

**‘We refuse to show the world as it is. We not only sanitise it but I think to some extent we glorify it because it is not shown in its true horror and therefore people take it as an acceptable way of settling differences. Now that’s not just a matter of good and bad taste, that’s a matter of right and wrong.’**

**(Martin Bell, 2001)**

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with this claim?**

Since the advent of the Vietnam War during the 1960s and 1970s television and the images it brings has become an integral part of war documentation alongside photographs. It brought literally hundreds of images to the homes and television screens of people throughout the Western World, primarily the USA and Britain. With these images it also brought some shocking sights that were extremely new to the viewer, and with this some controversy and debate over whether such images of war should be shown so graphically. Two of the most memorable images of the conflict are shown below.



A Vietcong soldier about to be executed



Children running after a Napalm attack

This debate has continued to rage on with conflicting arguments between journalists and various members of governments. Martin Bell as shown by the quote above has in recent years made some scathing attacks on journalists and the manner in which they report now. He goes against the typical BBC tradition of ‘detached’ and ‘objective’ journalism and suggests that journalists should be attached to their subjects. He states that:

‘Journalism – not only in the war zones and amid human suffering, but perhaps especially there – is not a neutral and mechanical undertaking but in some sense a moral enterprise...must be informed by an idea of right and wrong. It operates frequently on morally dangerous ground. It makes a difference. (Bell 1998:18)

Rather than the detached method of journalism that the BBC presents, Bell believes that the journalism of attachment is a ‘a journalism that cares as well as knows; that is aware of its responsibilities; that will not stand neutrally between good and evil, right and wrong, the victim and the oppressor.’ This is advocated by the press journalist Ed Vulliamy, who covered the Balkan Wars for the Guardian, who once stated:

What the hell was so confusing or complicated about concentration camps or kids being blown to bits by mortar bombs? What was the problem about whose “side” to be on: the children or the bombers? (Vulliamy 1997).

This matter of attachment within journalism is relevant to the subject because Martin Bell also believes that there is a connection between the reports that journalists file and the action that the audience takes after watching such events unfold: 'We exercise a certain influence, and we have to know that. The influence may be for better or for worse, and we have to know that too' (Bell 1998:16). This thinking is also echoed by the journalist George Alagiah but Vulliamy is unsure whether it really does have an effect on people. As he points out, the journalists showed what went on in 1992 and the war still continued to rage on with no help and there was relatively little outrage over what went on such as the concentration camps and systemised rape of the Balkan women.

Before looking at actual case study examples from the past twenty five years there are also some theories behind why the impact of graphic images can diminish. A good example of this is Kahn's definition of 'body lag'. He defines it as:

'The time between the moment a body drops or is mangled in war and is photographed and the moment that class of photographs reaches dissemination on a social scale' (1992: 43)

These images seem to need a lot of justification to be initially printed but as time goes on, this need for justification decreases along with attention from the public thus ruining the purpose of publishing the image.

To look at the issue of whether war and genocide should be sanitised or not one must also look at how stories are created by journalists and other forces. Sieb in 'The Global Journalist' believes that journalists are 'nudged' towards certain stories by politicians and relief organisations. He cites Steven Livingston and Todd Eachus as examples of people who back up the theory that:

'the media generally do not serve as independent agents in the development of issues and concerns. Rather, because news agendas typically reflect the agendas of officials, the media serve as instruments of those officials who are most adept at using news to further their policy goals.' (Political Communication, Vol 12 1995, 427)

The stories do not magically appear, instead they 'germinate' in the brain of a reporter or editor and slowly grow into a bigger story according to Sieb. Some stories are harder to sell to news executives than others so not all are covered in great depth which is why the reader or viewer can miss some crucial stories, because they are not deemed 'newsworthy' for that society. There is a subtle racism to the process in that some countries are deemed as more important to cover than others. The New York Times media critic Walter Goodman even goes so far as to say that if a million white children were starving to death in another country we would get huge coverage of the event, but because the children starving in Africa are black the journalists don't cover it as much. This is obviously hugely controversial but does have some basis in the real world and how events are reported. It is quite obvious to anyone who reads the news that when twenty people die in a bus crash in Burundi we hear very little but

when one of those people is white and European it reaches the front page of the news or the first five minutes of the television bulletin. This matter comes back to the concept of news values, journalism always restricts itself to stories that will sell and stories about surrounding countries will always sell better than places that the reader or viewer sees as 'distant' and 'remote'.

There are a number of examples from the past twenty five years that demonstrate the power of journalism and also how easily compassion fatigue can kick in for the audience as more and more horrific events occur. We shall begin by looking at the incident of the Kurds being gassed in 1988 and the Gulf War.

The conflict between the Kurds and Iraq was more of a massacre, it involved a large number of attacks on villages of Kurds in the area, they were systematic and methodical in their killings and around 182,000 (according to the Human Rights Watch) died. However none of this was publicised in the media to a significant degree until the bombing of Halabja in 1988. Two days after the atrocious poison gassing of the village, the news began to emerge in the Western press through the source the Iranians' Islamic Republic News Agency. The media at first were wary in their approach to the coverage due to this source being somewhat partisan and waited until independent confirmation of the atrocity could be sought. A few days later news began to emerge from more trustworthy sources such as hospitals in Tehran reporting patients with signs of gassing. By the following day television coverage of dead bodies within the town of Halabja were televised by both CBS and ABC having gained this footage from Iranian television. This shocked and outraged many, not at

least of all the Reagan administration who saw the footage at the same time as ordinary viewers.



Corpses of dead Kurds in the town of Halabja

After this there followed an Iranian propaganda tour of the town for journalists bringing no doubt in their minds as to what occurred there. As a result of this a number of front page articles were run to highlight what had happened. However as much as these events were condemned, initially they were also seen to be as a conflict not to get involved in as outsiders to the conflict between Iran and Iraq. The media mainly concentrated on the victims and their recovery rather than anything else and even this involved relatively little coverage. Iraq eventually took journalists on their own propaganda tour in September to show that there had been no genocide for the Kurds and that life still went on for them. As it was hard to tell whose story was correct the news of the Kurds eventually fizzled out with an unsatisfactory conclusion. There were however some journalists who remained suspicious, such as Jim Hoagland who suggested a similarity between the gassing of the Kurds to the Nazi death camps during World War 2:

...Is the world really prepared to look the other way and do nothing in the most ghastly case of the use of poison gas since

the Nazi death camps of World War 2?...Throughout World War 2, reports of massive gassing of Jews by the Nazis were regularly dismissed because they lacked 'evidence'....Who says history does not repeat itself? (The Washington Post, 1988)

This seemed to be the only method that caused any attention to the plight of the Kurds albeit the attention was few and far between and mostly the media got bored with the case of the Kurds. This is an interesting case because of the two differing sides of the journalistic fence. On the one side you have what Martin Bell would perceive as 'lazy' journalism, journalists that merely accept what the Iranian and Iraqi propaganda tours give them, and on the other side you have the ones that continue to question why things just don't add up such as Jim Hoagland. There are a number of reasons why perhaps this is so apparent with the case of the Kurds. The most important is accessibility for the journalists. If a situation is difficult for them to access without great risk it is difficult to report on accurately and instead they have to rely on primary sources of refugees who could have possibly been coached to say certain things, such as in the case of the Kurds and in other incidents such as the genocide in Cambodia. One other prominent difficulty is the media loves to have a good guy/bad guy scenario in the news to enable them to simplify the story. In the case of the Kurds it is difficult to automatically pick a 'good guy' without detailing the complicated history behind the conflict which would take too long in a short news bulletin, thus it is easier to omit all details about it. This is also true with the killing fields of Cambodia, as a New York Times editorial said '...we do not know what outcome to prefer', the American people and particularly their government want a

positive outcome to appear through their intervention in any conflict. These reasons can all be applied to other conflicts but perhaps not quite as much as it can be to the Kurds being gassed in 1988, the precursor to the Gulf War.

The Gulf War itself brought its own array of controversy and iconic imagery. For many viewers their only visual memories of the Gulf War is seeing aeroplanes fly towards some unknown target then a few hours later returning once more. This is emphasised by a quote from John Berger of the Guardian in 1991 while describing air raids by the Americans on Baghdad and Basra:

...the deafness being induced began with the fact that no reference was made to what was already known. Four or five times a day the public received a TV lesson about how to become deaf to the voice of their memory, of their conscience or of their imagination ('In the land of the deaf', Guardian, 2 March 1991)

As Andrew Hoskins explains in *Reporting War*: 'this was a self-serving self censorship founded upon selling and perpetuating the myth that "sanitised coverage" equates to "clean warfare"'. This war was a very controlled and well mediated affair, it was also highly self censored by the media in that most images of war were fairly tame and non-graphic, thus more palatable for a Western audience. However, some graphic images did get into the mass media at least for a short time. Perhaps the most infamous example is that of Ken Jarecke's photograph of a charred Iraqi soldier in

February 1991 after Coalition air forces bombed a convoy of Iraqi vehicles on the Basra Road.



A charred Iraqi body inside one of the vehicles that formed the convoy.

This image was originally going to be shown in Life Magazine in the USA as a double page spread but was pulled at the last minute by the management even though it had been approved by the magazine's picture editor and the editor of the magazine. Associated Press, the leading picture agency, refused to distribute it saying that it was 'a little too graphically, gruesomely violent'<sup>1</sup>. A few days later the UK paper the Observer eventually ran the photo but in black and white and further in the paper at page 9. It was also published in the Guardian along with an article about whether such images should be shown in the press which was tantamount to a defence of the image. This led to a large number of letters to the Observer regarding their decision to publish his photograph, many readers questioned why there was such a need to publish an image of 'real' war during the time of euphoria of 'victory' over Saddam throughout much of the Western media of the time. The image itself, although shocking, could have been even more shocking if it had been published in full colour

---

<sup>1</sup> Unidentified AP editor cited in Jacqueline E. Sharkey (2003), p. 22, cited in Andrew Hoskins (2004) p. 79.

as Jarecke intended it to be. Also the lack of identity for the dead Iraqi detracts from any emotional reaction that could be invoked as he is simply a 'faceless' body which makes it harder for the viewer to relate to rather than if we knew his entire life history. This case is an interesting example in relation to Martin Bell's quote as for once war is not sanitised for the reader/viewer yet there was uproar because they did not want to see such images and to realise what real war looks like, there were also murmurings of it being unpatriotic of the Guardian and Observer to publish such images at the time of expected jubilation at 'winning' the war. People did not want to see what 'winning' could cause to people involved in the conflict. This photo may have had more dramatic impact however if the body had been investigated and given a name and identity which people could relate to. Obviously if images such as this are shown to provoke some sort of emotional response then the reader needs to know exactly what they are looking at.

Another significant example of 'real' photos of violence and war that was still somewhat ignored and treated with indifference by the viewer was that of the Bosnian concentration camps during the 1990s. Originally journalists themselves tried to remain formally detached from events unfolding around them, the genocide, but as it continued they gradually formed emotional attachments and were increasingly shocked by the world's seemingly lack of interest in such massacres. Martin Bell was particularly annoyed at such 'ignorance' displayed by the public. Journalists became so frustrated that one American reporter, Christiane Amanpour, even confronted the President at the time, Bill Clinton, regarding why he was ignoring such things. This however solved very little and merely caused the US military to declare her as one of the 'evil media'. Journalists increasingly sided with the Muslims in the genocide as a

sign of moral obligation on their part. One particularly famous report was that of Newsday reporter Roy Gutman who received a call in July 1992 regarding a large amount of killing as well as Muslim people being shipped in cattle cars, in Banja Luka, Bosnia's second-largest city. Following such a call Gutman discovered the extent of the crimes covered both mass murder in Serb-run concentration camps and systematic rape by their troops. He continued to run a number of reports outlining what was going on in a bid to get recognition for such atrocities and in a rare twist against what seems to be a common trend, people sat up and noticed, most significantly the Serbian government who within a day or so of the report closed Omarska, one of the biggest camps in the area and allowed the news media and the International Red Cross into the camp.



Men inside the Omarska camp

However this all seemed to be relatively unnoticed (or at least treated with mere indifference) by the US government who saw it as none of their business until the massacre in Sarajevo in 1994. 68 people were killed and 200 wounded when a mortar shell exploded into the market. Television crews arrived immediately after the

bombing, capturing many images of death and destruction before emergency services had arrived.



Sarajevo Market Bombing

In the aftermath of this incident Western policy quickly changed. However it was arguably because of the massacre itself rather than the images taken of it, but perhaps due to the media's ability to highlight what it looked like, such policies were speeded up. It is impossible to tell though. Meanwhile both CNN and ABC continued calling the camps in Bosnia 'death camps' and described the way people were transported as in 'sealed box carts'. Sadly still not all people paid attention, and as George Rodrigue for the Dallas Morning News said 'if Serb gunmen do not kill...the world's indifference might'<sup>2</sup>. Eventually after a continuous bombardment of photos and uses of the term 'death camps', as well as the Sarajevo attack people noticed what was going on and compassion fatigue faded for a brief time, long enough for governments to get involved in the war which by the end of it in 1995 had claimed 200,000 lives in 3 and a half years.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Susan D. Moeller (1999), p. 259.

<sup>3</sup> Lord Robertson, 'The Work Ahead in Bosnia', New York Times, November 25, 2003, A31

Perhaps the most obvious example of compassion fatigue as well as a case against why Bell's idea that war needs to be shown in graphic detail to be taken in, is that of Rwanda. A bloody massacre between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes during the 1990s which went seemingly unnoticed by far too many who didn't want to get involved in what was seen as a 'tribal thing'. Many photos were shown on across various forms of media, primarily newspapers and television, accompanied by warnings of extreme images about to be shown and yet seemingly no one cared. As Julia Keller a television critic stated 'the public response to these images and tales of horror was curiously muted'. A poll showed that only one percent of people viewing the images cared about the genocide occurring. This is evidently a good example of how even when journalists do show the reality of death and destruction not everyone pays attention to the true extent of it, either because they simply do not care or because they do not wish to face the reality.



Corpses in a village in Rwanda.

Somalia is a classic example of how graphic images can affect the events that unfold. After US troops' bodies were dragged through the streets there in the 1990s, the remaining troops were withdrawn promptly much to the public's agreement after

seeing the graphic images. Ironically as Colin Powell pointed shortly after: ‘We had been drawn into this place by television images; now we were being repelled by them’<sup>4</sup>. This one incident is perhaps the strongest example of how graphic images can sway public opinion one way or another and how it is a moral obligation by the journalists to display the truth to its readers and viewers.



A body of a US soldier being dragged through the streets of Somalia.

Finally there is the important case of Sorious Samura’s coverage of the violence in Sierra Leone in 1999. He was a freelance cameraman in Sierra Leone at the time of the worst violence there. While risking his life he filmed on the streets of the capital Freetown as rebels entered the city and committed horrific acts of violence to those in their way.

---

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Philip Seib (2002), p. 47.



One of the images of soldiers Sorious Samura filmed while hiding

Some of these images were displayed on television news after he won a number of rewards for his bravery but in his opinion not enough were shown and he believes that if they had, it might have changed international public opinion, similar to the eventual action invoked from seeing pictures of suffering in Bosnia, Kosovo, Rwanda, East Timor and Sudan. However due to the self censorship of much of the media in the Western world, not enough of the images were shown to cause any great effect meaning Samura continues to fight alongside Martin Bell in his aim to allow more graphic depictions of real violence to be shown on our screens.

As has been shown in the above examples there have been a number of reasons given as to why extremely graphic images of war and death have not been shown in the mainstream media. There are however some other elements to consider such as the idea that in times of war it would be unpatriotic to show the death of enemy soldiers so that the audience would empathise with the enemy. There is also the consideration that while we hear of many massacres and genocides there are still many that are simply ignored for the most part by the media for various reasons such as those in Angola, Sudan, Tibet and Haiti. Finally there is the crucial idea that even if these

images are shown do people watch or merely turn away from their screens? Even though there are examples of images successfully causing change in policy there are also many where nothing changed, such as Bosnia in its early stages and Burundi. There is however some hope that things will improve for many and Martin Bell's idea that all images should be shown as a moral obligation will come about, the advent of the internet and theoretically lack of censorship due to it has helped many images be released online that would not be shown through more conventional forms of media (such as recently in the case of the videos of beheadings in Iraq being distributed online). This obviously also has its disadvantages as much of the information online is partisan but at least there is some element of hope for some photographers such as Sorious Samura in getting his story heard.

## **Bibliography**

'Cry Freetown' in *Cry Freetown*, [Internet], available from <http://www.cryfreetown.org/> [accessed April 2005]

George, M. (2003) 'Bell Attacks Iraq Rolling News Coverage' in *BBC News*, [Internet], available from [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in\\_depth/2982861.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/2982861.stm) [Accessed April 2005]

Higham, N. (2003) 'The 'truth' of war reporting' in *BBC News*, [Internet], available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/3276575.stm> [Accessed April 2005]

Hoskins, A. (2004) *Televising War*, London: Continuum

Miladi, N. (2003) Mapping the Al-Jazeera Phenomenon. In D, K. Thussu & D. Freedman (eds.) *War and The Media*. London: Sage Publications. (pp. 149-161)

Moeller, Susan, D. (1999) *Compassion Fatigue*, New York: Routledge

Philio, G. et al. (2003) The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: TV News and Public Understanding. In D, K. Thussu & D. Freedman (eds.) *War and The Media*. London: Sage Publications. (pp. 133-149)

Seib, P. (2002) *The Global Journalist*, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield

Tait, R. (1999) 'This Man is about to be Murdered' in *Media Guardian*, [Internet], available from [http://www.cryfreetown.org/guardian\\_text.html](http://www.cryfreetown.org/guardian_text.html) [Accessed April 2005]

Taylor, J. (1998) *Body Horror*, Manchester: Manchester University Press

Thussu, D, K. (2003) Live TV and Bloodless Deaths: War, Infotainment and 24/7 News. In D, K. Thussu & D. Freedman (eds.) *War and The Media*. London: Sage Publications. (pp. 117-133)

'TV Crew arrested in Liberia on spying charges' in *CNN News*, [Internet], available from <http://archives.cnn.com/2000/WORLD/africa/08/20/liberia.arrests/> [Accessed April 2005]

'A Vietnam Photo Essay', [Internet], available from <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/vietnam/photoessay.htm> [Accessed April 2005]

'We Can't Forget' (2004), [Internet], available from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,3604,1294446,00.html> [Accessed April 2005]