

The use of images of dead people on television and other media. The opinion of the journalists of Catalonia

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Abstract

The victims' right to privacy is paramount, although percentages vary according to each particular situation. There is full agreement in the case of images of people who have committed suicide and a lot of agreement when the images show victims of domestic violence or catastrophes. However, if the death has been caused by a political authority and might affect a large number of people, most would use these images, no matter how shocking, because they feel they raise the awareness of the population.

Among the different types of journalists answering the questions, women and young people defend stricter deontological positions to preserve the image of the victim, unlike men and older professionals. The research, which has been promoted by the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, was carried out via an online questionnaire in January de 2009, with the participation of 1,198 professionals.

Key words

Journalism, pain, affliction, images, corpse, television, information, Catalonia, ethics

Resum

Els periodistes catalans es declaren en general contraris a l'ús d'imatges de cadàvers i de despulles humanes a la informació. Preval el dret a la intimitat de les víctimes, tot i que els percentatges varien segons les situacions plantejades. Hi ha ple acord quan es tracta d'imatges de persones que s'han suïcidat i un acord destacat quan les imatges mostren víctimes de la violència domèstica o de catàstrofes. Ara bé, si la mort té una autoria política i pot afectar gran quantitat de persones, la majoria farien servir aquestes imatges, per dures que fossin, perquè consideren que sensibilitzen la població.

Entre els perfils de periodistes que responen, les dones i els joves defensen postures deontològiques més severes per preservar la imatge de la víctima, a l'inrevés que els homes i els professionals de més edat. La recerca, que està impulsada per la Universitat Pompeu Fabra, es va realitzar a través d'un qüestionari en línia el gener de 2009, en què van participar 1.198 professionals.

Paraules clau

Periodisme, dolor, aflicció, imatges, cadàvers, televisió, informació, Catalunya i deontologia

Introduction

One of the most persistent ethical concerns in the broadcasting media consists of determining what must be shown and what must be protected in the images that illustrate or show tragic events such as wars, natural catastrophes or large accidents, terrorist attacks, acts of violence or suicides. In these cases, it is very difficult to discover the role of some explicit images that, in addition to information, have an associated effect of morbidity or sensationalism. A choice must be made between the right of citizens to information and the right to privacy of the people appearing and this is an ongoing ethical debate.

Even more delicate is the treatment of images of dead people. Is it appropriate to show dead bodies in news items? Does seeing images of victims and specifically of dead bodies in accidents, wars or catastrophes help to raise the public's awareness of these issues or to provoke, by repetition, collective insensibility? It is not only a question of the effects that might be provoked in the receiver or of protecting the rights of the victim but also of preventing the suffering caused to relatives in seeing images of the death of a loved one over and over again in the media.

At the Department of Communication of the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, the Journalism Research Group (GRP in Catalan) is carrying out a study on the ethical quality that pro-

professionals and citizens expect from the media. This research is called "Ètica i excel·lència informativa. L'ètica periodística davant les expectatives dels ciutadans" (Ethics and information excellence. Journalistic ethics compared with citizen expectations) and is funded by the R&D programme of the Ministry of Science and Technology. The research started in January 2007 and will end in the first quarter of 2010. The work does not aim to establish the deontological quality of the information provided to citizens but to discover whether this ethical quality is as expected by the professionals themselves and, moreover, by citizens. Consequently, the research measures the degree of expectation and to a certain extent the satisfaction of producers and targets of information in Catalonia. Coordinated with the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, the same research is being applied to three more autonomous communities: to the Basque Country through the Universitat del País Basc, to Andalusia through the Universidad de Sevilla and to Madrid through the Universidad Carlos III. The Universitat Pompeu Fabra is the initial promoter of the study.

In all, the research was divided into three phases, each carried out over the course of one year. In 2007 the most important general and specific deontological codes were gathered for Spain and Europe. In 2008 journalists were consulted on their deontological expectations, the core issue of this article, and in 2009 it was the turn of citizens, which is still underway.

In this article we are concerned with a very specific part of the results from the second phase, i.e. analysing a response of journalists to a precise issue on which they were consulted. This is the exhibition of images of accidents, catastrophes and tragedies in which human remains or dead bodies appear due to the very nature of the news item, as well as the professional treatment required by such sensitive material.

From the time when the research was designed, it was noted that all the situations that generate human pain constitute, in general, one of the most controversial and discussed issues of the profession, concerning which the codes often recommend respect to the victims and family, as well as scrupulous treatment of the identity of the people affected. This issue is even more interesting in the media with the greatest social impact, TV news. This article presents and compares the answers of journalists from television with the opinions of journalists who do not use images as the core of their work.

Regarding the news treatment of victims, there are a series of explicit deontological recommendations. The Consell de l'Audiovisual de Catalunya (CAC) advises against the repeated broadcasting of images of a news item due to the pain this causes to family members, no matter how much the news programme warns of the shocking nature of the content and that the journalistic treatment may be correct. In their recommendations, moreover, the CAC (2004, 35-45) alerts to the peril of "media over-attention", of the disproportionate use of resources, of turning tragedy into spectacle and the use of archive images. It also explicitly states the following:

"As much as possible, and as a general rule, resorting to

images of dead victims, coffins or injured people must be avoided. Often these kinds of images are employed as simple illustration and in a repeated manner."

(CAC 2004; 44)

This problem is experienced constantly by editing teams. When news programmes have specific images of a tragedy, these are often used, as happened in July 2009 on the death of a young man in the festival of San Fermín, in Pamplona. Not only because a bull run is a spectacle that is broadcast live on television but because, throughout the run, a large number of cameras, both professional and amateur, take images from all angles of accidents and impalings. That's why the images of the death of this young man were repeated with the immediacy and repetition the CAC had warned against. Moreover, throughout that time other bloody and appalling incidents frequently occurred, involving injured young people, that received similar attention. The TV news programmes used a multitude of images to inform about these events and the newspapers put them on the next day's front pages. In fact, we might argue that, if the bull run had been broadcast live, what problem was there in using any image afterwards?

Often these images are used to enhance a piece of information, to illustrate the moment when the fact that is news and the multiple references made to it afterwards (Alsius, 1999; 397). Another case, also deontologically questionable but of a different nature, is the use of these images in a situation of emergency news stories, under the pressure of getting to the public in time. Normally both situations combine: the pressure to use very delicate material in little time and the subsequent repetition involved in continued information. The issue of the treatment of suffering is contained, moreover, in the codes and style guides of different news corporations and channels. We find specific recommendations in the code of ethics *Codi deontològic dels periodistes catalans*,¹ in the code of ethics *Código deontológico de la profesión periodística de la Federación d'Associacions de Periodistes d'Espanya (FAPE)*,² in the style guide *Libro de estilo de Telemadrid*,³ in the style guide *Libro de estilo de ABC*,⁴ in the principles *Principios d'actuació dels mitjans de la CCMA*,⁵ in the style guide *Libro de estilo de la COPE*,⁶ in the style guide *Libro de estilo de Vocento*,⁷ in the editor's guide *Estatuto de redacción de El Periódico de Catalunya*,⁸ in the editor's guide *Estatuto de redacción de la Agencia EFE*,⁹ and in the document "Compromisos éticos asumidos por la Asociación Nacional de Informadores Gráficos de Prensa y Televisión (ANIGP-TV)",¹⁰ among others.

Catalan journalists, on the whole, are aware of this problem, as commented in the in-depth interviews prior to designing the survey. Most of the thirty journalists interviewed mentioned the need to be careful with this kind of information and many even defended that this kind of images should not be shown, so that there was a clear discrepancy between what a large part of the profession says and what is sometimes done in news production. Precisely for this reason, the question about the images of

dead people had a quantitative place in the survey, because it asked about a controversial deontological point.

The in-depth interviews investigated this issue openly so that professionals would talk as freely as they felt was appropriate.¹¹ The question asked months later in the online questionnaire was formulated in the following way, as found by the journalists in a series of screens. The survey was available over twenty days in January 2009 and asked more than forty questions related to deontology.¹²

The same question was asked relating to five clearly different cases: the legitimacy of using images of dead bodies. The cases chosen were sufficiently different from each other to require an independent answer, as they ranged from traffic accidents to attacks and from wars to domestic violence. In all cases these were deaths with authors and circumstances that were sufficiently different to ask about each situation separately. Respondents were also asked about the suicides of anonymous people.

Three possible responses were provided for these five cases. Two were more or less resounding agreement or disagreement with the statement in the question, but with justification. And there was a third option, not exactly central, that was one of the justifications most widely employed by some liberal positions: it is appropriate to use images of tragedy and human suffering because it raises the population's awareness about certain offences being committed or about certain problems. The prior in-depth interviews helped to show that, with these possible answers, the range of typical attitudes would be covered that are held by journalists concerning this issue.

One further note concerning methodological issues. Why, in the question, did we use the expression "dead people" and not the more normal "shocking images of human suffering"? For reasons of accuracy. If a questionnaire asks about images that show the suffering caused by an earthquake or murder, it is not sufficiently clear what the person answering the question is imagining. Perhaps they are imagining collapsed buildings and rescue teams working there, i.e. hope. But if we ask about the use of images of dead bodies -of "dead people"- the question is more direct, simple and easy to understand. Moreover, it introduces some central elements to the debate, as we have already mentioned: the right of victims to their privacy, the right of viewers to information and also the right of viewers not to be offended.

Overall findings

As has already been noted, the survey was offered online. The messages accompanying the survey contained an explanation of the study's objectives and a direct link was provided to a website where they could answer a questionnaire of 48 questions, 18 of which were socio-demographic in nature. Number 35 was the one that asked about the use of images of dead people. 1,198 journalists answered the survey validly.

In general, the positions that defended absolute tolerance when showing any kind of image were the most limited in number, ranging from 21.6% in the case of war, a situation in which maximum freedom is given, to 1.5% of journalists who accepted this even in the case of suicides of anonymous people, the situation that, for the profession as a whole, warrants greater restriction.

Apart from these two extremes, the rest of the cases occupy the central positions: on terrorist attacks, 14.2% of respondents stated that images could be offered without any self-control; on catastrophes in general, 10.4%; on violence against women, 5.7%, and on traffic accidents, 4.3%.

As can be seen, those professionals are always a minority who state they have no problem in showing images of dead people, whatever kind. However, a leap can be observed when we go from collective tragedies to those that often have a more intimate and personal dimension. For wars, catastrophes or terrorist attacks, the result is over 10%, while in cases of violence against women only 5.7% believe it is justified to show images of dead people, as in traffic accidents. And, as has already been mentioned, the attitude of ethical permissiveness reaches its minimum in cases of suicide, where only 1.5% would show images of the dead person "without any problem".

Raising the awareness of the population

Most of the answers contain the argument of the need to raise the population's awareness. Specifically, all answers are between 35 and 50%, with the notable exception, once again, of the case of suicides. Only 6.5% of the respondents believe that images should be published to raise the awareness of the

Table 1. Should images of dead people be shown in the following cases?

Cases	Yes, because the public has the right to receive all the information	Only if they can help to raise the population's awareness	No, because the right to privacy of the victim must take priority
Traffic accidents	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Wars	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Domestic violence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Terrorist attacks	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Suicides of non -public people	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Source: authors' own.

population. In the rest of the cases this answer is the most common.

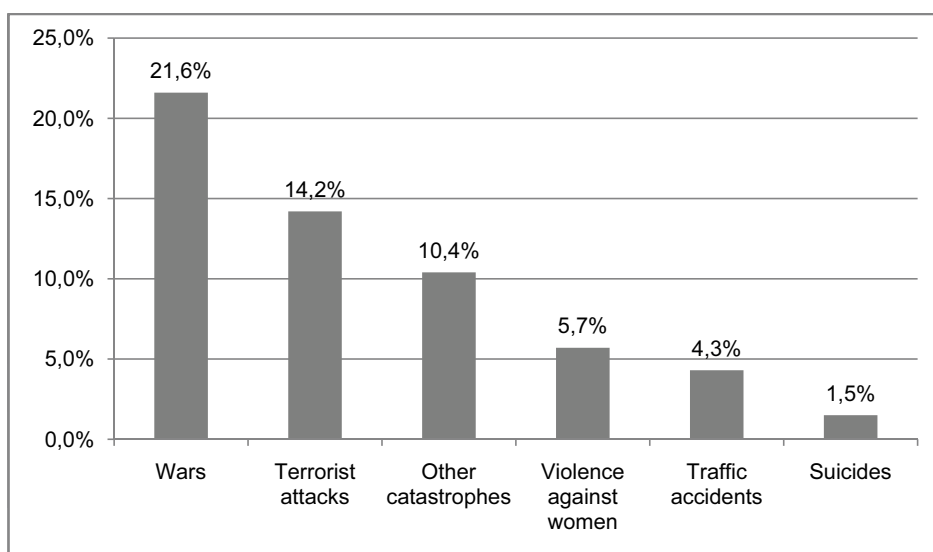
Once again, war is where the position taken is most permissive. 48.9% of the professionals accept using images to raise the awareness of the public. With the rest of the categories there is a clear similarity between them. For terrorist attacks, 37.9%; for traffic accidents, 37.4% and, for violence against women and catastrophes, two points less, 35.4% and 35.1%, respectively.

Absolute defence of the right to privacy

Perhaps when the results are turned around and we look at those professionals who, in one category or another, agree with defending, above everything else and solely, the right of people to their privacy, does the picture of journalism as a whole in Catalonia regarding this issue become easier to understand.

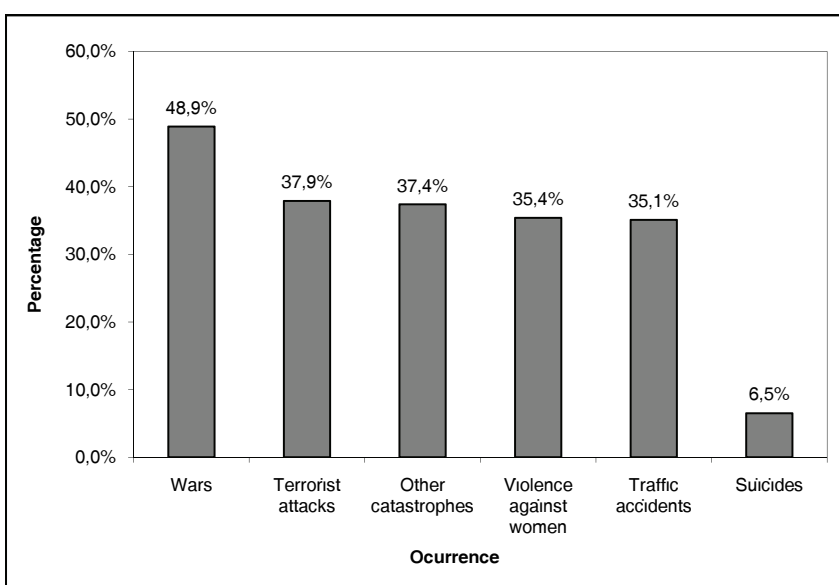
Victims' right to privacy prevails in the case of suicide and when the death, no matter how horrifying, is of a person who,

Graph 1. Cases in which the professionals surveyed find the showing of images of dead people totally justifiable (in %)



Source: authors' own.

Graph 2. Cases in which the respondents believe it is justifiable to show dead people in order to raise awareness (in %)



Source: authors' own.

so to speak, has an identity and face that must be protected. Especially in the case of unknown people, the answer is close to unanimous, with 90.3% of journalists rejecting the use of images. At the next level of answers, with a little more than 55%, come the cases of violence against women and traffic accidents, human tragedies with very different authors and conditioning factors that affect people more than communities. In these cases the right to privacy of the victims continues to be important. Also in the case of general catastrophes, which usually affect groups rather than individuals, the overall result is still above 50%: a small majority of journalists, 52.5%, defend the position that images of dead people should not be shown in this case.

The result changes when the horror of any violent death - and of the images that show this - is magnified by aggression of a political nature, be it in the cases of terrorism or war. These are the two cases that arouse the most justification for informing people of such occurrences and, in general, most journalists are in favour of using the images obtained. However, these cases differ significant from each other.

With terrorist attacks, the liberal position wins, albeit by a narrow margin. 53.9% prefer to use images for inform, while 46.1% of those surveyed wish to respect the right to privacy of the dead people. There are only seven percentage points' difference.

The results are much more decisive in the case of war, the only occurrence - together with suicide - with clear majorities. Only 28.3% of the journalists answering the survey were against showing these images. The right to information prevails resoundingly by a proportion of almost three out of every four journalists. 71.7% are in favour of using these images.

The variable of gender

If we introduce socio-demographic variables into the analysis, the first aspect that we wish to take into consideration is the gender of the journalists. This survey was answered by 57.3% men and 42.4% women,¹³ a proportion similar to that stated for 2004 in the *Llibre blanc de la professió periodística a Catalunya*,¹⁴ although the proportion of female journalists has risen by four percentage points, with the consequent reduction in the presence of men.

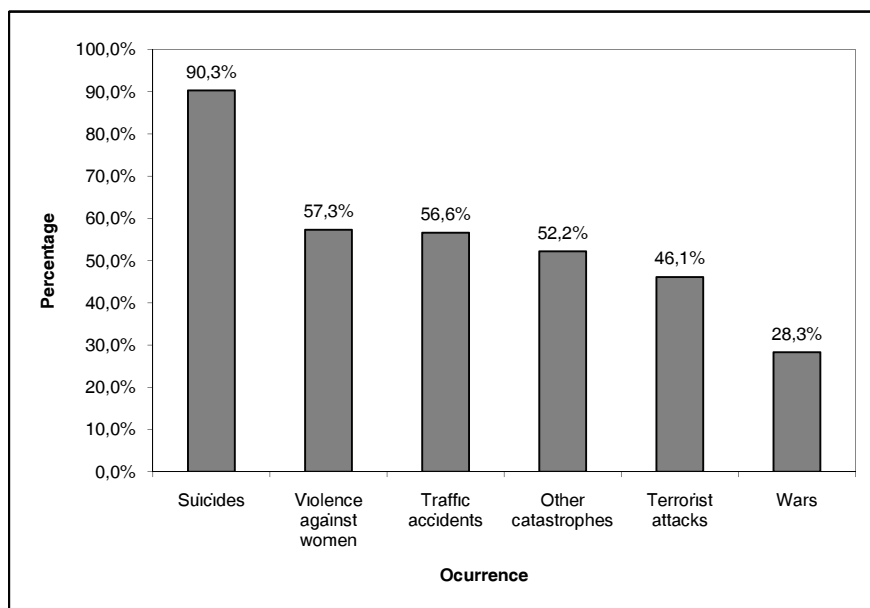
The comparative results by gender are quite significant. Among those defending the fact that the right to privacy comes before that of the need for information, the proportion of women is clearly higher than that of men: about ten points higher. In all the cases women are seen to be more reticent than men in using the images in question.

Male journalists are more permissive and lax. When they state that they defend the privacy of victims, as a gender they do so with less intensity than women. And within the completely liberal positions we find the same trend. The percentage of men defending the position of using images without restrictions is significantly higher than that of women, also in all types of occurrences.

Age and deontology

Very clear results are also obtained when the general answers are analysed according to the age of the respondents. The older they are, the more ethical lassitude appears and the permissive attitudes increase that pay less attention to the victim's right to

Graph 3. Cases in which the professionals surveyed believe that images of dead people should not be shown as the right to privacy prevails (in %)



Source: authors' own.

Table 2. By gender: against using images because the right to privacy prevails

By gender: against using images because the right to privacy prevails		
	Women	Men
Traffic accidents	64.9%	52.2%
Catastrophes	59.6%	48.9%
Wars	34.9%	23.4%
Violence against women	67.4%	51.6%
Terrorist attacks	55.5%	40.7%
Suicides	96.4%	88.4%

Source: authors' own.

privacy than the supposed needs for information. Journalists from the old school, so to speak, are more in favour of showing images of dead bodies in the media.

By age group, 30.7% of those surveyed are aged up to 35; 51.3% are between 36 and 55 years of age and 15.4% are older than 55. 2.5% did not answer the question about age.

The results show the clear trend noted before: the deontological permissiveness of the third age group, those aged over 56, with regard to this area in particular (because it should be noted that this is not observed - or is even the opposite case - when answering on other issues). Whereas there is a slight difference between the first and second age segment in favour of young people as more rigid defenders of deontological values and limitations, the difference is evident between these two first segments and that of the last age group. The difference is even more noticeable in the case, for example, of terrorist attacks, where there are almost twenty percentage points' difference.

If we review the opposite approach, i.e. the composition of the groups of journalists who do not take into account the objections that might be raised when these images are published, we find the same proportions. The liberal tendency increases clearly among those journalists aged over 56.

Television journalists versus journalists from other media

The third of the variables with a significant effect on the findings is the kind of media in which the respondent works. In general, journalists working for television are more rigid in

Table 3. By gender: in favour of using images without any ethical restriction

By gender: in favour of using images without any ethical restriction		
	Women	Men
Traffic accidents	1%	7%
Catastrophes	8%	12.6%
Wars	15.9%	26.6%
Violence against women	2%	8.8%
Terrorist attacks	10%	17.7%
Suicides	0.2%	2.5%

Source: authors' own.

deontological terms, i.e. they tend to defend the image of victims. They are more careful and prudent in their use than their colleagues working for other media, apart from the case of suicides, where both groups are equal.

The comparison has been made between the answers given by journalists working for newspapers, radio and news agencies, i.e. who tend to work with words - although there is the exception of press photographers - and do not handle or edit images. Specifically, of the 1,198 professionals answering the survey, 598 correspond to this group. 278 newspaper journalists answered (24.3%), 151 radio journalists (12.9%) and 174 working for news agencies (14.9%).

257 journalists answered the survey from the area of television (22.1%). The answers from journalists working on the Internet were not counted (146, 12.5%), nor those from unspecified media (86, 7.4%) as the work carried out by these is too imprecise to determine whether they worked with images constantly or not. Given this doubt, it was more prudent to leave these two groups out of the comparison.

As can be seen in table 6, the opinion of television journalists is more demanding from a deontological point of view for this issue in particular than that of their peers working for other media. The percentage of those who would like to have no professional restriction on the use of images of dead people on television is lower in all cases. The difference is very clear in the case of traffic accidents and reduces when the question is about catastrophes. But it widens again in the cases of terrorist attacks, violence against women and wars.

The same thing happens when we compare the percentage of

Table 4. By age: against using images because the right to privacy prevails

By age: against using images because the right to privacy prevails			
	Up to 35	Between 36 and 55	Over 56
Traffic accidents	62.1%	58.8%	44.2%
Catastrophes	56.3%	55.4%	39.8%
Wars	28.8%	29.9%	21.1%
Violence against women	63.1%	60.4%	42.5%
Terrorist attacks	50.6%	50.1%	29.6%
Suicides	93.6%	92.9%	84.5%

Source: authors' own.

Table 5. By age: in favour of using images without any ethical restriction

By age: in favour of using images without any ethical restriction			
	Up to 35	Between 36 and 55	Over 56
Traffic accidents	1.9%	4.4%	9.4%
Catastrophes	9%	10%	16%
Wars	19.4%	19.7%	33.9%
Violence against women	2.8%	6.4%	9.4%
Terrorist attacks	12%	13.3%	22.9%
Suicides	0.85%	1.8%	1.7%

Source: authors' own.

respondents stating that they are against the use of these images because the victim's right to privacy prevails over the citizens' right to information. In this case, the response given by television journalists is once again more demanding. The average approximate distance is ten points in the case of traffic accidents and catastrophes, seven points for wars and almost fifteen points in the case of violence against women and terrorist attacks.

Conclusions

There is a certain discrepancy in findings and nuances concerning the use of images of dead people in some of the cases we have asked about. The only general, common opinions are related to two types of event, wars and suicides, although with opposite opinions for these two cases.

Suicide arouses the greatest consensus in the survey, as the vast majority of respondents state that they are against showing any image of the dead person involved.

In the case of war, agreement is not so great but is very clear: three out of every four journalists would use the images. This consensus obscures a three-way position that, in simple terms, can be summarised as follows: 20% of journalists are in favour of always using images of dead people, 30% are against and the rest, half the journalists, alter the result because they would show these images in order to sensitise the population against the war, i.e. for non-informative reasons.

The rest of the situations in the survey - traffic accidents, violence against women and terrorist attacks - have a highly aligned series of majorities. These issues therefore express the points on which the profession is most divided in Catalonia.

With regard to terrorist attacks, the permissive stance wins by a narrow margin but, once again, this small majority is ultimately distorted because many of the journalists who answered that they would use the images use the argument of raising awareness.

Consequently, in the cases of victims killed by other people for political reason, war or terrorism, Catalan journalists prefer to sacrifice the victim's rights over their image for what they consider to be the greater or more advantageous good: educating the public against political violence.

This is reversed in the rest of the cases, although very small majorities continue. In the cases of violent death that can be attributed to fate or the negligence of someone, be it the victim or another driver but without any specific desire to kill, as in the case of traffic accidents, defence of the victim's right over their image just wins out.

However, if there is the desire to kill, as in the case of victims of violence against women, and there is a specific victim, the right to protect the person's images prevails. It might be thought that this is also the case of terrorism (individual victims killed), but we must remember that this has often produced tragedies that resemble war. There is no way of knowing whether journalists, in answering the question on terrorism, were thinking of the many victims of an attack, such as the one

Table 6. By medium: favour of using images without any ethical restriction

By medium: favour of using images without any ethical restriction		
	Television	Other media¹⁵
Traffic accidents	0.8%	5.8%
Catastrophes	7.1%	7.9%
Wars	15.3%	25.4%
Violence against women	3.5%	6.8%
Terrorist attacks	10.2%	17.4%

Source: authors' own.

Table 7. By medium: against using images because the right to privacy prevails

By medium: against using images because the right to privacy prevails		
	Television	Other media
Traffic accidents	63.3%	54.5%
Catastrophes	59.4%	49.4%
Wars	33.7%	26.5%
Violence against women	66.3%	51.8%
Terrorist attacks	56.9%	42.3%

Source: authors' own.

in Madrid in 2004 or London in 2007, for example, or the steady flow of terrorist victims with a clearer identity, such as those killed by ETA. Whatever the situation, in the case of terrorism the positions defending the use of these images on the whole are based on the need to raise the awareness of the population, a point that does not appear in the case of violence against women.

On the whole, it is evident that the deontological stances regarding the use of images of dead people are, in general, restrictive, as already expressed in the in-depth interviews, although the nature of the answer changes when the option of an educational objective or raising awareness by informing is introduced. For wars and terrorism, the victims' privacy is sacrificed in exchange for a supposedly greater good, a point that does not happen in the case of violence against women or in traffic accidents.

The conditioning factors that seem to influence these answers are, firstly, gender and age and, at a secondary level, the medium in which (or for which) the journalist works. In this case, young journalists are seen to follow stricter criteria because they are the most reluctant of all the age sub-groups to show images of dead people in news items. On the other hand, older journalists are those who seem to be most permissive when showing such images. Deontology is a discipline systematically provided by university courses for several years now and young journalists have taken this on board, prepared to take on the commercial interests of large communication companies. Subsequent studies would need to confirm the nature and origin of this deontological strictness on the part of younger journalists.

The trend is repeated in the case of gender. Women seem to be more against showing images of dead people, while men are more collusive. It should also be noted that this trend by gender can be seen in all the age sub-groups and always in the same direction.

The factor of the medium where the journalists work also reveals a highly interesting situation. While attitudes are more permissive and in favour of showing images in the press, on the radio and at news agencies, on the television journalists are quite a lot more critical. Those working for television are seen to be against showing such images, perhaps because they are often embroiled in public debates that question their work and have therefore taken many of society's precautions on board. In this context, television is the medium that tends to have the strictest opinions and also where the most famous examples of excess with images have occurred, a polarity that also warrants further investigation. It can be concluded, however, that those who work in producing television news themselves expect the final product they are working on to have more deontological quality.

Notes

- 1 Article 9.
- 2 Article 4, developed afterwards in the recommendations "Recomendaciones acerca del tratamiento informativo de las situaciones catastróficas".
- 3 Article 2.8.A.
- 4 Paragraph eight.
- 5 Article 3.5.2.
- 6 Articles 1.1.c, 2.3.c i 3.2.
- 7 Article 1.2.11.a.
- 8 Article 6.
- 9 Article 12.
- 10 Article 6c.
- 11 Specifically, the question was: "Do you think that any special precaution should be taken in the treatment of victims of accidents, tragedies, wars, domestic violence, etc.?"
- 12 The methodological aspects of the survey were supervised by a specialist team from the College of Sociologists and Political Scientists of Catalonia, led by Lluís Sáez.
- 13 0.3 % of those answering did not identify their gender.
- 14 On page 16, it establishes that, in 2004, there were 62.9% male journalists compared with 37.1% female journalists in Catalonia. SOLER, P. (dir). *Llibre blanc de la professió periodística a Catalunya*. Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya - Departament de la Presidència, 2006.
- 15 These data are obtained by calculating the average of the percentages of journalists working for the press, radio and news agencies.

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