

# Death. Streamed live



By Louise Marsland

28 Aug 2015

In this ultra-connected, real time world, death was streamed live this week in two significant game changing events: via Periscope from the Bangkok bomb blast by an eyewitness; and by the murderer who killed two journalists live on breakfast TV in the US, before uploading his video of the killings onto social media and tweeting about it.

The role of the media has always been there as a filter, a curator of the main news of the day, a protector if you will, from the true horror of some events making the news. There are editorial policies, broadcast laws and other norms and values that the media in most countries subscribe to and which are informed by societal expectations of the day.

It is innate human nature to look at car crashes, watch as disasters unfold on global screens. The introduction of live streaming services like Periscope and Meerkat; and the disturbing video filmed by the Virginia killer and then posted on his social media feeds when he was sure everyone knew his name, is raising serious questions for the media and about journalism vs eyewitness news.

A live Periscope stream of the Bangkok bomb blast on Monday, made many people uncomfortable, even while praising the eyewitness, Derek van Pelt ([@dvpme](#)), who was filming it, for being news and tech savvy. The [First Draft News](#) which studies and researches news, raises questions about the potential trauma for viewers and the responsibility of the eyewitness and the potential of the audience to influence the actual news coverage by the amount of 'likes' sent to the user, i.e., did Van Pelt consciously or subconsciously increase filming gory body parts to increase his 'likes'?



Image via NY Times

The killing on Wednesday of two television journalists during a live broadcast in Virginia in the United States, has set a disturbing precedent. The killer not only filmed the shooting with a body camera and uploaded the video to Facebook, but also live tweeted about it in what some media experts are describing as a "carefully orchestrated" campaign for maximum social media exposure. As fast as Facebook and Twitter took down the accounts, people were copying and sharing the video and the tweets.

Mainstream media in the main chose not to show the whole video, which showed news reporter Alison Parker and cameraman Adam Ward gunned down by former colleague Vester Lee Flanagan, who later committed suicide. Media showed parts of the broadcast filmed by Ward - none showed the video filmed by the shooter, Flanagan, of him killing his victims, which was widely shared on social media.

[The New York Times](#) said it "marked a new chapter in the intersection of video, violence and social media"; and a "frightful twist in an age of online sharing and ubiquitous video documentation".

*Gawker* executive editor John Cook told [CNN Money](#) that they showed some of the footage uploaded by the shooter, but not that of the actual killings: "The fact that the shooter had posted his own footage of the murders on his Twitter and Facebook feeds was a grotesque and newsworthy development, and we decided to show our readers a snippet of that video - again, in a format where they had to choose to view it -- but not the moment of the actual shooting."

### **Dark side of social media**

Other mainstream news outlets either froze the footage, only linked to it instead of embedding it or restricted the number of times they played parts of it, taking into account viewer sensitivities and their own editorial policies.

And as users started realising that the killer was updating his social profiles live on Twitter and Facebook and had posted the video of the killings to be shared, people started calling for Facebook and Twitter to take the posts down. The sites did, but not before the tweets and video were shared globally.

As [The New York Times](#) reported later: "There was uncertainty in the sharing. Users expressed reservations as they passed on the gunman's profile and his tweets. People were calling on Twitter and Facebook to act quickly to pull down his accounts. There were questions about the journalistic ethics of posting WDBJ's live shot and the killer's own document of the shooting, given that it was exactly what he had been expecting. But these questions didn't really slow anything down, a testament to the power of these networks to tap into each of our subconscious, automatic desires to witness and to share. The videos got out widely, forging a new path for nihilists to gain a moment in the media spotlight: an example that, given its success at garnering wide publicity, will most likely be followed by others."

The [Poynter](#) journalism institute in the US believes the shooter's video was too graphic for use; and also talks about what the live on air killing means to journalists and how newsrooms should protect their journalists or train them in safety on the job.

Another Poynter commentator, Roy Peter Clark, wrote about his disbelief in a piece on ['The Virginia shooting and the dark side of the social media age'](#): "Not only did Flanagan shoot his former co-workers, he took a video of the murder, a video that looks eerily like a video game in which we see the world through the eyes of the shooter. It feels like a homicidal, suicidal selfie, expressing the vicious narcissism of a murderer showing off his own hand firing off his own gun."

During my early newspaper career in South Africa in the 1990s, I saw my share of bodies blown to bits in bomb blasts, shootings, burnings and aircraft crashes. Some of it you never unsee. Of late the sickening aftermath of massacres and other atrocities are showing up more and more on my social media feeds and it is concerning and I find some of it very hard to process, even with my 30 years' experience as a journalist.

It's not an easy debate to have and I certainly don't have all the answers but it is a conversation we do need to engineer - as media and in the context of the society we want to live in. Because it is a sad truth now that yet another line has been crossed, there will be copycat killers out there in the future who also want their five minutes of social media celebrity.

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