Jessica M. Fishman, **Death Makes the News: How the Media Censor and Display the Dead**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2017, 281 pp., $30.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by
David D. Perlmutter
Texas Tech University, USA

All cultures have developed their own rituals surrounding death. Western societies in particular are riddled with largely unspoken taboos and superstitions about the dying. While death is part of the cycle of life and is the final rite of passage, and, in many religious traditions, is simply the portal to a joyous afterlife, it is somehow distasteful. Many of us want the deaths of those close to us sanitized and compartmentalized to avoid the ugly image of what a body looks like after serious disease, terrible accident, or tragic murder. We spend considerable sums to make the diseased look as lifelike—a compliment at an open-casket funeral service—as possible.

Although death is certain, the result is both scary and fascinating, particularly when people we do not know are involved. The palpable shock value of flesh torn by carnage may explain why so many motion pictures, television shows, and video games show graphic gore, horror, and doom. But fictional entertainment is one thing, and real-life experience is another. So it is curious that television and print news organizations are reluctant to picture actual deaths. Even obituaries often obscure the real cause of death.

Louis-Vincent Thomas (2000) has noted that death in the media is everywhere and nowhere, "obscene and absent from the scene" (p. 104). Likewise, no one displays an autopsy photo of a deceased loved one on the mantelpiece (Perlmutter, 1999, pp. 162–163).

That observation summarizes the theme of Jessica M. Fishman's new study of media practices, **Death Makes the News: How the Media Censor and Display the Dead**, based on in-depth interviews with picture editors and a review of more than 30 years of imagery appearing in the tabloid and "patrician" print and broadcast media. She explains:

> As noted throughout the book, there are several reasons to expect that dead bodies will frequently appear in the news. But are such images indeed common? The answer is actually no. . . . Despite a purported epidemic of "graphic" death spectacles, images of the corpse, also called postmortem pictures, are actually exceedingly rare. (p. 3)

It turns out that the truism "If it bleeds, it leads" is actually false when it comes to picturizations of dead bodies. Consider all transportation crashes (e.g., cars, trucks, busses, planes, trains, ships), natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes/cyclones, tornadoes, earthquakes, explosions, fires, famines), wars and
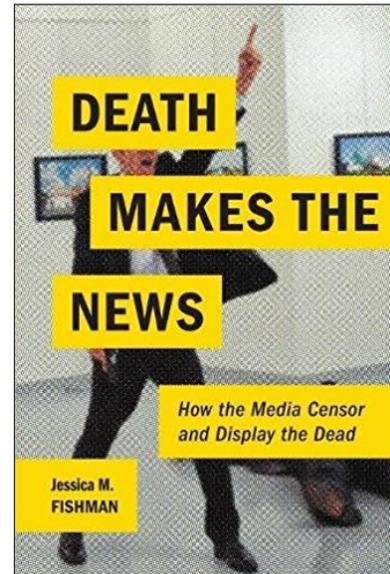
conflicts, crimes and mass shootings, terrorist attacks, and other widely covered news events about unexpected death. We typically see the aftermath of devastation, "death knock" interviews of witnesses, grieving family and friends, official responses, requests for aid, funeral ceremonies, and pictures of the dead when they were vibrantly living. But very rarely do we see close-ups of their corpses, or, when we do, the image is strategically pixilated to conceal faces and wounds.

Questions About Journalistic Practices

In *Death Makes the News*, Fishman features a number of pertinent case examples and photographs. These present a compelling step-by-step indictment that demolishes many fictions about the news business—in the process, upending a number of long-cherished assumptions. She clearly demonstrates the emergence of recurring patterns that determine when deaths are considered newsworthy by editors and when they are not. For example,

> Do the oft-maligned popular media actually show death more often than their respected counterparts? The answer again is no. . . . But do industry insiders have a realistic understanding of their own news practices? The answer, again, is no. Editors and photojournalists apparently endorse the same myths as do the rest of us. (p. 5)

Are these graphic images of the dead missing because photojournalists have few opportunities, bad timing, or insufficient access to document them because of logistical roadblocks imposed by authorities? Fishman also proves that this is not the case (except possibly for graphic pictures of wartime atrocities).

> If a picture shows the dead, the camera's documentary work, which is otherwise cherished for its faithful verisimilitude, is now despised as "sensationalism," as if it distorts reality with wretched excess. . . . The prejudice is so intense that even images that show no blood or gore are described as "brutally" or "extremely" graphic. (p. 11)

In the U.S. media, one would think American deaths would be more commonly shown than foreign ones. However, the opposite is true: "Pictures revealing the foreign dead are much more likely to run than those showing a domestic body" (p. 149), and "Only when reporting on foreign children does photojournalism intimately document dead children" (p. 163).

As Fishman discovered,

> The kinds of images that make the cut do so because of what they refuse to show. The visual documents that relay *less* information about the dead are said to have more news value. . . . Without irony, news professionals justify the new order, wherein "much will be left to the imagination." (p. 73)

Why are some death images depicted in the news, even celebrated with major awards (i.e., "fit"), while others (the "unfit") are never published or aired? What is the purpose and process of self-censorship in our society? Fishman provides a number of explanations:

1. Many editors passionately argue that not only are corpse images in bad taste but that the "powerful impact" may cause viewers "emotional distress and even physical harm"—because they are "too much" and can be "torture" (p. 79) to those who see them. Fishman notes that such decisions may actually ignore the desire of family members and community activists who favor dissemination of such end-of-life images to bring attention to their losses and causes (p. 239).

2. Editors believe that images of death "lack information" and are in "bad taste," disqualifying publication or broadcast under the rubric of remaining objective (pp. 82–84).

3. Because images may confront their audience with "disturbing realities," many editors prefer to use words rather than pictures to "frame fatality as a truly meaningful event and the center of the story" (p. 108).

4. Editors tend to favor positive images when covering American tragedies and crises involving deaths, emphasizing collective "hope, heroism, and restoration" (p. 177).

5. Foreign death pictures present viewers with a remote reality and are more acceptable than domestic ones (p. 203).

Subsequent Events Confirm the Book's Thesis

Because her research is theoretically grounded, Fishman's application of in-depth empirical social science techniques uniquely reinforces the value of her conclusions. Events since the book was completed only help to confirm her observations. The June 2016 terrorist attack and hate crime attack on Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, killed 49 people and wounded 53 others.[1] No pictures of the dead were published or broadcast. At least five people were killed in April 2017 after a truck drove into a crowd as part of a terrorist attack in Stockholm, the Swedish capital. Confirming Fishman's thesis about foreign events, photographs of the dead in Sweden were published. Compare that with the events occurring in October 2017 when gunman Stephen Paddock opened fire from a room on the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay hotel in Las Vegas on an outdoor country music festival, killing 58 and wounding some 546. Media were out in force there, of course, but only remote images of the actual victims on scene were printed or aired. The February 2018 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, also generated widespread coverage and condemnation of gun violence.[2] Seventeen people were killed

---

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hate_crime

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass_shootings_in_the_United_States

and an equal number wounded in one of the world's deadliest school massacres.[3] Again, the sanitization of death prevailed.

Fishman has managed a difficult feat: converting a good dissertation into a very strong (and actually readable) book. She fearlessly takes on the peculiar (even weird) incongruities and contradictions evidenced by photo editors and the results of their prejudices, although her study is not the first to explore how the news media collectively picture the dying and dead. The earlier works of Hanunsch (2010, 2012, 2013), Zelizer (2010), Gallio (2013), Morse (2014a, 2014b), and other authors cited in the Appendix are also well worth reading.

Concerns

Some quibbles: The author documents her work with extensive notes and an index, but the book lacks a separate bibliography, making it more difficult to spot check whether or not a research source was used.

Another weakness is the lack of a historical introduction to contextualize her otherwise impressive study. It would have helped to see that such squeamishness about death has not always been the case. Even in the United States, graphic images have been important shapers of opinion. In 1770, when Paul Revere marketed copies of his color engraving of *The Bloody Massacre perpetrated in King Street* in Boston, he moved many to join with the patriotic rebels. Following the invention of photography, images of dead and wounded appeared—even in wartime. For example, Timothy O'Sullivan (working for Mathew Brady during the Civil War) documented the bloated corpses of Union soldiers fallen on the battlefield at Gettysburg in the gruesome *The Harvest of Death*.

By the 1920s, tabloids were heavy users of photographs and were soon followed by the rise of inexpensive photo magazines in the United States and other countries. Fishman's book briefly discusses the ethical implications stemming from the possible staging of Frank Capra's [Robert Capa's] *The Falling Soldier* (full title: *Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death, Cerro Muriano, September 5, 193*6). This image was widely distributed internationally by the Magnum photo agency, most famously appearing in *Life* magazine on June 12, 1937.

By the time the United States entered World War II, all photos of war dead were censored by the Roosevelt administration, as was done by other nations in the conflict. After journalists chafed at the restrictions, the White House modified its policies, and in 1943, *Life* showed a photograph of three dead G.I.s on a beach in New Guinea from behind, thus obscuring their faces. The magazine asked readers in accompanying text: "Why print these pictures? Is it to hurt people? To be morbid?" Then the editors provided their own conclusion: "The reason is that words are never enough."

In the 1960s and 1970s, pictures of dead soldiers in their coffins arriving back from Vietnam further sapped morale and helped spark antiwar protests. Learning this lesson, in the buildup to the first

---

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_school_massacres_by_death_toll

Gulf War, the George H. W. Bush administration put in place a media ban on such images. It was not until 2009 that the Pentagon partially lifted the rule, ostensibly allowing such pictures only if immediate family members agreed to publication. One wishes there might also have been more specific discussion about the shocking coffin photos of prominent individuals such as Elvis Presley (1977), John Lennon (1980), and other celebrities on covers of the *National Enquirer*.

Conclusion

Death Makes the News is a breakout study and milestone contribution to the literature. As such, it is likely to remain a highly cited standard source. By taking us behind the curtain of newsrooms, inside the editorial decision-making process through interviews and observation, *Death Makes the News* reveals how and why journalists make the choices they do in terms of what to show us about the dead. Ms. Fishman encourages us to reconsider how pictures and words shape our own attitudes and beliefs. What is particularly shocking is not so much the actual images recording the end of life, but rather the need to mitigate their cruel reality, which causes experienced practitioners to recoil when forced to deal with the subject of death.

References

Gallio, N. (2013). *Framing death. La morte in diretta, tra cinema e media digitali* [   ] (Doctoral
        dissertation). Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna, Bologna, Italy.

Hanunsch, F. (2010). *Representing death in the news: Journalism, media and mortality*. Basingstoke, UK:
        Palgrave Macmillan.

Hanunsch, F. (2012). The visibility of disaster deaths in news images: A comparison of newspapers from
        15 countries. *International Communication Gazette, 74*(7), 655–672.

Hanunsch, F. (2013). Sensationalizing death? Graphic disaster images in the tabloid and broadsheet
        press. *European Journal of Communication, 28*(5), 497–513.

Morse, T. (2014a). Covering the Dead: Death images in Israeli newspapers—Ethics and praxis. *Journalism
        Studies, 15*(1), 98–113.

Morse, T. (2014b). *Post mortem: Death-related media rituals* (Doctoral dissertation). London School of
        Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

Perlmutter, D. D. (1999). *Visions of war: Picturing warfare from the Stone Age to the cyber age.* New
        York: St. Martin's.

Thomas, L.-V. (2000). *Les chairs de la mort* [   ]. Paris: Institut d'édition Sanofi-Synthélabo.

Zelizer, B. (2010). *About to die: How news images move the public*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Appendix

Other Recommended Reading

Barnes, L., & Edmonds, E. (2015). If it bleeds, it leads? Changing death coverage in *The New Zealand Herald*. *Pacific Journalism Review, 21*(2), 162–172.

Batchen, G., Gidley, M., Miller, N., & Prosser, J. (Eds.). (2012). *Picturing atrocity: Photography in crisis*. London, UK: Reaktion Books.

Duncan, S. (2012). Sadly missed: The death knock news story as a personal narrative of grief. *Journalism, 13*(5), 589–603.

Florea, M. L., & Rabatel, A. (2011). Les modes de re-présentation de la mort et leurs enjeux dans la construction de l'événement [Media representations of death and the issues involved in the construction of the event]. *Questions de communication, 20*, 7–18.

Rabatel, A., & Florea, M. L. (2011). Re-présentations de la mort dans les médias d'information [Re-presentations of death in the information media]. *Questions de communication, 19*, 7–28.

Walter, T., Littlewood, J., & Pickering, M. (1995). Death in the news: The public invigilation of private emotion. *Sociology, 29*(4), 579–596.