

To Publish or Not to Publish 1

Keep in mind a photojournalist's ethical duty to be fair, accurate and clear.

There is said to be a "breakfast rule" to guide publication decisions: Do not publish anything that will make people choke on their breakfast.

Situation

Parents in your community are calling and writing the local newspaper. They are angry about two recent uses of photographs in the morning newspaper:

1. Three American troops and 10 Iraqi citizens, including two children, were killed when a car bomb exploded in a shopping district. On the front page of the Tuesday paper was a photograph that clearly showed the uncovered bodies, blood and damage to cars and shops.
2. On Wednesday, on the back of the comics page, a full-page advertisement for women's undergarments was published. Some considered the poses "seductive" and "far too revealing." Children who read the comics might see the ad.



- Do you think public response should guide the decision to publish or not publish more than news value? Are the subscribers right to complain?
- Is there an ethical reason to publish or not publish?
- What considerations guide your decision?
- What is your decision?

Golden Mean

Moral absolutes can be troublesome. We can almost always think of exceptions to moral guidelines. Recognizing this problem, Aristotle developed the concept of the golden mean, a middle course between extremes of excess and deficiency. Aristotle would contend that it is unethical never to lie, just as it is always to lie. The challenge, as he saw it, was to find the point of ethical balance between two extremes -- in this case, between excessive and deficient honesty. A century earlier, Confucius developed much the same philosophy with his "Doctrine of the Mean."

Categorical Imperative

Immanuel Kant contributed the concept of the categorical imperative to the study of ethics. He said people should make ethical decisions as if their chosen action would establish a universal law, a clear principle that would apply to everyone. For example, before a person lied to the news media to prevent embarrassment, he/she should ponder the consequences of a categorical imperative that ruled that everyone should lie to the news media to prevent embarrassment.

Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill helped develop the philosophy of Utilitarianism, a belief that all actions should be directed at producing the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The greatest good is defined as that which produces the greatest happiness for the human race, not the individual. In other words, Utilitarianism asks individuals to be impartial about their own happiness and focus on the happiness of the greatest number.

Social Justice

In his book *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls urged decision makers to consider the values of all affected publics, not just those of the powerful. To do this, Rawls suggested decision makers figuratively put on a "veil of ignorance." By that, he meant that they should look at the situation from all points of view without regard to rank, power, or status; in other words, decision makers should "forget" their current status and imagine that they are someone else affected by the situation. Rawls also suggested that, in order to redress social injustice, the most disadvantaged publics in a situation should receive the most advantages. The only exception to that should be freedom, which Rawls said should be shared equally by all.