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The unreal death of journalism

Death is always in the news. From local car crashes to catastrophes in faraway places, deadly events are grist for the media mill. The coverage is ongoing – and almost always superficial.

It may be unfair to blame journalists for failing to meet standards that commonly elude artists. For centuries, on the subject of death, countless poets have strived to put the ineffable into words. It's only easy when done badly.

Yet it's hard to think of any other topic that is covered so frequently and abysmally in news outlets. The reporting on death is apt to be so flat that it might be mistaken for ball scores or a weather report.

Pallid coverage of the dying is especially routine in U.S. news media when a war is underway and the deaths are caused by the U.S. government.

When a news report breaks through cliches to evoke realities of carnage, the result can be memorable. Here's a passage from an April 1999 story by Robert Fisk, reporting for the London-based daily Independent about a U.S.-led NATO bombing raid on a target in Yugoslavia:

"Deep inside the tangle of cement and plastic and iron, in what had once been the make-up room next to the broadcasting studio of Serb Television, was all that was left of a young woman, burnt alive when NATO's missile exploded in the radio control room. Within six hours, the [British] Secretary of State for International Development, Clare Short, declared the place a 'legitimate target.' It wasn't an argument worth debating with the wounded – one of them a young technician who could only be extracted from the hundreds of tons of concrete in which he was encased by amputating both his legs. ... By dusk last night, 10 crushed bodies – two of them women – had been tugged from beneath the concrete, another man had died in hospital and 15 other technicians and secretaries still lay buried."

Compare that account to the easy enthusiasm for NATO's air war from New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, who wrote a day earlier: "It should be lights out in Belgrade: Every power grid, water pipe, bridge, road and war-related factory has to be targeted." Or

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consider the contrast between Fisk's grisly account and the media jargon that the Times brought to bear on its front page that same week: "NATO began its second month of bombing against Yugoslavia today with new strikes against military targets that disrupted civilian electrical and water supplies..."

Such contrasts – between facile journalese and human experiences of death – are also part of the standard media terrain much closer to home. Days ago, the state of California was all set to kill Michael A. Morales in a San Quentin death chamber. But news reports told of delays after two anesthesiologists refused to participate in the lethal injection.

Public acceptance of killing thrives on abstractions. And, in turn, those abstractions (like the phrase I just used, "lethal injection") are largely facilitated by news media.

The reporting about the death penalty is usually light years from what really goes on. We're accustomed to those kinds of gaps. By the time we become adults, we've seen thousands of televised narratives – from entertainment shows to newscasts – that purport to depict death but actually do nothing of the sort. It's not hard to watch because so much about death is hidden from media viewers.

For those who champion death-dealing policies as solutions, whether administered by the "Department of Defense" or the "Department of Corrections," euphemisms are vital. Fog prevents acuity about what can't stand the light of day.

"Government officials don't want the American public to view the death penalty as a lethal, destructive, violent act that isn't really necessary," says Bryan Stevenson, executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative of Alabama. "Therefore we sanitize and obscure the act of killing a person, who is no longer a threat to anyone, with protocols and procedures that are aimed at comforting the public. The problem is that intentionally killing another human being is always painful and shocking. As medical doctors, correctional staff and anyone who gets close to capital punishment quickly discover, there is no comfortable way to kill a human being who doesn't have to die."

But there are plenty of comfortable ways for news media to report on the killing of human beings.

Norman Solomon is the author of the new book "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death." For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com