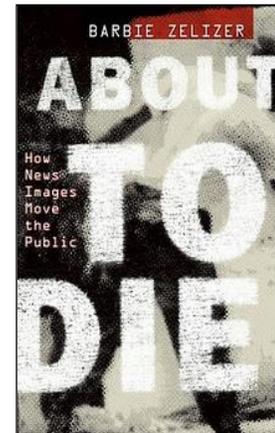


Barbie Zelizer, **About to Die: How News Images Move the Public**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 432 pp. \$49.50 (hardcover), \$18.09 (paperback), \$13.87 (e-edition).

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This is an important book for many different kinds of scholars. It is a major work in visual communication, and has won praise for its innovative reading of photographs as texts. It speaks to me more as a work of journalism history. For others, it will be a book about public culture more generally. Built by accretion through many studies presented in many forums over the past decade, the book carries an accumulation of meanings and audiences, but does so in a coherent fashion.

*About to Die* studies a particular kind of photograph. Many of the images that it presents and discusses are well-known. It will remind some readers of *No Caption Needed*, the landmark book on “iconic photographs” by Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007). But Barbie Zelizer is not studying these images because they have become famous—although she is interested in the ways in which they become carriers of collective memory. She is interested in them because they are generic, not because they are iconic.

This book is a study of a specific photographic genre, of a news form. But it is novel in that the form it chooses, photographs of people who are “about to die,” is not a form that newsfolk recognize as such. Not that it doesn't exist as a genre or form. On the contrary. Once Zelizer explains what an “about to die” photograph is, you begin to see them everywhere. But, because it is not on a standard list of news forms, there is not a body of craft knowledge or thought devoted specifically to it. It is a different kind of formal entity than, say, objectivity, or the ingredients of objectivity—the summary lede, sourcing, balancing—all of which have been studied historically (Mindich, 1998; Schiller, 1981; Schudson, 1978). Historical studies of recognized news forms complement, enter into dialog with, or interrupt the way news professionals themselves talk about these forms.

Zelizer's study does not engage journalism common sense on its own terms. Because she addresses a form that journalists and journalism scholars didn't know existed as such, Zelizer is able to interrogate the work that the form does culturally, in rich and unexpected ways. The result is, among other things, a fresh and original critique of the normative discourse of journalists. Journalists and journalism scholars like to debate ethics, and photographs dealing with death are a key site for this kind of debate. Is it okay to show dead bodies? Whose dead bodies? Does it make a difference if they're friends or enemies, heroes or villains? Does it make a difference how they died? Does it make a difference if you can tell who the corpse was? Ethical issues like these can be finessed, sometimes, by choosing a pre-death photo to illustrate the news. Not always, though. Journalists gave serious thought to the ethics of printing photos of jumpers on 9/11, for instance. Zelizer records such debates with a hint of impatience. Even as journalists debate publication of such photos using their familiar terms—the

public's right to know, intrinsic newsworthiness, and so forth—their normative discourse comes across as dodgy. They dodge accountability, for instance. They unwittingly contribute to the misrecognition of traumatic events. (Compare this with Susan Moeller's argument in *Compassion Fatigue*, [Moeller, 1999]). Moreover, they seem to miss much of the point of such photos.

The about-to-die photograph does work that a corpse shot cannot. It conveys tragic occurrences, but with a difference. To be sure, this is a book about tragic news. Zelizer's longstanding scholarly interests in the Holocaust, the JFK assassination, and 9/11 are all well represented here. About-to-die images in such situations do not simply record tragedy, though. They suspend it, inviting a different kind of emotional investment from the public. In Zelizer's terms, about-to-die images shift from the "as is" to the "as if"—from documenting things done to depicting death as a potentiality, or, in grammatical terms, from the indicative to the subjunctive.

Displacement to the subjunctive spares the public's feelings. About-to-die photographs elide the trauma of plain depictions of dead bodies. At the same time, though, suspending news of death as probable or presumed commands the reader's or audience's engagement on the basis of "contingency, the imagination, and emotions."

The shift to the subjunctive in the about-to-die photo reflects a conjunctural shift in the main work of journalism at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One thing a historian will note about disaster images is a general increase in squeamishness. Nineteenth-century journalism was not so delicate about gore. Civil War photography—most of which was not published as photography, but was rather translated into engraved woodcuts—was elaborately gory. Those news images are utterly indicative, stating in unambiguous terms what was being done. That indicative news era had replaced an earlier period of partisan journalism, which in grammatical terms might be characterized as imperative. Partisan journalists were all about telling their readers what they **MUST** do. They **MUST** organize and demonstrate. They **MUST** vote the ticket. The indicative journalism that replaced it—what Michael Schudson has called "naïve empiricism" (Schudson, 1978, p. 6)—was all about facts, and nothing is more of a fact than a dead body. A body about to die, however, is something else.

Shifting from the imperative to the indicative to the subjunctive tells us something about the news system. Kevin Barnhurst and I have written about this in *The Form of News* (2001) as a shift in the tense of news from the past to the present and future as professionalization converts journalism from the collection of facts to the expert explanation of how things are working and what will come about. Journalists think of photography as the ultimate form of describing facts, although scholars and critics have pointed out how much compositional work goes into both the shooting and the printing of photos. We have long been aware that photos go beyond depicting the world "as is." Journalists, and photojournalists especially, don't want to recognize this. Doing so would remove the normative underpinning from their craft practice.

Journalism shifted to the subjunctive in part in response to changes in the infrastructure of the news system. Around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the U.S. at least, bottlenecks increased in the news system—chokepoints at which the flow of news could be monopolized. Wire services like the

Associated Press are a good example. At around the same time, economies of scale in local newspaper markets began to make the typical daily a natural monopoly. Partly in response, an aroused public worried about the manipulation of news for private profit and the debasement of popular tastes and morals by greedy sensationalists. All of these factors combined with the desire for upward mobility by newswriters and for respectability by publishers to encourage a professionalization project. Put another way, the perceived power of the press forced responsibility on journalists. The mood of responsibility is the subjunctive: should, could, ought.

One could argue that journalism's subjunctive period is coming to an end. In 2001, it was meaningful for journalists to debate whether to publish photographs of jumpers on 9/11. If news organizations didn't publish them, then likely they wouldn't circulate. Within a few years, this logic had elapsed. During the Iraq War, neither the news media nor the Pentagon had the power to control depictions. The Abu Ghraib photographs were taken and distributed by military personnel, not photojournalists. A thriving business in so-called war porn appeared; one particular porn site, with the appealing name "Now That's Fucked Up," offered soldiers access to sex porn in exchange for their war porn. Forced off the web by the U.S. government, the content of this site found book publication in Europe. In a similar way, Jihadist videos, including videos of beheadings of U.S. civilians, circulate widely. While that form of vernacular circulation is on the rise, legacy news media find their audiences dwindling.

Journalists will continue to debate the ethics of publishing traumatic images. What will change will be the public import of these images. In Zelizer's account, news photographs shape public culture in significant ways that can be read partly from the text and context of the photographs themselves and partly from the reactions of readers and audiences. The ability of photojournalism to produce public meaning, I would argue, is coming to an end. Toward the end of the book, Zelizer wrestles a bit with the problem of the increasingly chaotic circulation of news images, and the increasingly vernacular production of meaning associated with them. She insists on the durability of journalism. In a book of grim depictions, optimism about the power of journalism might seem out of place.

I greatly admire this book. You should read it.

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