you familiar with what images were published and possibly how from that day?

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Kinda sorta.

Researcher: ok

Chicago Tribune AMEP: you know it was a while ago. I kinda remember things and sometimes you know visual memory combines several visual things into one so it’s not always accurate but I do recall the incident.

Researcher: The believe I think Meg mentioned that there was an image that ran on the front page and then there was some more coverage on the inside in the sports section.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Right.

Researcher: So I'm waiting on my my my front page view of that. I haven't gotten that. So I apologize for that. But umm. So Ummm. For specifically the print edition, do you remember who was involved in making that decision with you?

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Uh yes. Generally, almost each day would be the Managing Editor and sometimes the Editor as well.

Researcher: Ok.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Those are decisions that usually are made at a… we meet as a group an often there are multiple editors who are involved.
Researcher: Uh huh.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: But they're usually in the room for sure. The editor and or managing editor.

Researcher: And are they in the room for sort of all photo decisions or....

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Not at all. Just page one. Page one is a big meeting and it's a very important decision each day.

Researcher: Ok. So because of the nature of these particular images, would there have been any more in depth conversation? You know how would you have treated images like these?

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Whenever we have images that have any kind of emotional impact and or disturbing images they're not always just gory sometimes it's just the colossal nature of an event, we do have a more extended conversation about that to make sure that we've vetted out all of the possibilities and make a decision knowledgeably. We are thoughtful in those kinds of decisions particularly when death is in the mix in some way. So I think this one had.. and this one wasn’t gory from what I remember. It was... there wasn't very much to it in the way of — you know it wasn't bloody. And we’re not afraid to do that when we have to and if it's important we will. But in this case, the way I remember it was pretty dramatic stuff where he flew off the luge and we saw him up in an area above the shoot that he... you know obviously did not belong and you can see him hit his head. It was a pretty strong group of images that we got. I believe we used a combination of — actually I have it up now so I am seeing images. We used AFP, Getty, AP kind of a whole mix but the picture online I'm not sure I remember which image that was. We’re seeing a guy on a stretcher — on one gurney rather in one image here. So umm... there’s some blood in those but I don’t believe that’s the one we used on the cover. I believe we used the image of him in flying up on the side as he was sort of ejected from his — from the luge.

Researcher: Right. Right. There were sort of two groupings of photos that emerged from I think — I can't remember his name offhand. Peters. I think is his last name. An AFP photographer. And one section was sort of the process photos —

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Parks. AFP Getty guy and then the AP guy was Jeff MacIntosh the way I see it here. So yes. I mean online we used all of those. And that's generally kind of a different set of conversations there.

Researcher: Right. So what kinds of — I guess what kinds of factors would effect the decision in print versus online?
Chicago Tribune AMEP: Well, when we’re talking about print, we’re talking about a very different sort of set of situations. For example, the primary difference is that newspaper is out on the streets with that image visible to any passer-by completely, you might say, involuntarily perceived by the public. You may not choose to see that picture and if it’s sitting in the news stand huge, you’re going to see it anyway. And so, we make decisions based on that. That’s an important thing. Who’s the audience and who’s going to see this? And kids are going to see this. And people who probably shouldn’t see it are going to see it. Umm we don’t censor the pictures because we don’t really — you know, it’s our job to put the information out there. We’re reporting. So umm we do think of course of the audience and how it’s going to be perceived. I mean. In this case, I don’t think it was very difficult because most of the images were dramatic but yet not gory and we felt this is one of those stories that has — you know it’s page one because all eyes are on the Olympics. It’s page one because this is an important thing. This is a dangerous sport. And this is the consequence, one of the consequences of such a dangerous sport. It’s not the only sport that that can happen, but it important to see that these are games, yet this kind of thing can indeed happen.

Researcher: Right.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: So I think those are kind of the things now as far as what we would discuss as to — I think number one, is did the person die of that particular moment that we’re showing or is he dead at the moment. Those are very important factors in our decision I would say. And we do that pretty regularly because often it’s about death and those are — there use to be a rule around here about the "mask of death." It’s a quote. Call any face that you see of a dead person is probably not a good thing to do in the newspaper but things have changed over the years and that is not a fast rule.

Researcher: Ok. Can you explain that a little more to me.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Yea I think it’s all about the situation. I think our rules as when I first came here there were more rules and they were more rigid. I think rules are completely contextual and they have to do with the situation — each situation separately and how it will be perceived. I mean we went through huge horror consequences and discussions about all kinds of war images. Now, you know, people in the media today — is just so incredible and it’s so accessible to everyone, I think in a way peoples — the threshold has changed. I believe people are now use to seeing certain things that they weren’t use to seeing. It doesn’t effect them as emotionally as it might have at one time. I think on the other hand, that when you put it on the front page of the newspaper and you stick it in the newsstand and put it on the street, you still have to be very careful of what you’re displaying.
Researcher: ok

Chicago Tribune AMEP: So there’s not a rule, but there still are huge considerations on the matter of the front page thing.

Researcher: Ok so then how would you apply that now, or how would Chicago Tribune apply that to publishing those images online?

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Now online we would do it differently we would... we can do it differently. First of all, it’s a very much narrower audience. Still — strangely. I think we have hundreds of thousands of print editions out there and sometimes to get to a gallery, for example, we may put a picture like the one that we use on page one out on the front of the site. And then we would have you click to get to the others — a gallery of images, for example — and there we might be able to put some disclaimer or be aware that there are some pictures here that might be disturbing to you and might depict death and umm we can do that and sometimes we do it and sometimes we don't.

Researcher: Now for this particular incident, do you remember or do you know who would have been involved in the conversation about the online gallery or who would have been in charge of that?

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Well, in this case, cases like this. In recent years this would have still be the same group of people plus another group of people — I would have been involved, I think the Managing Editor certainly would have been involved in that, and or the editor. And then we might also have online people present to discuss that as well. Now in our structure, the editor is in charge of all the content for both the print and the online editions. So that chain of command still applies on either platform.

Researcher: Interesting. That’s beneficial.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Yea. The editor of the paper is the content — the journalism guy for both as well as other duties but there still is this chain that says the content comes out of one group. Now there are heads of online that could disagree and so on and so forth and have input, but we still — the journal is... I think still comes from the same place. So I think that’s — you know, we might argue and we might even fight about it but I think there's still a lot of the same people because we're the ones vetting it. We’re the ones talking to AFP or Getty or AP and talking to them about the situation. We've got reporters there who can report it out for us. These decisions can't be made in a vacuum. But we do combine the thinking so we have the journalists also talking to the online people who might have a different set of values to add to ours. I’d say that was a fair way to characterize it.
Researcher: Can you explain by "Different values?"

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Well I think often online I mean journalism is still journalism and sometimes there are other considerations that are added to the mix. And we have to still be there with the journalism. I think the online sometimes they're talking about how many clicks it's going to get and yea we respect that. About our audiences and that's part of it but I think those are the things we have to weigh. You know, at what cost?

Researcher: Right. I do you actually have the gallery pulled up here. It looks like there were 12 images.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: No more actually. I think if you go to the next one. Eleven. Twelve. Yea that's right. There were only twelve. Nice sequence because you still have him on the luge in the first shot, which is good. I think it gives you the whole sequence. I think this one was easy because we didn't find anything — any of the photos that was too disturbing to not show this. You know? It was one of those things that wasn't all that difficult. I mean like, when Fallujah when they hung those burnt bodies from the bridge, that was a toughie. That was very tough. And we had an all day long conversation. And when people jumped from the Twin Towers — that was a toughie. And we ran the pictures in both cases, so... but we angst over that. We had many opinions and many arguments so we hear lots of sides and that's the way we do things here. Sometimes we over think, people might say, but I think it's good to hear as many voices you know as we have among us to make those decisions.

Researcher: Right

Chicago Tribune AMEP: We hang pictures. We show pictures to a large audience just to get reactions. And that's one of the ways we vet through it.

Researcher: Ok

Chicago Tribune AMEP: We do slideshows at 11 o'clock. We do slideshows again at 3:30. And multiple editors get to look and in the meantime there are images that we put online already because it's immediate and that's also part of the decision. We gotta get that out there — now. We want to be the first ones to have it, so we do have to make quick decisions in some cases. And then we might even say, you know if we get negative reactions, we don't like the way it's working for us and we might take it down. So online is a little different.

Researcher: Right. What kinds of options do you guys weigh out in these discussions, either for the online or for the print version? Is there different perspectives?
Chicago Tribune AMEP: Yea, I think there are different perspectives. I think sometimes we may rule a picture out and just spike it and say the Chicago Tribune will not publish this picture on any platform. And we do that every day. There’s a lot of horrible things in the world that are photographed. Now it’s the ubiquitous digital camera — there’s no escaping images on all kinds of stuff including Wiener-gate and all that kind of crazy. And we make decisions. We don’t run those. We didn’t run those. Now you can get those online. But not from us, you know. It’s kind of that we have a brand and we have a reputation and we have a journalistic standard that sometimes we... It’s tempting to break that for online to get it out there fast but the people who consume that, consume it fast and it goes away. It’s not like that newspaper front that sits in the newspaper stands all day long and goes up on the wall and goes in the scrap book and so on. It’s more consumed and gone on to the next thing. So those are things that we really add to the mix in our thinking for online.

Researcher: Ok. So what kinds of things would get an image nixed for the day?

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Well I think part of it is just taste. You know in the case of naked body parts. Just for the sake of the salaciousness we’ll not do that. If it’s pertinent to a horrific moment, and we scrub pictures for oh look there was an explosion but oh look we found an arm over here, we found something, then it changes our thinking. You know we have to really look closely sometimes. Especially some of the suicide bombings in the Middle East have always been tough for us to get all the little parts that are in the picture that might have really traumatized someone. So we have to look through it to make that kind of decision so sometimes we’ll do it! I mean we have the bus driver in a bus that was blown to bits completely burnt hulk and there was the driver still at the wheel slumped over a little blood on his head. We ran that picture because we felt that’s important. There were 30 people killed in that bus and it wasn’t gory and it wasn’t anything that we would’ve felt made it unworthy of publishing. But sometimes it is hard to take. You know, sometimes that’s the reality of it. We have to make that decision. Is this news event so horrific that we want to do that? We don’t always, but when they were doing those back and forth bombings we felt you know people have to know. Loss of life is not just an abstract idea. There’s a guy right here doing his job and that picture showed that — it showed a man in pursuit of his everyday living. Dead at the wheel because of this violence. So yea I think those are the kinds of thoughts that we... I think sometimes we run them. I remember an African slaughter where there were bodies everywhere during I believe it was the — it must’ve been Rwanda. Yea. Rwanda when tribes were involved in just slaughtering each other. Eventually you have to show some aspect of that to really tell the true story. You can’t just talk about genocide in general terms. I don’t think that reaches people the way you want to reach them on that kind of story. So sometimes you have to — and you have to modulate it. You have to put it out there one day, not for two or three days, perhaps.
If you put it out every day, then they don’t even feel it the way you want them to feel it. It becomes you exploiting it in their minds.

Researcher: So is there a standard procedure or method for Chicago Tribune to go through when facing these decisions? Is there a process?

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Yea. We definitely have a process and it starts with picture editors. The picture editors have to see it all to make the call, so they see every picture that’s available on any given topic. So they start and they give us I mean I also look at everything that comes over the wire so I see everything myself as one of the picture editors. But they’re beginning to sort it through. They start early in the day and by 11 o’clock, like I say, we show some. Whatever we have. And we vet it. And then at 3:30 we do it again. And then we make our call at deadline based on the pictures that we’ve seen. Now sometimes we have to go back and say these are all much too, you know, too hard to take, too gory, too gross, too horrific. Sometimes we’ll go back and say they’re not horrific enough — let’s do a harder edit. And again it depends on all the discussions that we’ve been having all day and where we feel this event — how it warrants the depiction.

Researcher: Ok.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Could you hold on a sec? Can I take care of something real quick?

[on hold]

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Thank you for holding. Sorry about that but there’s a million little things that happen around here than I have to dive into but...

Researcher: No problem. I appreciate it. I know you’re a very busy person.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Not a big one. This one just needed a couple seconds of my attention.

Researcher: Ok. We were talking about sort of the standard procedures for dealing with kind of images of this nature.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Right I think what we do is, as I say, we start sorting an what we do on a more controversial thing is we’ll show more pictures. We’ll give a range. We feel that you can’t just look at three pictures and make a decision that that’s the right one to use. Sometimes even though we’ve done that, we feel that we have to take the editors through the same process. You don’t know how horrible it was until you see it, so you can’t make a judgement based on just showing you know one of the lesser images. The ones that perhaps are cleaner and less disturbing. You
have to give them a range of pictures that make them go through the whole range of emotions that are there. And so we sometimes take editors through that process with us.

Researcher: Ok. So what kinds of questions do — are the editors sort of mulling over at that point as they're looking at these things?

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Well I think, again the primary one is Is this event significant enough to push our readership into a place, an emotionally disturbing kind of place and is this warranted by this event? And can we do it other ways? How can we best tell that story? And sometimes it's how we must tell that story.

Researcher: Right. Ok. So does... and I should've looked this up before I spoke to you... Does the Chicago Tribune actually have a written Code of Ethics or....?

Chicago Tribune AMEP: It does have a written Code of Ethics but it doesn't include how we make decisions based on as I said we don't we really have a fast rule because it's so contextual these days. It's really hard to say the Tribune will not run a picture of a dead body that's not the case. And we can't say that. And we will try and sometimes... and many occasions children and you know innocence kinds of things where we probably just can't do it. But because we have the long conversations and very involved context issues, we don't feel that we need to spell that out. Also it would handcuff us. We wouldn't be — then 911 would come along and we'd have to break all the rules anyway. Yea we have an ethics thing where we talk about we won't publish pictures that are altered or in any way misleading, untruthful, so on and so forth. But nothing like, you know, we won't show dead bodies or we won't show injured bloody people.

Researcher: Ok that makes sense.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Cause, you know, now we do. We do.

Researcher: Why do you think that that's changed?

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Well, it's — now I can give you the context of 20 years cause I've been a picture editor of some sort for 20 years. I think the events of the world have number one been a factor. They've been the stories have been pretty horrific. I mean there's always been wars. But we didn't always have access to the imagery of war the way we do now. I think access is number one. I think the journalism has changed a great deal. People expect to see everything. I mean it's not like the — I mean the early newspapers were just words that were weeks old in some cases. Somebody had to get that information from the front. Now people want to see it and they want to see it now and they almost don't care for you to edit
anything. Now, we know that and we have to respect that we’re still the ones that have to be the gatekeepers, so we continue to edit. But I think things have changed a great deal and people have high expectations to see — they hear about horror, you know, in Vietnam, that war was a television war. That was new to people for the first time to see the images of the day pretty much, or at least of the week. And they wanted to see it! And it effected public opinions so that’s a whole other standard for that kind of reporting and now I think almost everything is like that. I mean even, the silly stuff like Wiener-Gate. People want to see that. They want to know exactly how crazy this guy was and what he did and — we draw the line. There are things I mean we didn’t show any of that. We showed the bare chest things and the innocuous things but we surely weren’t showing body parts and stuff. But again you can get that online and people have an expectation to be able to find it and see it in some way. But not from us.

Researcher: Right.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: And that’s today. Ha. I’ll say that that’s the way it stands today. Cause ummm.... in 2010 it was certainly like that, but I don’t know about 2012 or even the end of 2011. Things are changing pretty quickly.

Researcher: Right.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Real quickly.

Researcher: Right.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Makes it kind of fun in a way, but also kind of scary in a way.

Researcher: Why do you say that?

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Well, because we’re loosening some kinds of standards because of again what the times that warrant it, and I think journalism sometimes you have to take a step back from what’s popular and what’s you know what’s everybody wants to see and you have to think about what it is you should do. It’s not just what everybody wants, it’s your standards and how you believe that journalism should be dispensed and I think sometimes we — and you know. The business is under attack. The business is under huge financial issues and so all of those things are impacting on what people expect and we have to keep taking the deep breath and reexamining who we are and what we’re doing.

Researcher: Right. How do you think those standards have sort of evolved over, you know at least your 20 years at the Tribune?
Chicago Tribune AMEP: Well like I said, we use to have a pretty solid rule about things and then I think those things changed. During my time here I've seen it change because you know, a story like Rwanda was something that you whenever you thought it got as bad as it could get, it got worse. Every increment of the story got worse and it as picture editors we bring that those visual stories to the table and sometimes we're the messengers with the bad news. Sometimes we take the hit for being you know the sensationalists when, in fact, we're just bringing what the news brought. And so I see that that's changed again because there are so many cameras and there are so many images. I think that's changed a great deal because — it wasn't even on the table in the old days. It wasn't even available. Now it's there. Now, you know, not only is it there but it's there — he shot it 10 minutes ago and I have it on my desktop. And that changes things. I think that changes expectations and it changes your journalism. You can deliver that stuff that quickly. And I think that I've seen that change. I mean I think also the news events of the day, the mans inhumanity to man — it just gets worse and I think we need to tell that story and sometimes we have to tell it in a disturbing way.

Researcher: Right.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: And that's I think we realize that more and we have it more available to us so in some ways, we go there more often. Now we still make huge decisions and don't run most of it cause in any given day, we could do some horror shows for people, but we don't do that. We do it when we think it reaches that level.

Researcher: Right.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: In another way, we would indeed be contributing to the sort of numbing our readership. They would see it so often they would think, nothing of it and that's not good either.

Researcher: Right. So, I'm just trying to look over some of my notes here. For this particular decision about the luge crash — there was the front page image run, there was some more coverage in sports and there was the online gallery run. How do you feel about the decisions?

Chicago Tribune AMEP: I feel pretty good about it. I don't have any issues. No regrets.

Researcher: Ok. So there's nothing you would have done differently.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Really, no. I think we did it right. I think we were able to tell the story on the front page without being gross. In almost a dignified way. There's some sense of the victim here has to have some — taking the victim's dignity into account is one of the things we definitely think about. If it's just so, you know, I
mean how — you can't be too dignified if you're dead, but there is that to take into consideration. And I think we did with you know the image we used on the front. I think it did that.

Researcher: Right.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: And I think the online didn't get — I don't think it was one of those that had too many situations where we'd say oh we won't use that. There may have been a few we did not use because of too gory, too much blood, but I think the ones we showed — Also out of context makes things worse, too, and I think with people coming to his aid, you bring back that dignity. It's not just him lying there on his own, unattended.

Researcher: Right. Do you know about how many people would have been involved in the actual editing together of this 12 frame gallery. I know it's a very sort of there is a story here, I can absolutely see you know the narrative.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Right. There's a sequential order that tells the story of what this guy went through. I think that was probably three or four people. I think ultimately the person who built the gallery, probably Meg, probably made the final but I think there were others up front including myself.

Researcher: Ok. It's interesting. There are a couple images in here that I didn't see researching any other news organizations. Kind of why I'm curious. A lot of sort of the front end establishing shots of him on the luge.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Yes. There are a few from. The way it works in the Olympics, there might be you know a dozen photographers along the corridors so you're seeing other sources here along the course as he progressed through. So I think we have access to lots of organizations or we did at the time. We don't have AP anymore. We're one of the few in the country. We decided to not work with them anymore. But umm... AFP's got I think the money shot that we ran. I believe it was AFP. Him up on the — you see the luge sort of flying and you see him up on the pile ons or whatever that structure is. Clearly indicating oops that's not — that ain’t right.

Researcher: This is not where you're suppose to be.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Something's wrong with this. Yea that's kind of what — and again if your picture tells that story, you're going to get the rest of it. There's going to be a headline there that's gonna say "Man dies" or something to that effect. You don't need to show the dead body.
Researcher: Right. Well I think that brings me to the end of my questions. Is there anything else that I'm forgetting to ask that you'd like to add?

Chicago Tribune AMEP: No. I think I've volunteered probably plenty of that I probably felt was important to the discussion. Only thing I would ask is that do whatever you — if anything, whatever gets published or whatever is available I would be interested in — hugely interested in reading.

Researcher: Absolutely, And I'm going to go ahead and get your email address from you so I can send you the consent form.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Absolutely. ----- at tribune.com Pretty easy.

Researcher: Ok. And I will send that off to you. And If I have any other questions, is it alright if I send you an email or give you a call.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Yea I think emails good. I can rip one off fast and get back to you. I carry a blackberry. I'm always online.

Researcher: I think every journalist is, right?

Chicago Tribune AMEP: There's no choice anymore.

Researcher: Right. Exactly. Ok. Well I really appreciate your time. I know you've a very busy individual.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Or you're welcome. It's always good to talk about process. I think people are very interested and I think especially people studying should really understand the way it works in the field.

Researcher: Right. Because it's not necessarily — you know you don't have time for the books and the equations when you're in the newsroom and you just gotta get that stuff up online.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Yea and you're rewriting the books as you go along! It really is the only way to do it. Thank you for your questions. They were — I thought they were very good.

Researcher: Well thank you,, I appreciate your time.

Chicago Tribune AMEP: Keep in touch. Let me know how it goes.

Researcher: I will definitely. Thank you so much. Bye bye.
**Interview 2: St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Deputy Managing Editor**

Researcher: I appreciate you taking some time for me. I know it's been a long time since the 2010 Olympics.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Right. I've been trying to refresh my memory.

Researcher: Me too. I was actually stunned to see the Post Dispatches response actually because it was so honest and so transparent about the whole thing and you didn't see that at any other news organization.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Ok.

Researcher: So any information you can give me. Anything you remember is spectacular. It will benefit me hugely.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Yea and if I, you know as we said in relying on memory here. But as I recall things, it was a case of just deciding which photo actually was better to capture that thing. So you know the opening ceremonies photo was the larger theme of the Olympics, but then that event, the death was you know, it did indeed it was the elephant in the room casts a pall over the whole opening ceremonies so you had to take note of that which is what Vahe (Georgian — article on PD, Death Casts Pall Over Olympics) based his opening day story on. So that's why we used that secondary photo — you know show the... I dunno. The logistics of where it happened. It's not a gruesome photo by any means. Unlike what television showed which had that whole whiplash reaction and you know TV when I go back and read the Editors' Desk column, TV suffered because they kept showing that through the whole weekend. And I think it was "Why are you showing this man's death over and over and over?" So there was this building of criticism toward broadcast that newspapers really didn't suffer. Newspapers they either ran the photo or didn't run the photo but it was over and done with. TV though it just people it was in their face during the weekend. I was surprised to go back and see what I had one reader call in and say "Why did you run a photo of a dead person?" And Stephanie had only one person respond to her poll, which you know polls you know usually draw pretty good response online. So I don't think the photo itself was really controversial. Now, maybe I'm wrong. Are you coming across other newspapers who were heavily criticized for it?

Researcher: I actually found what was interesting is NPR on their website posted I think the exact same photo you guys posted and they had this litany of comments about the ethical you know like was this photo ethical? Should they have shown a dead person. But it was all user contents. It was probably four or five pages of comments.
St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Hmm. Ok.

Researcher: and it was so many that they actually had to shut down the comment thread. So it was really interesting to see that you guys had nothing but they had, and I don’t know if that’s maybe because the audience is a little bit bigger there or what.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Well certainly. But at the time we had anonymous story commenting so people were free to say what they wanted. And usually that feeds on itself. We now have Facebook commenting so it’s much more policed, measured than it use to be. But a controversial topic, you know, once somebody said your liberal rag is just trying to get numbers, we’d have 50 people piggy backing on that sort of thing. So I’m surprised. I just don’t think it was seen as a controversial photo. Frankly, over the last ten fifteen years, newspapers including our newspapers have been more willing to run photos of dead people. We still — we discuss it every time if we’re going to run a photo that shows a dead person and we decide can it be on the front page? Should it be on the front? Does it need to be on the front page? And the standards — there’s kind of a scale. We’ll say we do need to show this photo for this reason, but let’s put it on an inside page with a jump on the story in black and white, make sure it’s not color. Is there blood in the photo? Well we’re not going to use it then because it’s going to upset people. But there are certain you know photos that carry a message that just words won’t. I think last week the line up of bodies in Syria where the execution style killings occurred. There was a fuzzy photo of this row of bodies just laying there with their hands tied behind their backs. We ran that inside. The story itself ran inside too. But we said ok this photo is ok because it’s powerful but it’s not — I don’t mean this to be callous — but it’s not upsetting. So we said ok that photo’s ok to use. But if there had been blood all over that photo, we probably would have said no. It’s too much.

Researcher: So blood might be a determining factor?

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Yea. It would be. I mean you have to take into account people — readers reactions. And yea there are cases where you want them to be horrified. The soldiers on the bridge in Iraq. Bodies. Americans would want to see what that horrible scene was. Again I don’t think we ran on the front page. It’s been a long time but I think that thing ran on the jump. So. But I’m getting off from the Olympics.

Researcher: That’s ok. It’s interesting to hear what — sort of what the decision making process is like and what that conversation looks like inside of the newsroom. Do you guys follow — is there a specific list of questions you ask yourself? Is there a formalized process for the whole thing?
St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Ummm... we don't have a checklist of questions. I'd say we do follow a formal process because we've done it so many times. But it would be a conversation that would involved the news editor. The photo editor. If the wire editor were the one saying we should be running this photo. And you know I'm generally in that conversation. I'm the front page editor. I'm in charge of the wire desk and the news pages. And if it were something that were I think there's going to be a strong reader reaction, I'd get the editor involved. You know, cause of no surprises. Don't want him taking the brunt of reader rebellion over a photo choice. But you so it would be I'd say four people would generally discuss. The page choice.

Researcher: So it would be the page designer.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: the photo editor. The news editor. The originating editor which in most cases would be a wire photo. Don't run a lot of photos of local people that die. You know. If there's a body in the scene, it's usually something covered up — police investigation or something.

Researcher: Is there a reason for that?

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: I mean we wouldn't run — soldiers dead in a field. You know, so a death here would probably be the same thing. It would just be a tragedy and you know you don't need to see the body to see that someone was shot — a homicide scene or died in a car crash. If there were some I dunno. Some horrid thing that you just can't imagine. I guess you would consider it. And obviously closer to home is going to be more upsetting to folks, but that's not really the determining factor I wouldn't say. I just really I can't think of a story where we have said we need to show this body. And there aren't that many from the wires, either. You know. A couple times a year three times a year. You know. And it generally involves a war or some foreign conflict or you know in Haiti the earthquake aftermath.

Researcher: Which was going on right about the same time. It was just before the luge.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: yea.

Researcher: I think the Chicago Tribune said you know in the context of everything that was going on, this luge accident was sort of like a blip on the radar. which was interesting to hear. They'd been having all of these conversations already about the earthquakes so they were use to that so it was a quick decision about these images, because there were some pretty gruesome ones available on the wire.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: From the luge?

Researcher: yea. There were some bloody bloody shots.
St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Ok. Well it — in my memory, my photo editors spared me from having to make that decision because I don't recall seeing a bloody shot.

Researcher: Good call.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: yea that is good! I mean that's fine because I'm — we would not have used that I'm sure.

Researcher: So in the situation like this, would the photo editor have come to you and said this is our selection of photos? You know what do you think? Or?

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Yea They generally give us a selection. They're empowered to make judgements too so I mean they do send some photos out and I think from reading this column that Stephanie was the photo editor that night and she may have said just boy there's no reason to show that. I can't recall whether I saw more than what we ran or not.

Researcher: And I sent an email out to Stephanie. It sounds like she's out of the office for a little bit but hopefully I'll get to talk to her maybe next week.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: yea.

Researcher: It's also interesting to see there were a couple of photos in sort of this sequence as he comes down the track and I noticed that you guys chose to run a photo before the moment of impact. Kind of thing. And it was the same photo both online and in print. Do you know if the same people would have been involved in that conversation or are there two different? Is it two different sides of the post or?

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Uhhh no. It's the same operation as it umm I'm adjacent to the online editors. In fact the online news editor is on my team. Do we have different standards online? Not really. Do we show more things online? Yes. But that's just because you can publish more online. But I don't think we'd say ok I think we — we have occasionally put a photo online that we wouldn't put in print but we've done so with a click through disclaimer you know warning "Graphic material." Photo could be upsetting.

Researcher: That makes sense. Real quickly before I forget. Do you guys actually have a formal Code of Ethics at the PD or do follow you know like another formalized set or....?

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Yea we have an Ethics Policy. We have a newsroom handbook that has a number of policies — racial identification policy and you know ummm but I'm not sure it has a photo component. I could check on that.
Researcher: That would be awesome if you could do that for me.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Yea I will. I'll check and if there is one I'll email you a copy of it.

Researcher: Spectacular.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Any reference to photos in there. And if not I'll tell you that I did not come across such a thing. And you could ask Larry Coyne (Director of Photograph at Post Dispatch) if he has one for his staff alone but I doubt he would have one for just his staff. That doesn't seem to make sense.

Researcher: Interesting. Ok. So you mentioned the poll that Stephanie had done. Is that something you guys do often? Do you sort of — she talks about her decision between two photos. Is that kind of a frequent event where you'll sort of I don't know if justify is the right word but just talk about a process and ask the readership how they feel?

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Not often. We've done it a few times. I've done it in the Editors Desk a few times. There was a photo a really cute feature photo of a little boy pushing a lawnmower. The lawnmower wasn't on but it looked like this two year old three year old mowing the lawn. And we chose — I chose not to use the photo just because I knew some readers would say "My god you're saying it's ok for a 3 year old to be mowing the lawn. You're saying that's cute." You know they would see the photo and react before they read that it was that the lawnmower wasn't on. Some would still say the day was irresponsible for letting a kid be near a machine with blades. So we chose not to use the photo. The photo editor thought it was a cute photo in fact it won a feature photo contest without being published. Umm... and I put an Editors Desk on just asking readers what they thought. So there was a poll on that one.

Researcher: I actually remember....

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Yea ok you've seen that?

Researcher: Yea I remember that photo.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Yea I mean it was a cute photo no doubt. But you know. Is it worth angering a lot of readers? Maybe it was. Maybe it would have pleased more readers than it would have angered. But I guess I was being conservative that day.
Researcher: Do you usually get a lot of response when you put those polls up?

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Depends what it is. I think that one got a decent response. I mean polls with Sarah Palin got big responses. It just depended what the topic was. But we don’t poll a lot like did we do the right thing? You know but sometimes when you really don’t know and I just I know what readers like. Not to justify. But more to get a conversation. Not to justify what we decided or you know seek criticism but just to get a conversation going on the blog.

Researcher: Had a conversation started, do you think people from the newsroom would have joined that conversation?

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: About what?

Researcher: About this particular — about Stephanie’s piece. The photo decision for the luge.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: I just don’t recall it be controversial. You know this photo is not upsetting. You know a man’s death is upsetting. This photo is very forensic. Here’s a scene in which he died. And yes you can envision in another split second there’s impact but I don’t know. Other than your reaction to someone died which is strong. You know the photo itself is not like Oh my god How could you show that. To show his neck being snapped would be a whole different conversation.

Researcher: Yea.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: And to show the body laying on the track afterwards would be a different conversation, too. We know he died, do we need to see his body laying there?

Researcher: There were actually a couple of organizations that published that photo which is interesting.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Yea.

Researcher: Not I know you wrote a follow up piece to Stephanie’s piece which was Whoa! We didn’t hear anything.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Right.

Researcher: You seemed really shocked. Can you tell me a little bit about that?
St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Yea the tone of the Editor’s Desk blog? Umm... it seemed to be shocked. I think that’s because we were coming of the weekend in which all the broadcasts had been so heavily criticized. But you know when you look back at it, it really was a whole different thing. They are repeatedly showing the same thing. In a stronger format than we are, you know. Film of the accident did include the collision. So I just because of the volume of criticism of broadcast, I probably expected more criticism of our photo. But it wasn't there. And I understand why it wasn't there.

Researcher: Hmm. So overall how do you feel about the decision in the end?

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: I think it was the right decision. Yea I look at this page and I'm fine with it. Vahe story was about the death and you know. The photo taught me that story and told a little supplemental information — here’s the scene of the death. This is how such a thing could happen.

Researcher: I actually thought it was interesting that the photo that ran on the front page didn't run in the story online. Do you know if there's a reason for that?

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: I don't know. I really don't. I thought you said the photo did run online.

Researcher: It ran in Stephanie's piece, but it didn't run with the same article online. Umm which I just thought was interesting. Although the article talked more about you know just the increasing risk of sports like this and the push to make things faster and quicker and almost more dangerous. In the Olympics. That's just kind of the way things are going. I don't know that really that the tone was set with the accident but it wasn't really about the accident. Story about the grander scheme of things.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Yea but again I you know it may have been as simple as someone didn’t attached the photo to that online story.

Researcher: Ok. Which happens!

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Which happens. Yea and I suspect that was it. It was just the story flowed online when the newspaper went to print and we — our system unless we program a story to go online immediately, print stories flow online at midnight.

Researcher: I guess is there anything else you want to mention you think I might have forgotten about this or?
St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: No. Not really. I think. Not really. I don't have any more.

Researcher: No more comments.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: No more comments. I’m happy to comments! But I don’t have anything more to say about it. Larry would be a good subject — person to talk to also. Larry Coyne.

Researcher: Yea. I sent him an email too, so I hope to hear back from him soon. And if you can send me anything on the ethics code that you have, the handbook that would be spectacular. I would appreciate that. And umm. Again I really appreciate your time. I know it's been a long time and it’s hard to remember the details but this actually really helps a lot.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Well good. And if you have any more questions feel free to shoot me an email or call again.


St. Louis Post-Dispatch DME: Bye bye.
Interview 3: NPR, Supervising Senior Producer for Multimedia

Researcher: Can you start by telling me about yourself and your role at NPR?

NPR SSPM: I’m the Supervising Senior Producer for the Multimedia unit here and you know for the most part being umm you know the lead visual editor for the website and really for our online properties.

Researcher: ok.

NPR SSPM: So you know we have a team of visual journalists, to photographs / videographers, then a team of photo or multimedia editors, a small team but a team none the less of about [...] and um we have basically two full time folks for the site and then two folks who are working both on multimedia for our end of things — digital news and then working specifically with a couple of our other programs here. One working with the music team and the other one working with our impactive government project. So in general, though for a major website, it’s a pretty small team. So we do a lot of photo editing for the site. But not everything. Some of that definitely is handled by what we call Web Producers, but the folks who build the pages and do a lot of the text writing and editing for the website. And in some instances they select their own photos to go with stories. And then we have a group of home page editors who work closely with us on most things. Occasionally they will do their own edit photo selection. But for the most part work with us on that. That’s probably our this is one area that we pretty much touch most of the time it’s photo editing for the lead stories on the homepage.

Researcher: Ok. So did you have the same position in February of last year during the Olympics.

NPR SSPM: Yes. I’ve been in this job since July 2008.

Researcher: Ok. So you said you were sort of involved in the process for editing the photos for this story. Can you tell me a little bit about how you guys approached things that day? I know there were a lot of images to choose from on the wire. I’m just curious how you came to the decision to publish I think you published one of the images of him sort of mid air.

NPR SSPM: Right. Mid air. Right before he hit the post.

Researcher: Right.

NPR SSPM: Well I mean I think there were a couple of factors that we weighed. But the underlying theme I guess is that we really try to make some decisions based on the standard ethical considerations. Slash photojournalism ethics considerations.
And we look to some of the guidelines that are articulated by the folks at Poynter and Bob Steele in particular. In cases particularly like this one is what's the news worthiness of the image? What would be the impact of running a particular picture? Is it accurate? Does it really convey the message about the story that we want to convey? Are there alternatives? Is somebody going to be adversely affected? Somebody or a group of somebody's? We try to identify as much as possible the stakeholders — people who could be harmed by it, people who have an interest one way or another, which includes editors and journalists. But another group is also our viewers, family members, that type of thing. We try to weigh that stuff quickly but try to touch as many of those points as possible to make a decision. That year in particular, that came just on the heals of a lot of the earthquake coverage out of Haiti so we had spent a fair amount of time debating some of these issues in terms of the photos that we were using from Haiti. And had come down with I think a good understanding of the need for that because we actually had a few instances during our Haiti coverage where we had to have some pretty strong conversations about the types of photos we wanted to run and needed to run. You know for coverage and so when that story broke, and when the image started coming across the wire, we pretty much immediately convened a small meeting of some of the editors and some of the homepage editors and myself and some people on my staff to talk through what we wanted to do. And there was clearly concern about subsequent graphic nature of some of the other photographs that were released but also the what the impact of the particular photo that we were — that we ended up using would be both in terms of how it would work with the story but also what potential reaction could be to using that type of an image. But at the time we I think had a fairly comprehensive conversation but it really didn't take a lot of time in terms of getting us all on the same page as to what we wanted to do with the story and with the image.

Researcher: Right. I'm kind of curious if you remember anything about why you selected — I know there is one photo that comes up immediately after the shot you chose where the body is a little more contorted and actually more hitting the pole and you guys selected to go with something probably a little less shocking. Just wondering if you can remember anything about, was there a debate?

NPR SSPM: There wasn't a specific debate between those two pictures but at that point in time the Wall Street Journal had published a series of like five or six images from that including after he hit the post, he's on the ground, I think there was blood evident in at least one of the pictures. You know pretty graphic sequence. And we pretty much right away knew that we did not want to go into that territory. And wanted to — we didn't feel it was necessary because the nature of the story indicated that there had been a pretty violent collision between this man and the post and that he was dead. And did we need to show that? Probably not. We really then decided, ok well if we don't show that, we've decided not to do that, then what image can be used to represent what happened? Be representative, but also be
within I think the range of — the more contorted pretty much at impact image just did not fit the criteria. We wanted to not get into the actual showing actual impact, showing the body afterwards, it didn’t feel to us like we needed to go there in order for people to understand the story and to know what was going on. And you know placement is always an issue. This was going to be the first thing that people saw when they came to our site and we did not again — we try to look at this holistically so it’s not just the photo, it’s the photo, it’s got a headline, there’s text, with you know at least an excerpt of a story that is probably going to be with it as well, captions — although at that point in time I’m not sure if our homepage actually supported captions which was part of the issue that we ran into with Haiti, that sometimes you can explain things in a caption but at that point our homepage was not able to do that so it made it more, you know put more responsibility on us to be as accurate as we could with the photo plus the headline so that people were not confused and knew what was going on. Or not mislead. So yea we decided to use that picture because it said what it needed to say about the accident happening. And gave plenty of information and along with a headline and the story you pretty much know what the outcome is and we didn’t feel like we needed to be that literal to say you know here’s a picture of him hitting a post, here’s a picture of him on the ground dying. In essence we didn’t feel that that provided any more information to the reader. Conversely, it had the potential of potentially doing more harm to the stakeholders. It could have turned off some viewers. Clearly sort of upset some people. You have something that his family would have wanted to see if they opened our website. So all of those things kind of weighed into our decision.

Researcher: Right. You mention that you guys sort of arrived at the decision fairly quickly. I guess in the context of Haiti imagery and things like that, if those conversations were an hour, do you remember this conversation being a ten minute conversation….?

NPR SSPM: It was probably ten minutes, maybe less. And I said I think we were all on the same page at the start. And you know that’s the point of having the discussions in the newsrooms is that the more you have them, the more you can A) identify the times when it’s necessary to really seek other opinions from your colleagues and also you kind of start at a more advanced point in the conversation so you don’t necessarily have to lay the ground work of what are the things we need to consider? What are the types of issues can arise? You kind of understand some of that going in to so you can have these conversations in a more efficient manner.

Researcher: Right. Do you remember who was involved, like directly involved in those conversations?

NPR SSPM: Not everybody, but I was. I’m not sure who the homepage editor on duty was at the time, but I know Randy Lowlessten (?) who manages the homepage staff was involved. It’s probably Jeffery Katz who is Assistant Managing Editor for Digital
News and it might have been Mark Stencel who is Managing Editor for Digital News I think might have been involved also.

Researcher: Ok. That makes sense. You guys do have a really small newsroom there.

NPR SSPM: Yes, yes we do.

Researcher: You mentioned the Poynter website, their guidelines I don’t know if it’s called their Code of Ethics or anything. Do you guys have a Code of Ethics over at NPR?

NPR SSPM: We have one and we have had one for several years and the current one is actually being refined. You know, as we speak. The new one is basically still in process, but we have had a code of ethics for several years here. Which you know is some of which was drawn from some of the things that Poynter has published and then some other things which are pretty standard for news organizations. But I think the Codes that we're working on now are going to be probably a little bit more specific and touch more specifically on some issues that are unique to publishing online as well as publishing content on air.

Researcher: Are familiar with how much the current codes of ethics address photography or imagery?

NPR SSPM: I mean the current code of ethics was written before there was much photography or imagery at NPR so there are not real specific references to either in there.

Researcher: So is that why you guys sort of default to the Poynter...?

NPR SSPM: Not necessarily. I mean I think a lot of it is... some of it is common sense, but the Poynter things that we refer to don’t necessarily address photography either but they are pretty extensible to that. They're very basic in the sense that they are things that really can apply to all types of journalism. But are very succinct so that it's not a diatribe of like 20 pages it's stuff that's really broken down into ten or so categories that are pretty easy to line up with whatever question you have.

Researcher: That makes sense.

NPR SSPM: And I think that's a problem with a lot of codes of ethics is that they're way too long. And it's very hard to... it's hard for folks to get.. to read all the way through and to go back and apply them to what any particular case is. And so... I think there are maybe two strands to that one. You know you've overall code of
ethics but there really should be an actionable kind of guidelines that you can apply to kind of reach the types of decisions that your organization supports.

Researcher: Right. So do you guys as a photo team have a standard procedure for trying to make these kinds of decisions, about shocking imagery, or anything that might be borderline.

NPR SSPM: No. We don’t really have a standard procedure. I think we all rely on each other. I think you use your experience for the most part to at least flag stuff. And then ask the questions of your colleagues. What do you think about this picture? Do you think we should it? If you think we should use it, then the question is where? Does it need a warning? Is it something that some cases is it something that we don’t put on our site at all and maybe we just provide a link to? I think we use our at first — the first phase is using our gut and relying on our experiences and the second phase is always asking an opinion of someone other than yourself to really get a second or sometimes a third or fourth set of eyes on a particular image or particular set of photos. And then, you know, the other thing is always off asking outside of your immediate group so that you can really perhaps get another opinion that is hopefully less likely to be in line with what you would normally do.

Researcher: Right. That makes sense. So for this particular event and like I mentioned, I was reading through the litany of comments. I noticed that it looks like NPR actually closed the comments early. I know you guys usually close after 5 days. It looks like these were closed after two. I’m just wondering as those comments are coming up, for this story — for really any story — how does that, or does that factor in to any decisions about the story, keeping it up or...

NPR SSPM: For the most part they don’t. For the most part people on the editorial team some of the news editors will look at comments but we really try not to spend an awful lot of time with them. We have folks who will monitor to make sure that they’re appropriate and not completely off point, but umm we try not to have our editorial decisions driven strictly by comments we’re receiving and really kind of let what we’re doing with the news determine what we do at any given moment on our site. The point of comments sometimes is to inform your journalism but also it’s a conversation between the readers and your site, but also the readers and each other. And part of an ethical decision making process is understanding that sometimes your decision are not going to be what everybody would like. There will always be somebody who’s not going to be happy with that, which doesn’t necessarily mean that you made the wrong decision. It just means that in this particular instance, there are people who are, that their opinion is going to be different than yours. And you respect that and acknowledge that but the goal is to have a decision that makes sense both to you and to others that at the very least you can explain in a way that makes sense.
Researcher: Right. So how do you feel about the ultimate decision to run...?

NPR SSPM: I think it was definitely the right one. The more graphic nature of the other photographs I don't think added anything to the story line. That was not going to be something we could read with the piece or hear talked about described on air. And I think the images got the point across, the image that we used got the point across pretty clearly without the need for it to be more graphic, more sensational. At some point later in that news cycle the Journal basically removed all of the photos that they had put in the gallery earlier in the day, which I think was an indication that perhaps they reconsidered the news worthiness versus shock value of those other photographs.

Researcher: Interesting who was that that removed those?


Researcher: Oh. Interesting. I didn't realize that. Because I know a lot of sites still have the full gallery up.

NPR SSPM: Yea. This was on the homepage for several hours and then they removed it — they pulled it. I think they actually took it completely off the site and later that day.

Researcher: Right. Cause I know some posted the raw video and took it down later and some people chose to put up sort of graphic content warnings and things like that. Interesting. Well I think that actually answers all of the questions I have right now. Is there anything else you feel like I've missed that you wanted to add?

NPR SSPM: No. I don't think so. I think we probably covered it all.

Researcher: Actually I have one really quick question. What is your background? Are you journalism school trained? Or...?

NPR SSPM: No actually. I don't have a journalism degree. I have a law degree. I have been a journalist for probably the better part of 30 years now.

Researcher: I was just curious because a lot of people don't directly start talking about codes of ethics and with a law background that completely makes sense and talking about claimants and stakeholders.

NPR SSPM: Well if you're a good journalist, you should be talking about that. I think that that stuff is always at the forefront or should be in conversations and usually when people make pretty glaring errors they usually haven't done that so... I think
you know, as an editor that's something that I think we're responsible for making sure happen in our newsrooms.

Researcher: I think that kind of wraps it up for me. I appreciate your time a lot. I know you're very busy individual.

NPR SSPM: Well I'm glad this was helpful.

Researcher: Yea. I appreciate it a lot. Would it be ok if I need to if I could follow up with you in the next week or two?

NPR SSPM: Sure.

Researcher: Beautiful. Well thank you so much. I appreciate you're time I'll let you get back to your busy day.

NPR SSPM: Alrighty. Take care. Have a great weekend.


NPR SSPM: Bye bye.
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