

## Macro Issues

1. What are the privacy rights of
  - a. Shelby McGuire?
  - b. Shelby McGuire's mother and 4-year-old brother?
  - c. Sergeant Swenson?
2. Critique the argument that these photos should be shown because they illustrate the type of tragedy that law enforcement officers are often called upon to handle.
3. Critique the argument that these photos should be shown because they illustrate the horror of domestic violence.
4. Critique the statement that "if we were presented with a similar situation and a similar photograph today, we would absolutely not do it the way that we did it in the Shelby McGuire case." In your opinion, is that based on sensitivity to reader concern or caving in to reader pressure?

### CASE 8-F

#### HORROR IN SOWETO

SUE O'BRIEN, FORMER EDITORIAL PAGE EDITOR

*The Denver Post*

On Sept. 15, 1990, freelance photographer Gregory Marinovich documented the killing, by a mob of African National Congress supporters, of a man they believed to be a Zulu spy.

Marinovich and Associated Press reporter Tom Cohen spotted the man being led from a Soweto, South Africa, train-station platform by a group armed with machetes and crude spears. Marinovich and Cohen continued to witness and report as the man was stoned, bludgeoned, stabbed, doused with gasoline, and set afire.

It was one of 800 deaths in two months of factional fighting among Blacks as rival organizations vied for influence in the declining days of apartheid.

The graphic photos stirred intense debate among editors. In one, the victim, conscious but stoic, lies on his back as a grinning attacker poises to plunge a knife into his forehead. In the final photo of the series, the victim crouches, engulfed in fire.

As the series was transmitted, several member editors called to question what the photographer was doing at the scene—could he in

any way have stopped the attack? In response, an advisory went out on the photo wire, saying Marinovich had tried to intervene and then, when told to stop taking pictures, had told mob leaders he would stop shooting only when they “stopped hurting that man.”

Decisions on what to do with the photos varied across the country, according to a survey. If any pattern emerged, it was that newspapers in competitive markets such as Denver, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and New York were more likely to go with the harsh graphics.

The burning photo was the most widely used, the stabbing the least. Several editors said they specifically rejected the stabbing as too extreme.

“It showed violence and animalistic hatred,” said Roman Lyskowski, graphics editor for the *Miami Herald*.

“That’s not as unusual an image as that knife sticking right out of the skull,” said another editor, who agreed that the stabbing was much more disturbing than the burning, saying he recalled immolation pictures from the Vietnam era.

When the Soweto series cleared at the *Miami Herald*, the burning photo was sent to Executive Editor Janet Chusmir’s home for her approval. At her direction, the immolation picture ran on the front page, but below the fold and in black and white. The detail revealed in color reproduction, Chusmir and her editors agreed, was too graphic (see [figure 8.5](#)).



Figure 8.5. AP/Wide World Photos. Used with permission.

At the *Los Angeles Times* and *Dallas Morning News*, however, the burning photo ran above the front-page fold—and in color.

The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* chose the stabbing for front-page color.

"I look at the moment that the photo freezes on film," said News Editor Joe Sevvick. "Rarely do you see a photo where a knife is about to go into somebody."

The photo ran in color on the *Pioneer Press* front page, accompanied by the story Cohen had written on the attack and a longer story on the South African government's attempt, announced that day, to crack down on Black-on-Black violence.

In Denver, at the *Rocky Mountain News*, Managing Editor Mike Madigan wanted to run a comprehensive package on the Soweto story. The tabloid's only open page was deep in the paper, but a page 3 box referred readers to the story with a warning the photos were "horrific and disturbing." Inside, stories on the attack and government crackdown and an editor's note on Marinovich's intervention accompanied three photos: the victim being led away from the train station, the stabbing, and the burning.

Most papers that ran the more challenging photos involved top management in the decision. Frequently, top editors were contacted by telephone, or came in from home, to give the photos a final go-ahead.

In most newsrooms, the burning or stabbing photos made it to the news desk for approval or rejection. But there, they sometimes were killed abruptly.

"The editors at that point said no," one picture editor reported. "They would not take the heat."

Several editors deferred to the so-called Post-Toasties Test.

"The question is 'Which of those photos would help tell the story without ruining everyone's breakfast?'" asked Rod Deckert, managing editor of the *Albuquerque Journal*.

One editor said his paper is especially likely to de-emphasize disturbing material in the Sunday paper, which children often read with their parents. But many editors who rejected the more brutal pictures said the Post-Toasties Test is irrelevant.

"If you're putting out a paper in New York and don't have something that's going to cause some discomfort over breakfast, then you're probably not putting out the full paper you should," said Jeff Jarvis, Sunday editor at the *New York Daily News*. "I don't think the breakfast test works for [today]."

Others cited distance tests. Some newspapers, in deference to victims' families, are less likely to use death photos from within their

own circulation areas. Another editor, however, said his paper is *less* likely to run violent photos unless they are local and have a “more immediate impact on our readership.”

Newspapers also differed widely on how they packaged the Soweto story. Some accompanied a photo series with the Cohen and crackdown stories, and a note on Marinovich’s intervention. Some ran a single photo, often the burning, with only a cutline and a brief reference to the train-station incident in the “crackdown” story. Two respected big-city dailies, which omitted any reference to the Soweto attack in their accompanying stories, ran cursory cutlines such as “Violence continues: A boy runs away as an ANC supporter clubs a Zulu foe who was beaten, stabbed and set ablaze.”

Although 41 papers used at least one of the Marinovich photos, only four—the *Charlotte Observer*, *Akron Beacon-Journal*, *Rocky Mountain News*, and *USA Today*—told the story of Marinovich’s attempt to halt the attack (see [figure 8.6](#)).

Among collateral considerations at many news desks was the coverage of South African troubles that had gone before. At least one editor said the Soweto photos, which followed several other beating and killing photographs from South Africa that had been used earlier in the week, were “just too, too much.”



**Figure 8.6.** AP/Wide World Photos. Used with permission.

With only three exceptions, editors said race did not figure in their considerations. One white editor said the fact that both attackers and victim were Black deprived the series of clarity.

"You don't have a sense of one side against another. You don't have a sense of right or wrong."

Two editors who identified themselves as Black, however, argued for aggressive use of the photos. Both work in communities with significant Black populations.

"I think Black readers should be more informed about this," one said. "Across the board, Black Americans don't realize what's going on with the Black-on-Black violence."

Front-page placement and the use of color frequently triggered reader objections, but the adequacy of cutline information and accompanying copy also appear significant. The *Albany Times Union* was flooded by phone protests and subscription cancellations. Two other papers perceiving significant reader unrest—the *Dallas Morning News* and *Los Angeles Times*—ran the burning photo in color on their front pages. However, each of the three papers also ran the front-page photos with only cutline accompaniment, referring readers inside to the stories that placed the images in context.

In retrospect, *Rocky Mountain News's* Madigan said he was very pleased with the final Soweto package and readers' reaction to it.

It wasn't so much the idea that "yeah, we ran these really horrific pictures and, boy, it knocked people's socks off." I don't think that was the point. I think it was more the way we handled it. Just one word or the other can make a terrific difference in whether the public starts screaming "sensationalize, sensationalize," or takes it as a thoughtful, important piece of work, which is what we were after.

## Micro Issues

1. In all but the most important stories, would you support a ban on dead-body photos in your newspaper or newscast?
2. Some editors believe it is their ethical duty to avoid violating readers' sense of taste or compassion. Others argue that it is their duty to force society to face unpleasant truths, even if it means risking reader anger and rejection. Whose side would you support?
3. Many readers suspect that sensational photos are chosen to sell newspapers or capture rating points by appealing to morbid tastes. Do you believe they're right?

## **Midrange Issues**

1. Editors sometimes justify running graphic photos by saying they can provide a “warning bell,” alerting people to preventable dangers in society. What values might the Soweto photographs offer readers?
2. Is the desire to avoid offending readers an ethical consideration or a marketing consideration?
3. Is it appropriate to base editorial decisions on what readers are likely to be doing at home: to edit newspapers differently, for instance, if they are likely to be read at the breakfast table, or present newscasts differently if they are to air during the dinner hour rather than later in the evening?
4. As an editor, would you be more likely to run a photograph of someone being murdered if the event happened in your own community, or if it happened thousands of miles away and none of your readers would be likely to know the victim or his family?
5. Do you see any distinction in
  - a. whether a violent photo is run in color or black and white?
  - b. whether it is run on the front page or on an inside page?

## **Macro Issues**

1. Is aesthetic, dramatic, or photographic value ever reason enough to run a picture, regardless of how intrusive it may be or how it may violate readers’ sensitivities?
2. Is it your responsibility as an editor to find out if a photographer could have saved a life by intervening in a situation rather than taking pictures of it? Is that information you need to share with your readers?
3. Is it your responsibility as an editor to find out if the presence of the camera at the scene in any way helped incite or distort an event? Is that information you need to share with your readers?
4. When dramatic photographs are printed, how important is it for readers or viewers to be told all the background of the story or situation?