

CASE VIII-F

“Film at Ten”: Handling Graphic Video in the News

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It was supposed to be a routine transport of an alleged kidnapper. WBRZ-TV had been following the story and was at the Baton Rouge Metropolitan Airport to get videotape of sheriff's deputies escorting Jeffrey Doucet back to stand trial.

FBI agents had arrested Doucet in California for the alleged kidnapping of 11-year-old Jodie Plauche. In February, Doucet, a karate instructor, allegedly kidnapped the boy in Baton Rouge and took him to California. A month later, Jodie was found unharmed when FBI agents arrested Doucet in an Anaheim hotel room.

East Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff's Department Major Mike Barnett and Deputy Bud Conner were escorting Doucet. WBRZ-TV was the only news crew waiting at the airport for Doucet's 9:17 arrival. Reporter Ed Buggs planned to insert the video of Doucet's arrival into a story for the ABC affiliate's 10 P.M. newscast—a story about the return of the alleged kidnapper.

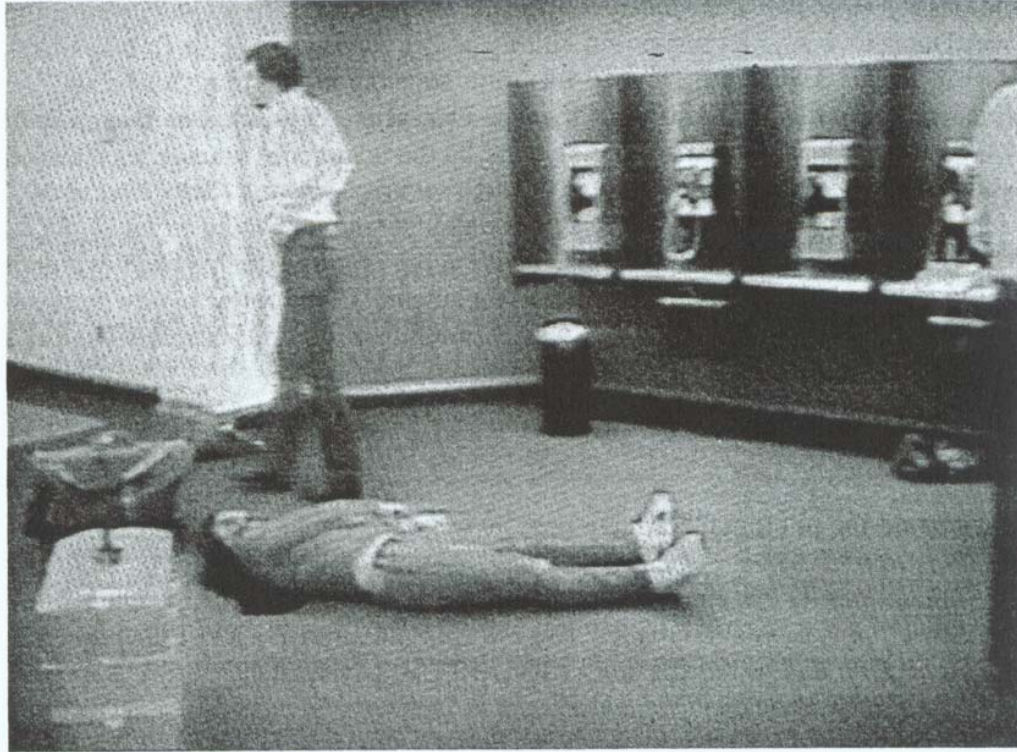
As WBRZ-TV photographer Abram McGull videotaped the scene, Barnett walked about six feet into the airport terminal checking the area for suspicious characters. Then, Barnett signaled to Conner to bring the handcuffed Doucet forward. With Doucet on his right, Conner walked past a bank of public telephones. At that point, a man wearing blue jeans, a striped tee shirt, dark glasses, and a baseball cap turned from the wall phone where he was standing, aimed, and fired at Doucet's head. The man who pulled the trigger was Jodie's father, Gary Plauche.

The WBRZ news crew had witnessed and videotaped the event. The tape distinctly showed Plauche firing the gun and Doucet's head jerking as the bullet entered his skull. From there, the cameraman quickly focused on Doucet as he dropped to the floor. Next, McGull focused on the action in front of the telephones where Barnett and Conner grappled with Plauche. Barnett called the suspect by name, “Gary why, why Gary?” Finally, the two sheriff's officers grabbed the suspect's gun. From there, the cameraman zoomed into Doucet's face and open eyes as blood gushed from his head.

The next pictures showed Conner kneeling over Doucet as Barnett held Plauche in the background. Both men yelled almost synonymously, “Call the sheriff's office, call the sheriff's office, call an ambulance!” A policeman then walked into the scene and radioed emergency medical services for help.

By this time, Conner was crouched over Doucet's body. The videotaped action now showed Plauche being handcuffed. Next, Conner is shown delicately slipping Plauche's gun into Barnett's coat jacket. McGull then videotaped a wider scene where Conner paced around Doucet's body as it lay still on the floor—his head surrounded by a pool of blood.

Reporter Buggs immediately called his newsroom for help from News Director John Spain. At the time, Spain was attending a local theatrical production a few blocks from the station.



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After being paged, he told the news team at the airport to send back the video via their microwave truck and then proceed as quickly as possible to the station.

The story led their ten o'clock newscast. WBRZ anchorman Jay Young said good evening and introduced Buggs who was sitting beside him. Young said, "A Baton Rouge man arrested for the recent kidnapping of an eleven-year-old boy has just been gunned down at the Baton Rouge Metropolitan Airport minutes ago as detectives brought him back from California. "Eyewitness News" cameras were rolling with reporter Ed Buggs as the shooting rang out. Ed, a dramatic, a tragic, and, of course, a bloody event."

Buggs responded, "And I think, Jay, that what rests most in my mind .as I try to calm down, as well as news photographer Abram McGull, is the fact that it was so unexpected. We were in the airport for the arrival this evening of a 25-year-old karate instructor. He was arriving back in Baton Rouge. Local authorities were bringing him back. He has been indicted by a local parish grand jury on charges of aggravated kidnapping. What you are about to see is some very graphic film."

With the videotape of Doucet walking into the airport, Buggs told the story of the night's shooting. He showed Doucet walking down the hall with Conner just as it had occurred. The actual tape continued to roll with the suspect firing the deadly shot, the struggle to control the suspect,

and then Conner kneeling over Doucet's body. At this point, editing of the videotape begins to take place.

As Buggs explained, Doucet was on a transfer flight from California, the video shows police handcuffing Plauche. That scene continued as Buggs said, ". . . the gunman who was standing there by the telephones you see was in such a position that you did not have to go through security guards to carry a weapon." Here the shot changes. Buggs shows a wide shot of Conner pacing around Doucet. The viewer could see Doucet's entire body on the ground with his head in a pool of blood. The picture then zooms back to Plauche. The reporter is now back on camera introducing the story that was supposed to air originally on Doucet's return.

Micro Issues:

1. Should the photographer have kept taking the videotape after the shooting occurred? Why?
2. Should any of the videotape have aired on the news? If so, how much?
3. Since the station's microwave truck was at the airport, should the reporter have gone live to tell the story for its 10 P.M. newscast?
4. If police confirm Plauche learned about Doucet's arrival from a WBRZ employee, should that employee be fired?

Middle-range Issues:

1. Does a disclaimer for the graphic video ethically allow its use?
2. Should a person lying in a pool of blood ever be shown on television news? If so, what are some of the scenarios when you would allow it?
3. Was it okay to air the videotape and tell the story without knowing whether Doucet's relatives had been notified?
4. Should stations in other markets air the film? Why?

Macro Issues:

1. Should the videotape be used in subsequent newscasts?
2. What responsibilities do newspeople have regarding source confidentiality?
3. Is it ethical to use police sources to break a story?
4. Will running this videotape prevent Plauche from getting a fair trial in East Baton Rouge Parish?