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# COMMENTARY

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Wednesday, April 17, 2002

## POINT / COUNTERPOINT

### Winning a losing battle

The Seattle Times called it "disturbing," but the word isn't strong enough to describe Mike Urban's photograph of a woman being assaulted. Urban snapped the photo during the 2001 Mardi Gras Celebration in Seattle. It shows a helpless woman stripped of her clothing and being groped by a crowd of men, each of them smiling. To "protect her privacy," the woman's face has been pixelated.

The photo was never published in a newspaper, but it recently won a first-place National Press Photographers Association award. The NPPA features the photograph on its Web site. Since the NPPA gave the award, the photograph has been surrounded by controversy. Should the picture have been published? Was it worthy of an award? The answer to both questions is no.

Urban worked for the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, but the newspaper ultimately decided not to publish his photograph, since the publication has a policy against publishing photos of sexual abuse. Editors were also legitimately concerned about the subject, since the woman in the photograph hasn't been identified.

As Rebecca Roe, a lawyer and the former head of King County's prosecutor's sexual assault unit, told the Seattle Times, publishing the photograph is simply a "revictimization, not just of the woman in the photo, but of other women."

Others would argue that news is news, no matter how shocking, and the photograph should have been published in the newspaper and on the Web site in order to "get the word out" that these assaults actually happened at the Mardi Gras celebration.

True, the media have a responsibility to report the news. However, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer ran a front-page story describ-

ing the assaults, including the one in the picture. It is imperative that the public be informed about events such as this one, but there is no acceptable reason why the potentially harmful photograph needed to be included with the story.

Yes, the photo is newsworthy and has shock value, but sometimes ethics needs to win out over all else. And in this case, ethics should tell us it's wrong to run a photo of a woman being assaulted, especially without her permission. It's a serious invasion of her privacy. Furthermore, even with her face blocked out, if the victim saw the photo, she would be forced to relive the experience. Other assault victims would also have to relive theirs.

Kudos to the editors at the Seattle Post-Intelligencer for making the right decision — one that other journalists should take an example from.

The other aspect of the debate centers around whether or not the photograph was worthy of an award in the first place. Many people are upset that the photographer didn't try to help the victim, though Urban says he was "obviously unable to do something."

While I acknowledge that it is highly unlikely Urban could have physically fended off the woman's numerous attackers, I wanted to hear that he at least attempted to help. In the ideal situation, Urban would have thrown aside his role as the passive photographer and at least tried. But then, in the ideal situation, the assault never would have happened. Still, I have a hard time supporting an award that was won because of someone else's misfortune.

Common sense told editors not even to publish it in a newspaper. Ultimately, the photograph doesn't belong in any publication or contest without the consent of the woman pictured.

E-mail columnist Jacquelyn Lewis at jacquelynlewis@dailyemerald.com. Her opinions do not necessarily reflect those of the Emerald.

#### ON THE WEB

Mike Urban's photograph can be viewed at the National Press Photographers Association's Web site, <http://www.nppa.org/bestofp/ethics.htm>

### Picture worth more than 1,000 words

The image of a woman — her face blurred to protect her identity, struggling to free herself as she is stripped of her clothes and sexually abused by riotous crowds at last year's Mardi Gras celebration in Seattle — is completely disgusting. In an equal-opportunity assault, black, white, Asian and Hispanic hands clamor to grab her breasts and crotch while other revelers pin down her arms and legs. The woman is obviously dazed and helpless while jovial faces of titillated men swarm around her. The photo is extremely graphic in nature and depicts what most people would choose not to see over their morning coffee on the front

page of the newspaper — humankind at its worst.

But just because the image, taken by Seattle Post-Intelligencer photographer Mike Urban, is haunting doesn't mean people shouldn't look at it. On the contrary, Urban's photo is the most important image taken during the violent Pioneer Square riots — where one man was brutally beaten to death in the streets — precisely because of its evocative nature. Sexual assault is a reality of life, and people who do not understand its ramifications or turn a blind eye to the epidemic need a picture as shocking as Urban's to effect social change.

The photo, which was never printed in the P-I itself, won first place in the 2001 National Press Photographers Association's "Best of photojournalism — domestic news" category, much to the chagrin of opponents who claim it was unethical for Urban to take the picture in the first place. But as a journalist, Urban's duty was to photograph what was happening that awful night — not to police an angry mob of sexual predators. After all, that's what the Seattle Police Department was for, and by in large, officers failed the public by simply watching the melee unfold.

I am from the Seattle area, and many of my girlfriends were at Pioneer Square that night. They have told me their horror stories of being grabbed, sexually assaulted, verbally harassed and scared to death of what the crowd would do next. But the stories of the sexual assault survivors somehow got lost in the controversy surrounding the SPD's apathetic response to the riots. And my friends' struggles that night are epitomized by the sexual violence that the anonymous woman sadly experienced.

A picture like Urban's is worth a thousand survivors' stories to be told about that night, and it should not be swept under the rug just because it is controversial. Sexual assault survivors are constantly being brushed off by a society that would rather believe these kinds of atrocities don't happen in the first place. Although Seattle-area newspapers wrote stories about the assaults, descriptions don't affect readers as much as an image could have. So which is more unethical: Taking a graphic picture or pretending the incident never happened?

What is unethical is not the photographer or the photograph, but the plethora of men clearly enjoying the sexual assault of a powerless woman. I am thankful to Urban for taking the picture when he did, if only to spark a public debate about the lack of sexual assault discussions in the media. What happened to the woman in the picture was awful, but it would be far worse to let her story slip through the cracks of social denial.

E-mail editorial editor Julie Lauderbaugh at julielauderbaugh@dailyemerald.com. Her opinions do not necessarily reflect those of the Emerald.



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#### Editorial Policy

Responses can be sent to [letters@dailyemerald.com](mailto:letters@dailyemerald.com). Letters to the editor and guest commentaries are encouraged. Letters are limited to 250 words and guest commentaries to 550 words. Please include contact information. The Emerald reserves the right to edit for space, grammar and style.

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#### CORRECTION

In the April 6 story "Debate continues over American Sign Language," ASL Club president Shun Yanagishita's name was misspelled. The Emerald regrets the error.

#### Letter to the editor

##### Many mascots are demeaning

Congratulations to the University law students for bringing up the important issue of demeaning school mascots.

I am a seventh generation Irish/American and am neither a drunk nor a violent man. Yet, I have to put up with the Saint Patrick's Day drunk-fest and the Notre Dame's culturally insensitive "Fighting Irish."

This is truly harmful and disrespectful to me and my people. I ask the athletic department to take a stance for our Irish students by not playing Notre Dame.

While we are at it, let us scrub our mascot, the Ducks. After all, in the 20th century, land developers and hunters systematically destroyed wetlands and duck populations in such a way that would have comparatively made generals Custer and Sheradin cringe.

John Muir O'Brien  
 junior  
 pre-journalism

