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Graphic death in the news media: present or absent?

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Abstract

The debate over the absence or presence of death in public discourse has dominated death studies for some time. While the argument that death had been removed from public discourse and only existed in the private realm dominated at first, in recent years scholars have come to accept that death has moved back into public discourse. An important aspect has been the role played by the mass media. However, there has been little empirical research as to what level death is actually visible, for example in terms of photographs. To this end, this paper examines how two German and two Australian newspapers cover death in terms of graphic photographs. By examining the number and types of photographs published during a two-month timeframe, as well as through in-depth interviews with journalists, this paper argues that visible death is still largely absent from public discourse. Importantly, there exist differences as to what level of graphic death is acceptable between individual newspapers as well as countries, supporting the argument that the absence/presence of death dichotomy needs to be seen in a much more complex light.

Keywords

Death and media, death in public discourse, graphic death, journalism and death, dead body

Introduction

Representations of death and dying in the modern age have found increasing attention from scholars in various disciplines, particularly so in the area of sociology (Howarth, 2007). Studies in this field have investigated a variety of areas of representation, with increasing attention being given to aspects of how death and dying is portrayed in the mass media. The debate on how media represent death has been at the heart of the argument that death in Western societies has in the late 20th century been absent from public discourse and only present in private form. This claim was originally made by the historian Philippe Aries (1974) who argued that death was forbidden in modern society because Western culture placed such a high value on happiness, love, life and joy.

The shift away from public bereavement was also noted by Gorer (1965) who argued that natural death was excluded from public discourse. In his seminal article “The Pornography of Death”, Gorer argued that there had been a reversal of attitudes to sex and death since the 19th century, leading to death becoming somewhat of a taboo subject. “Whereas copulation has become more and more ‘mentionable’, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon societies, death has become more and more ‘unmentionable’ *as a natural process*” (Gorer, 1965: 195; emphasis in original). However, Gorer (1965: 197) also suggested that while natural death had become “smothered in prudery”, violent death was being increasingly displayed to mass audiences. This, he argued, had led to so-called “death-denying” societies. This notion

of a “sequestration of death”, or removal of death from the public to the private realm” was also supported in research by Giddens (1991) as well as Mellor and Shilling (1993).

Yet in recent times there has been an increasing amount of research which argues that death is moving back into public discourse. Walter (1991; Walter, Littlewood & Pickering, 1995) argued against the prevailing view that death had appeared from public discourse by noting that in fact death was ubiquitous in a variety of forms in the mass media. Yet, Walter et al. (1995) qualified their statement by arguing that only a minority of deaths were actually reported in the news, which concentrated on the deaths of public figures or public deaths of private individuals. “The deaths boldly headlined and portrayed by the news media are extraordinary deaths ... They are also types of death which, unlike the majority of deaths, typically occur in a public place” (Walter et al., 1995: 594). Adding support to Walter’s (1991) observations, Howarth (2007: 35) noted that social theorists had been so preoccupied with uncovering hidden death that they perhaps neglected to note the omni-presence of public death. Pointing to social and cultural diversity in the West, Howarth (2007: 39) argued that “denial of death might more properly be identified as a neglect of marginal experiences and practices surrounding death and dying”.

Unfortunately, few studies have empirically examined just how visible death is in Western mass media in order to shed more light on the public/private debate. A number of studies have examined representations of death, particularly in international news reporting (Adams, 1986; Burdach, 1988; Singer, Endreny & Glassman, 1991; Moeller, 1999; Christensen, 2004), but few have examined how present death is in the sense that people are directly confronted with it. While it may be true that death is omni-present in the media, particularly in foreign news reporting which more often than not focuses on ‘bad news’, there have been few studies that explored just how confrontational that coverage is. We often hear complaints about media showing gruesome pictures of the dead, yet there is little empirical evidence of just how salient this coverage is. This article therefore attempts to provide some empirical data of the photographic coverage of death in newspapers of two Western countries, Germany and Australia. This coverage is analysed in depth in relation to the four newspapers’ journalists’ comments on how they report death. It is important to talk to the actual news producers about their attitudes to reporting death rather than just infer reasons for decisions from the content published in newspapers alone. In this context, Moeller’s (1999) study has been a notable exception.

Media coverage of death

A number of scholars have examined the coverage of death in the mass media (for example, Christensen, 2004; Gerbner, 1980; Höijer, 2004; Moeller, 1999; Seale, 2004; Walter, 1991). From these studies we can see that media place different values on people according to their age, gender, status, nationality, as well as the cause of death. In his study of killers and victims on US television programs, Gerbner (1980) found that women were most likely to be represented as victims. In a study of news coverage of famine, Moeller (1999) found similar results, stating that mothers and children made ideal victims. Höijer (2004) noted that some victims were simply ‘better’ victims than others. She added elderly men to the list, as they were considered weak and therefore more worthy of compassion. Palgi and Abramovitch (1984) noted that in traditional societies, the death of a chief or a man of high standing had much wider-ranging consequences than the death of a stranger. This resonates with Walter et al.’s (1995) argument that the deaths that were reported in the media were either

unusual ones or those of public people, such as politicians, sportspeople, celebrities, etc. The cause of death also plays a role in whether media report a certain death, with Combs and Slovic (1979) finding that newspapers overemphasised homicides, accidents and disasters, but underemphasised death caused by diseases. Examining the media coverage of natural deaths, Seale (2004) found that newspapers placed negative emphasis on certain types of deaths, such as the deaths of people who died alone. Dying alone, Seale (2004: 967) argued, was represented as “the outcome of an undesirable personal character”.

An area where there exist a number of studies is the representation of death in international news reporting (Adams, 1986, Singer et al., 1991; Christensen, 2004). Here, researchers have been concerned with the apparent bias in reporting deaths from culturally similar countries while disregarding deaths from distant places. This problem is best explained by the oft-cited comments from US journalists who say “one dead fireman in Brooklyn is worth five English bobbies, who are worth 50 Arabs, who are worth 500 Africans” (Moeller, 1999). A similar line exists in Australia (Romei, 2004). And while journalists may not actually use a calculator and apply this rule when deciding which news to report, studies have found there is much truth to the claim that journalists select news about deaths from abroad based on how close the victims are to their own culture (see, eg. Adams, 1986; Singer et al., 1991; Moeller, 1999).

Visual coverage of death

It has also been argued that distant deaths are more likely to be portrayed graphically than deaths that occur close to home (Walter et al., 1995; Taylor, 1998; Sontag, 2003). Taylor (1998: 129) notes that “death is rarely seen in ragged human remains unless they are foreign”. Overall, however, media images of death in Western cultures have been known to be relatively sanitised. Fraser (1992) noted that, while media bosses wanted ever more gruesome and detailed pictures of people dying, at the same time they filtered out what they felt viewers should not see, thus ‘cleaning up’ events to make them acceptable to the public. In the British tabloid press, known to be very sensational, there even existed a taboo on graphic images of death and dying, resulting in very few such images being printed (Meech, 1992). In his analysis of photojournalism and war, Taylor (1998: 2) has argued that “images of bodies *in extremis* are regular subjects of entertainment in various media and are popular in the press, where their use is nonetheless more circumspect than in books, journals and exhibitions”. Campbell (2004) also noticed this form of ‘sanitised’ reporting and argued that if dead bodies did occur in the media, it was mostly those of people from distant places.

Petley (2003) also noted that while fictional representations became ever more explicit, non-fictional ones became increasingly sanitised in British and US mainstream media. Petley cited British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) producer guidelines which stated that dead people should not be shown unless there were compelling circumstances. Petley (2003) related an important anecdote by a British journalist about the aftermath of a mortar bomb landing in a Sarajevo street. A news agency camera crew had filmed the aftermath of the bombing, and journalists from various countries went about using part of the footage for their reports.

It was instructive to see how the reporters from different countries, and different television traditions, dealt with the pictures. The Italians used almost all of them: the brains, the intestines, the gutter literally running with blood in

the rain. The French used the gutter and the bodies. The Americans used the gutter. We used none of these things: just the covered bodies being put into the ambulances, the empty pram, the abandoned shoes (cited in Petley, 2003: 73).

This statement would suggest that scholars need to be careful in arguing about any single Western representation of death, as it appears that even within Western countries there are quite important differences in terms of what is deemed acceptable and what isn't. While this study attempts to establish some of the differences that exists within the West by examining the similarities and differences in pictorial treatment of death in Germany and Australia, a much wider study is needed in order to make out some more general differences and similarities between various national cultures of the West.

Two studies that have dealt solely with the coverage of death in photographs are those by Tsang (1984) and Singletary and Lamb (1984). Examining the use of news pictures in *Time* and *Newsweek*, Tsang (1984) found that violence was more likely to be shown when from abroad, with 31 per cent of *Time's* and 25 per cent of *Newsweek's* foreign pictures being violent. This compared to only 12 per cent of *Time's* and 13 per cent of *Newsweek's* US pictures being violent. Tsang (1984) also found that for culturally distant regions, such as Asia, the proportion of violent-oriented photographs was high, while for both Eastern and Western Europe, non-violent photos dominated. Singletary and Lamb (1984) examined news values in award-winning photographs and found that 81 per cent were either about accidents, disasters, crime or violence. Of those, around one-quarter showed personal injury or death, but only 2.7 per cent showed graphic details such as blood (Singletary and Lamb, 1984: 105). However, as the authors noted, the sample was limited to award-winners, not the daily newspaper coverage, which might reflect different trends. By examining the daily newspaper coverage of two German and two Australian newspapers, then, this paper addresses this gap in the literature.

Method

The study examined the pictorial coverage of death in the foreign news of two German newspapers, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, as well as two Australian newspapers, *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. One reason for selecting the two countries lay in the fact the author is of German origin and resides in Australia, and is therefore fully conversant in both cultures. This was deemed important in order to more fully understand underlying cultural behaviour in journalistic decision-making. The four selected newspapers are regarded as being amongst the leading quality newspapers in their respective countries, particularly in terms of their international news coverage. Each article that reported the death of at least one person was analysed during the months of September and October 2004. In addition, eight journalists from each newspaper, who were involved in the production of international news, were interviewed. Participants included editors, sub-editors, foreign desk workers and photographers. Interviews followed a semi-structured format.

Results

The four newspapers published a total of 997 stories that mentioned the death of at least one person during the research timeframe. This included 351 stories that were accompanied by a photo. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine* published by far the least photographs, at only 39 stories with a photo, or 18 per cent of the overall number of

stories published. *The Australian* published the most, with almost half the number of stories being published with a photo (129 stories/45 per cent). The *Herald* and *Süddeutsche* published a comparable amount of photographs, at 93 (39 per cent) and 90 (35 per cent) respectively.

But not all stories about death also meant death was visible in accompanying photos. In fact, very few photographs showed death at all. As Table 1 shows, only roughly 4.5 per cent of stories (16 out of 357) that included photographs actually showed a corpse in the photo. This finding is reasonably in line with Singletary and Lamb's (1984) finding that only 2.7 per cent of award-winning photographs showed graphic details such as blood. In fact, if we reduce the analysis to only pictures which showed blood, the number in this study would be five, or 1.4 per cent. Even if one adds to the photos of death the portrayal of body bags and coffins as well as the event of someone being killed, the total figure rises to 27 of 357 stories, or 7.5 per cent. Overall, the vast majority of photographs showed the dead people when they were still alive or showed general scenes of destruction that did not include bodies. A large number of stories also included photos that were unrelated to the deaths.

[Insert Table 1 here]

From the data we can also see a trend that would be revealed more in-depth in the interviews with the journalists. It appears that Australian newspapers are more open to showing death in news photos than are German newspapers, while German newspapers tend to prefer to show photos of people from when they were still alive. Again this relates to the comments made by the British journalist cited by Petley (2003) in that different nationalities had different sensibilities about showing death. However, there are clear distinctions within the Australian setting itself. *The Australian* showed the most amount of death, with 11 stories including a photo of a corpse. The *Herald* published four such stories, while the *Süddeutsche* published two and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* no such story. Thus, in terms of visible death alone, no direct national dimension is obvious. However, if we consider the other photographs published, this distinction becomes a little clearer. For example, 16 stories in *The Australian* included photos of injured people, as did nine stories in the *Herald*. Both *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and *Süddeutsche* published only three stories that included photographs of the injured. Further, *The Australian* published two stories with photos of killings, with the *Herald* publishing one such story, while no German newspaper published this type of photo.

Journalists' views on photographic representation of death

A total of 32 journalists were interviewed about their use of photographs of the dead, eight at each newspaper. First, journalists were asked general questions about whether their newspaper had any guidelines in regard to the use of photographs of the dead. Journalists at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* said they tried to not publish any photos of the dead, and if they did, bodies should not be identified, with the exception of a person lying in state, which was deemed acceptable. But gory details, such as disfigured or bloody corpses, were completely taboo. Particularly important was a consideration of the dignity of those who died.

“There really have to be very compelling reasons for us to show dead people, at least from close up. Of course one wants to show there are dead people lying there. But a dead person's face

covered in blood, from up close, these horror shots, we try to avoid that,” one journalist said.

In fact, as another journalist from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* pointed out, for a long time it was taboo to show any dead at all, apart from monarchs or heads of state lying in state. However, he said, in recent years this rule has been softened.

Süddeutsche journalists also said they rarely showed death in photographs, and if they did it was only if the victims could not be identified.

“Recently we had a photo of members of the Iraqi National Guard who had been taken from a bus and been shot. We originally wanted to show a picture of that, but on every photo we had there were faces visible. If you had only seen a line of bodies lying on the street, we would have shown it, but you could see faces,” the journalist said.

Similarly, when Saddam Hussein’s sons Uday and Qusay were killed in 2004, the *Süddeutsche* chose not to show the photos of their bodies, as they deemed them too degrading. *“Even criminals, which is what Saddam’s sons certainly were, have a human dignity (Menschenwürde). Which is why we didn’t show those photos,”* a journalist said. This attitude towards criminals appears to be in strong contrast to Australian journalists’ perceptions, and is discussed in more detail soon. Even the ‘documentary evidence’ factor, which some might say existed in this case, to show people that the two men were really dead, did not seem to apply, mainly due to Iraq being culturally distant. Another *Süddeutsche* journalist said:

“I believe that for us in Germany, the news that they had been killed could be told just as well without pictures. It is possibly quite different for people living in Iraq, or an Iraqi newspaper, because these people were somehow afraid that they were not really dead ... But for us it was clear that we wouldn’t show those pictures.”

Again, some *Süddeutsche* journalists said the depiction of death had changed from the past, when photos of the dead had been absolutely taboo, while now it was okay to depict death, albeit in a very sanitised manner. *“We trust our readers know very well what it looks like when there are many people lying in their own blood, and that it is all very terrible. And these people, these victims, do not have to be put on display unnecessarily,”* said one journalists at the *Süddeutsche*. These comments by German journalists then appear to generally support Walter’s (1991) argument of the resurgence of death in media representations, although it needs to be kept in mind that based on the empirical evidence presented above, photos of the dead are still few and far between.

Echoing German sentiments, *Sydney Morning Herald* journalists said their newspaper tried not to show too many photos of dead bodies. Photos that were permissible were shots of bodies which weren’t identifiable. *“Every now and then if there is a big story about some shocking massacre somewhere we might print a picture that shows what are clearly bodies covering a field. But I don’t think we would print a close up of any of them,”* a *Herald* journalist said. If people looked like they were asleep it was easier to publish their photo. *“If you have a photo of someone*

with their chest open and their guts spilling out, that's maybe a bit too much. But if you have someone who looks like they're asleep, that's less hard to run," another *Herald* journalist said.

It appears that organisational pressures such as senior editorial influence play a big part, as some journalists said their editor did not like to show photos of dead bodies. *"The current editor has a policy that the Herald won't publish photos of dead bodies unless there is a newsworthy reason for them to be published,"* one journalist said. Yet a few journalists said they wished their newspaper showed more such photos. One journalist, for example, stressed he believed one needed to show reality and to bring home to readers how particularly bad a situation was: *"I don't think we should revolt readers every day with blood and gore, I don't think that's the point, but I think it's unrealistic to cover a war without showing when there is major carnage."* Similarly, the journalist thought the newspaper's somewhat more graphic coverage of the aftermath of the Asian tsunami in late 2004 had contributed to the outpouring of compassion in Australia. *"I think with a completely sanitised coverage of that people wouldn't have realised just how awful it was."*

So, while German journalists and those at the *Herald* were generally concerned not to show photos in which the dead could be identified, journalists at *The Australian* appeared to be relatively free from these concerns, as could be expected from the empirical evidence presented above. A number of journalists at *The Australian* said they preferred to show death in order to present to readers what had happened, believing that not doing so would be an interference with reality.

"You could make the point that newspapers go against public interest by not almost every day showing graphic photos of car accidents. You have a responsibility to show: a kid gets in a car, he goes out for a drive, this is the result of it, here it is. To send a message, 'you guys have to be really careful because this is what can happen to you'. And the pictures can powerfully bring that home," one senior journalist at *The Australian* said.

However, journalists said they did not believe their newspaper used photos of death gratuitously but still discussed the publication of gory pictures quite intensely, deciding on a case-by-case basis. One journalist said a way to get around problems of showing blood in the newspaper was the use of such photos on mono pages instead of colour pages, in order to lessen the impact. Further, the time at which a death occurred played a role in the publication of photographs. Said one journalist:

"There are different degrees of death. So a mass grave with a thousand people who died two years ago, you've got much more chance of that running on the front or world page than you have of a headless corpse directly in front of you now, bleeding red and raw and meaty."

A difference in German and Australian journalists' responses was the concern for one's own dead compatriot compared to the death of people of other nationalities. While German journalists did not differentiate between the two, journalists at *The Australian* and the *Herald* said one needed to show particular consideration when showing dead Australians due to the possible effects this could have on relatives in Australia. This attitude is in line with the arguments of Walter et al (1995) and Sontag

(2003). However, it is also interesting to note that German journalists did not see a difference between death from abroad and death at home. One way to explain this difference may lie in the different cultural conditions of the two countries. As I have argued elsewhere in regard to language considerations (Hanusch, 2008), German society places a larger emphasis on the collective than does Australian society. In this regard, German journalists may be more considerate of others, including those outside their society. Further, the German code of ethics for journalists is also somewhat more restrictive and specific in limiting the reporting of death than is the Australian equivalent.

Journalists' reactions to published photographs

In addition to the more general conversations with journalists in relation to how they approached photographs of the dead, journalists were presented with five examples of photographs which had been published during the research timeframe. This section summarises their comments relating to each of the pictures showing dead bodies.

The first photograph presented to journalists showed twelve dead men lying face-down in a trench. They were Nepalese hostages who had been taken hostage in Iraq and subsequently killed. Their shirts were marked with what appeared to be blood stains. The photo was published on page 6 in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of September 1, 2004. Most German journalists accepted this photograph as publishable, with five journalists at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* saying they would or might publish it, and three journalists expressing opposition to publishing it. The margin at the *Süddeutsche*, where the photo was published, was slightly larger, with six journalists advocating publication and two opposing it. The main reasons for publication, in line with previous comments, were that the photo did not show the victims' faces or was not overly gory in detail. The fact the photo was published in black and white also helped, as the blood on the victims' bodies was not clearly visible. However, opinion was somewhat divided on this issue, with one-third of German journalists rejecting the photograph. In the main, journalists felt it was against the victims' human dignity (*Menschenwürde*) to show them like that, or that they thought it had no information value or effect in bringing across to readers the horror of the situation. Said one *Süddeutsche* journalist: "In what way is this photo meaningful? That people die there unnecessarily? But it has no further meaning".

In Australia, there were clear distinctions along individual newspaper lines, as noted in the more general comments. Whereas all the journalists interviewed at *The Australian* thought the photo could be published, only three at the *Herald* thought so, while five were opposed to publication. A point to note here is senior editorial influence in such decisions. A number of *Herald* journalists remarked that while they might be inclined to publish the photo, their editor would not be. This was due, they said, to the editor's dislike for showing dead people in the newspaper. However, a small number of senior journalists also remarked that on a few occasions they had been able to get photos past the editor into the paper. Thus, a *Herald* journalist said: "I think I lost the argument on this very picture. But I've won the argument on others. And there are days when I would just proceed and publish, because I am usually there when the editor is not."

Reasons given by *Herald* journalists for rejecting this photo were similar to those given by German journalists. They thought the photo was too graphic. However, journalists at *The Australian* were much less discerning with this photograph, with no one expressing opposition to it. Reasons given for such a decision were that they

thought the photo was not too graphic, faces weren't visible and bodies weren't mutilated and that in general it was a compelling photograph. It should be noted that *The Australian* also published this photograph, but did so on the front page and in colour, with blood stains clearly visible (*The Australian*, 2004: 1), suggesting that limits of what could be published lay far beyond black and white photos of faceless victims.

In the second photograph, a large group of people was shown carrying a dead man. The body was that of a Palestinian who had been killed during an Israeli military attack in the Gaza Strip. The man was being carried to his grave by a group of Hamas supporters who were angry at the Israeli attacks. The photo was published on page 8 in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* of September 8, 2004. This photo was generally deemed acceptable by the journalists interviewed in Germany and in Australia. Only two journalists argued against publication, one each from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and the *Herald*. The reason given by these journalists related to the face of the dead man being visible. One *Frankfurter Allgemeine* journalist said if the victim was not identifiable, he would publish. But showing the man's face was against his dignity. Again we see the consideration of dignity in German journalists, a trend that would continue throughout the analysis of photographs.

Similarly, a *Herald* journalist first said he objected to the photograph because the victim's face could be seen. He later conceded that the man's body was not mutilated and that the photo was probably a borderline decision. The overwhelming majority of journalists had no problem with the photograph. Reasons for publication included that the man had no visible injuries and looked almost peaceful and he was put on display by the people around him, justifying publication. Further, journalists argued there was another narrative going on in the photograph, referring to the demonstrators, which made this a political event. Thus, the focus was somewhat taken away from the body. It appears then that in general, these sanitised pictures of war – which, as Fraser (1992) had pointed out, were typical of western culture's coverage of death – were acceptable to the vast majority of journalists in both Germany and Australia. The dead man in Figure 2 appears to be someone lying in state, and journalists had already indicated in general discussion that this was acceptable.

The third photograph shown to journalists was arguably the most graphic. The photo showed four dead men lying in what appeared to be a mortuary. Their faces were clearly visible and the man in the foreground, identified as the Indian bandit Koose Muniswamy Veerappan, had an obvious bullet wound to his head. Veerappan had been on the run from police for more than 30 years. In the photo, there were a number of photographers around the bodies, taking photos. One photographer appeared to take a photo of Veerappan from less than a metre away. Also, from the right-hand side someone's finger was pointed straight at Veerappan's head. The photo was published on page 10 in *The Australian* of October 20, 2004.

This photo drew varying reactions from journalists. All German journalists rejected the photo outright, as did six of the eight *Herald* journalists. At *The Australian*, however, there was a completely different attitude to this photograph, with seven journalists arguing in favour of publication. German journalists' main reason for rejecting the photograph was primarily the graphic content, with a bullet hole clearly visible. There were more reasons not to publish this photo however, including the fact that the faces were photographed from a close distance. It seemed that showing the face would be a reason for rejection alone, but the bullet hole made it even worse. Another reason was the voyeurism of the photographers, which gave the photo what some journalists saw as a bizarre atmosphere. Incidentally, two journalists

said it was quite a good and interesting photograph, but only if it were published alongside a documentary about the voyeurism of photographers. Yet another reason for rejection was more closely tied to cultural differences. Some journalists at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and *Süddeutsche* said the photo might be important in India, but it had no significance for a German audience.

“You really have to say he had significance for the region, and he may have been someone who had been pronounced dead a number of times but then never was. For us it would have no significance, I wouldn’t publish such a photo because it’s not interesting,” a *Süddeutsche* journalist said.

We see here again the factor of cultural proximity at work. In this regard, it seems that, as newspapers try to give their readers news they can relate to or that are relevant to them, graphic photos are easy to avoid when the country in question is dissimilar culturally. In this context, the evidence does not support Walter’s (1991) and Sontag’s (2003) arguments that the more distant a country was, the more gruesome photos could be. This does not appear to be the case for newspapers like the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and *Süddeutsche*, which generally try to avoid graphic photos.

In contrast, India has more ties with Australia, with a large Indian population living there. This appeared to play in the minds of those journalists in Australia who were in favour of publication, supporting Watson’s (2003) argument about the influence immigrant cultures could have on foreign news coverage. For example, the two journalists at the *Herald* and some journalists at *The Australian* who argued that it could be published, cited the importance of the story for India and the interest in Veerappan as a reason. It appeared that India’s cultural connection to Australia and the fact that India was in the media spotlight due to a sporting event at the time could have also played a part in journalists regarding the story as important.

“We do have quite a sizeable Indian population here. It’s interesting also that when that happened, the Australian cricket team was playing in India. I would have run the story anyway, but I suppose that people’s minds were more focussed on India right at that point,” a journalist at *The Australian* said.

Other journalists at *The Australian* argued the photo could be more easily published as the dead man was a ‘bad guy’. A number of journalists at *The Australian* said it was much easier to publish a photo of a bad guy than of a good guy. It should be noted that German journalists were generally more even-handed, saying that even bad guys had a right to privacy and human dignity, as noted previously in relation to the coverage of the deaths of Saddam Hussein’s sons, Uday and Qusay. The *Herald* journalists who rejected the photo did so for similar reasons to German journalists, citing the graphic content as not appropriate for publishing, despite the dead man being a ‘bad guy’. Here, then, the dead man was obviously not bad enough to override the paper’s policy of not publishing graphic photos of the dead. The notion of ‘bad guy/good guy’ warrants further attention and needs to be seen in relation to cultural differences. A good indicator of the differing values in Australian and German news is the use of personal titles in news reports. In Australia, generally every person is accorded their title, such as Mr, Mrs, Miss, Ms, Dr, Professor or similar. There are some exceptions, however, which include sportspeople, artists, actors, authors,

musicians, journalists, the long dead and, importantly, *convicted criminals* (News Limited, 2001: 38).

It appears then that as soon as someone is designated as 'a bad guy', he or she loses the right to their title, resulting in a diminished status of the person. German journalism does not make this differentiation in description, as titles such as Mr or Mrs are generally not being used and people are simply referred to by their surname. Of course this does not mean that criminals are necessarily regarded as being completely equal in news reports, but at least in their naming they are. This stylistic reference to people appears to also find its expression in the reporting of the dead, in that Australian journalists appear to have less concerns about showing graphic pictures of a 'bad guy', whereas German journalists do not make this distinction as often or as much. Again, we need to consider, however, that the limits of what is acceptable differ strongly between the *Herald* and *The Australian*.

A fourth photograph presented to journalists showed a large number of body bags lined up on the ground. In the bottom left-hand corner were a number of doctors in white robes. The body bags contained the bodies of the victims of the Beslan school siege. A few of the bags were partially open, showing body parts, yet no identification was possible. The photo was published on the front page of *The Australian* on September 6, 2004. Most journalists from all four newspapers said they would publish this photograph, mostly for the impact they thought it had, documenting what happened in Beslan. However, German journalists were slightly more apprehensive about using the photo, indicating discomfort with the visible body parts. The body parts were enough reason for three German journalists to reject the photo, while no Australian journalist rejected it outright, although some suggested cropping. For example, *Frankfurter Allgemeine* Journalist thought it was degrading to show the victims lying there and therefore thought it should not be published.

It should be noted that all journalists thought the photo was extremely powerful, and even if they didn't think the body parts should be published, they advocated cropping the photo. The majority of German journalists argued the strength of the photograph in portraying what happened outweighed the fact that some body parts were visible. Journalists argued that the bodies were not identifiable and were almost lost in the overall impact of the picture. "*I would publish this even if there are body parts in it. If you really want to find something you'll always be able to find something, but the overall impact of this photograph is so powerful. I think it's a strong photo that simply shows the impact,*" a *Süddeutsche* Journalist said.

Responses by Australian journalists were strikingly similar. A majority of the journalists approved of publishing the photo, mainly for its news value and impact. The argument that the body parts were almost lost in the picture was also made by Australian journalists. In fact, the photo ought to be published, some journalists said. "*At the end of the day some things also demand a little bit of confrontation. Some events are so bad that you can't shield people from the reality of it,*" a journalist at *The Australian* said.

The fifth photograph showed a body lying on top of a crashed motorbike in front of the Australian embassy in Jakarta, following a bomb explosion at the embassy's gates. The body of the victim, who appeared to have been passing by at the time of the explosion, was visible from behind. No identification was possible, but the body was lying awkwardly, almost mangled. Some destruction in the building was also visible in the background. The photo was published on page 2 in both *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* of September 10, 2004.

Journalists' reactions to this photo were comparable to their reaction to the photograph of Koose Muniswamy Veerappan. No *Frankfurter Allgemeine* journalist approved the publication of this photo, while only two *Süddeutsche* journalists approved. In Australia, the clearly different policies of publishing photos of death again led to all journalists at *The Australian* arguing for publication, while seven of eight *Herald* journalists were opposed to publication. Among German journalists, the main reason for rejection was a belief that the photo showed the fate of the victim too closely – an invasion of privacy. Even though the victim's face was not visible, journalists thought it showed too much of the single fate of the dead person. This could be compared to remarks made in relation to Figure 1, where some journalists said that it was easier to show a large number of dead people rather than just one person. Another factor that influenced German journalists' considerations was that journalists believed the event itself did not have a lot of significance for Germans, and thus did not have much information value. Two German journalists also suggested it might be a little easier to publish the photo if the victim had been one of the bombers. This relates to the previous argument about the different values attached to 'bad guys' in German and Australian quality newspapers. Supporting the view that only a minority of German journalists thought it was more acceptable to publish photos of dead 'bad guys' was the large number of German journalists who said it did not matter whether the dead person was a victim or a bomber. The two *Süddeutsche* journalists who said the photo could be published did so mainly on the basis that the picture was documentary evidence.

In Australia, journalists interviewed at *The Australian* were all in favour of publishing the photograph. Some journalists noted that it was reasonably confronting, but they argued it was not particularly gory, which justified publication. Two journalists noted the photo would very likely not be published if the dead person was an Australian, again demonstrating the distinction between Australians and non-Australians. However, journalists said there was no further distinction between other cultures, which contradicts Walter's (1991) and Sontag's (2003) arguments that the more culturally removed a country the more graphic photos were. In fact, Australian journalists referred to their coverage of the September 11, 2001 events and other events where US soldiers, for example, had been killed and graphic photos shown.

At the *Herald*, most journalists believed the photo was too graphic, showing the body too closely. One *Herald* journalist however argued the photo was alright to publish, as it didn't show the dead person's face, was in black and white, and there was a wider narrative going on with the embassy building in the background of the photo. The responses from *Herald* journalists were noteworthy in that, while the photograph they were shown was the one published in *The Australian*, the same photograph was published in the *Herald*, albeit in slightly smaller size. This shows that journalists' tastes may not always correspond with those of the newspaper, or the editor, they work for. In particular, if newspapers do not have clear, written guidelines on what can and can't be published in terms of photos of the dead, there will always be room for individual opinions based on the circumstances at the time. Additionally, one can argue that the events in Jakarta were much more significant for Australia, as that country's embassy was affected. This therefore created more interest or need in photos to be published about the event.

Conclusion

From the above discussions and the empirical evidence, we can see then, that in terms of its visual representation, death is still largely absent from news media

representations. An extremely small minority of photographs that related to death actually showed a dead person, and, with the notable exception of *The Australian*, most journalists were opposed to exposing their readers to graphic death. In this regard, the evidence would contradict Walter et al.'s (1995) arguments relating to the omnipresence of death in the mass media, albeit only in terms of the presence of visual representations of death. I have indeed found that death as a subject is quite present in the media today, but perhaps we need to more clearly define what we mean by the "presence of death". Do we refer only to mentions of death, of which there are many, or do we include how death is presented and perhaps even problematised? I would then find myself agreeing more closely with Taylor's (1998: 193) argument that the press is "careful to write more detail than it cares to show" and Campbell (2004: 55), who similarly argued that "we have witnessed a disappearance of the dead in contemporary coverage". In this regard, Campbell (2004: 70) has noted that the importance of the significance of context, which in terms of images, he says, involves the coming together of three dimensions: the economy of indifference to others, the economy of 'taste and decency' and the economy of display. In fact, Campbell's 'economy of taste and decency' seems to have played a large role particularly in German journalists' decisions on whether to publish certain photos.

This, then, also sheds new light on the argument that the more distant deaths are, the more likely it is that photos of bodies are shown (Walter et al., 1995, Sontag, 2003). Based on the empirical evidence presented here and the interviews with working journalists, however, we may need to again view these statements with some caution. While Australian journalists certainly admitted to such sentiments, German journalists in general appeared to be less inclined to make that distinction. Their argument was more often based on human dignity, and where a person was from did not seem to play a large role. In fact, as seen in the case of the Indian bandit Veerappan, the distance of the dead person made it actually easier to decide *against* publishing the photo. This is further support for the argument that we need to be cautious of talking about a single Western representation of death. There exist in parts huge cultural differences between and, indeed, within Western countries, and these impact on how journalists in those countries perceive their role. Studies of comparative journalism practices (eg. Weaver, 1998; Esser, 1998) have demonstrated the sometimes significant differences in characteristics, values, attitudes and perceptions amongst journalists from different cultures. These are important to bear in mind when examining cross-cultural representations of death in the news media.

Perhaps we also need to reconsider what purpose is served by publishing, or indeed not publishing, graphic imagery of death. In light of the comments from journalists at *The Australian*, we may need to think further about which path of action in relation to graphic imagery is to be preferred. As one journalist at *The Australian* suggested, by sanitising death in the public sphere we may be doing the audience a disservice, in that 'reality' (in itself of course a complex concept) may be altered. Campbell (2004) makes a compelling argument for the publication of such photos in order to stir readers to action against injustices. Both Campbell and Taylor (1998) thus question the compassion fatigue theory (see, for example, Moeller, 1999; Sontag, 2003) by arguing that the audience is denied real knowledge. "The absence of horror in the representation of real events indicates not propriety so much as a potentially dangerous poverty of knowledge among news readers" (Taylor, 1998: 11).

Howarth's (2007: 35) notion that "death is complex and multifaceted and cannot be moulded to fit into a simplistic public/private dichotomy", needs to be seen in this light. While there does exist some kind of distinction between how German

newspapers present graphic death as opposed to Australian newspaper practices, there appears to be no one single Western way of representing death. Rather, representations appear to be on a continuum, from no photographic representation to a small number of representations. Death is, in terms of photographs, then still largely absent from public view. Some journalists in this study pointed out that the treatment of death had changed over the years, and the small amount published in today's newspapers may in fact be higher than, say, 50 years ago. It would be an interesting study to compare the changes in photographic representations over the decades. It should also be noted that this study only investigated quality newspapers in Germany and Australia. Tabloid newspapers are generally renowned for showing more drastic photos of death as well as for using more emotive language. Future studies could address this problem. There are, of course, other gaps in the literature on media coverage of death, which have been beyond the limits of this paper. For example, it would appear that the vast majority of studies examining media representations of death have concentrated solely on the West. More work is needed in examining how other cultures' media report death. This would not only shed more light on perhaps differing practices, but also enable us to view Western representation in a new light.

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Table 1: Content of Photographs

	<i>FAZ</i>		<i>SZ</i>		<i>The Australian</i>		<i>SMH</i>	
Alive	11	28%	23	26%	21	16%	19	20%
Injured	3	8%	3	3%	16	12%	9	10%
Killing	0	0	0	0	2	2%	1	1%
Body bags or coffins	2	5%	0	0	4	3%	2	2%
Corpse	0	0	2	2%	11	9%	3	3%
Grief	1	3%	8	9%	6	5%	4	4%
Destruction	14	36%	22	24%	31	24%	21	23%
Unrelated	8	21%	32	36%	38	29%	34	36%
Total	39	100%	90	100%	129	100%	93	100%

(Note: Where stories were accompanied by more than one photo, the dominant photograph was coded.)