

Truth or taste

The depiction of the Hani murder

Catherine
O'Dowd

Just how much **reality** can readers take before they stare horrified, **marmalade** slowly dropping from their toast onto the **news photograph** before them, as they reach for the telephone to **cancel** their subscription?

As **editors** across the country debated the pictures before them — the body, **blood spilling** over the bricks around the head, tongue caught between the teeth, **bullet hole** visible in the jaw — they were wondering **how much** could they show?



IT WAS EASTER SATURDAY, 10 April, 1993. The body was that of Chris Hani, secretary-general of the South African Communist Party, ex-chief of staff of Umkhonto weSizwe and considered by many to be the one voice the radical black youth would listen to. He had been shot four times in his driveway by a right-wing white.

Sowetan chief photographer Robert Mgwase, who lived a few houses away, was the first photographer to arrive at the scene. "There was a stampede once we were allowed in," he said. "People were falling, the media people were pushing the cameramen. Photographers were pushing each other for angles."

Star photographer Alf Khumalo said "I remember I was using a zoom lens and I closed in on the face. It was traumatic, especially since I had seen him the week before that... He was telling me how happy he is, everything is going well, and the next thing he is dead." Khumalo took a variety of pictures. "If it wasn't him I wouldn't have shown the face. I normally just show hands, the legs... But it's different with a leader of that calibre and a lot of people reacted to that."

Once the pictures reached the news desk editors were left debating how to walk the narrow tightrope between news and sensation, between reality and tastelessness.

United States journalism academic Sue O'Brien has pointed out that on a limited range of stories, fairly firm policies guide editors. Identities of sex-crime victims and most juveniles are protected; bodies are seldom shown; victims are not identified until families have been notified. "But there is no consensus on the question of degree: How much blood or pain is too much? Is the moment of death less objectionable than its aftermath?"

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ALL THE LUCKY NUMBERS: PAGE 12

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HANI: THE AWB LINK

Riddle of car driven by arrested immigrant

ANC calls for calm

Blacks taunted in street

Point blank shots fired at lifeless body

By GUY CARROLL

THE MURDER OF CHRIS HANI, THE ANC LEADER, WAS THE MOST SHOCKING AND TRAGIC EVENT TO OCCUR IN SOUTH AFRICA SINCE THE END OF APOSTATISM IN 1990. THE NEWS OF HIS DEATH WAS RECEIVED BY MILLIONS OF PEOPLE IN THE FOUR CONTINENTS AND IN THE HEAVENS. THE DEATH OF HANI WAS A TRAGEDY OF THE FIRST ORDER. THE NEWS OF HIS DEATH WAS RECEIVED BY MILLIONS OF PEOPLE IN THE FOUR CONTINENTS AND IN THE HEAVENS. THE DEATH OF HANI WAS A TRAGEDY OF THE FIRST ORDER.

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HANI IS DEAD

APRIL 11, 1993

COMMENT
Laid down his life for peace

Suspect held within minutes

By DESMOND BLEW

Mandela calls for calm

JANUZZI, a 48-year-old, Polish-born immigrant worker, was arrested in Boksburg, about 15 km from Johannesburg, after Chris Hani was shot down in the street.

O'Brien suggests that such questions are generally simply subjected to a utilitarian balancing: does an image's social or news value outweigh its violation of prevailing standards of compassion and taste?

The news value of this event overrode any unwritten rules about no bodies on the front page. "If this had been Joe Soap hit by a train, this [picture] would not have gone as far as even the subs desk," said Charles Mogale, *City Press* news editor. "But then this was Chris Hani and this sort of thing happens once in a lifetime."

So this was a body that was to make page one in most newspapers on Sunday and Monday. But how much were readers going to be allowed to see of the gruesome details? Photographic critic John Berger suggests that gruesome pictures "remind us shockingly of the reality, the lived reality, behind the abstraction of political theory, casualty statistics or news bulletins". Such photographs serve as "an eye we cannot shut".

But how much can you show readers before they will take no more? And especially on the front page. Rick Wilson, editor of the *EP Herald*: "From a marketing point of view, you use the front page and the picture for impact. But you don't want to shock people so that they actually turn away. You want them to buy the paper."

Two factors were to divide editors within and across newspapers. One was Hani's face. The other was his blood.

Hani's mouth was open, the tongue caught between the teeth and a bullet hole visible in his jaw. Blood was splattered over mouth and nose. Only two newspapers of the 17 surveyed chose to show the face. The others selected

pictures showing the body from behind the head.

Most editors agreed that the face was just too gruesome to bear. Perhaps if the face had been composed, they said. Mgwase of the *Sowetan* said he had taken a photograph of the face, but rejected it as "too terrible to use". He felt the blood and the mouth being "wide open" made the photograph a "bit much". You don't want the picture to look like "a morgue shot", said Jim McLagan, *Argus* picture editor.

Evelyn Holtzhausen, night editor at the *Cape Times*, explained that the viewer can become a voyeur, indulging in blood. "There is a very subtle line between where a picture had impact and where it becomes what we call a marmalade dropper." He explained that as "somebody who is sitting with their toast at the breakfast table, reading this story with such a degree of interest that the marmalade drops off their toast and falls flop on the table".

But two newspapers took a different approach.

City Press showed Hani face on, blood spilt across the bricks. The photograph filled the entire front page above the fold. The headline, in red type, was set inside the picture.

Mogale said that the photograph they used "is about the goriest we could find. I'm not into gore but I believed, everyone believed, that we needed to shock the nation a bit and deliver the story to them as blatantly, as raw, as it was, and this was the best we could do." He said elsewhere that "there are occasions, once in a while, when we feel that the situation warrants shocking the nation a little and this picture is a case in point."

Mogale indicated that another motive was concern about what their competitors might be using. "We didn't know what [the *Sunday Star*

and the *Sunday Times*] had up their sleeves, we had to play all our aces. Especially the *Sunday Times*, they are a much bigger operation than we are and we didn't know if they would have a whole special on Hani. All we could do is have a good picture, the best picture we had and what we felt was a good story."

The photographer, Tladi Khuele, had another concern. His contention was that a faceless body, that can only be recognised by reading the caption, becomes just another of the many anonymous body pictures that had come out of the violence in South Africa. "I can take a picture of a person from behind and people say, 'ah, it is one of those bodies'. But if he's well-known, people say, 'Is it him? It looks like him, maybe it is, he's dead'." He felt it important the people realise immediately that this is Hani, that they be shocked and say "I know this man, who killed him?"

In the *Sunday Star's* Late Final the photograph again showed the face. Editor David Hazelhurst, who made the decision himself with the agreement of colleagues, said that he "had no hesitation about showing [Hani's] face", given that he was "the second most popular person in this country".

He went on to explain that he was "influenced slightly" by the report from the graphic artist who went to do a drawing. "She told me that while she was there the body had been covered by a blanket and scores and scores of people came there and asked that the blanket be lifted, so they could see the face."

Hazelhurst said he was concerned not by "the sensibilities and sensitivities of the whites in the northern suburbs but by the actual people who revered Hani, who went [to his home] and the funeral. Seeing the face is not a horror to those people as it would have maybe been to some whites. Without exception the people wanted to see his face."

The photographer, Alf Khumalo, felt that it was a powerful picture but a gruesome one. "When you look at it from a transparency it looks gruesome but it looks even harsher when it's bigger," he said. "I actually got worried about the reaction of the masses at large."

But like Khuele he felt it was important that the body be immediately recognisable. He too

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felt that this body must be distinguished from the many anonymous ones that have been shown over the years. "It was important to show the face, to show people this was Hani that died, to show people it really happened. Otherwise they would not have believed, that's how much they loved him."

Hazelhurst was more worried about the blood that lay spilt across the bricks. The red blood spilling around the head was an obvious visual element. Khuele said of the shooting of

the photographs: "Everybody was there, TV crews and papers, all wanting to get a "good" picture, the obvious thing being the blood on the pavement."

Hazelhurst wanted the picture cropped so that what he described as "that huge pile of blood" was not included. He marked the picture himself, to be cut directly below the foot on the left, taking out about half the blood present in the picture as it was published. And he had left in more space

above the body, leaving in two feet that he said "sort of framed picture, which I felt brought more poignancy into it".

However the "cock-up factor" in journalism took over, with the transparency being cropped incorrectly in the works. Thus a controversial picture hit the streets unintended by any of its editors.

For the *Sowetan* the blood did not carry the same weight as the face. Mgwase explained that they had sought a balance that would convey the importance of the event but yet not be too gruesome. For them showing the face crossed the line but showing the blood around the body did not.

Die Burger picture editor, Pieter Spaarwater, said that "we believe, though not I personally, that blood is off-putting. People read this [newspaper] over their breakfasts". Their solution on the front page was to crop some of the blood, though not all, and run the picture small — over two columns.

The *Cape Times* ran a front page picture showing just the body with almost all the blood cropped out. It is a small picture, 4 columns wide but only seven cms deep. Night editor Holtzhausen said: "I don't think it's necessary to over-egg the cake. That picture, cropped the way it is, is powerful. Using more blood, and maybe using the picture bigger, wouldn't have achieved more. I think the impact is there."

The *Sunday Times* took perhaps the most extreme action of any paper that chose to show the body on the bricks. They ran a page one colour picture over half a page high showing Hani with his head turned away and virtually no blood visible. Behind the body stand Sexwale and Thenjiwe Mthintso. At the top of the page is a small black-and-white photograph of the body covered by a flag.

Assistant editor Dennis Hands confirmed that they drew the line at gory pictures. The main picture was selected for its human drama, with Hani's friends looking down at him, rather than for its potential to shock. He said that in choosing that picture "Tokyo Sexwale's very close association with Chris Hani clearly came into consideration."

And what did the readers think? *City Press* and *Sunday Star* received a handful of letters of complaint. Hazelhurst said "you got less of an outcry than if I'd got a crossword clue wrong". Mogale said *City Press* generally only get response to pictures of pinups. "Every single telephone call I can remember getting in response to a picture is some guy saying: 'She is my cousin, how can I reach her?'"

That Hani's supporters wanted to see his image, despite the horror, seemed borne out by two related tales from the black newspapers. Khuele said that many in the crowds who gathered on Sunday to mourn Hani's death had cut out the picture of Hani from the front page of *City Press* and were carrying it with them.

For those who saw it, Hani's face remains etched in memory, symbol of the last gasps of the apartheid regime.

Would readers have felt less or more for the event by having that image engraved in their memory? The jury is out. And editors are left to make hard decisions on gut instinct and too little time.

Catherine O'Dowd is a MA candidate in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University.

The price of butane gas and other inflammables has soared in the Durban area following this week's municipal depot explosion which injured 28 workers.



28 labourers at a Durban Municipal depot were seriously injured yesterday when a gas pipe exploded during a cleaning operation.



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