Violent news videos can be a moral motivator, says researcher

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Credit: University at Buffalo

Violent news events present editors with a troubling journalistic decision: How much of the violence, if any, should the audience see as part of the story?

Matthew Grizzard, an assistant professor in the University at Buffalo Department of Communication, says his latest research suggests editors should include violent video in those stories they consider to be genuinely newsworthy.

"Showing graphic content and providing a more accurate and complete representation of severe events can motivate people to care more about what they're seeing," says Grizzard, an expert on the cognitive and emotional effects of media entertainment. "We see increases in moral sensitivity and a greater desire for humanitarian and military interventions designed to stop violence motivated by exposure to more graphic portrayals."

The findings appear in the journal *Mass Communication and Society* and stand in striking contrast to the prevailing wisdom that broadcasting graphically violent news content is gratuitous and sensationalist.

The Society of Professional Journalists is more specific, going so far as to state that "common-sense" demands that journalists "recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm and discomfort...and [to] show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity."

But Grizzard's research questions this common sense approach to the problem of whether or not to show violent news content.

"It's hard to make progress by continuing to say that all violent content is bad, when we lack the empirical evidence to support such a conclusion," he says. "One of the things I'd like to see happen with this research is that we start looking at the evidence and begin asking what decisions are justified from evidence rather than tradition.

"Right now, the decision to sanitize violent content isn't based on scientific evidence; it's based on what we presume to be the effects of showing that content."

The study results also address disagreement among communication theorists. Some argue that viewers would perceive video which was

edited to remove graphic violence as more severe than an unedited clip because the human mind in the absence of actual footage would create details more gruesome than reality. However, Grizzard's study does not support this conclusion.

"If that were the case, we would have seen more anger and disgust in the more sanitized clips," says Grizzard.

Participants in the study watched one of three versions of a television network's story about a mass execution conducted by ISIS militants: the first version showed only the militants driving victims to the execution site; a second froze the video just before the actual shooting; and a third version aired the video to its unedited violent conclusion.

"When subjects watched the most graphic clip they felt the most acute levels of anger and disgust, moral emotions that predicted increased desire for intervention," says Grizzard.

But Grizzard still advises caution. The research doesn't advocate the wholesale addition of graphic content. News directors should first consider the story's importance as a news item, but once they've made a decision to tell a graphic story, Grizzard says, existing graphic video content should be part of that story.

"Otherwise you are failing to include the actual consequences associated with human tragedies," he says. "If you've made the decision that people need to know about this, then why pull back and not show them why they should care?" he asks.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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