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Journalism, Memory, and the Voice of the Visual

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Chapter 1
Journalism, Memory, and the Voice of the Visual

What are news images for? Still photos of a small John Kennedy Jr. saluting his father's coffin may have helped a grieving American public accept the death of its president in much the same way as a flag raising on Iwo Jima may have reduced the complicated reality of World War II to a symbolic gesture of victory. But neither example makes clear what equips an image to deliver the news and what makes some images work better than others, either on their initial display or in their recycling across time and space. Instead, multiple questions surface about these "flashbulb memories": Under which conditions does an image work most powerfully?[1] What kind of information does one need to understand an image and how much information is necessary? Who fosters an image's understanding? How does this impact public response to the news?

These questions motivate this book. As still photographs, videos, film, and digital images fill a growing and increasingly diverse print, broadcast, cable, and digital landscape, a fuller understanding of news images becomes critical. Because many images reflect unsettled public events—the difficult and often contested planned violence, torture, terrorism, natural disaster, war, famine, crime, epidemic, and political assassinations at the core of today's geopolitical environment—their consideration can help clarify how the public forms sentiments about the larger world. It can also elucidate under which conditions images promote broader political agendas and what happens to a healthy body politic when images reduce complex issues and circumstances to memorable but simplistic visual frames.

This book tracks the emergence, positioning, and use of one visual trope in U.S. news photographs—depictions of the moment at which individuals are about to die—as a prism for addressing news images more broadly. Reflecting a larger universe of news photos that similarly target the cusp of impending action—about to win, about to kiss, about to set sail, about to separate, about to fight—this trope exemplifies the strengths and weaknesses of news images as vehicles of information and memory. Drawing from pictures that have over time been deemed important enough to warrant sustained journalistic attention but stretch beyond familiar iconic depictions, this analysis of about-to-die images in nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century U.S. journalism, with some discussion of news images elsewhere, raises fundamental questions both about how these pictures depict the news, how they figure in collective memory, and how they connect with the public at multiple points in time. In so doing, it suggests a refinement of how news images have been thought to function and how the public has been thought to respond.

News Images, Information, and Memory

The eighteenth-century German dramatist Gotthold Lessing was among the first to address the singularity of visual representation, when, in his 1776 essay on the Laocoon, he distinguished painting from poetry: the visual can only use, he wrote, "but a single moment of an action, and must therefore choose the most pregnant one, the one most suggestive of what has gone before and what is to follow."[2] This ability to strategically freeze a moment in the sequencing of action has drawn the attention of various thinkers since photography's inception: Cartier Bresson coined it the "decisive moment," Victor Burgin the "pregnant moment," and Alfred Eisenstadt the "story-telling moment"—all in reference to an "instant arrested within a narrative flow" that coaxes the viewer to suspend disbelief, draw conclusions and invoke the "intended sentiment" of the depiction. Freezing a moment as a still photo turns a dynamic sequence into a "static scene … using space to replace or to represent time" and condenses action "into a single image, generally a moment of climax [representing] a process while avoiding the impression of simultaneity."[3]

As one kind of image, the photograph makes it particularly easy to suspend disbelief about what is shown. As Susan Moeller noted, "A photograph provokes a tension in us—not only about the precise moment that the image depicts, but also about all the moments that led up to that instant and about all the moments that will follow."[4] Its reduction of the world into miniature size, supposed flatness, predictable size and shape, traditional sidestepping of color, and fixation on a single moment in time all make it, in Oliver Wendell Holmes's term, a "mirror with the memory." Considered a primarily realistic mode of visual representation, photographs work through two forces, which scholars have termed denotation and connotation: denotation suggests that images reflect what "is there." Associated with "indexicality," "referentiality," and "verisimilitude," denotation—what William Henry Fox Talbot termed a "pencil of nature" and John Berger a "record of things seen"—shows things "as they are" and appears to capture life on its own terms. Connotation suggests that images provide more than what is physically caught by the camera, where, associated with symbolism, generalizability, and universality, the image draws from broad symbolic systems in lending meaning to what is depicted. Photographs have been thought to work by twinning denotation and connotation, matching the ability to depict the world "as it is" with the ability to couch what is depicted in a symbolic frame consonant with broader understandings of the world.[5]

Images have not been easily incorporated into much of the existing research on journalism. Adopting the sentiments of most journalists, complementary research strands on news production, content, and effects have tended to position news images in a supportive role to words, where the verbal record underpinning journalists' authority as arbiters of the real world takes precedence over its visual counterpart. Journalism, largely seen as a project of modernity, is presumed driven by words. Though images relate variously to them—bolstering, complementing, negating, and affirming what they stipulate—words remain journalism's authoritative cues because they are thought to enable information, evidence, reasoned testimony, and deliberation.[6] This means that for as long as journalists are thought to invoke reasoned and systematic reasoning, patterned procedures and standardized codes of behavior so as to encourage rational public response, accommodating a tool that works in other ways challenges longstanding notions of what journalism is for. It also leaves relatively unaddressed

the related question of what news images are for.

The relationship between the words and images of news has not had a steady history either. Hanno Hardt, for instance, tracked some of the debates by which photographers came to be seen as appropriating journalistic authority, while Julianne Newton, Caroline Brothers, and Michael Schudson have been among those documenting the contradictory responses of journalists toward the visual tools of their trade.[7] Though the capacity to accommodate visual representation has always differed by news medium—Ericson, Baranek, and Chan provided a useful description of the ramifications of newspaper's reliance on the visual, radio on the audio, and television on a combination of the two, further complicated by the Internet—most news organizations use text-based editors rather than photographers to select pictures across all news media, with often ill effect: in the view of a former director of photography at the *New York Times,* "the editors didn't value what pictures did.[8] They were considered soft."[9] Even today, with the multimodal platforms of the digitally mediated environment displaying still pictures regularly across slide shows, video packages, and online galleries of images, words still retain authority. As one wire service bureau chief recently remarked, "Words can go deeper than pictures. What about ideas? Concepts? Explanations? Background?"[10] This disregard for the image has buttressed a default understanding of news as primarily rational information relay that uses words as its main vehicle and implicitly frames images as contaminating, blurring, or at the very least offsetting journalism's reliance on straight reason.

That is not to say that scholars have not considered news independent of information, evidence, facts, and reason. John Hartley, for instance, observed that "pictorial news creates the public sphere within the semiosphere … rendering visible the continuous (and necessary) dialogue between … a rational public sphere and the fantasy layers of the semiosphere." John Fiske, S. Elizabeth Bird, James Carey, Kevin Barnhurst, and John Nerone have used journalism's representational forms, the tabloids, popular and lifestyle journalism as opportunities for addressing news as exercises in pleasure, community building, meaning making and code breaking. Other scholars—John Taylor, Susan Moeller, Jean Seaton, Eleanor Singer and Phyllis Endreny, and Carolyn Kitch and Janice Hume—have looked at spectacle, emotions, and passion in the hard news coverage of difficult events.[11]

And yet framing journalism as primarily the relay of reasoned information persists as the default construct in journalism's study, providing a useful starting point for thinking about how news images might work differently, particularly in unsettled events where the public need for information is thought to be critical. This assumption is worth addressing, for as the circumstances for producing news are changing, the primary emphasis on reason may be less relevant than ever before. The wide diversification of journalistic forms across high and low, broadsheet and tabloid, serious and sensational exemplified by two centuries of illustrated magazines, tabloid news, broadcast news, and online news, calls for a reassessment of the lingering emphasis on hard information and its association with the mainstream news of record. Previous enclaves separating print from broadcast and online journalists have given way to a restructured convergent environment, where multiple platforms regularly display a single story, professional and amateur journalists are repeatedly brought into close and sustained contact, and many journalists pull together multimedia stories without explicit

organizational cues, producing variant treatments of events on their own that involve video, still photos, sound, text, and graphics. New aspirations of digital collaboration incorporate viewers in news making, while contemporary pressures toward corporatization make multitasking and multiskilling the rule rather than the exception. The involvement of picture agencies like Getty, Magnum, or Newspixs, often at the expense of staff photographers, and the increasing importance of paparazzi, freelancers, citizen journalists, and archives, make the editorial task of finding one image for a story into a search among more possibilities than ever before.[12] All of this has made the work of news production substantially more varied and multidirectional today than it was in preceding years and more open to a less-strident reliance on reason.

Fault lines over the so-called appropriate display of news images also indicate that the emphasis on reason might be more uneven than assumed. Because most journalists still privilege a picture's denotation, relying on photographic realism to enhance their coverage of the real world, they tend to display pictures in greater numbers and prominence whenever they need to assert authority for their coverage. But connotation reveals itself as important, if not more, than denotation. The work of Stuart Hall has shown how pictures are frequently used in ways that depict not the core of a news story but its peripheral, symbolic, and associative sides —scenes removed from those described in the text but valuable because they play to broader mind-sets about how the world works, "material for interpretation … to be solved, like a riddle."[13] For example, in the still ongoing Iraq War, images of children proliferated according to the surrounding context: in the news media of those nations prosecuting the war, children were shown being nurtured by the military forces; in the media of those opposing the war, pictures of maimed and dead children appeared. Denotatively, it could be argued that both sets of images showed life "as it was," but each set made a certain kind of sense in a particular connotative context.

Moreover, further questions about reason are introduced as images move across time, where additional disconnects occur between information and understanding, on one side, and depiction, on the other. As markers of collective memory, "photos are most useful when they symbolize socially shared concepts or beliefs rather than present new or unfamiliar information." Moving beyond journalism to various carriers of collective memory, such as art installations, posters, and cartoons, news images offer arbitrary, composite, schematic, conventionalized, and simplified glimpses of the past in service of the present: one may not know or remember the name of the South Vietnamese villagers who stood huddled together as a U.S. military photographer snapped their last moments before being shot to death, nor the date or circumstances under which the photograph was taken, but the photo's resonance as an image of war atrocity charts its meaning without such detail. As David Perlmutter has shown, not even an image's impact can be guaranteed. For over time as people look at news images in different contexts, they may accept their preferred meaning by taking the fastest if not the fullest, most reliable, or most all-encompassing route. What remains is what makes sense: "The natural tendency of social memory is to suppress what is not meaningful or intuitively satisfying … and substitute what seems more appropriate or more in keeping with [a] particular conception of the world."[14]

All of this suggests that despite their marginalization by both journalists and academics, news images deserve more attention as vehicles of more than just straight reason. Acting as conduits of both news and memory, they draw public attention regardless of how fully they depict what viewers might know and understand. Over time, the tendency to disconnect what is understood from what is seen intensifies, suggesting that reasoned information relay is not the sum total of what images provide.

Qualifying Reason: Contingency, Imagination, and Emotion

Qualifying journalism's focus on reasoned information is supported on multiple levels when addressing news images. First, pictures function in ways that have little to do with a definitive set of certain and unambiguous cues for understanding the world: they are thought to be analogic—continuous and operating in more/less terms—rather than digital—discrete and operating in either/or terms. Generally offering an affective and often gestalt-driven view of the world, they tend to be indexical—directing attention to something; material—having a tangible form; iconic and syntactically indeterminate—representative of something but in a fuzzy, porous way. Most important, images are expected to offer only fragments of understanding, and thus direct their viewers elsewhere to understand what is shown—to the purposes, processes, and formulations at work beyond a camera's frame.[15] While words are valued for their evidentiary qualities, images offer instead implicative relays, suggestive slices of action that people need to complete by interpreting and imagining what unfolds beyond the camera's frame.

Second, the fact and actuality of photographic depiction has been so central to supporting the journalistic record that its opposite impulses—contingency and imagination—have been left unaddressed. Because photography dates to a time when its practitioners angled for its recognition as a tool of objective, scientific recording, contingency and the imagination were both associated with a set of "hand-me-down terms from the other arts … that did not fit very well and that hobbled assessment of the medium." Largely uninterested in terms that might complicate, modify, or qualify what was shown, some critics went so far as to identify contingency as one of photography's weaknesses and, accommodating the blunt force of the photograph's depiction of the here-and-now, pushed aside all that it entailed—possibility, qualification, play, supposal, conditionality, and implication.[16]

Nonetheless contingency and the imagination assert their presence in news images. Defined as the quality of being uncertain, conditional, or (im)possible, contingency softens the fact-driven force of the photograph by introducing chance, relativity, implication, and hypothesis into the act of viewing, forcing people to imagine and interpret a sequence of action beyond the picture's taking.[17] The imagination offers the possibility to interpret in a fanciful, illogical, baseless, or irrational fashion, with an uneven regard for what is actually shown. Both qualities can alter unseen sequences of action over time. A black-and-white photograph of a naked female corpse killed by the Nazis becomes an art installation years later, featuring a beautiful nude woman sleeping erotically under pastel strobe lights. A picture of a person

dying of AIDS later transforms into a glossy advertisement for a popular clothing line. When dealing with events of an unsettled nature, contingency and the imagination may constitute a particularly useful stance for those needing to establish meaning. For the ambiguity of the codes through which images are set in place "allow[s] considerable play in the meaning of the work, [which] is not immanent."[18] In fact, contingency and the imagination suggest that closure around images is rarely achieved and that they may provide the necessary leakage through which visual meaning can change.

Third, the idea that news images might bypass the intellect to engage the emotions has been acknowledged as more of an irritation than strength when thinking about journalism. Drawing from John Stuart Mill's 1859 admonitions against the power of popular sentiment, Jurgen Habermas and Karl Popper are among those who have more recently argued that affect, the emotions, and passion undermine the development of the reasoned public that journalism is expected to bolster,[19] making a public emotional response to images undesirable. Rationalizing the public sphere, they maintain, enhances the public good, and journalism is implicated in its maintenance. It may be, however, that rationality has been overemphasized as a way of explaining public action, in large part because it supports journalism's own self-recognition as a project aligned with modernity. For as the British cultural critic Raymond Williams pointed out, collective existence cannot take on meaning without some recognition of the structures of feeling that drive it.[20]

Though these points of entry—contingency, the imagination, and the emotions—have not been the primary target of journalism scholarship, they have drawn attention elsewhere. For instance, Richard Rorty made the case for contingency as a useful parameter through which to conduct moral deliberation, Roger Silverstone argued that imagination "opens the door to understanding and in turn to the capacity to make judgments in and through the public world," and both George Marcus and Lauren Berlant suggested that the emotions enable rather than undermine rationality.[21] Multiple scholars have argued that late modernity encourages a rethinking of the centrality of reason. Though the emotions remain "the aspect of human experience least subject to control, least constructed or learned (hence most universal), least public, and therefore least amenable to socio-cultural analysis," a focus on the rational leaves "unarticulated its dependence on emotion-concepts [such as] how emotion enters into political theories, how pictures of emotional needs and pains legitimate political theories, how political regimes privilege, amplify, stunt or nurture actual political emotions."[22]

The importance of contingency, the imagination, and the emotions is also supported in developments beyond the academy, where a rise in identity politics, personal blogging, and nationalism suggest that many people engage in ways that cool reason cannot explain, remaining "little inclined to set aside the persuasive force of passion." Qualifying reason may thus be particularly important in shaping public response to events of an unsettled nature:

> So when do we think about politics? When our emotions tell us to…In addition to managing our emotional reactions to things that are novel, threatening and familiar, affect influences when and how we *think* about such things…. Emotions enhance citizen rationality because they allow citizens to condition their political judgment to

fit the circumstance.[23]

Or, as one scholar aptly summarized, "Our commitment to reason is an emotional one" that draws on "strong reserves of emotional capital [that] are necessary for matured and reasoning modes of conduct to prevail."[24]

The shooting of twenty-six-year-old Iranian philosophy student Neda Agha-Soltan, killed during election demonstrations in Tehran in June 2009, illustrates how images do more than provide reasoned information. The incident unfolded as quickly as its impact became known: a bystander's brief cell-phone video captured the shooting, its forty-second sequence depicting the young woman crumpling to the ground after being shot in the chest. As people rushed to assist her, she turned her panic-stricken face toward the camera and blood began to trickle from her mouth. Though she did not die on camera, her rapid demise was implied by the depicted sequence of action.[25]

The unnamed bystander's video was sent by e-mail to an Iranian asylum seeker in the Netherlands, who forwarded it to CNN, the BBC, YouTube, Facebook, and other news organizations and social networking sites. For a mediated environment hungry for pictures of the Iranian protests, the video's informational value was beyond doubt, and nearly every U.S. news organization ran some visual treatment of the story. Multiple news organizations offered links to the video, though journalists, worried about its verification, graphicness, low resolution, and shaky focus, struggled to explain what it showed: CNN at first blocked out the woman's face, then withheld her name and ran a pixilated version of the video on-air before eventually screening the full video; ABC withheld the video altogether and showed instead a few select still images on freeze frame, one of its news executives noting that "we don't show people on television at the moment of their death." Both CBS and NBC heavily edited the video's most graphic sequences. Social networking sites, however, exhibited no such hesitation, and they facilitated the full video's rapid transfer from site to site, many of which experienced thousands of hits in rapid succession and pushed the video to go viral, where it became a "trending topic" by nightfall on Twitter. As *Photo District News* later observed, "The clip proved too strong to be bogged down by fact-checking."[26]

Figure 1.1: Anonymous Cellphone Video, YouTube/Public Domain, "Iran–Neda Girl killed in Tehran" (Screenshot at 0:05), June 20, 2009.

As coverage continued, the video soon gave way to still photos in much of its display. One still image, frame-grabbed from the video, froze a single powerful moment from the more extended sequence of action. Fuzzy and out-of-focus and taken before the blood started to flow, the picture targeted the woman prone on the ground, her wide eyes beseechingly searching out the camera (fig. 1.1).

The image was arresting, implicating the viewer in the woman's helplessness, vulnerability and anguish. One trade paper put it best, when it noted that a "viewer can't help but imagine being there."[27]

Though at first journalists conveyed their unease with the voyeurism of watching Agha-Soltan die—*Time* noted that the woman looked as if she were "begging to tell a story, but it is too late; she is dying as we watch"—the image was nonetheless widely displayed across the U.S. news media, appearing in still form in nearly every newspaper and newsmagazine, even above the fold on the front page of the often picture-free *Wall Street Journal*, on multiple TV news programs, and on online news sites. Many news organizations continued to link to the video alongside the still photo, but as an increasing number of people voiced discomfort with its display, the latter took over as the event's primary depiction, before long constituting its most prominent, shared visualization across all of its mediated forms.[28]

Helping to set the mnemonic template for remembering Neda Agha-Soltan—who within hours became a symbol of freedom of expression and human rights, martyred as the "Angel of Iran" in their defense—the photo, instrumental in capturing public attention, took on a role larger than that associated with a simple news picture of a topical and breaking news event. Over the following days and weeks, the image moved into other contexts as Agha-Soltan inspired poetry, stories, songs, documentary films, videos, posters, and other memorial activities.[29] At the same time, multiple news organizations hailed the picture as a symbol of the Iranian protests and positioned it within their lists of iconic photos of other unsettled events that they constructed on the spot. Compared with Robert Capa's picture of a Republican soldier during the Spanish Civil War, the shooting of a Vietcong officer in Vietnam, and a solitary man's assault on the tanks of Tiananmen Square, the image, though not necessarily a candidate for iconic status itself, reappeared in countless additional contexts, each time showing Agha-Soltan's languishing eyes piercing the image's third wall and connecting with the public on the other side. Calling her death "probably the most widely witnessed death in human history" and naming her "a battle cry for Iranian protesters, her face a symbol for the thousands of people who suffered under the government's heavy-handed crackdown," by the end of 2009 *Time* included the woman among its top ten heroes for the year, while the *Washington Post*, saying that she had "moved the world," suggested that she should have been given a posthumous Nobel Peace Prize instead of U.S. president Barack Obama.[30]

Each time the image appeared and reappeared, incessantly and in multiple contexts, its viewers, who already knew she was dead, engaged yet again with a picture of her facing death with animal-like fear. The frame-grabbed image not only appeared numerous times in the

weeks after her death but months later too—when her grave was desecrated in November 2009, when discussions of women's rights highlighted Iran's repression of women, when her parents proclaimed the government responsible for her death in December 2009, and in yearly retrospectives of news photography. The image and its taking also ushered in widespread discussion among journalists of a change in journalistic practices: the Poynter Institute, a professional forum for journalists, called for a "next-step journalism" that could accommodate the kind of collaboration evident in covering the woman's shooting, while PBS Boston affiliate WGBH gathered journalists in a roundtable to address the squeamishness that had prompted the U.S. networks not to show the full video. Citing a slew of earlier similar images—the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination, images of dead U.S. soldiers in Mogadishu, the shooting of a Palestinian boy in Gaza, and a decapitation video of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Danny Pearl—one reporter noted that "the notion that the viewers of ABC, NBC and CBS cannot handle blood is ridiculous … you have to see what's going on in a war or conflict zone in order to understand." *Photo District News* pondered whether coverage of her death signaled a "turning point for conflict reporting," and the image punctuated debates at the *Columbia Journalism Review* about citizen journalism. Contemplating the confluence of new and old media in a somewhat more poetic fashion, one news magazine observed that Agha-Soltan "died on the Web, and she is being given a second, perhaps eternal, life on it."[31]

The image's display provoked similarly diverse responses from the public. Though many viewers felt the picture emblematized Iranian repression, the repeated display of her dying vexed viewers who lamented that "instead of being put to rest, her final, bloody image is being strewn across blogs and Twitter" and other settings in the mediated environment. "What does it say," wrote one blogger, "when we feel squeamish and protective about the deaths of some, but not others…. People like Neda owe access to their deaths so Americans can access their own humanity." Complaints over the image were tied to a perceived disregard for women of color.[32] Many viewers also expressed an irrational wish for her not to have died: as some social networking sites filled with messages lamenting how "the world cries seeing your last breath," others recontextualized the dying woman's last moments as taking on "new life, flickering across computer screens around the world." Irrational scenarios circulated imagining her still alive: "Stay, Neda, Don't go, Neda," lamented one poem, while the United for Neda video, put together by a group of Iranian singers and artists, sported lyrics calling on her to "be strong" and "keep your head held high." The *New York Times* noted how protestors filled the streets after her death chanting "Neda lives! Ahmadinejad is dead!'" OneWeb site—weareallneda.com—gave posters the chance to leave memorial messages to a woman who would never read them, and thousands of messages were logged within weeks.[33]

The image's repeated and often illogical display patterns, evocative public response and importation into different discussions, which both debated professional standards and appropriateness and expressed wishful lamentations about imagined sequences of action, all show how images assert themselves beyond narrow invocations of reasoned information relay. Community building, recovering from trauma and grief, arousing empathy and indignation, concretizing complex events, creating new alliances, imagining alternative endings, debating parameters of coverage, expressing hope for a different order, creating context, rethinking

professional practice, facilitating catharsis, enabling analysis and comparisons—all of these were brought to bear on a fuzzy image frame-grabbed from a demonstration in Iran. Though each response built on an initial act of information relay, it was not the image's informational dimensions that sustained the picture's display. Rather, the image of Agha-Soltan continued to reappear for reasons having to do with nationalism, grieving, memory, identity, community, trauma, and compassion, all of which were more easily crafted through the event's visual representation than through its words.

It is thus possible, even probable, that news images, and particularly photographs, function through a qualification of reason—a combination of contingency, the imagination, and the emotions—that settles not at the image's original point of display but over time by different people putting it to multiple uses in new contexts. Images regularly travel across circumstances that are transformative, sometimes playful and hypothetical, and often internally contradictory. This means that an image's meaning relies not on individualistic whims but on fundamental collective impulses on hand to help people make sense of what they see. As Mark Johnson noted, "The capacity to share meaning and to reason is imaginative through and through, starting from our most mundane, unreflective bodily interactions and working up to our most impressive activities of hypothesis formation, problem solving and reasoning." Thus admitting contingency, the imagination, and the emotions more readily into discussions of journalism may help explain why news images are useful for viewers struggling to make sense of unsettled events of a difficult and complicated nature. Following John Dewey, who long ago noted that "imagination is the chief instrument of the good," it may be that to a greater degree than reasoned judgment these impulses help people engage with the news, and that is why images appeal to them.[34]

"As If": The Subjunctive Voice of the Visual

The power of contingency, the imagination, and the emotions has drawn the attention of some of photography's most renowned observers, even if it has not been at the top of their conversations. Walter Benjamin was fascinated by photography's illogical dimensions. Reporting a nineteenth-century encounter with photography where people said, "We didn't trust ourselves at first … we were abashed by the distinctiveness of these human images, and believed that the little tiny faces in the picture could see us," he argued for an object's "aura," an ineffable quality of the object that was simultaneously elusive yet compelled the public to make sense of the object. Roland Barthes insisted on the photograph's "third meaning," which compelled viewers after encountering both the image's literal/informational side and its symbolic dimensions; though the third meaning was both difficult to locate and describe, involving what he called the image's obtuseness, accent, or anaphoric side, Barthes used it to push discussions of the photograph toward the idea of "the punctum," which saw the onlooker's engagement with the image as key to understanding the image itself. While Susan Sontag maintained that images remained "inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation and fantasy," Terence Wright commented on the camera's play to the continuous present, where the viewer could

take time to speculate on (or fantasize over) an event which could not be perceived in the same way in the normal course of events…. It presents the opportunity to the viewer which goes beyond the bounds of everyday perception, offering the time and space to imagine, examine or analyze in a way that would not normally be possible.[35]

These ruminations suggest that something beyond denotation and connotation rests in photographs, a quality that enables their shaping and use in ways that have not been fully accounted for. When Dorothea Lange's acclaimed photo "Migrant Mother" is recycled into an advertisement for life insurance or a picture of a Palestinian raising hands bloodied from the Israeli soldier he just killed becomes a political cartoon, photographs seem to be crafting their power through more than just a combination of literal and figurative meaning. Because images of different events look similar even on their initial taking, recurrent visual impulses carry meaning across unusual contexts, and viewers make images meaningful in ways that might not be readily apparent, photographs facilitate making sense of the world in a way that is not necessarily rational, evidentiary, or reasoned.

The voice of the visual elucidates how this happens. The notion of voice is defined here as an image's orientation to the imagined, emotional, and contingent cues in its environment, which facilitate its relationship with a broad range of contexts, events, people, practices, and other images. Voice builds on an image's denotative and connotative sides so as to locate the image's use value beyond what it delineates and connotes at first glance.[36] While denotation grounds the image in reality, and connotation carries the meaning of an image across a set of possible associations, voice orients to the ways in which an image travels via these associations to other contexts, where it can be used by other people, seen through other images, and activated for other aims. Thus the image of Agha-Soltan not only denotes a dying woman and connotes state repression, but acts as a relay for community building, the expression of women's rights, recognition of amateur videography, and a new tweaking of the relationship between old and new media. Much as Clifford Geertz long ago distinguished between "culture of" and "culture for,"[37] voice refers to the ways in which an image's meaning is used *for* a wide variety of strategies and objectives, all of which increase over time and space.

This means that voice accounts for an image's larger environment—its transportation to other spatial and temporal contexts, its variable use value among viewers, its connection with other images, its reliance on the past. Loosely borrowed from linguistics, voice builds on associated linguistic terms—aspect, tense, voice, and mood—which complicate, qualify, and expand on what is shown. Defined grammatically as that which highlights the relationship between the subject and the word of action,[38] voice makes an image's completion dependent on features beyond its own parameters—other images in the same field of depiction, past similarity with events, a viewer's state of mind, attitude, temporal and sequential positioning. As Slavoj Zizek contended, "Voice does not simply persist at a different level with regard to what we see, it rather points to a gap in the field of the visible, toward the dimension of what eludes our gaze … ultimately, we hear things because we cannot see everything."[39]

Voice thus suggests rethinking how images work when they come into contact across time and space with other people, events, contexts, and images. Voice helps explain why a single

image can be recycled to multiple contexts, where it plays to members of various publics, to cues from other events at other times and places, and to a public familiarity with other images. It facilitates the inclusion of contingency, the imagination and the emotions as necessary cues in visual representation rather than as adjuncts to reason, thereby introducing new dimensions to the terrain on which images are thought to work.

The voice of the visual is subjunctive in character. Taken too from linguistics, which defines subjunctivity as the mood or voice of a verb used to express condition, desire, opinion, hypothesis, or statements that are contrary to fact, the subjunctive grammatically couches what is depicted in an interpretive scheme of "what could be" rather than "what is." It situates action within the hypothetical, changing the statement "I shot that man" to "I might have shot that man." Usually signified in verbal language by auxiliaries like "might," "could," or "should," by the substitution of "would have" for "had," and by the use of "if" clauses, the subjunctive voice thus adds impulses of implication, contingency, conditionality, play, imagination, emotionality, desire, supposal, hypothesis, hope, liminality, and (im)possibility to the supposed certainty of visual representation. When added to the denotative and connotative impulses usually associated with photography, subjunctivity offers a way of transforming the relationship between the possible, probable, impossible, and certain by accommodating contingency, the imagination, and the emotions, and it becomes particularly useful in the unsettled times associated with war, terrorism, natural disaster, epidemic, torture, and planned violence. In this regard, it can readily appear and resurface across images in unexpected contexts.

As a mode of tackling experience, the subjunctive—often called the "as if"—has been addressed by scholars beyond news images. Originally surfacing as both a philosophical treatise and a psychological intervention at the turn of the twentieth century,[40] today the subjunctive reasoning used in law and philosophy; the thought experiments of physics, mathematics, and biology; and grammatically driven mood or voice characterizing the structure of multiple languages all foster an alternative engagement with reality. Anthropologist Victor Turner introduced the subjunctive into his discussion of ritual process and liminality:

> I sometimes talk about the liminal phase being dominantly in the subjunctive mood of culture, the mood of maybe, might be, as if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, desire…. [It is] fructile chaos, a storehouse of possibilities, not a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structures, a gestation process.

Roger D. Abrahams, Jerome Bruner, Charles E. Scott, Roger Silverstone, and Michael Schudson each elaborated on the notion in the different contexts of folklore, psychology, philosophy, cultural studies, and journalism; I addressed it in my discussion of journalism's live performances of media events. In her analysis of the standoff, Robin Wagner-Pacifici described the subjunctive as a "world in which strong emotions … uncertainty and ambiguity are foregrounded."[41] Moreover, the more recent emergence of the "as if" as the title of popular songs, movies, books, television shows, a Web comic, and a collective blog for authors concerned with intellectual freedom—almost every one of which surfaced after the events of

9/11—suggests that a drive for the subjunctive may increase in times of collective anxiety.[42]

The role that the subjunctive voice might play in visual representation is fruitful, for it helps explain how people might engage with images differently. Through its reliance on contradiction; on often illogical, unpredictable, and idiosyncratic connections; and on the changing use values of an image, the voice of the "as if" can be thought to provide contingent, imagined, or impossible conclusions to already-finished sequences of events, activate visual markers for subjunctive ends, and facilitate the depiction of disparate events through similar images. Equally important, it forces an event's meaning through the display of images that are themselves contingent. What all of this suggests is that the voice of subjunctivity—and its concomitant invocation of emotionality, contingency, and imagination—become particularly useful around events that are unsettled, ambiguous, difficult, contested, or in otherwise need of public consensus.

Voice thus offers a window onto a different kind of patterned response to the news, activated by news images. Although a move toward the emotions, contingency, and the imagination is not widely prevalent in default discussions of journalism, a closer look at news images may offer a different lens both on how journalism comports itself and on the different tools through which the body politic in its multiple formations can be maintained.

Images in Journalism: From the "As Is" to the "As If"

Today's mediated environment makes it difficult to be naïve about images. Four interrelated—and not mutually exclusive—interpretive communities have been particularly invested in articulating assumptions about the value of news images—journalists, news executives, politicians and officials, and viewers. Though not the only groups to voice their sentiments about what news images are for, their investment complicates the assumption that pictures document reality as it is.

On the face of things, journalists value images for their "eyewitness" authority and the act of "having been there" that a photograph implies. Though journalists tend to reduce images to supports to words, photographs help journalists credential their coverage by drawing on photographic verisimilitude and realism to show that one was present to witness an event. As one photographer who covered the battlefields of Vietnam and Lebanon said, journalism's need for pictures is undeniable: "Many people ask me 'why do you take these pictures?' … It's not a case of 'There but for the grace of God go I'; it's a case of 'I've been there.'" This would seem to suggest that the "as is" of visual relay helps journalists do a better job of being journalists, with journalists readily relying on images to substantiate their stories. One director of the French photo agency Vu noted that journalism makes "wholesale use of (photography) for the purposes of simple effectiveness…. It's true because it's in the papers and it's even more true because it's in the photograph."[43]

But the resulting images of news are not necessarily the ones with the greatest truth value. As one photo editor maintained, "Since we've seen almost everything there is to see in this age, what photo editors are trying to do it make you feel something." During war, for instance,

news organizations tend not to depict human civilian devastation on the "other" side, military casualties, battles gone badly, wounded or captured soldiers. Though journalists often maintain that they try to show a full and accurate depiction of the events they cover, regardless of the explicit parameters that may surface, a spokeswoman for the British *Independent* offered a more contained strategy about the war in Iraq when he said that "we are not keen on showing US or UK prisoners of war."[44] Instead one's own war tends to be depicted as clean, heroic, and just, with images limited to those that are consonant with prevailing sentiments about the war. When such sentiments involve securing and maintaining support for the war, images tend to reflect themes of patriotism, civic responsibility, and the good of the nation-state. They also tend not to be graphic. When they are transported into other fields of visual display—posters, film, postage stamps, T-shirts—it becomes clear that subjunctive notions of the world "as if" it were a better, more coherent, gentler, more equitable place than it may be on the ground regularly drive visual selection and presentation, and particularly around unsettled events.

Journalism's somewhat contained regard for images has had multiple ramifications. Although images have long been part of news, how images could or should be used to relay information about the real world was never fully addressed, and the challenges facing journalism as it accommodated visual representation, from its earliest introduction as lithographs, newspaper illustrations, early photographs, and drawings, were not clarified. Images were regarded as the fluff of news, material that was secondary and adjunct to the words at their side, and that sentiment continued even when the ascent of wire photos made it possible to access images as quickly as words. Nearly a hundred years after their onset, photographs were still derisively labeled the work of "newspaper illustrators" or "pictorial reporters," "a mechanical side-line to the serious business of factnarration—a social inferior," while photographers were called "journalism's poor relation." Though trade forums debated photographers' membership in professional associations, resistance was high and photographers were denied membership on grounds that photography was "not journalism." This means that even the most basic standards for image use—where to put an image, how to title an image, how to caption an image, and how to position an image alongside words—were not developed at the time of their emergence.[45] Not surprisingly, today many journalists remain unclear about what to do with images and how to discern which image might be appropriate or relevant for a news story; they are also split on the value of graphic imagery. For instance, the *New York Times*' public editor lamented whether news images should be presented as art or news:

I believe *Times* readers deserve more precise and consistent explanations of the images put before them. Making the wording and explanations uniform across all sections of the paper would help ensure that readers know whether they are looking at news or at art, no matter what part of the *Times* they are reading.[46]

This uncertainty intensifies when difficult targets of news depiction arise. Ambivalence probes more deeply than the question of whether viewers will flinch at seeing grotesque imagery, as some recent literature suggests. Because many journalists still see images not as

constructions—the result of actions taken by individual photographers, their corresponding photo editors, and the larger institutional setting that engages both—but as mirrors of the events that they depict, the authority of images grows when the news increases in magnitude or importance. As one editor said of U.S. journalism, "It is a tradition … that when the event or history is raised to a level of great importance, we use pictures to reflect that importance." Coverage of unsettled events, then, turns to visuals when information is thought most needed, readily turning over column inches, airtime, and online spaces to accommodate an increased and more central pictorial presence in the news.[47] As often as not, these images push the "as if" side of events—the emotional, imagined, and contingent—as much as they reflect what transpires on the ground.

This is because the various kinds of journalistic practice that undergird journalism's truth claims to the real—the "as is"—also encourage journalists to gravitate toward the "as if." Practices of composition, uses of text, and conventions of presentation can all be developed in subjunctive ways. For instance, the "as if" has many helpers in news photography, where conventions insufficiently clarified as part of regular news relays—credits, captions, and the relation between text and image—blur a news image's denotative and connotative impulses and by extension bolster its subjunctive voice. Credits can be insufficient and pushed to the back of the news hole, captions are often overgeneralized and bear a questionable link to what they depict, and images tend to exist in an imprecise relationship with the words that they accompany. Such blurring is intensified when news organizations cover difficult events and images regularly appear that do not play to the key information points of a news story but are instead repetitive, aesthetic, memorable, dramatic, and familiar from other events.[48] In other words, in covering events where a greater public need for information relay has long been assumed, journalism often turns to images that offer familiarity, memorability, and ease of access but not necessarily reasoned information.

Additionally, journalists' mnemonic practices draw from the subjunctive voice, which helps viewers see and remember events across time through images that reduce complex and multidimensional phenomena into memorable scenes. Often they are memorable because they activate impulses about how the "world might be" rather than how "it is." When a depiction coaxes viewers to consider how it "might mean," "might look," or "might end," it involves many qualifications of reasoned information. A photograph of a kiss, tendered in a public square at the end of World War II, draws imaginary visions about who the people might have been, what kind of relationship they might have had, or where their engagement might have led. As the image travels to new contexts, it plays off of additional subjunctive impulses. This illustrates what Lessing said about the visual long ago: images break the sequencing of action in the middle. By freezing that sequencing midway at a particularly memorable representational moment, viewers are able to embellish numerous emotional, imaginary, and contingent schemes on the "about to" moment depicted in the photo. Moreover, when viewers complete the sequence of action, they often do so in ways that do not correspond with what happens on the ground.

The chief executives of news media organizations tend to value the "as if" dimensions of news images for a different reason, largely because they believe that imagined and contingent

interpretations help compel public attention. Driven by what some photographers see as a strategic recognition of the image's power, recognition often rests alongside a conservatism about which images to use, by which executives often shy away from unusual or unfamiliar depictions. In one photographer's view, news executives "are afraid of pictures which they know are terribly powerful, for they are unable to show the real truth and are vulnerable to all kinds of manipulation. Their natural instinct is that of self-protection, the repetition of well-known types of pictures."[49]

This gravitation away from the world as it is and toward its subjunctive reflection tends to become particularly prevalent during large-scale crises, when news executives encourage images to literally come to the fore of the journalistic record. Following September 11, executive tweaking facilitated a "sea change" in the *New York Times'* then-current use of images, when its pages displayed more than double the number of images it had displayed in noncrisis times. During the beginning of the 2003 war in Iraq, broadcast and cable news organizations turned to photographic galleries and interactive visual displays, showing, in the words of then-news anchor Dan Rather, a "literal flood of live pictures from the battlefield"; the *New York Times* again doubled its daily display of photographs, while certain TV networks featured slide shows of photographs, profiling them against background music.[50] The pictures that appeared were repetitive, familiar, formulaic, and patterned, reflecting the "as if" of crisis and war as much as their "as is" dimensions.

This is not to say that graphic pictures of the "as is" do not appear. But often when they do, the responses that they generate provide an opportunity to gravitate back to the "as if." In 2004, for instance, photos of four dead U.S. contractors in Fallujah, Iraq surfaced, which showed their bodies defiled by an Iraqi mob. While the news stories were graphic and unrelenting in tracking what had happened, the equally graphic pictures were presented with marked ambivalence, as news executives and journalists pondered questions of decency, appropriateness, and the so-called "breakfast cereal test" fretted over the protection of children and public opinion either for or against the war and worried about possible charges of sensationalism, political bias, and lack of patriotism.[51] As one NBC news editor observed following the network's decision not to show one particularly gruesome image, "I think we can convey the horror of this despicable act while being sensitive to our viewers." Though death's depiction pushed news executives into debates over whether, where, and how they should display the images, their discussion moved toward a narrowing of possible imaging practices. Guidelines on photo display were published, reviewed, discussed, and revised, and ombudsmen's columns tracked whether the duty to publish changed if the bodies were military rather than civilian, Iraqi rather than American, visible as distinctive human beings rather than charred corpses, women and children rather than men. In the words of one newspaper, the incident "resulted in more mainstream media self-examination in one day than the entire attack on Iraq had in a year." Arguments—about our dead versus their dead about civilian versus military dead about showing the faces of the dead about class, race, and the dead about identifying the dead before their next of kin were notified—were caught in the tension between what John Taylor called "polite looking" and the "prolonged, uncontrolled staring" with impunity into another's misfortune, inviting revulsion, "identification and reflection, rejection

and denial, and moments to be inquisitive about the dreadful fate of others." As the debates signaled conflicted measures of temperateness and a desire for graphic imagery among news executives, the former won out, reflecting, as the *New Republic*'s Adam Kushner said at the time, "something fundamentally amiss in … journalism—that an instinct to protect viewers is trumping an instinct to inform."[52] His words were prescient, for in the years since that graphic display from Fallujah, few other incidents in Iraq have received similarly explicit visual coverage.

Officials and politicians recognize the subjunctive value of news images in shaping public opinion and justifying policy, and they remain among the first tools of journalism to be discussed in unsettled times. The use of images for political purposes relies on the recognition that abstract concepts and complicated events can become visible and understandable through certain kinds of depiction. Connected here has been an assumption that seeing photos is enough to promote action or responsiveness of some kind. Particularly following the Holocaust, the sentiment prevailed that had there been pictures available of the atrocities as they unfolded, the Holocaust might never have happened. Though that notion was laid to rest in later wars whose related atrocities were depicted but still received no sustained official attention, the presumed connection between public action and photographs persists nonetheless.[53]

Thus, in the final stages of World War II, images of the victims of the concentration camps were used to help secure waning support for the war effort. In 1993, when images surfaced of a U.S. soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, the assumption was that officials changed policy due to the uproar it generated. Regardless of the assumption's accuracy, the images' impact was widely invoked as an impetus for withdrawing troops from Somalia. In the beginning of the war in Iraq, the Bush administration pushed the "as if" over the "as is," when it banned the display of coffins of the military dead on the basis that showing the coffins was insensitive to the dead soldiers' families. This remained the U.S. administration's stance, even though it went against public polls, which already by late 2003 sided with the caskets' public display. Although a shift toward more easily accommodating explicit images was expected to take place with the Obama administration, change was undercut by a turnaround in May 2009, when Obama refused to release photos showing the abuse of U.S. prisoners.[54] Again, the "as if" prevailed, when replaying to a pretended reality rested on a presumption that not displaying abuse would diminish attention to its unfolding.

Viewers use images to come to grips with the news, relying on their capacity to render the world more concrete, accessible, and readily understandable. But viewers can also be among the most vocal supporters of the image's play to the "as if." Though people tend to recall more about the news when visuals depict what is happening and exhibit certain empathetic bodily responses to what they see in images,[55] viewers have definite assumptions about what should and should not be shown, and many regularly try to constrain images by notions of decency, taste, appropriateness, and tone. Though this is not the case with all viewers and has not always been the case—Barbara Norfleet and Jay Ruby have separately documented the extensive practices of taking pictures of the dead, including one's own children and family members, which prevailed as recently as the middle of the twentieth century—most of the public supports journalism's moments of death as private and unseen.[56] And yet, that timidity

about seeing death in the news is now regularly overturned by a mediated environment that foregrounds graphic images. Though the mediated environment is saturated with images of death and accommodates fictional, televised, cinematic and digital depictions of death which are dramatic, prolonged, and not ambiguous, very few photographs in the news actually depict death.[57] At a time when pictures of death and gruesome acts of violence proliferate elsewhere, it is curious that many viewers remain so uncomfortable by the same images when they are shown as part of news.

Moreover, the recent public trend against graphicness in the news has been steadily rising, at least in the United States. In 1993, U.S. survey respondents were evenly divided over whether or not pictures should be used to show violence, but by the following decade a preference for a more limited display of photos was widely articulated: in 2001, the *Boston Globe, Newsweek*, and *Time* were each deluged by readers who protested the display of photos of Osama Bin Laden—"We don't need to look at that evil face, big and bold on the cover of your magazine," wrote one angry woman to *Time*.[58] By March 2003, 57 percent of the U.S. population felt that the U.S. media should not show pictures of captured U.S. soldiers in Iraq, and one year later, when the images of the mutilation of four U.S. contractors in Fallujah, Iraq were published, a full 71 percent of the U.S. public said that the pictures had been too gruesome or explicit, and only 7 percent wanted even more explicit pictures.[59] In September 2009, the Associated Press took a picture of a mortally wounded Marine in Afghanistan, and though the Marine's father asked that the picture not be published, the AP distributed it nonetheless, justifying its decision "to make public an image that conveys the grimness of war and the sacrifice of young men and women fighting it." Letters to the editor and postings from readers deluged the newspapers that printed the picture, and U.S. defense secretary Robert Gates protested the decision in "the strongest terms, saying it was "appalling" and a "breach of public decency."[60]

Because this trend takes shape alongside journalists and news executives who are split on the value of explicit news images, debates among them over the degree of explicitness often become pronounced. When Sidney Schanberg—writing in a 2005 *News Photographer* commentary, titled "Not a Pretty Picture: Why Don't U.S. Papers Show Graphic War Photos?"—observed that a lack of graphic display of the Iraq war was undermining journalism's obligation to full reportage, his piece generated critical letters to the editor. A writer for *Broadcasting and Cable* urged the U.S. networks in 2007 to offer more graphic coverage of the Iraq war, and readers called him "an idiot" who was "heartless toward the families of those who have loved ones" in Iraq.[61] In June 2009, *New York Times* ethicist Randy Cohen argued that Obama's banning of photos of the abuse of detainees held abroad by the United States was wrong, likening the effect of their display to that achieved by seeing the video of the young Iranian woman shot to death in Tehran. "There are many kinds of understanding," he wrote, "including the kind grasped from making a visceral emotional connection to an event." His column generated extensive disagreement among readers who argued that the Abu Ghraib photos were old news and did not merit display.[62]

Contemporary public discomfort with graphic display exists beyond the United States too, though the topic changes by context. The death of Princess Diana in 1997 saw the Italian news

media publishing graphic images, while British journalism followed conventions of extreme restraint.[63] After the 2004 tsunami, Indian journalists protested the graphic display of their dead in the Western news media, arguing for the same restraint that the U.S. news media had shown its dead following the attacks of September 11.[64] And, as discussed earlier, Muslim and feminist Web sites were filled with laments about what was seen as a gratuitous display of Neda Agha-Soltan's streetside death in Tehran in 2009. As one writer for the *Toronto Star* phrased it:

> News organizations have been on the receiving end of grisly photos since the invention of the camera. But there's never any debate over whether we will show the blood-spattered body of a murder victim.… We just don't do it.… If the victims are not one of us, if they live far away or have no names or cultural commonalities, they're fair game. Hence, it's perfectly acceptable, if not mundane, to show piles of skulls in Rwanda or a skeletal and swollen-bellied African baby on the verge of death.… Except last year, when the bombs were crashing down on Iraq and houses were flattened, their inhabitants incinerated, the very same networks and newspapers that proclaimed their high moral ground and concern for reader sensibilities refrained from running pictures of the civilian casualties.[65]

Graphicness thus is a moveable, serviceable, and debatable convention, dependent on those who invoke it and for which aim. As a standard of depiction whose moderation pushes the "as if" over the "as is," it often acts as a barrier when information is too proximate, either culturally or geographically.

Viewer involvement in pushing the "as if" over the "as is" is facilitated by today's porous mediated environment. As public lobbyists, religious and pedagogic leaders, members of militias and insurgencies, aggrieved or bereaved family members, celebrities and activists all articulate their sentiments about news images, the image moves into environments where multiple displays and meanings can be continuously recrafted. Not only does such involvement further complicate the image's status as a carrier of reasoned information, but the subjunctive voice alters, mutes, and sometimes suspends the questions normally posed of journalism, drawing attention not to what people see but asking them to consider what it reminds them about or which possibilities it raises. All of this suggests that though there may be some general belief that seeing is believing, seeing is preferred only under certain circumstances. "As if" prevails over "as is."

No wonder, then, that journalism often embraces images that do not follow obvious lines of reasoned information relay, pushing the memorable shot over the topical one; the image that appears in every newspaper, newscast, and online news site on a given day; the picture that resembles a painting more than a less aesthetic but real street scene; the shot that recalls familiar images from earlier events, similar or disparate.[66] What is worthy of depiction, how, and why are thus decisions weighed on not only by journalists but by news executives, officials, politicians, and viewers, making the question of what news organizations do with images more porous than assumed. The patterning of these accommodations, made more

pronounced in today's digital environment, suggests that news images often reflect more about subjunctive visions of the world than show what is transpiring on the ground.

The potential impact of all of this on a healthy body politic should by now be obvious. The ambivalence over photography's integration into news; the unevenness with which photos are used; the emotional, contingent, and imagined appeal that images wield in a supposedly rational mediated environment; the ongoing debates over what counts as an image; and the active involvement of nonjournalists in making calls about which images to show complicate the longstanding recognition of news images as carriers of reason and suggest instead that images play to different impulses altogether. If the power of news images derives in part from the "as if" of what they show, then images can be used to simplify, soften, and render contingent the untenable features of the geopolitical realities that they depict. Their invitation to respond as much to the imagined, conditional, and impossible as to the real and known may constitute a different kind of response to the unsettled events of the public sphere that deserves further attention. Though the "as if" may have both positive and negative consequences, it suggests that news images reside in a sea of potential leakages, which wedge in and around the words of news coverage, between the actual and aspired dimensions of journalism, and between journalism and the larger mediated environment.

Those leakages need to be more carefully charted. Susan Sontag was among the earliest and most prominent of cultural critics to change her mind on how images work: "As much as they create sympathy, I wrote, photographs shrivel sympathy. Is this true? I thought it was when I wrote it. I'm not so sure now."[67] It may be that images simultaneously do both, and it is in the intricate circumstances by which each picture is produced, distributed, contextualized, recycled, and viewed that its impact comes clear, if only for a fleeting moment and for a particular segment of the public.

About to Die

The about-to-die image invites a close consideration of the "as if" of journalistic relay. At its simplest level, the about-to-die image represents a range of ambiguous, difficult, and contested public events, which are shown by depicting individuals facing their impending death. Focusing on intense human anguish, it offers a simplified visualization of death-in-process in events as wide-ranging as natural disaster, crime, accidents, torture, assassination, war, illness, and acts of terrorism. Although not the only visual trope for depicting such events in journalism or the only way of visually treating death, its repeated appearance suggests a systematic pattern by which certain public events are reduced to heart-rending moments of intense personal fear and dread. Not surprisingly, over time such depictions often become the iconic images of the events that they show; more predictable is their repeated, patterned, and frequent use value among multiple sectors of the public.

By stopping action at a potentially powerful moment of meaningful representation, the frozen moment of impending death forces attention even though people know more than what it shows. Reminiscent of Aristotle's injunction to dramatists to place death offstage and drawing

on Roland Barthes' interest in the special temporality created by the "will have been" of future anteriority,[68] the about-to-die image works by coaxing people to suspend disbelief, deferring knowledge of where the depiction leads long enough to respond to a scene that shows less information than is known. These images sanitize visualization in much the same way as euphemistic labeling sanitizes language: just as soldiers "waste" people rather than kill them or "collateral damage" obscures the devastation to people and buildings it wreaks, strategically visualizing people about-to-die hides the more problematic visualization of death itself.[69] Understanding is thus suspended so as to engage in the act of seeing. Showing and seeing the picture of Neda Agha-Soltan dying on a Tehran street facilitated multiple responses to the Iranian demonstration, not all of which furthered a clearer understanding of what had happened. At some point, the picture's recycled contexts became equally important, if not more so, to the original setting in which it was taken.

The about-to-die image thus provides an escape hatch for journalism, by which it counters its ambivalence about images and images of death by playing to a suggestive picture, sidesteps contradictory aspirations between the realized and desired dimensions of news, and stays abreast of the tensions between journalism and the larger mediated environment without alienating any of its residents. Centering not on the finality of death but on its possibility and, conversely, its impossibility, images of impending death allow journalism to remain open to the contingencies involved in the images that shape it. In so doing, the subjunctive voice becomes the impulse through which people can engage with the news, even if that engagement suspends the relationship between understanding and depiction.

The choice to show and see impending death in the news draws from a set of broader impulses and attitudes about death's representation. Viewing death has long been associated with voyeuristic spectacles of suffering, where looking at those dead or about to die constitutes a public duty, often of an involuntary nature;[70] with aspirations about how life is supposed to be lived and ended, using what Michael Baxandall called a "period eye" to depict death's dramatic nature, graphicness, and publicness;[71] with multiple taboos about privacy, dignity, and voyeurism;[72] and with an invitation to either empathize or dissociate.[73]

Viewing death has also been associated with mourning and grief, where gazing on pictures of the dead can help mourners come to terms with their loss.[74] Photography, wrote Roland Barthes, keeps "time in a frame … making each installment hypothetically knowable" and seemingly "death defying"; belonging to the past but engaged in the present, it creates a temporal moment of "having been there." In that regard, his final work—*Camera Lucida*, where he called photographers "agents of death," was written as he grieved his dead mother and tracked the inherent connection he found between photography and his mourning of her. Susan Sontag famously observed that "all photographs are *memento mori*…. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability."[75] Marianne Hirsch and Jay Ruby separately demonstrated how photographs provide a medium for mourning in everyday life.[76]

The about-to-die image in some ways addresses these impulses more effectively than depictions of people already dead. Offsetting the predictability and lack of surprise associated with death photos that Barthes attributed to the *studium*, the about-to-die image draws viewers

through what he called the *punctum*—a piercing of the visual frame that forces a renewed engagement with a depiction that breaks with the expected. Coaxing people to complete understanding by filling in what they do not see, the encounter, like other instances of the sublime, "allows the observer to enjoy the threat it momentarily poses to his rationality."[77]

But the about-to-die image works beyond its compositional parameters. Presentationally, it draws attention through its generalizability, not specificity: the impending deaths from atrocities in Cambodia come to look like those in Iraq; assassinations in Guatemala resemble those in the United States. Giving journalists a way to show the unsettled events of the news while sidestepping the discomfort and ambivalence that throws people into disarray almost whenever they face death's depiction, these images draw viewer involvement rather than introduce distance, as images of death tend to do when they seal viewing with the impossibility of engagement. By lessening the discomfort caused by viewing and enhancing identification with what is seen, the about-to-die photo also works as a vehicle of memory, becoming the central and often iconic image that stands in for complex and contested public events. Not only is it often sustained over time but photos of people facing impending death are repeatedly used, recycled, and displayed in various contexts. They win awards, they reappear in retrospectives, and they often take on iconic status. No surprise, then, that they travel to contexts other than the news, appearing widely across educational, political, cultural, commercial, and religious venues.

What does it mean when the news encourages the emotions, imagination, and contingency as a way of responding to the world? The subjunctive voice provides a construct for understanding how and why certain images emerge as powerful and memorable depictions of events, even if they do so in ways contrary to both articulated journalistic conventions and assumptions of a rational public response to the news. This analysis of the about-to-die image challenges traditional understandings of the function of news images and their public response —moving the conversation from default notions of reasoned information toward an environment which privileges contingency, the emotions, and the imagination. It also brings the discussion of news images into the landscape of visual representation writ broadly—tracking how an occupational ideology meets up with a broader discussion about the nature of the image.

This book provides a close analysis of a select set of news pictures of impending death that have appeared in U.S. journalism since the mid-1860s, all chosen because they have appeared repeatedly, frequently, and over time and in so doing have generated sustained journalistic and public discussion. By combining the life histories of such images with a tracking of the journalistic and public responses they have enabled, a charting of their uses and recycling over time, and a thematic analysis of the ways in which their visual attributes have driven certain modes of public response, this analysis situates this strategically chosen subset of news images against the larger universe of news images that appear in the news.[78]

This book is comprised of seven additional chapters. Chapter 2 tracks the importation of the about-to-die image into journalism and the practices characterizing the trope. Chapters 3 through 5 address the different motifs that signal the trope's display. Chapter 6 charts the ways in which these motifs surface in unsettled events stretching across time and space. Chapter 7

tracks the about-to-die image in the so-called war on terror. Chapter 8 considers the impact of the trope of impending death on the intersection of U.S. journalism and its public. Taken together, these chapters consider the question of how the "as if" of news images helps to move the public in its response to unsettled events.

Through the trope of the about-to-die moment, this book considers how visual subjunctivity has shaped the treatment and response to a slew of unsettled public events over a century and a half of news images, and it targets the strengths and problems this raises. In so doing, it tracks how the "as if" of news relay shapes knowledge and understanding of the world. Given journalism's stature as a major institution of recording and memory, news images deserve attention on their own terms. This book demonstrates how powerful, complicated, nuanced, tenuous, internally contradictory, and often problematic those terms can be.