

Health Journalism Ethics: A Victorian Example

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This case study is from the Victorian period dealing with the dissemination of news on anatomy, which was considered central to the question of medical research and how educators engaged with the public.

In 1846 an inquest into the death of a British soldier posed a challenge to the common understanding of the skin as a defensive barrier for the human body. A private called John Frederick White died from injuries caused by flogging. He received 150 lashes for having assaulted a sergeant. After the punishment he admitted himself to the infirmary. After 2 weeks his skin was completely healed but in less than one month he was found dead in his dorm.

The Army Medical Officer carried out a cursory post-mortem and it was concluded that he died from inflammation of the heart and the lungs and that in no way were the flogging and the death of the soldier connected.

This did not convince the coroner for Middlesex, Arthur Lowe, who decided to open an inquest. The inquest received great coverage by the national and local press. The reports of the anatomical details taken from the post mortem sparked a public discussion of the pathological and physiological characteristics of the human skin.

The Times in particular played a key role in collecting the campaign against flogging with its dissemination of the type of blow caused by the whips. At the time, these types of wound were still considered only skin deep.

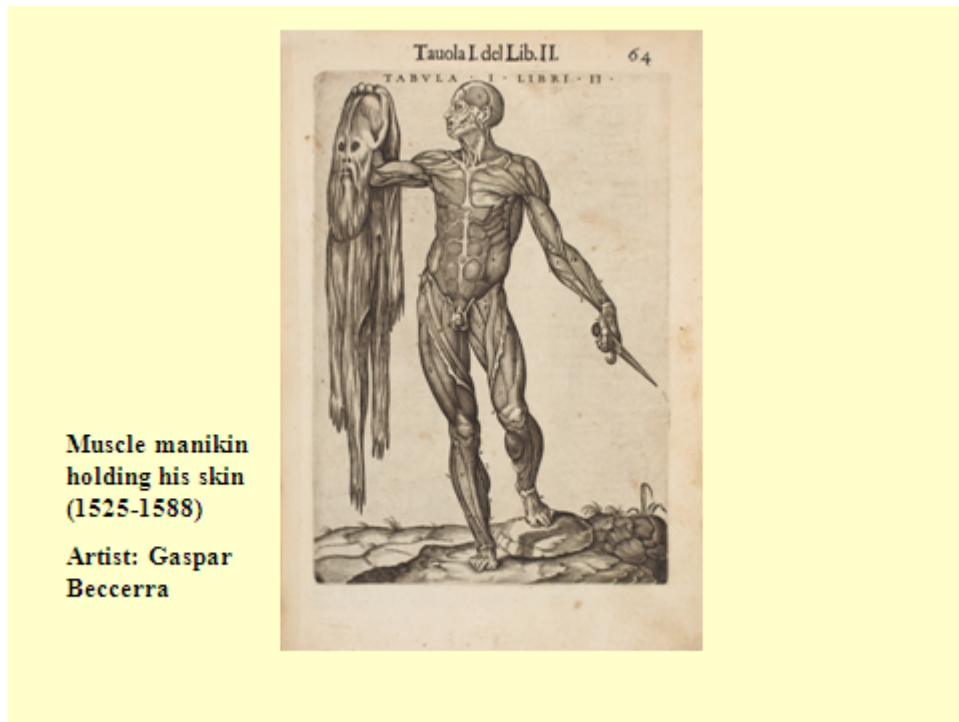


Figure 1

Figure 1 shows a man holding his skin. This was very common until at least the eighteenth century in human anatomy, where the skin is thought to be a removable cover. Something you must get rid of, because actually the truth is inside from a scientific point of view it is inside that is interesting.

Between the eighteenth and nineteenth century this popular image of the skin was witnessing a shift. People started to understand that the skin actually is a multi-layer organ connected to nerves and to the other parts of the body. Therefore, a corporal punishment can be fatal, even if it's restricted to the skin.

There are two elements that attracted the attention of the press in this story. One was the medical colonel, Thomas Wakley, the founder of the *Lancet*. He was one of the first colonels with a medical background in Britain. He supported the repeal of the stamp duty [a tax applied to all commercial publications at the time] and was very keen in spreading medical knowledge and knowledge about health to the general public and challenging the monopoly of this knowledge. He particularly was against flogging.

The second detail could have impaired the inquest. Thomas Wakley wanted to demonstrate that there was a connection between the flogging and the death of the soldier. A detail, published by *The Times* on 16 July 1846, when the coffin of the body of the soldier was brought into the courtroom it was noticed that in the middle of the back between the shoulders where the greatest inflammation had been, a great piece measuring 8 inches by a yard [20 by 90 cm] had been cut away.

The missing fragment of skin that at the beginning seemed nowhere to be found created great excitement and interest in the public. I would like to point to you the attention to the fact that when

the paper says where the greatest inflammation had evidently been is wrong. The missing piece of skin from a medico-legal point of view was not providing evidence. It was not important. But indeed it was a delaying factor in the inquest and the colonel had to find out what happened to this missing piece of skin.

The idea that a part of skin was missing created a euphoric imagination: horror but at the same time excitement in readers, and the press lingered on this at the beginning because it attracted attention.

One reader wrote a response to *The Times* saying that while animals were protected, a human being is cut into pieces. A story published by the *Times* said a soldier should not be cut into small pieces under the pretence of a slight correction. Again this rhetoric of the fragment goes on in the House of Commons where MP John Bowling said 'we must get rid of flogging at once and for ever, that not a fragment of this could be any longer tolerated'.

But the missing piece of skin was not a product of the flogging. It was an effect of the dissection post mortem. A medical officer within the army managed to find the missing piece of skin. He brought this to the courtroom and it was given to the reporters. He told them he had to cut the piece of skin during the post-mortem for the purpose of analysing it. They tried to put the piece of skin back on the soldier's body and they found that it didn't match, there was still a large gap. The medical officer had to explain that probably the piece of skin had shrink because it had been immersed in spirit and he had to cut the piece to fit it into the bottle.

Thomas Wakley was happy with the answer. But this is not the story that would have created a landmark in the history of the anti-flogging campaign. Thomas Wakley wanted to bring back attention to the connection between injuries by flogging and the death of the soldier.

The Times printed clear letters which told how the jury had first noticed that a large piece of skin had been removed. This observation gave rise to biased reporting on the character of the officers of the regiment which were not founded in truth.

The missing piece of skin was also playing to the anti-flogging campaign at the time and also the medical profession were using the post-mortem examination for legal evidence but it was very controversial at that time.

The problem of the missing piece of skin was solved for the inquest and allowed Thomas Wakley to get to the conclusion, which was a third post-mortem examination performed by Erasmus Wilson, one of the first surgeons specialising in dermatology.

Erasmus Wilson explained, during the final judgement, as reported in *The Times*, that extensive injuries to the skin would produce serious internal irritation which would give rise to fatal disease of the internal organs: 'Therefore it has been considered that the injuries resulting from flogging are confined to the skin, but have given evidence that in this case the flogging was followed by suffering in the state of the muscles'. This was happening in 1846, before the development of germ theory, and the discovery of sepsis; today we would say that this was a case of septic shock.

Another letter published in *The Times* explained in a popular way the connection between the surface and that of the body, saying that 'every lash, like every other kind of laceration, affects the power of the health. But this is not all. The skin sometimes may be treated like an inorganic substance but has a special relation with internal organs. In the end, flogging is not to be treated as a thing that is skin deep.'

Flogging in this case was not a punishment but was a murder. In fact, the coverage of this case sparked and fostered the anti-flogging campaign. Following this event, there was the formation of anti-flogging association led by Thomas Wakley, and in the House of Commons they decided to limit the number of lashes given during punishment to 50.

Flogging in the army was officially abolished in 1881 it was hardly still in practice. Because people historically had a kind of empathy in understanding this connection between the skin, and health, and inner organs.

Reasons for the Press Response

Why did the press pick up the fragment of skin as an element of so much interest to their readers? We have to take into consideration that fragmentation is a product of modernity to some extent. The fragmented model plays an important role in the history of the press, when novels were published in periodicals as a series. The fragment is a delaying factor and works very well in the narrative, and journalism is also about narrative and attracting readers' attention. Just recently an Italian philologist commented that incomplete works implies a 'solidness' between the missing part and also a euphoric imagination for reconstruction. During this period, popularisation of knowledge went through fragmentation. Medical and anatomical museums displayed and still display today for sensationalist tourism human tissue and pieces of human skin.

But it could also be said that the fragment couldn't be an historic interpretation of the fact, precisely because there is something missing. There are some cases where focusing on the fragment of the human body could be useful and important. If we think about tattoos for example; the fragment plays an important role because it is a reminder of a universal concept and you can easily establish this link. But in the case of the missing fragment of skin I don't think it would really work because it was the understanding of the skin as a human organ which was shrouded in mystery. So it was important to disseminate this idea that the skin is not a removable part of the human body.

I will conclude with a mention of contemporary news coverage of human anatomy. It is not so different to what was happening in the Victorian period, because the predominant frames in news are awe and amusement, fear and Frankenstein metaphors. So it is still very tempting for the journalist to linger on anatomical details for sensationalising.

The ethical dilemma is, to what extent should anatomical detail be used in news reporting? What part does it have as an element of investigative journalism that is something to be published? And must it be published to give understanding?