Introduction

“Newlyweds killed in car crash.” “Girl slain by stray bullet.” “Thousands dead in earthquake.” These are headlines in the news that, like many others, alert us to tragic events. Because news often begins where life ends, stories about suffering surround us daily. “When somebody’s killed, that’s news,” maintains the news director of a CBS television station.  

Another news industry insider reflects, “That something happened and someone died seems to be all the context required for a story. That death resulted is the key.” The industry enjoys consensus on this point: fatal events are among the most important and therefore most newsworthy events.

As disaster, disease, accident, and violence persistently strike, death makes good copy. But the words do not tell the whole story, and so, as reports emerge, cameras are there at the epicenter. At the scene, cameras can create an infinite number of images, but only one or two will get published. This process begs serious questions about the way we construct the news. When the media are organizing all this death into “newsworthy” pictures, how do photographers and editors make these decisions?

Because pictures craft boundaries with their frames, photojournalists and their editors must decide which aspects of reality to hide and which to illuminate. As a technical matter, photojournalists must decide when to selectively narrow their focus. After choosing which pictures to make, photojournalists then funnel a selection of their cache on to their editors, who must quickly decide which among these images will circulate publicly. They reject the vast majority and pick just a precious few.

With each catastrophe, photo editors at major news organizations will examine thousands of images of devastation, looking for one that will make the cut. Margaret Sullivan, New York Times public editor, reflects, “Editors constantly make decisions about what to include and what to leave out.” The selection of the seemingly right image can be a fraught
process, burdened with representing parts of the event that are considered essential, or the entire event, as well as the larger symbolic implications of the event. Daniel Okrent, another public editor at the New York Times, explains that when tragedy strikes, they search for the pictures “in all ways commensurate to the event.” But what defines the commensurate image of death? Okrent adds that some pictures seem “to perfectly convey the news” while others seem “unfit.” But how does an editor distinguish between the “fit” and “unfit” image of death?

To address these questions, I gained behind-the-scenes access to see exactly which pictures are rejected. During this process, photojournalists and editors also shared their personal perspective in private interviews, where I promised anonymity to encourage frankness on this controversial topic. In addition, a team of researchers carefully tracked which pictures appeared in the news over a thirty-year period.

Because images of death have not been studied in this way before, and because certain myths about the news media are persuasive, the answers are often surprising. What we learn challenges conventional wisdom about our news culture because much of what we presume is inaccurate. The truth is even different from what the news editors themselves claim when explaining what influences their own judgment. The kinds of images they say they value differ from those they actually select.

The following chapters expose the algorithms determining the final product, thereby bringing some transparency to the behind-the-scenes decisions. What is uncovered demands a new perspective on the depiction of death, opening up new ways of thinking about how it is portrayed and, more broadly, the pervasive editorial forces, never stated explicitly, that persistently construct the news. This book attempts to explain these unwritten rules.

A Preview: Assessing Photo “Fitness”

According to conventional wisdom, the bar for deciding which images of death should be shown in the news is set very low, where just about anything goes. All kinds of sensationalist images of death seemingly abound in the news, provoking audiences to condemn them for indiscriminately trafficking in the morbid. Even photojournalists and their editors have strongly criticized their industry’s apparent fixation on death.
The news industry is said to be driven by an exploitive “if-it-bleeds-it-leads” mentality in which commercial success depends on the shock value of blood-splattered film. Powerful economic incentives are believed to demand attention-grabbing images, making the documentation of death a remunerative activity. In return, the industry’s allocation of its vast resources seems destined to favor the bad-news-is-big-news formula. Photojournalists, in particular, are considered indispensable to coverage of a crisis, and so, by almost any means necessary, they go swiftly to the front lines. Related expenses are viewed as a profitable investment that will be well rewarded in the competitive media market.

By seeping into the most esteemed corners of journalism, “tabloidization” is blamed for sensationalizing the news, making once-taboo images of death now commonplace. In her book *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death*, Susan Moeller blames the “market-driven, tabloid-style” news for creating increasingly frequent corpse images and, consequently, an audience that has seen too much death to care. Howard Kurtz, the media reporter and columnist for the *Washington Post*, has argued that the crisis of “tabloidization” has infected quality papers like his: “We are complicit,” he alleged. Other critics (as discussed in the following chapter) have shared outrage over what is described as a horrifying trend.

As noted throughout this book, there are several reasons to expect that dead bodies will frequently appear in the news. But are such images indeed common? The answer is actually no, as explained in chapter 2. Despite a purported epidemic of “graphic” death spectacles, images of the corpse, also called postmortem pictures, are actually exceedingly rare. This has been the case for at least three decades. Despite the transformations of quickly changing media formats, as the news has spread from print and broadcast to newer technologies, each platform remains unlikely to visually document death. Digital and broadcast news media abstain at least as much as traditional print news because the newer media share the older media’s aversion to corpse images. Regardless of the novel technology, a reluctance to display death remains steadfast.

One may question whether the types of images that get published are limited not by reluctance so much as by feasibility. Perhaps photojournalists have very few opportunities to document dead bodies. For
example, the police may arrive first at the scene and tape it off, prohibiting photojournalists from getting close enough. Other logistical challenges can arise that would make these photographs hard to obtain.

Can bad timing or insufficient access explain why deaths are rarely seen? The answer is no. Instead, there appears to be a strong editorial drive to hide these bodies, and the first half of this book (especially chapters 3, 4, and 5) makes this case. Paid staff photographers will risk their lives to directly document death, only to have their editors reject the resulting images. Photojournalists eventually learn to take pictures that conceal the corpse using camera techniques that the industry otherwise shuns. By creating a variety of images (which chapter 3 categorizes) that obliquely convey death, they indirectly and imaginatively suggest a body without actually showing it. When they produce these euphemistic pictures of death, it is not because they have nothing else to show.

Sometimes editors decide to run a picture that originally documented a dead body, but before publishing it they spend impressive effort digitally extracting the dead from the image. When powerful camera lenses zoom in to reveal a dead body, editors reverse course by employing post-production Photoshop strategies to mask the evidence. Typically, the evidence is distorted beyond recognition with enlarged pixilation, or blurred with a digital smear. As editors carefully apply these techniques, they labor to undo the camera’s documentary achievements. This is notable for an industry that strives to provide an accurate account, and claims to forbid photographic manipulation.

With understandable skepticism, some may challenge the argument that the press is broadly aversive to showing death. That is, some may question the extent to which the press, in general, prioritizes restraint. One could reasonably argue that restraint is likely to be found only at the most reputable news sources, like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. After all, these esteemed news organizations are expected to be relatively restrained compared to the least-common-denominator appeal of television news and tabloids like the *New York Post*. In contrast to upscale news products, the popular press is described as especially likely to pander to debased, morbid interests. Presumably, the bottom-feeding news media, as they are disparagingly characterized, are guilty of trading eagerly in lurid fare.
But is the accusation grounded in fact? Do the oft-maligned popular media actually show death more often than their respected counterparts? The answer again is no. Overturning conventional thinking, the patrician press, like the *New York Times*, runs substantially more photographs of corpses than do tabloid and television news outlets, where the dead are all but invisible. We see (in chapter 8) that the corpse is exceedingly rare in the media most suspected of sensationalism because, despite their reputations, tabloids are the most reluctant to exhibit them. In fact, compared to the patrician press, tabloids use postmortem images less frequently and less prominently.

One may expect that photojournalists and their editors, who work diligently at their craft on a daily basis, would have fairly accurate insight into their decision-making processes. They are the ones immersed in the 24/7 production of the news, where they must rapidly decide among hundreds of images, and they are the ones whose livelihood depends on getting it right. It would be reasonable to assume that, given their intimate experience producing the news, their account of what they do would avoid major misconceptions.

But do industry insiders have a realistic understanding of their own news practices? The answer, again, is no. Editors and photojournalists apparently endorse the same myths as do the rest of us. For example, photo editors also believe that corpse images are common in the news media, especially in tabloids like the *New York Post*. It turns out, we all get it backwards.

**Exceptions to the Rule**

After documenting the systematic and widespread self-censorship in the news, the second half of this book examines the relatively rare occasions when death is depicted directly, showing the body. Certain types of death are considered worth viewing, and these exceptions highlight the importance of nationality, race, and age, although not in the ways often expected. Yet, with a new, simple formula, the exceptions are remarkably predictable. Once we realize how firmly the norms of disclosure are set, the exceptions are easy to foresee.

In prior studies of U.S. news media, scholars have concluded that the death of an American is much more likely to be considered newsworthy
than that of a foreigner. But these conclusions are based on studies of written or verbal reporting, after analysis of things like headlines and story copy, because the research was focused on what the news communicates through words. This prompts us to ask, do images in the news follow the same formula?

The answer is, not really. The deaths that are most likely to be judged fit for word-based reporting are least likely to be judged fit for pictures. As illustrated in chapter 9, American deaths are paid the most attention, as measured by words, but their bodies remain nearly invisible. Therefore, on the rare occasions when pictures of the corpse do appear, they document foreign fatalities.

Race also influences what gets considered newsworthy. Given that we associate the abject corpse with foreigners, it would be reasonable to expect that racial hierarchies also have an effect. One might expect that postmortem pictures are most likely to show the world’s dark-skinned victims, but pictures of Caucasian victims are, by far, the most common. They are the most common overall, and they are also the most common when coverage of foreign and domestic death is analyzed separately.

Consider figures 1.1 and 1.2, which include photographs published in December 2016 on the home page of the L.A. Times, the Washington Post, and the New York Times. These pictures document the slain Russian ambassador to Turkey. Such images illustrate the industry’s inclination to judge pictures of foreign fatalities most newsworthy, especially those documenting light-skinned victims.

As discussed later, there are other factors that predict when a postmortem picture will get published. In particular, the size of the tragedy, which is often defined by the number of lives lost, has a large effect, but again, not in the way expected. The news industry claims that images of dead bodies are used judiciously, reserved for the most horrific tragedies. The Washington Post’s ombudsman, Andrew Alexander, reasoned that the “hardest-hitting images” help convey “the magnitude” of a tragedy.7 Like many editors, he insists that large death tolls demand such images.

But is this actually the case? Often it is not. Nearly all published news images of foreign corpses do indeed represent events claiming many lives, but editors virtually ban corpse images representing large American death tolls. In the very rare case when a news image shows an American dead, that picture is likely to depict an event that killed a single
person, or just a few. (See chapter 11.) The American bodies seen also represent actuarial anomalies striking a lone victim, such as a woman killed when her apartment walls collapsed, or a man felled by an exploding ice machine.

When domestic death tolls swell, the news cameras quickly avert our eyes while photojournalists and their editors contend that “positive” images tell the story best. For example, instead of revealing the defeating finality of death itself, editors select images of first responders aiding
the injured and alive victim, highlighting acts of recovery. The pictures focus on life, documenting how Americans restore order from disorder, and how the nation’s strength overcomes adversity. This kind of photojournalism showcases a sanitized, redeemable victimage in place of images that may flatten a nation’s self-image.

Although large death tolls do not generally predict when postmortem images are judged newsworthy, there are other ways we can measure the scale of a tragedy. In particular, the innocence of victims could be equated with the magnitude of the event, and thereby explain why some postmortem pictures are deemed newsworthy. Indeed, editors and various pundits maintain that we must take special notice when innocent victims, especially children, the most vulnerable of all, are put in harm’s way.

When natural disasters, violent conflicts, and accidents take the lives of the littlest ones, the sense of loss is profound, but are children’s deaths actually predicting when the postmortem picture appears in the news? They are not, and this is the case because (as chapter 10 details) dead American children are made invisible. Pictures of these children are off
limits and, as a result, essentially all news images of dead children reveal the bodies of foreign youth. Only when other countries lose their children do these heartbreaking pictures become newsworthy.

Meanwhile, the dead American child generates a great deal of media coverage as measured by the number of stories, their prominence, and their length. Tragedies involving American children—like the 2013 Newtown massacre of young students at the Sandy Hook Elementary School—generate media storms spanning several days, even weeks. The death of just a single American child, such as the mysterious slaying of JonBenét Ramsey in 1996, can immediately saturate the news, and then haunt it for years, amassing thousands of stories. These deaths are considered unfit for photojournalism, but they are otherwise judged most newsworthy.

Words and Pictures

We know precious little about news images because classic studies of the news, along with more recent investigations, focus on the use of words. However, there has been growing interest in understanding the influence of images. As a form of communication, pictures matter greatly because our brains generally prefer pictures above words. Eye-tracking studies show that people read very few news articles but do pay a lot of attention to the accompanying photographs. Vision is our dominant sense, and because we are intensely visual creatures, the images we see—and those we don’t—can dictate our perceptions of reality. Pictures can influence not only which events we think about but how we think about them. Psychologists find that “the impact of the story is more often determined by the photograph than the story itself” because images “stir emotions and foster public outcry like no other means of expression.” Studies also suggest that “images persist in memory longer and more vividly than text and verbalizations, all while exerting a stronger influence on perception and judgment.” The popular adage, “Pics, or it didn’t happen,” may seem like a flippant refrain, but it became a common catchphrase because it is a telling account of influence.

In tacit recognition of the importance of images, the news generates a constant supply of pictures. Images are not only abundant but also prominent, because editors give them priority treatment. The availability
of particular images can influence editorial decisions about which stories will lead the news, or whether the stories will run at all. Television news producers will drop a story entirely if they don’t have accompanying images, while a riveting picture can compel them to run the story up front.11

This book argues that it is important to understand how the news media use images because, from their inception, they take on a unique role. These images do not follow the same rules as words do, and in fact, there is a fundamental disconnect, generating two distinct trajectories of newsworthiness. When editors decide a photo is newsworthy (or not), they make assessments that are not generalizable to the rest of reporting, and what holds true for words does not for images. The story and picture are eventually packaged together, but each has been shaped by very different editorial forces.

In our news culture, there is a strict division of labor between images and words, and explicit communication about death is often assigned to words alone. Stories about death saturate the reporting because, more than any other event, death demands this public accounting. Such stories are considered highly legitimate, and inherently important. To make the fatal facts widely known, the headlines boldly announce body counts while the accompanying stories provide grisly details. While the words sharply focus on the death toll, the pictures that would corroborate these accounts are not permitted. This book considers how these extremely frequent omissions have important implications because they routinely shape the news and ultimately affect us all.

The Photo’s Failure

Photojournalism is that profession and set of technology that has long been charged with revealing the central facts, thus helping a dispersed public clearly see the evidence. Death is one of life’s most important events, and the corpse is evidence of that event. But death upends the conventional role of photojournalism as an eyewitness, and suddenly we want a camera that knows not how to expose but how to conceal. With these reversals of fortune, the camera’s ability to copy, which is usually its greatest asset, is now an anxiety-provoking liability.

Indeed, the more revealing an image is, the more likely it is to be omitted from the public record and kept out of sight. Photojournalism
now withholds the most relevant information, intentionally making pictures evasive because restraint and innuendo are prioritized over disclosure. If a picture shows the dead, the camera’s documentary work, which is otherwise cherished for its faithful verisimilitude, is now despised for “sensationalism,” as if it distorts reality with wretched excess.

Although camera pictures are typically admired for being more “powerful” than words, editors reject the image that specifically documents the dead for being “too strong.” These pictures are rebuked for “attacking,” “hitting,” and otherwise “traumatizing” people. To signal their transgression, we also rely on sexual metaphors, labeling these photographs as “pornographic” and, by extension, “exploitive.” Some even vilify the documentation as “snuff porn,” implying that the news industry is complicit in a crime.

The prejudice is so intense that even images that show no blood or gore are described as “brutally” or “extremely” graphic. Many of these pictures could be interpreted as depicting a sleeping rather than a dead person (if not for the clarifications provided by headlines and captions), yet they are treated as cause for alarm. Being a “graphic image” is an offense even though all images are graphic, by definition, due to their pictorial form. In this most ironic turn, even the fundamental nature of photojournalism as picture-based reporting is scorned.

Or, in another twist of fate, instead of complaining that these pictures are excessively revealing, editors insist that they are not newsworthy because they reveal nothing: the picture documenting a death is reproached for “providing no information.” Ordinarily, editors endorse the cliché that a “picture is worth a thousand words,” but rather than applaud the fact-filled relay—the bragging rights usually afforded photojournalism—they condemn the postmortem image for failing to relay at all. (Chapters 6 and 7 contend with these ironies.)

Regardless of the rhetoric we use to justify the censorship, our underlying contempt is remarkable given that images of death—including gory ones—are mainstays in many forms of entertainment that attract large audiences. We support a massive market for violent entertainment, and the U.S. Department of Justice has estimated that by the age of eighteen, the average American has seen over forty thousand screen deaths. Dead bodies are shown in dramas, action adventures, crime fiction, science fiction, and even comedies. Such imagery has
long been common among a wide array of genres, including those in film, video games, and fairy tales. Americans are not squeamish, and yet, even highly sanitized images in the news quickly ignite disgust and outrage.

Prized Pictures

The same editors who passionately argue that corpse photographs are not newsworthy believe that a select few are actually “essential.” Apparently, there are those images that should never be seen, and those that must be seen. Most postmortem pictures are regarded as wickedly perverting journalistic ideals, but some are cherished as means of “bearing witness.” Instead of being lambasted as pornographic, these striking exceptions are even fêted as Pulitzer Prize–worthy.

Consider the several years of civil war convulsing Syria. When reporting on the crisis, American news coverage has sometimes promi-
nently pictured corpses, and editors have regarded these images as not only legitimate but indispensable. Even U.S. presidents hailed their importance while imploring all of us to look. The Pulitzer Prize committee also honored several of these images. A picture of a bloody boy, lying dead in his father’s arms, received a 2013 Pulitzer Prize because it was judged to embody the profession’s ideals. (See figure 1.3.) That same year, a picture taken at night, as a flashlight revealed a young Syrian man lying dead in a field, also grabbed acclaim. (This image appears in the last chapter, where it is discussed further.) During the summer of 2015, American news media widely disseminated pictures from a Turkish beach of a drowned three-year-old Syrian boy. (Figure 1.4 was a particularly popular one.) The news declared them a “necessary” and “stark testimony of an unfolding human tragedy.”

Whereas many postmortem pictures do not make it past editorial gatekeepers, who earnestly denounce them, a few get escorted through
as heroes, and the evaluations of these images swiftly shift, depending on
the nationality of the deceased. When American lives are lost, it seems
unconscionable to document the dead, but during major international
tragedies, images of the dead seem ripe with promise. They are believed
to improve the lives of millions by inspiring political action, ending
wars, and correcting inequalities. The pictures of a small boy on the sand
were credited with having “sparked international outrage over Europe’s
migration crisis.”15 The images were also credited with triggering a life-
saving chain reaction in which “changed hearts can change minds and
ultimately policy and history.”16 As foretold, the picture would “change
the world,” and at the close of 2016, Time magazine honored it as one of
the “turning points in our human experience.”17

The promise placed in such pictures becomes their justification,
which can be problematic. If we equate the newsworthy image with the
one that will have very positive social effects, this logic demands that
editors pick only the ones that will achieve good, even though the effects
of a specific image can never be predicted. At press time, an editor has
no way of knowing what changes, if any, will be triggered by publishing
a particular picture. Even in hindsight, we lack proof of what an indi-
vidual photograph accomplished. With so many other historical factors
to consider, it is nearly impossible to trace the effects of a single image,
leaving us to infer causality where it might not actually exist.

The argument that a picture is newsworthy because it will better the
world puts the bar ridiculously high, and we have used this lofty ideal
to justify the censorship of images documenting American death. Al-
though news editors and audiences tend to have faith that there is value
in bearing witness to foreign tragedy, fantasizing about the potential
benefits of seeing these images, we do not imagine that the domestic
depictions could have positive effects. Instead, we expect that pictures
that happen to reveal domestic deaths will cause great harm if published.
Despite our convictions, the positive and negative effects have yet to
be established scientifically. (It is unclear, for example, whether pictures
of Sandy Hook Elementary School fatalities could advance gun control
policy to save lives.)

The tendency to justify a picture as newsworthy if it promises to
achieve great good also reveals how we make heavy demands of pho-
tojournalism while expecting relatively little of word-based reporting.
When the news uses words to inform us of the death toll, editors feel no need to defend the language choice as one that will right a wrong and save lives. When reporters use words to relay who has died—and where, how, and when they died—these particulars seem inherently important and naturally newsworthy. In contrast to the corresponding images that we often judge odious, when they are announcing a tragedy, the words seem without sin, as if they are duty-bound to transmit the facts. For these reasons, the words about death need no justification. Like the words, pictures could be considered broadly legitimate and, like words, they could be valued simply as a record of an important event. But their fates have diverged dramatically.

Our Photo Fetish

The celebration provoked by some images, and the deep anti-picture prejudice provoked by others, are two sides of the same coin. Whether we are glorifying its power to change the world or criminalizing it as snuff porn, we endow the postmortem picture with a magical power. We are convinced that some images harm while others heal, some violate while others liberate, and some embolden evil while others defeat it. As we fetishize, the image inspires quickly shifting fantasies and fears.

Although the thinking is magical, it is applied quite systematically. The difference between a “fit” and “unfit” postmortem photo conforms to certain patterns, which editors absorb and translate into practice. Editors lack objective criteria (such as scientific insight into a picture’s actual effects) when deciding which image should be published, but with great reliability, editors make similar decisions each day, and what they learn to reproduce, audiences learn to expect.

Yet, with a mass audience numbering in the millions, the fantasies and fears of some will not always perfectly align with those of an editor, and in these moments, controversy erupts. These are heated controversies, where fears reflect an exaggerated sense of danger involving loosely defined conceptions of harm. But whether the threat is real or imagined, when fear is heightened, protection becomes more important. In response, we perceive a need to be vigilant against the threat, creating a persistent sense of a crisis in journalism, which in turn breeds an inexhaustible need for control. The controversial picture of death
sparks intense fights over the purpose of the press, the role of evidence, and even the nature of truth. With each controversial image, we argue over who can know what, and through what means it can be known. With a sense of desperation, we scramble to defend vast notions of taste, decency, privacy, and ethics. Mix in other important distinctions, like those involving nationality, race, and class, and there is even more at stake. The pictures provide irresistible opportunities to wrangle with really big issues because, in our deliberations over death’s depiction, our preoccupations reverberate. With so much meaning at play, it makes sense that we obsessively police these images. Here, then, is the story of perhaps the most contested news practice: picturing the corpse.