

Photojournalism under fire

Maybe you should keep your camera down for a little while, said a mother to her photojournalist son, after the Princess Diana accident.

The world-wide outrage by the public at the accident and the paparazzi's role in the tragedy has led the media to rethink its role, and the credibility of photojournalism in particular has been called into question.

This deep concern has extended to South Africa and was hotly debated at the recent Second SA

Photojournalism Conference at Rhodes University.

As TJ Lemon, chief photographer of Independent Newspapers in Johannesburg, said at the conference: "There are choices we have to make. Our role is dealing with morality and reflecting reality. The point is that people have gone too far. Somehow, people in newsrooms are losing the human, moral values."

When paparazzi photographers go beyond the reasonable limits of celebrity pursuit – massively invading privacy and breaking laws; when editors sensationalise, distort and create photographs (as the Daily Mirror did to digitally manipulate Dodi Fayed's head so that he was facing Diana and looking as though he was about to kiss her) – the credibility of the profession as a whole is at stake.

Steven Frischling, a photojournalist from New York, is very concerned about the credibility of photojournalism after the incident. "Some people have said 'no worries, we know what you do'. Other people whom I know, including my mom, have made comments like 'maybe you should keep your camera down for a little while'."

"It's only my mom and sister-in-law who make comments such as I should keep my camera down for a little while, but you know what that means – they think what I do is the same as the paparazzi and that bothers me."

This concern over credibility has extended deep into the student psyche too, as some of my senior students have echoed this concern. Craig Hallett and Tom Gray, fourth year journalism students commenting in their recent Mass Media Ethics presentation at Rhodes, say

When paparazzi go beyond the reasonable limits of celebrity pursuit, when editors sensationalise, distort and create photographs, the credibility of the profession as a whole is at stake, writes MONTGOMERY COOPER, photojournalism lecturer at Rhodes University.



Diana's death has led to a loss of "credibility and faith in a profession that we have spent four years studying to join".

Frischling continues: "What do people who are not in our profession think of when they hear 'photojournalist'? What about the work of the Capas (Robert and Cornell), Don McCullin, Tim Page, Margaret Bourke-White, Eugene Smith, Nick Ut? Does their work now get degraded in the eyes of the general public because of the label placed on our profession because of these few (paparazzi)?"

Kurt Holter, freelance photojournalist working in New York, feels that the public doesn't "really see any difference between the different sectors. One tends to forget that, to the general public, the only difference between a so-called legitimate photojournalist covering a local traffic accident and the paparazzi chasing Princess Di is the fame of the victim."

"Regardless of how this tragedy turns out, I think a major backlash against the news media is coming."

The roots of photojournalism lie in reality –

but almost daily that reality is corrupted by irresponsible photographers and editors. And with that corruption comes loss of credibility and the public starts to question and doubt the media. "The Princess's death has caused a global guiltfest over intrusive photographers," says Matthew Cooper in the 8 September edition of Newsweek.

Chris Henderson of The Herald Press, Huntington, Indiana says: "I believe that this incident is going to cause a lot of problems not only abroad, but here (US) as well. I think it will set us back a good deal in the public's eye."

"I noticed that on CNN they were making a distinct difference between photographers and the press (by which they were seemingly only including reporters). The photographers were in another separate (not equal) category, along with the paparazzi. Am I wrong?"

"The scariest thing I've heard so far about this on TV is NBC News continually referring to the paparazzi as the Press Corp. If that doesn't lump us together in the public eye, I don't know what does."

The head of the largest photojournalism association in the world, the National Press Photographers Association, spoke out recently against paparazzi behaviour. David Lutman, the president, said that in "every profession, there are people who go too far – who stretch the notions of ethics and decency. Most professional photojournalists try to tell the human story by uncovering truth rather than stalking it."

"The marketplace has pushed some aspects of photography in the direction of pursuit journalism and consumers as well as professional photographers should be giving serious thought to the extreme nature of that appetite. High speed chases are clearly a deplorable extreme."

"Perhaps those who make their living from tabloid journalism will learn, from this disaster, that there are real human consequences to their unprofessional behaviour."

Robert Magwaza, chief photographer of the Sowetan, however, questions whether the South African press wouldn't have behaved in this same manner, given the same situation.

"The problem is the market and the needs of the market – the public. The bigger you play the

picture, the more the circulation shoots up. We have, to a certain extent, become funeral undertakers. Do we bury the stories; do we cover them with a blanket? I am sure that the stories we carry reflect the society that we serve."

US photojournalist George Gryzenia, Grand Rapids, agrees with Magwaza, "As long as there is demand for these types of images (and there has been an obvious demand up to this point), there will be a jackal or seven to do the job."

"Those wishing to hold the paparazzi responsible should also look into holding the public at large, who create the demand, responsible."

Ken Lyons, President of the US Virginia News Photographers Association, echoes Magwaza's thoughts on the behaviour of the press. "Remember, Diana was in the area unannounced. If your local publication discovered Lady Di was in your local area, would you not want to send every photojournalist on the staff to find her and make images of her?"

"I do believe the paparazzi can go too far. Peering into windows and entering private property to capture a candid moment is going too far." But he went on: "Following a vehicle which you believe is carrying a passenger your local readers would be interested in knowing is in their area, is done often at local newspapers when presidents or other important individuals are in town. I can tell you, if she was visiting my area, we would certainly be covering her."

Famous photojournalist Peter Magubane describes so well the altered state that a photographer can move into when a news story is breaking right around you. In his book, *Magubane's South Africa*, he says: "I no longer am shocked. I am a feelingless beast when I am taking photographs. It is only after my assignments that I think of the dangers that surround

ed me."

Greg Locke, photojournalist from Newfoundland agrees with Magwaza and Magubane and argues that most of us photojournalists have been in a position at one time of our professional lives photographing violence or accidents.

He said: "Hands up you newspaper photographers who didn't shoot a car wreck in the past month? Why is your car wreck any different from this? Most of us who have been in this business have photographed lots of car wrecks, bodies, staked out court houses and been sent to photograph celebrities."

"Some of us are more ashamed of the reaction from our fellow 'professionals' than of the tactics of the evil paparazzi. No, I don't think the paparazzi are scum. I think they are guys who picked up an assignment to photograph Lady Diana that day."

The South African photojournalists at the photojournalism conference discussed whether photojournalists have to show all the gore.

Referring to the accident pictures of Princess Di in the tunnel that have been posted on the World Wide Web, Professor Paul Lester from Fullerton University, California, commented: "In motion pictures, you see it all, now. We don't have to be so literal in our coverage any more... we must give readers some credit. The picture will still have impact for the readers."

Magwaza concurs and gives an example of an multiple pile-up he photographed. "There were 11 killed, with a woman squashed in the cars. You take the pictures, of course. You're a photographer. But then I take off my photojournalist's hat and put another hat on - the hat of a parent. And looking around I find there is a box of sandwiches spread all over the road. And

then you think that here's the mother who woke half an hour ago and she is never going to reach her home tonight. That's our point of entry, instead of the blood splattered all over the road. Let us try and find the family."

"The children were still waiting for mummy and no one had broken the news."

Maybe this ability to get out of photographer mode and back into feeling like a human being is what distinguishes the photojournalist from the paparazzo.

Dirk Halstead, Pulitzer Prize winner and former White House photographer, says: "There is enormous world-wide anger focused at the paparazzi whose actions led to the chain of events that caused her death. A lot of it is well-deserved. However, one email correspondent tried to equate Pulitzer Prize winners who photographed executions to the paparazzi who take their nourishment from the lives of celebrities."

"It must be remembered that most of the photographers who have won the Pulitzer with their photographs were professional journalists who in the course of their reporting found themselves witnessing these events."

In 1965 working for UPI, Halstead covered an execution by South Vietnamese authorities of Chinese businessmen caught in a crackdown on war profiteering.

He said: "I did not seek out that story. It was part of the ongoing story of the Vietnam war and I covered it. My refusal to photograph it would have had no effect on the outcome."

"Paparazzi are a different animal, so let's not get into a frenzy of self flagellation over this episode," he concluded.

Centre of attraction in South Africa: When Princess Diana visited Nelson Mandela in Cape Town just before her death South African photojournalists got their share of her.

Photo: i-Afrika

