The Public Construction of Truth
letter sent to Globe and Mail, October 3, 2006, in response to mass publicity of Amish school killings. letter not published

Dear Editor,

I thank the Globe and Mail and other media for telling us about the most recent schoolhouse killings. However, I am disturbed by the media's frenzy, and the extent of the graphic coverage. Wouldn't words be enough? Do we need half-page pictures?

Yes, I do believe that the public has the right to know. But to know what exactly? Do we have the right to see the anguish of bereaved relatives, who at the best of times go to great trouble to avoid being photographed? Does the public have the right to have its appetite for images of pain whetted?

The Amish people, who never want to be photographed, are not likely to complain, but this is not the same as consent. Their values run counter to our culture's expectation that people fight for their rights. They are non-violent, simple-living pacifists. They are twice violated – first by the killer, and second by the press.

I find this especially disturbing as a researcher, who carefully follows procedures to respect the rights, privacy and dignity of human research participants. We need informed consent, partly to be ethical but also to ensure accuracy. Without respectful requests for consent, the results of any research is fundamentally flawed. Truth cannot be told by someone who violates the people being reported on. Yet the public construction of truth is largely in the hands of the press, which too often seems to have no regard for such respect.

David Wagner