



**Worth a Thousand Words:
The Associated Press and Lance Corporal Joshua Bernard
Teaching Note**

Case Summary

War photography has been a feature of journalism for more than 150 years. But while it has evolved both morally and practically—shifting along with social mores, technology, and legal concerns—a central question has remained: how to deal with death on camera?

This case focuses on the Associated Press in September 2009, when it grappled with how to handle one particular photograph from the war in Afghanistan—an image of a wounded soldier who subsequently died from his injuries. The photograph of Lance Corporal Joshua Bernard had been taken by Julie Jacobson, an experienced war photographer embedded with a US Marine squad. Embed rules forbade publishing shots of identifiable dead or wounded troops before the servicemen's families had been notified, after which news organizations were free to publish, although many chose not to do so.

AP photo editors were used to making judgment calls about whether or not to release photos to the organization's thousands of members. The photograph of Bernard was particularly problematic. It was blurry in spots and poorly lit. Yet several editors felt that it had news value because it highlighted the human cost of a war that was slipping from the media's radar. At the same time, they were mindful of the impact that publication could have on Bernard's family and the AP's relationship with the military. Both Bernard's father and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates protested the photo's distribution.

Students learn about the history of the press' relationship with the military and of AP's photographic war coverage since its establishment in 1846. They follow Jacobson's personal career trajectory as an embedded journalist with US troops in Iraq and then Afghanistan, where in August 2009 she is caught in a Taliban ambush. Class members relive the attack, during which Jacobson photographs the mortally wounded Marine, and step into the shoes of AP editors as they weigh what do with the image that both Bernard's family and the military do not want made public.

Teaching Objectives

The embed system, introduced for the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, provides a way for journalists to cover aspects of war and of army life that would otherwise be inaccessible to them. But living and traveling with troops has significant drawbacks for reporters, not least creating a dependence and familiarity that could compromise their work. Discuss the embed system and its implications for journalism as part of a wider conversation about the logistical issues that journalists face when covering war and the best way for them to do so.

Embed rules banned news organizations from publishing photos of identifiable dead or wounded US servicemen before their families were notified, after which they were free to do what they wanted with the images. In practice, few media outlets since the start of the Iraq war in 2003 chose to publish such photos, although pictures of opposition or foreign civilian casualties were more commonly distributed. Talk about this policy, media response, and the broader issue of publishing images of troops who have been wounded or killed. Is there a difference between publishing a photo of an injured or wounded non-American and an American? Where does the line lie between presenting the reality of warfare and respect for the servicemen and their families? Moreover, who should decide: the military, the media, or the relatives of the troops involved?

Jacobson believes that the photo of Bernard is more effective than a written story, arguing “a name on a piece of paper barely touches personalizing casualties.” Do you agree—and do photos always have more impact, especially in today’s visual culture? Suggest ways that journalists can communicate the realities of war more effectively to audiences, especially to readers and viewers relatively disconnected from conflicts in other parts of the world.

Class Plan

Use this case in a course about photojournalism; covering conflict; media and censorship; government-press relations; and media ethics.

Study question. Help students prepare for discussion by assigning the following question in advance:

- a) Does the photo of Bernard’s final moments have news value? Define the meaning of news value in this context.

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to the questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the students’ work both to craft talking points ahead of class and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion.

In-class questions. The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions in order to promote an 80–90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would

like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

- a) AP editors believe that the image of Bernard has “news value” because it “tells a story,” illustrating “the real cost of the [troop] escalation” in Afghanistan. Do you agree with this rationale? To what extent should the graphic, personal nature of the image be taken into consideration?
- b) AP’s decision is ultimately one of distribution: whether to give AP’s thousands of clients the choice to run the photo if they choose. Should AP make the call, or should it let its members choose what to do for themselves?
- c) AP Executive Editor Kathleen Carroll feels that Bernard’s family should be warned about the possible publication and so assigns a reporter to attend the soldier’s funeral and show the image to Bernard’s mother and father. Do you agree with this strategy? Does it set a worrying precedent? What else could or should AP have done out of respect for Bernard’s family?
- d) Carroll felt that the photo needed more than a mere caption, so she asked news editors “to make this young man a person” by learning more about his home life, his squadron, and the circumstances of his death. Do you agree with this approach? Does it help humanize Bernard or exploit his death?
- e) According to Carroll, “you’d like dying to be a private act, but it isn’t in wartime.” Do you agree? How much decisionmaking authority should go to the family of the deceased?
- f) According to Photo Desk Supervisor Jim Collins, editors examine any photos involving bodily injury to see if the graphic nature of the shot subsumes the meaning of the picture. Discuss this approach. Do you agree that a close-up of a dead person that lacks context, such as that rejected by AP in 2003, is “not a picture?”
- g) The Bernard photo is graphic by its very nature. But Collins says that sometimes a horrifying image is “what viewers need to see.” Is this one of those times?
- h) AP puts at risk its relationship with the military by publishing the photo of Bernard. To what extent, if at all, should this factor into the decision?
- i) General Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, suggested that an embedded journalist would get only a “soda-straw” view of the conflict. Do you agree? Is such a view preferable to no view at all?
- j) In April 2003, AP had distributed a photo of a wounded Marine in Iraq whom Jacobson had not been able to identify. The Department of Defense had not objected. In what way, if at all, does the photo of Bernard differ?

- k) Over her career, Jacobson had forged personal guidelines on how to handle if someone was injured while she was working: if no medical or emergency personnel were present she assisted the injured person, but otherwise she would “step back and do my job.” Do you agree with her policy? What do you think of photojournalists devising their own approaches to such situations? Are more codified guideline feasible, or even desirable?
- l) AP distributed photos of enemy casualties more frequently than it did of American casualties. Is there a difference?
- m) Do photojournalists in wartime face special challenges over and above their print colleagues? How so?

Suggested Readings

“Visual Journalism,” *Nieman Reports*, Spring 2010.

SYNOPSIS: In this issue of the Harvard-affiliated publication, photojournalists explore the new avenues for their work in the digital age. Themes of articles, which illuminate several aspects of the case, include “Envisaging Digital,” “New Pathways,” “Shifting Strategies,” and “Visual Literacy.”

<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=102073>

Fred Ritchin, *After Photography*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008.

SYNOPSIS: Ritchin, a former head of picture for the *New York Times Magazine* and associate professor of Photography and Communications at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, considers journalistic photography in light of the rise of digital technology. He explores issues such as the democratization of image making, and the impact of manipulation and staging on our perception of truth—ultimately concluding that the medium has an optimistic future and that documentary images will help us to connect and understand one another better.

Susan Sontag, *On Photography* New York: Anchor Books, 1990.

SYNOPSIS: According to Sontag, the world of images is central to a capitalist society, used to rulers to control the masses. Taking a photograph “is to appropriate the thing photographed,” an aggressive act that alienates people from direct experience, deadens experience of the real world, and instead creates an illusion of knowledge. The book, while dense, is widely considered to be a classic on the subject of photography and a rich theoretical text to bolster the overall subject of the case.

"Different Perspectives," *On the Media*, National Public Radio, September 11, 2009.

SYNOPSIS: This broadcast provides a useful postscript for students to listen to once they have finished discussing the case. In it, AP Director of Photography Santiago Lyon explains why the organization ultimately decided to run the photo of Bernard.

<http://www.onthemedial.org/transcripts/2009/09/11/03>