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Kjerstin Torpmann-Hagen Artist Statement

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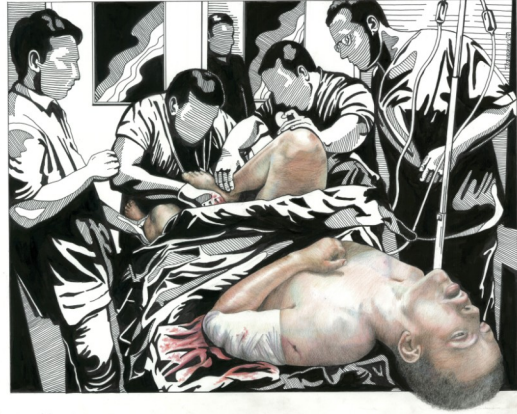
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KJERSTIN TORPMANN-HAGEN ARTIST STATEMENT

The theme of this drawing series is death and disaster as a commodity in news media.

After working in the news media for years, I have now spent the last two years researching content and presentation of web television news in Norwegian online media with the hypothesis that the attributes of new media have an impact on the selection and presentation of content. One of my major findings in this research was that there was a significant increase in coverage of disasters and human suffering happening abroad. Overall, online media focused on breaking news events, and considerably less on background stories. In the coverage of tragic and explicit events abroad – always based on dramatic footage from news agencies - there were never any explanatory or inquiring underlying stories. These findings were consistent with the results presented in the annual report on American Journalism in 2008. The 10 top stories of the Online Aggregators were, with few exceptions, about war and natural disasters around the world. The authors of this report also found that what wasn't covered in news media was in many ways as notable as what was. The increase in news coverage on wars and disasters abroad meant less coverage on important national social, political and economical issues. They also pointed out the tendency in news media to move on from stories quickly. On breaking news events the media flooded the zone but then quickly dropped underlying storylines of causes and consequences. In today's tough news market the value of shocking and disturbing news is continuing to increase, at the cost of traditional news values.



The glut of stories and images of death and disaster abroad, together with the emphasis on the dramatic events themselves, rather than their causes and consequences, naturally have a significant impact on the public's worldview, and their sense of understanding and compassion. Over the years, photojournalism from wars and other catastrophes has had an invaluable influence on public opinion, contributing to the ending of wars and increased giving of aid. However, what happens when these pictures oversaturate the news media? My objective is to shed light on various aspects that concern me regarding the results from my research. Most important is my concern that the increasing amount of photographs of human suffering may desensitize the audience and serve against its original purpose. When we get used to seeing pictures with these motives in our daily serving of news, its impact on us may disappear. Our emotions might be stirred, but without any further knowledge it is easy to shake them off without any further engagement. Furthermore, because the media is flooded with stories of death and disaster and little else from countries overseas, people may end up with a distorted view of the world. The endless stream of horrors from undeveloped countries the media is feeding us may make it seem as though getting engaged is useless – the things we do today seem to have no effect. Other and related concerns are the way these tragic news often serves as gratification for audience's needs for chilling entertainment and voyeurism, more than as rational information to increase the newsreaders knowledge about the world situation. Results from Stanford Poynters Eyetracking Project in the U.S. show that eighty percent of the viewers of online news read crime and disaster coverage, and the results from my research showed that stories of crime and disaster together with stories from sports and entertainment aggregated the most readers in Norwegian news media. Images of death and disaster seem in this view to be merely great articles of trade.

With this series of drawings I am trying to deconstruct the effects of over-abundance of images of human suffering in news. My work reproduces commonly seen images of victims of disasters abroad, but by transforming them from one mode to another, from photojournalism to drawings, I hope to create a greater attentiveness of what we look at every day in our media. I have distorted these photographs in various ways by rendering selected figures as realistically as possible by using color pencils, and the surrounding people and the setting using black ink, similar to the style of adult graphic novels. By doing this I want to raise the issue that we perhaps are so accustomed to seeing disturbing photographs that they hardly impact our emotions more than a graphic novel would, and I also want to question the news value of the images we find in the media's flood of stories of death and disaster.

The State Of News Media (2008) www.stateofthemedias.org/2008/

