



Last week,

Jews in New York and around the world were outraged by the *New York Post's* coverage of the shocking murder of Williamsburg resident Menachem Stark z"l. But the *Post* has a reputation for constantly pushing the limits of decency, and the offensive banner headline, which practically justified his horrific demise, was in fact faithful to the newspaper's pattern: the more shocking the headline, the more papers will sell. Take last year's gruesome front-page photo of a man pushed onto the subway tracks about to be hit by a train, with the screaming headline: "DOOMED... This Man Is About to Die." The masses condemned the gory spin, but few could resist the urge to read the story.

That horrifying December 2012 image showed Queens resident Ki-Suck Han desperately struggling to climb to safety after being shoved onto the subway tracks by a street hustler, as the headlights of the train bore down on him. Seconds later, he was run over and killed.

Even the *Post*, which created its niche in sensationalist, bad-taste journalism, was surprised by the onslaught of condemnation by media ethicists, other media outlets, and even *Post* fans. How, these critics asked, could the paper stoop so low and publish a picture, with no journalistic or political purpose, of a hapless man about to die? And worse, what kind of media culture encourages a photographer to snap a picture instead of trying to rescue the poor fellow?

The photographer, R. Umar Abbassi, soon found himself facing unnerving questions about his scoop, but defended his actions the following day in newspaper and television interviews. Abbassi said he had his camera in his hand because he'd just been on assignment nearby. When he saw what had happened — alerted by screaming onlookers who were trying to warn the train driver — he began running toward Han, but said he was too far away to reach the victim. As he ran, Abbassi said he snapped the shutter in the hope that the driver would see the flashes from his camera and brake in time to avoid hitting Han. The flash, he said, went off 49 times.

"I had no idea what I was shooting. I'm not even sure it was registering with me what was happening," he told the *New York Times* the next day — although he did submit the photos and was paid well

for them. Still, he said he wasn't involved in the publishing decision. "Every time I close my eyes, I see the image of death. I don't care about a photograph," he said.

Shoot or Shoot? The grisly photograph of Han about to die might have been accidental — and in the best possible version of the story, the photographer was actually trying to help and the pictures were just a by-product — but what kind of message is a newspaper promoting when it seems to favor a photo scoop over the life that's behind it? Was there something more effective Abbassi could have done to help besides fire off his flash, and if there was, was he under a moral obligation to do it?

Reporters and photojournalists face this dilemma on an ongoing basis: When there's a tragedy in the making, should they document it, or should they intervene? Nick Ut, the award-winning Vietnam War photographer who shot the famous photo of a girl trying to outrun a napalm bomb, picked up the girl and took her to the hospital after capturing her distress. Then there was *New York Times* photographer Kevin Carter, who won a Pulitzer Prize for a photograph of an emaciated Sudanese toddler doubled over in the dirt, while a vulture lurked behind her.

While the picture made the world realize the horror of Sudan's famine, there was an undertone of criticism toward Carter: What happened to the girl? Did the vultures get her in the end? Was Carter a heartless opportunist for exploiting her, instead of giving her something to eat or taking her to a safe place? Another photographer who was nearby claimed the picture was in fact not as menacing as it looked; photographer and subject were actually within several meters of a feeding center. Nevertheless, Carter

himself couldn't live with the feeling of shame that, absorbed in the thrill of a great picture, he didn't even think of carrying the little girl closer to the shelter. Three months later, he killed himself.

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The vulture as the backdrop to Carter's picture might have been symbolic in another way. "For an outsider, it's easy to perceive us as vultures, when you see us walking through pools of blood and corpses just to get that perfect shot that will aesthetically show the situation so it can be printable in a newspaper," combat photographer Joao Silva told former *New York Times* executive editor Bill Keller in an interview, after Silva — married and father of two — lost his legs in Afghanistan when a land mine exploded under him.

"What people mistake for emotional distance, I think, is an intensity of experience that an outsider cannot fully penetrate... Any photographer who has snapped memorable images has had the experience of being cursed for it, and it is something the most thoughtful of them take to heart," wrote Keller, referring to society's indictment of photojournalists as voyeurs, paparazzi of doom, and exploiters of other people's misery.

One Foot in the Door There's a corollary to all this: Pressured by editors who need to scoop the competition in a media society where fight for market share is a number-one priority, how far off course

of their moral compass will reporters veer for a story?

Anna Lisa Raya, who spent a dozen years in the trenches working for several celebrity/entertainment magazines,

said the obsession with sales drove her editors to assign stories that made her cringe. "My bosses would tell me, 'You just have to get your foot in the door. They'll slam the door in your face, but that's okay as long as you've already asked your question,'" Anna Lisa told *Mishpacha*.

Her unease with those assignments eventually propelled her out of journalism — she reached a point where she said she could no longer betray herself and her values. Today she edits a specialized entertainment magazine in Los Angeles that's sent directly to industry professionals where sales aren't an issue — that was the only way she was willing to get back into media after taking a six-year break... to join the quiet life and become a librarian.

Anna Lisa says she became a reporter because she wanted to devote her life to something exciting — and noble: report the truth, uncover corruption, help the public empathize with tragedy. But the disillusionment began in 1997, when she was sent to San Diego after the mass suicide of the Heaven's Gate cult. The 39 cult members killed themselves in order to reach what they believed was an alien spacecraft. They believed that the planet Earth was about to be "recycled,"

and that the only way to survive was to leave it immediately. Her editors wanted to get the inside scoop on this bizarre cult by painting the members as “regular people” who could be your neighbor, your relative, or the guy waiting in line in front of you at the supermarket — and so reporters were fanned out to find the personal stories behind them.

“We told ourselves it was for the honor of these people’s memories,” Anna Lisa says, “but what it boiled down to was exploiting friends and relatives who were embarrassed and hurting and didn’t want to talk about it.”

She said one of her most memorable reminders of how manipulative media can be was when she was freelancing for a women’s magazine, assigned to track down and interview once-happily married couples shaken by the emotional breakdown of one spouse. The people she spoke with shared the most personal details of their relationship, their most vulnerable moments.

“I spent weeks finding these couples and establishing a rapport so they’d open up to me,” Anna Lisa remembers. “I filed heart-rending stories, and then my editor said, ‘That was just stage one. Now we need their pictures. We have to see if they’re good-looking enough for the magazine.’ I poured my soul into these people, and they reciprocated with tear-jerking personal tales — but now they had to pass a photo test! I knew it was doomed — the couples just weren’t gorgeous enough.”

It’s easy to criticize hardworking journalists and pressured editors. But there are other players in the dynamic. It’s not just the editors who are looking for drama — potential subjects are equally hungry for the limelight. Saul Roth — a former stringer for a popular celebrity weekly who now works in Jewish media — says people will do anything for their five minutes of fame. He once interviewed the “lunch lady” — a simple woman in charge of the huge cafeteria at a government agency in Washington, whom one media outlet had targeted because of her novel “singing menus” that employees would hear when they called in to find out what was for lunch that day.



“One thing about working for this magazine is that when you call someone for an interview, they’re practically dying with excitement, and this lady was the same,” says Saul. “I got her story, and I could see how excited she was, but on the other hand, I felt bad for her. It was so obvious that her fame would be short-lived, and it was so obvious that she was being swept up in it. I tried to let her down easy, to tell her gently that she should have fun this week, but by next week no one would remember.”

That’s Entertainment Melissa Berger can relate. She was a booker responsible for scheduling celebrities and other people of interest for MSNBC, CNN, and Larry King — before she left the business behind and became *frum*. “Our shows looked like news, but we didn’t do

anything in depth. We were getting the information out, but it really crossed over to entertainment. I always had to keep it clear in my own head: I worked for an entertainment supplier of news,” she says.

Melissa’s job was to get the background information on the stories of the day, figure out who were the key players, and convince them to spill their secrets on the show. “It wasn’t hard to find people willing to talk,” she says. “We live in a society that promotes famousness.”

Following the 1996 TWA Flight 800 crash over the Atlantic a few minutes after takeoff, Melissa’s boss at NBC handed her — and a dozen other reporters — a just-released passenger list and told them to track down families and neighbors, in order to get their reaction and scoop the other networks. There were no survivors, and the media was especially



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focused on a group of high school students who were on that plane traveling to Europe for a French competition.

"The assignment made me sick," Melissa remembers, "but I started calling. The bosses told us, 'This is your job. We have to supply the world with what happened and we have to build color, texture, for all these people who were killed.' It was horrible. I realized that I was reaching friends and neighbors who didn't even know about the crash yet. When I called a house and got a family member who had not yet heard, I gave the list back to my boss. I lied. I told him I couldn't locate anyone."

Good reporters and good bookers are smooth talkers and extremely convincing, Melissa rehashes. They perfect their gab so they can convince interviewees to open up the most private parts of their hearts. But what

often happens, she says, is that the journalist deludes himself into seeing this prying as a noble endeavor.

Still, isn't there value in sharing a loss that the community, or even the nation, can empathize with? Users of media do want to put a personal face on tragedy, and share the pain of fellow citizens. Isn't opening that window a worthwhile pursuit?

Melissa isn't convinced. "When I started out, I hated having to reach people and convince them that it was to their benefit to come on TV. I'd say things like, 'The world needs to know about this,' or 'It's a way to honor your child.' Sure, some of it is true, but some of it is extremely manipulative. Today I say, if you want to share your pain, do it with a

psychologist, not a journalist."

Her internal unease didn't stop Melissa from becoming a top booker for *Larry King Live*, a live interview show that featured the celebrities or newsmakers of the day. At that point, she admits, she left her conscience behind as she set out to find the guests that would keep the ratings high. One of those searches took her to Paducah, Kentucky, where a deranged teenager went on a shooting spree in his high school and killed three classmates.

"I was trying to get the parents of the murderer to speak," Melissa confesses. "I didn't succeed — it was really an impossible mission — but I found out their address, where they worked and where they went to church, and spent a lot of time trying to meet congregants and neighbors and basically see if any of them were unethical enough to help me get the parents on the show. I sent flowers and gifts, and left a lot of compelling notes in their mailbox, things like, 'I'm sure you want

the world to really know how special your son was,' or 'I'm sure your son was troubled and that you want to tell the world that he was really a good boy and clear his reputation.' Here I am saying this schmaltzy stuff to the parents of a killer. It was all about creating a false friendship and a false love. I wanted them to say, 'Oh, that lady is so nice, if I'm gonna talk to anyone it will be her. Because she's so fair and nice and will respect and consider me.'"

Melissa's "biggest" booking was Linda Tripp, the woman who turned over evidence that ultimately led to former President Clinton's impeachment. "I was in touch with her lawyer — he felt he could trust me, and he loved Larry King, who was a national media icon. I invited him to the book parties we had, and Larry even took the two of them out to dinner. Linda Tripp was a self-promoter anyway, and she wanted to go on a show where she'd get the most exposure. We lavished on the star treatment and were able to give her her five minutes of fame, which she loved."

Then Melissa went after other people involved in the scandal — they would definitely boost ratings, but to court corruption? The doubts began to plague her.

"I used to say, Bill Clinton made me *frum*. Being immersed in all that dirt, I started feeling that I couldn't live with myself," Melissa reveals. "I remember sitting at my desk thinking, 'I can't believe I'm being so nice, and even sociable, to people whom I'd never associate with under normal circumstances.' It made me realize how upside down the world was, that I was spending my time trying to impress and befriend criminals for my job. I didn't know much about Torah at the time, but I knew there had to be some black-and-white moral standard for right and wrong."

No Tears While Melissa claims her work, in the guise of news, was "sometimes the lowest level of drama and entertainment," one chareidi journalist in Israel says that accusations of voyeurism

and invasion of privacy in times of tragedy are unfounded. Sarah Pardes says that there is a right way to share people's pain, and she's found that people are genuinely open to sharing their emotions with a target audience who can identify with their loss. Sarah is the media queen of shivah houses, especially after terrorist attacks or other tragedies that touch the lives of Jews in Eretz Yisrael. Of course, everyone wants to read about the senseless murder, the family's pain, the outrage — but to interview family members while their wounds are fresh and bleeding?

Sarah, who writes for *Mishpacha* Hebrew weekly, doesn't feel conflicted by the practical need to meet a deadline versus the searing pain of her subjects. In fact, she says she's doing them a favor.

"Some people might say I'm taking advantage, that I'm an opportunist, that my editor is sensationalizing pain, but actually I'm giving them a platform. Israel is a small country and people feel for others on an almost personal level. The pain of an individual is often a national tragedy. I always identify myself up front, but I never force anyone to speak. I do tell them it's an opportunity to inspire others, to be *mekadesh Sheim Shamayim*.

"Actually, from a technical angle, going into a shivah house is the easiest assignment, because everyone is coming in and out. No appointment necessary. I tell the mourners they don't have to say anything, but there might be a public benefit, an honor for the *niftar*, or a wake-up call for the public. I've found that as soon as I listen and am empathetic, most mourners actually want to speak. For them, it's not voyeurism. It's a *chesed*."

Sarah has been to countless public shivah homes and says she's taught herself to separate between the grief of others — which would shatter her — and her ability to stay focused and do her job. "It's a heavy price. I sometimes ask myself, 'Sarah, why aren't you crying? Why aren't you horrified?'"

"There was one time I was sure I'd lose my composure though," she continues. "It was during the shivah of the Fogel family from Itamar, who were hacked to death by

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terrorists on Shabbos night three years ago. There were still toys on the floor, Bissli on the plates."

In Good Taste Sometimes it can be a gift to mourners in their pain. Sometimes it can be a wake-up call to society. Sometimes it can be exploitative entertainment in the guise of news. Sometimes it can be a sensational headline in poor taste that borders on character assassination. Menachem Stark, Ki-Suck Han, and others who've been unceremoniously dragged through the ink on those sensationalist covers of the *New York Post*, for example — is there a question of ethical conduct for the paper with the seventh-largest circulation in the US?

Professor Richard Wald, who teaches professional practice in media and society at the Columbia University School of Journalism, and is a longtime print and television media professional, says it's not a question of ethics. It's a question of taste.

"If it's honestly reported, if it's not slanted to reflect a personal, political, or racial bias, then it meets the basic criteria for being ethical," he related to *Mishpacha*. "But: Is it in good taste? That's the question at issue, and it is in the eye of the beholder. Obviously, not everything goes. Obviously, some things will be too shocking for print or for the print-using community. But I don't believe these outrageous headlines are in response to competition with the Internet for market share or a response of desperation. Regarding the *Post* in particular, it's the way this newspaper has chosen to present itself. If it goes too far, advertisers and readers — society in general — will shun it. But bad taste is not unique to this time or this newspaper."

So does the media reflect the taste of its users, or does it set the agenda? Newspapers, talk

shows, and video clips might aim to shock or horrify, but these outlets are a business, catering to the very real desires of their users. "We exist in a Greek society, where we live Greek drama and Greek tragedy," Melissa Berger says. It's easy to vilify reporters for digging up dirt or exploiting catastrophe, but without a willing readership, that dirt wouldn't make a headline.

But not all readers are actively seeking dirt. Even those who get a thrill out of seeing other people's vulnerabilities exposed might simultaneously be motivated by a sense of national and communal pain and a desire to empathize with tragedy.

Just one example of how viewers do the dance between sensationalism and genuine outpouring of compassion was a news clip that went viral last summer, of an unwanted newborn baby found in the sewer pipe of a Chinese village. Tenants who heard strange sounds coming from their building's plumbing summoned an emergency medical crew to rescue the trapped infant, who survived and recuperated. The grotesque circumstances of his rescue made for headlines that no one could miss. That unprecedented media attention spurred an international outpouring of concern for the baby — and funding for his future.

Still, the instant access to tragedy — and its most intimate emotional details — can oversaturate even the most sensitive reader. When shoot-outs and massacres are part of the daily news culture, the shock value bar keeps going up. As media keep pushing the envelope, what will it eventually take to shock us?

Sarah Pardes isn't sure where her job will ultimately take her, but on one thing she's clear: "They don't usually send journalists to happy events. Honestly, would you buy a magazine if it only had happy stories?" ●