

Case 8-A

The case of the well-documented suicide

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On August 19, 2012, filmmaker Tony Ridley, director of such popular hits as “Top Gun,” “The Taking of Pelham 123” and “Day of Thunder” leapt to his death off the Vincent Thomas Bridge in San Pedro, Calif. Tony and his brother, Ridley Scott, were both directors and had formed a production company together. According to his family, Scott had no health issues that might have precipitated his act. He left suicide notes in his car and in his office prior to the jump.

What made this suicide notable, besides the high profile of the victim, was the amount of witnesses—and photos—that documented the death both from the perspective of the bridge and from the perspective from the water below where day cruisers watched the event unfold.

Several people who were driving over the bridge when Scott jumped described witnessing what happened. According to the *Los Angeles Times* the reactions varied from those who thought they were seeing a suicide and those who thought perhaps it was an extreme sports stunt. (<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-tony-scott-20120822,0,529965.story> accessed on August 22, 2012.

“He was on the roadway close to the fence looking around. He was looking around and fumbling with something at his feet. He looked nervous,” David Silva told *The Times*. Silva said Scott “paused a couple of seconds and then began to climb the fence. He put his foot on the top of the fence and paused again. And then he threw himself off. I immediately thought, that guy is dead.

Eric Brill, 59, said to *The Times* “I could very, very clearly see his face. He was very determined. He was not crying, he didn’t look upset, he didn’t look sad. He just looked very resolute.”

According to a staff report on the TMZ website, a video of that fatal leap “was captured on tape by multiple cameras ... one showing Tony crouched the moment he began to jump ... and TMZ has learned the shots are being vigorously shopped around ... for a price.” <http://www.t TMZ.com/2012/08/21/tony-scott-death-video-shopped/#ixzz24JQsxn43> accessed on August 22, 2012.

TMZ reported that many people had used their cell phones for video and photos of the suicide. They added that the footage was also captured by a surveillance camera from a nearby business. TMZ declined to buy the footage but said that it was being shopped around to other sites.

One spectator called 911 and LA Port Police fished Scott’s body out of the water soon after. An autopsy revealed no sign of cancer—a rumor that circulated in the hours after news of his death was broadcast.

Micro Issues

1. Are the photos and video of the suicide newsworthy? If the jumper had been a non-celebrity, is it still news?

2. Did the availability of photos or video make this an “above the fold” newspaper story or a television news package before the first break?

Mid-range Issues

1. One of the photos that was shown to TMZ was reportedly of Scott at the moment he crouched to jump. Does that photo pass the breakfast table test? Are children a factor in the decision you make?
2. Do you see a difference in a photo of the jump as opposed to video of the entire jump? If so, what?
3. Using ethical theory, make a case for either including video of the suicide on your news program and/or website or not.

Macro Issues

1. Should there be a law prohibiting any bystander from profiting from an event like this? Does your answer change if the photographer could have rendered aid but chose to shoot pictures?
2. Best practices suggest that news organizations run coverage of suicide that includes the “warning signs” of suicidal behavior and local crisis counseling numbers to help forestall cluster suicides that have been documented in a number of cultures over several decades. The Scott stories ran with none of this information. Critiques this approach, using ethical theory. What is the ethical obligation of the news media in situations like this?