Katrina pictures didn’t need bodies to show the suffering

Henry Howard

Hurricane Katrina has unleashed a torrent of visual images: a major city inundated by floodwaters, victims scurrying for safety, volunteers helping evacuees recover.
And dead bodies. Many U.S. newspapers have a blanket policy of not running photos of dead bodies. Running such photos, the reasoning goes, fails to show proper respect to the deceased and the grieving family, and it can be revolting to readers.

But what about when death is a major part of the story? In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, there is widespread belief that hundreds of lives could have been saved by an earlier evacuation, a better emergency plan and/or better coordination among various government agencies.

“Photographs of flood victims’ bodies are part of the overall coverage of Hurricane Katrina,” Cliff Schiappa, a regional photo editor for The Associated Press, told CNN. “When choosing an appropriate image, we do not want to be gratuitous, but rather put the image in context of the flood and suffering.”

At the Journal and Courier, we generally do not run photographs of dead bodies. However, in extreme cases such as the Katrina victims, we would consider running such an image, based on the news value of the story and the content of the actual photograph.

Since Katrina made landfall, newspaper editors have viewed thousands of compelling, newsworthy photographs.

Some showed the floodwaters. Some showed pain, anger and hope. And, yes, some showed dead bodies.

I checked back to see how our photo choices compared with other papers at www.newseum.org, the Web site of the Newseum — “the world’s first interactive museum of news.” There, I perused a digital catalog of front pages from around the nation.

I focused on the Sept. 2 editions from more than 40 front pages from newspapers around the Midwest. That day, the news had turned from the shock of the weather to the chaos of the aftermath. Here’s what I found:

• Several newspapers chose the same photograph that ran as the main image in the Journal and Courier that day:

a woman who fainted being carried away outside the New Orleans Superdome.
• A photo by Michael Ainsworth of the Dallas Morning News was used as the dominant image most often, by 10 of the papers. The photo depicted tense evacuees lining up to board one of the buses, heading from the Superdome to the Houston Astrodome.
• There were several other newspapers that used various photos of a scene outside the New Orleans Convention Center where an elderly woman was clinging to her last moments of life. The photos were powerful and showed a wide range of emotions. In one image, an aide was with the woman, saying to first-aid workers for assistance. In another, nearby evacuees were visibly upset and crying.

• One newspaper, the Courier-Journal of Louisville, Ky., ran a dominant photo of a man who had died in his lawn chair outside the convention center.

• Three small newspapers did not run photos related to Katrina that day.

When it comes to choosing whether to run a compelling yet graphic photo, there is no easy answer. For our Katrina coverage, we found that we could show photos that told the stories of devastation and desperation without showing a dead body.

At the Journal and Courier, we will continue to use sensitivity and news judgment in our photo selection process.

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