But Should You Print It?

Some concluding observations on the ethics of journalism.

There are four areas of sensitivity: violence; intrusions into privacy; sex and public decency; and fakery.

Violence: Electronic software such as Quark, Photoshop, and Illustrator, offers temptations to photographers and photo editors. It is so much easier now to manipulate images for effects of composition of the kind demonstrated on the previous page. They cannot be detected. They ought always to be admitted. The credibility of photography must not be eroded by cover manipulation.

Privacy: By comparison with fakery, a declining concern. When the first edition of this book was published the British Press Council had just been called on to deliberate whether the Daily Mirror had 'brought football into disrepute' by printing a photograph of a top player embracing a topless model. The ruling was that this publication was outside the editor's discretion. The march of civilization has since given those who need it a daily ripple, and renewed confidence. The few miraculous acts of creation, female midriffs without a belly button between them. No doubt some photo pioneers will one day cross the public barrier. It will not mean ceasing.

Sex and public decency: public tolerance has markedly relaxed in areas of decency, it is now acceptable to re-examine an old privacy. A California court ruled that even a photograph of a husband and wife photographed in a public place is an intrusion: Members of the opposite sex engaging in amorous demonstration is clearly a subject which the broadcast of that most intimate reaction of the attention has been focussed on the efforts of Britain's Royal Family to maintain a minimum of privacy. But the California law notwithstanding, publication of photographs of them in public places, even in a newspaper, is an intrusion. It has beenfall, within the discretion of the editor. It caused a furore at the Palace in 1981 when the Princess of Wales was pictured going into a village shop in jeans, but the village shop was a public place and it is hard to fault the photographer/editor. There can be no defence, on the other hand, for photographs which trespass on private property for no other purpose than the thrill of trespass and the trivialization of invading private space. Editors who publish them, whether supplied by paparazzi or staff, invite and deserve censure. Trampolines and the Long Tom should be reserved for occasional moment when it can be defended in the public interest, as in the espousing and documentation of wrongdoing. Peping Toms who are merely prurient rich legal restraints that would prevent the defensible as well as the indefensible intrusion.

The pursuit of a rural buttck is by no means the only sensitive area of privacy. Intrusions into the private life of ordinary citizens are widely resented and we ignore then at our peril. The Press Council has censured the photographs of relatives in distress and people in prison, and it deprecates photographs of funerals unless they are public occasions. The public nature of the event and the person is the crux of it: it is unacceptable under any circumstances for the publication of a man being sick, but when the man is the President of the United States, George Bush, and the occasion is an official Japanese state banquet, news世界第一 war. So can free comment. The Daily Mirror was rightly upheld after it published a three-column picture of a fat driver, headlined 'The Brute,' of a man who had beaten a child to death.

Violence: In the first place, photogra phers have to consider very carefully whether the very presence of the camera may invite or encourage violence for the sake of the public interest. The classic example is the Irian Jaya massacre in Indonesia where some photographers walked away without taking a picture and others stayed to record the event. Perhaps the murder would have happened without the camera, and certainly the photograph- ers' conflict of duties is under standable. But if to take and publish those pictures was correct, was it real ly wise by the Pulitzer: Committee to award a prize?

Photographs of violence do cause distress to many people and that sometimes to be accepted, but to inflict distress at random is to strain the case for doing it at all. Circumstances must determine case, and certainty is elusive. The commu nity or readership being served has a bearing. In fifteen years of editing first a provincial daily and then a national newspaper, neither immune to controversy, it is the response to a single photo which still perplexes me. It showed an empty coffin in the foreground of a burned out car. By telephone, letter and per sonal visits, scores of readers of The Northern Echo let me know their outrage at this photograph. It was news, it was coherent, and it was common practice to publish accident pictures, it was a reminder of the toll of the roads, etc. But was the response to a single photo to band wounds, not expose them. Or perhaps the slashing of the coffin did transcend some taboo. The general defence to publication of this picture seems to me to be sound today as they did then, there is a limit to their validity. It would have been a better public service if the newspapers, eighty I think, chose not to publish the car crash pictures of the actress Jayne Mansfield showing her head impaled on a shard of shield glass and her body lying severl feet away on the road. There has to be some fitness of purpose, and a constant awareness of the capacity of a photograph to excite deep emo tion. With the offensive photographer, pictures help in the event it portrays of such social or historic sign ificance that the shock is justified. Is the objection kinetic detail, and the victims were dehumanized? The Ghomeration, however, was surely justified in publishing Jaremke's photograph of the burned and twisted human sacrifice; but I still believe that publication, with one caveat, would have been justified. It would have compelled a more painful recognition of what we ask of our armed forces. The caver is one of privacy. Such a picture makes its point by anonymity. It would be a gratuitous intrusion into private grief to identify disfigured victims. There is something more significant in all those protests about Jaremke's picture. They suggest that even now, at the end of the first quarter century the world has become more wise, even now after the trenches and Hiroshima, and Vietnam, popular culture is still largely imbued with a romantic conception of war and resists a grim reality. Perhaps, in a world where evil flourishes and must sometimes be fought, it is necessary to sustain the heroic image in the belief it is the only way to avert war.

In its own small way, it says what Siegfried Sassoon meant by the Gare memorial at Ypres inscribed with its 58,896 soldiers missing in action.

Here was the world's worst wound. And here with pride
Their names forever living.
Here was war, in which all men were

Was ever an immolation so belied as these inscriptions of the nameless names?
Will right the Dead who struggled for the same
Rice and deride this spectacle of cruelty.

Staring at the photograph of the immunized and transcendent savage, the presence of a foreign field, it was not possible to think of this cadaver as a pulse in the eternal mind, a rich dust that will give back laughter learned of fronds, and flowers and gentleness.