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Publishing the perished: The visibility of foreign death in Australian quality newspapers

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Abstract

The issue of media coverage of death has been under discussion by only a few scholars, and there have existed some disagreements as to just how present death is in public discourse in the Western world. This study adds to the literature on death by investigating the Australian media context. Specifically, it examines how journalists at two Australian quality newspapers, *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, cover death in their foreign news reporting. It finds that journalists express preferences for certain types of death as well as for certain nationalities. Further, it sheds some light on just how visible death is in the news, by arguing that while present in the written word, the visual representation of death is still highly marginalised.

Introduction

The subject of the coverage of death in international news reporting has only been marginally examined in the academic literature. While there exists a large body of research into how media cover wars and even catastrophes, few studies have investigated the coverage of deaths specifically. This study attempts to help fill the gap by exploring how Australian journalists cover death in their foreign news reporting. Investigating the coverage of death can help us understand how other cultures are portrayed in the media through reporting about people rather than only political or economic stories.

One issue under debate which is important to view in the context of this study is the previously accepted notion that death, in Western countries, has been absent from public discourse and only present in a private form. Historian Philippe Aries (1974) made this claim, arguing that death was forbidden in modern society because of the high value placed by Western culture on happiness, love, life and joy. Cultural anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer (1977) also noted a shift away from public bereavement to private grief, thereby excluding natural death from public discourse. Gorer further argued that there had been a reversal of attitudes to sex and death since the 19th century, leading to death becoming somewhat of a taboo subject. “Whereas copulation has become more and more ‘mentionable’, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon societies, death has become more and more ‘unmentionable’ *as a natural process*” (Gorer, 1977: 195; emphasis in original). However, Gorer (1977: 197) also noted that

while natural death had become “smothered in prudery”, violent death was being increasingly displayed to mass audiences.

This point was taken on by Walter, Littlewood and Pickering (1995), who challenged the claim that death had disappeared from public discourse, arguing that death actually appeared regularly and in a variety of forms in the mass media. Yet, Walter et al. (1995) qualified this by arguing that only a minority of deaths were actually reported in the news, which concentrated on the deaths of public figures or public deaths of private individuals. “The deaths boldly headlined and portrayed by the news media are extraordinary deaths ... They are also types of death which, unlike the majority of deaths, typically occur in a public place” (Walter et al., 1995: 594).

Thus, Aries’ point about death being absent from public discourse could be accepted with the qualification that it was private death that was absent, while public death appears quite regularly in the media. “Where death may be ‘located’ in symbolic representation includes, at the same time, where and how it may not appear, namely as a natural end of everybody’s physical life” (Traber, 1992: 3). Traber (1992) argued that the increasing secularist attitudes in Western countries had made death an event that had to be dealt with as quickly and as unobtrusively as possible. This study thus attempts to find out how Australian journalists deal with death in their newspapers.

Representation of death in the mass media

It appears that death does not always equal death, particularly when it comes to death in foreign news. A review of the literature on this topic shows that there appear to be different values placed on people according to their age, gender, status, as well as the cause of death. Importantly, Gerbner (1980) argued that portrayals of death and dying served symbolic functions of social typing and control. Thus, dominant social groups tended to be overrepresented and overendowed. In his examination of killers and victims on US television programs, Gerbner (1980) found that women and minorities were most likely to be represented as victims.

The status of a person can also influence how death is perceived. Palgi and Abramovitch (1984) noted that in traditional societies, the death of a chief or a man of high standing had much wider-ranging consequences than the death of a stranger, slave or child. The cause of death is also important in its representation in the media, as has already been pointed out elsewhere, in that the media appear to prefer violent death over ‘normal’ death. Combs and Slovic (1979) examined the coverage of causes of death in two regional US newspapers, and found that the newspapers overemphasised homicides, accidents and disasters but underemphasised death caused by diseases. They argued one reason possibly lay in the fact that violent accidents and homicides made more interesting and exciting news stories, but a further reason was probably the fact they were a source of societal vulnerability about which people needed to be informed. Diseases however were much more common and inevitable, and also usually took only a single life (Combs and Slovic, 1979: 843).

Finally, differences in the representation of death are made when reporting about death from abroad. It appears that the further culturally removed a victim, the more gruesome photos can be and the less detailed written accounts are (Walter et al., 1995; Sontag, 2003). Walter et al. (1995: 587) argued that the more an audience could identify with the victims, the more interest was shown in the story – the so-called ‘it could have happened to me’ effect. This would also imply that the type of death would be important, in that if the audience can relate with the circumstances, they might identify more easily with the event.

Adams (1986) examined US TV coverage of natural disasters between 1972 and 1985, and found that earthquakes, typhoons and floods in the countries of the Third World received proportionately little attention compared to other regions of the world. Not satisfied with the simple geographic factors, Adams tested a number of other explanatory variables, among them factors such as cultural proximity. He found a number of factors such as: (a) the number of US tourists to a particular area, accounting for cultural proximity and social interest factors; (b) the number of estimated disaster deaths within the first hours of the disaster; and (c) the distance from New York City, accounting for geographical proximity. Other factors examined by Adams included the gross national product of the affected country, the gross national product per capita, the political and economic ties with the United States, the number of US citizens having family ties with the affected country as well as the proportion of leading journalists with an ethnicity in common with the affected country. Disasters that could satisfy a number of these factors would be more likely to cause the audience to identify with them and therefore be more likely to be reported, as opposed to disasters that only satisfied one factor, for example.

As noted by Walter, Littlewood and Pickering (1995), the often-cited comments by journalists referring to the comparative value of death (“One Australian is worth five Americans, 20 Italians, 50 Japanese, 100 Russians, 500 Indians and 1000 Africans” (Romei, 2004: 5)) suggested that the more easily an audience could identify, the more interest was shown. “This does not support the hypothesis that audiences take particular pleasure in the pain of others, but rather that the more personally threatening the story is (‘it could have happened to me’), the more interest is shown” (Walter et al., 1995: 587).

Moeller (1999) analysed the US news media’s coverage of diseases, famine, war and death and studied journalists’ criteria for publishing these events. In her study, Moeller also provided a number of tongue-in-cheek calculations by American journalists, such as “one dead fireman in Brooklyn is worth five English bobbies, who are worth 50 Arabs, who are worth 500 Africans” (Moeller, 1999: 22). Another journalist, Walt Mossberg, related to Moeller (1999) that the location was the most important:

Is it a place Americans know about? Travel to? Have relatives in?
Have business in? Is the military going there? You’re not going to
get on page one with something about Bangladesh nearly as much

as you do with something about some country where your readers have some kind of connection (cited in Moeller, 1999: 21).

It is this cultural proximity then, the connections a country has with another country that are so important. And of course if one has a connection with another country, it is much easier to identify with a person from that country. “We tend to care most about those closest to us, most like us. We care about those with whom we identify” (Moeller, 1999: 22). Those with whom we identify will be from countries that share similar world views, values, political systems, histories, languages, etc.

Method

In order to shed some light on how Australian journalists report death from abroad, this study was conducted in two stages. Firstly, to find out the actual content of international reporting of death, content analysis was employed. Secondly, journalists involved in the selection of foreign news were interviewed about how they report death in order to add a qualitative dimension to the study. Counting the stories that included death allowed for statistical inferences in relation to the types of death reported as well as how death was represented in photographs, while the interviews allowed for more in-depth probing of the reasons behind such decisions.

The newspapers selected for this study were the quality dailies *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian*. These newspapers were selected because both are regarded as being among the leading newspapers in Australia. *The Australian* is the country’s only non-finance national daily and has an extensive coverage of international news. The *Sydney Morning Herald*, owned by Fairfax Ltd., is widely regarded as one of the top two quality newspapers in Australia, the other being its stable mate *The Age*. Although its coverage tends to concentrate on Sydney, the *Herald* also covers a wide range of national and international news. The fact that almost all metropolitan and national newspapers in Australia are owned by either News Limited or Fairfax informed the selection of the newspapers from the two companies.

The time frame for the study was September and October 2004. The choice of this particular time frame was purely random. The researcher believes that two consecutive months would provide a sample size large enough to provide some statistical significance. Each newspaper is published Monday through to Saturday. The period September 1 to October 31, 2004 yielded 51 issues for each of the two newspapers. The unit of analysis was international news that included news of the death of at least one person. Photos which were published alongside such stories were also examined. News stories studied were taken from the front, news, and feature sections of the newspapers.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews with journalists at *The Australian* and the *Herald* were conducted during April 2005. The interview process included eight journalists within each organisation. Interviewees consisted of past and present foreign news editors, foreign news desk staff, sub-editors, photo staff and editors, as

well as a range of senior editors, such as night editors, production editors and former foreign news editors. It was believed that eight interviews at each newspaper should provide a good cross-section of respondents' views on death in foreign news.

Analysis of results

The content analysis showed a clear preference in newspapers reporting violent deaths of some form – natural death was indeed largely absent from the coverage, as Walter et al. (1995) had argued. In fact, the vast majority of stories focussed on violent deaths, supporting Combs and Slovic's (1979) findings. Accidents, violent deaths and natural disasters all received considerably more attention in terms of stories per event than the other events (Table 1).

Table 1: Causes of death

	<i>The Australian</i>		<i>SMH</i>	
Total number of stories	135	100%	115	100%
Accident	21	16%	12	10%
Violent	92	68%	75	65%
Disease	1	1%	2	2%
Natural death	9	7%	16	14%
Natural Disaster	9	7%	7	6%
Suicide	1	1%	2	2%
Unclear	2	1%	1	1%

In line with Walter et al. (1995) then, it was really the extraordinary deaths that newspapers focussed on, while death from natural causes was underreported. Yet how were these unusual deaths portrayed in newspapers? How did Australian journalists deal with the photographic depiction of these deaths?

Visual representation of death

An examination of the pictorial treatment of death shows that, in line with previous studies (Fraser, 1992; Petley, 2003), graphic death was mostly absent from public discourse. As Table 2 shows, only roughly 6.3 per cent of stories that included photographs actually showed a dead person in the photograph. This finding is reasonably in line with Singletary and Lamb's (1984) finding that only 2.7 per cent of award-winning photographs showed graphic details such as blood. In fact, if we reduce the analysis to only pictures which showed blood, the number in this study

would be four, or 1.8 per cent. Even if one adds to the photos of death the portrayal of body bags and coffins as well as the event of someone being killed, the total figure rises to 23, or 10.4 per cent. Overall, the vast majority of photographs showed the dead people when they were still alive or they showed general scenes of destruction that did not include dead bodies.

Table 2: Content of Photographs

	<i>The Australian</i>		<i>SMH</i>	
Alive	21	16%	19	20%
Injured	16	12%	9	10%
Killing	2	2%	1	1%
Body bags or coffins	4	3%	2	2%
Corpse	11	9%	3	3%
Grief	6	5%	4	4%
Destruction	31	24%	21	23%
Unrelated	38	29%	34	36%
Total	129	100%	93	100%

(Note: Where stories were accompanied by more than one photo, the dominant photograph was coded.)

Table 2 also reveals an important difference between coverage in *The Australian* and the *Herald*, which the interviews with journalists could shed some more light on. From journalists' statements it would appear that *The Australian's* editorial team takes the approach of 'showing things the way they are', which includes showing graphic death. At the *Herald*, on the other hand, journalists reported that their paper preferred not to show any death if possible. As Table 2 shows, *The Australian* published 11 stories with photos of a corpse or corpses, while the *Herald* only published three such stories. *Herald* journalist SMA said: "Every now and then if there is a big story about some shocking massacre somewhere we might print a picture that shows what are clearly bodies covering a field. But I don't think we would print a close up of any of them". If people looked like they were asleep it was easier to publish their photo. "If you have a photo of someone with their chest open and their guts spilling out, that's maybe a bit too much. But if you have someone who looks like they're asleep, that's less hard to run," Journalist SME said.

Journalist SMD reiterated that "the current editor has a policy that the *Herald* won't publish photos of dead bodies unless there is a newsworthy reason for them to be published". Yet a few journalists said they wished their newspaper showed more of such photos. Journalist SMG, for example, stressed he believed one needed to show reality and to bring home to readers how particularly bad a situation was: "I don't

think we should revolt readers every day with blood and gore, I don't think that's the point, but I think it's unrealistic to cover a war without showing when there is major carnage". Similarly, the journalist thought the newspaper's somewhat more graphic coverage of the aftermath of the Asian tsunami in late 2004 had contributed to the outpouring of compassion in Australia. *"I think with a completely sanitised coverage of that people wouldn't have realised just how awful it was."*

A number of journalists at *The Australian* said they preferred to show death in order to show readers what had happened, believing that not doing so would be an interference with reality.

"You could make the point that newspapers go against public interest by not almost every day showing graphic photos of car accidents. You have a responsibility to show: a kid gets in a car, he goes out for a drive, this is the result of it, here it is. To send a message, 'you guys have to be really careful because this is what can happen to you'. And the pictures can powerfully bring that home," Journalist OZA said.

However, journalists said they did not believe their newspaper used photos of death gratuitously but still discussed the publication of gory pictures quite intensely, deciding on a case-by-case basis. Journalist OZE said one way to get around problems of showing blood in the newspaper was the use of such photos on mono pages instead of colour pages, in order to lessen the impact. Further, the time at which a death occurred played a role in the publication of photographs. Said Journalist OZH:

"There are different degrees of death. So a mass grave with a thousand people who died two years ago, you've got much more chance of that running on the front or world page than you have of a headless corpse directly in front of you now, bleeding red and raw and meaty."

In their deliberations about whether to publish certain photos, journalists also differentiated between whether the dead were 'good' or 'bad' guys. For example, journalists at *The Australian* argued a photo could be more easily published if the dead person was a 'bad guy'. Additionally, deaths of compatriots are considered with special care. Journalists at both newspapers said one needed to show particular consideration when showing dead Australians due to the possible effects this could have on their relatives in Australia.

Despite some differences in *The Australian* and *Herald's* approach to photographs of death, both newspapers nevertheless showed some overall similarities in their approach. Most importantly, the overall number of graphic photos is quite low, which lets us add another dimension to Walter et al.'s (1995) claim that death appeared regularly in the media. While death does appear very regularly in the international news pages of Australian quality newspapers, it is by and large absent in

terms of visual depiction. Death thus becomes something that is mentioned frequently, but rarely described or depicted in much detail.

In fact, media images of death in Western cultures have been known to be relatively sanitised. Fraser (1992) noted that media bosses wanted ever more gruesome and detailed pictures of people dying, yet at the same time filtered out what they felt viewers should not see, thus ‘cleaning up’ events to make them acceptable to the public. In the British tabloid press, known to be very sensational, there even existed a taboo on graphic images of death and dying, resulting in very few such images being printed (Meech, 1992). Petley (2003) also noted that while fictional representations became ever more explicit, non-fictional ones became increasingly sanitised in British and US mainstream media. Petley cited British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) producer guidelines which stated that dead people should not be shown unless there were compelling circumstances. Campbell (2004) also noticed this form of ‘sanitised’ reporting and argued that if dead bodies did occur in the media, it was mostly those of people from distant places.

Identification with the dead

The results of the study show that, in line with past studies, cultural proximity to the location of fatal events or the dead person’s nationality plays a large role in determining whether to publish stories. Put simply, those that are ‘like us’ are more worthy of being reported than those nationals who come from countries which are culturally more dissimilar. Of course, Australian deaths abroad are considered probably the most important. For example, Journalist OZE said: *“If there was a crash of a tour bus where it’s known a lot of Australians go on holiday, then that might be an extra bit of the framework that makes you think that is a significant story.”* Or as Journalist SMD put it: *“If five Australians are killed anywhere in the world, that immediately jumps up the queue of newsworthiness, compared with five people in Colombia killed in a bus accident, which won’t even be reported.”* In addition, there is a further distinction between the dead from culturally close countries and those from distant countries. This supports Moeller’s (1999: 22) observation that “we tend to care most about those closest to us, most like us”. It also supports Meech’s (1992) finding that nationality was an important selection criteria in stories about death. *“People are generally interested in things they can relate to. So they can relate to disasters, or mass murders in places they culturally relate to,”* Journalist OZA said. At the time interviews were conducted with Australian journalists, an Australian military helicopter had crashed on an aid mission in Indonesia, killing nine servicemen. Journalist OZC pointed out that this was an important news event as they were fellow Australians which were

“people like us. And if it happens in Britain they are a little bit like us. And in America they are quite like us. There are strong connections, maybe New Zealand as well. And then in different parts of the world the connection is not as great, and the cultural differences are greater.”

The reason why the Madrid train bombings in 2004 were a big news event in Australia shows how some of the factors can combine and increase the importance of an event. Journalist SMB worked on the night the first news from the Madrid bombings came in and related the thought process behind it: *“It’s Europe, it’s a commuter train, and that’s something that would resonate in Sydney. They are white people like us, they are going to work like us, into office jobs, they are on the train and get wiped out. And it’s a terrorist act.”* Similarly, if the Asian tsunami in late 2004 had hit only Burma, the story might, at least initially, not have been as big: *“Not many people go to Burma. But Ko Phi Phi and Phuket, places like this people know about, and it’s obviously a bigger story,”* Journalist SMB said.

An oft-cited factor was that some regions were always important, regardless of the event. These included the United States, the countries of the European Union, but also political hot spots such as Iraq, Iran and the Middle East. *“There are several running stories which by their nature are automatically considered. Iraq is an example, that is a running story. So almost everyday you’ll be looking to do something from Iraq,”* Journalist OZB said. Such statements alluding to certain countries as dominant newsmakers support the core-periphery theory within the political-economy approach to communication.

Compassion fatigue

One important aspect coming out of the interviews was ‘compassion fatigue’, which received attention from Moeller (1999) in her book on how the media covered wars, famine, diseases and death. It refers generally to the media’s perceived failure to report events from distant countries in detail as they occur all too frequently and therefore lose news value. The term ‘news fatigue’ is a term preferred by Journalist SMD when questioned about ‘compassion fatigue’. The journalist rejected the notion of compassion fatigue because it implied journalists did not care, which he believed was not correct. Having conducted interviews with 16 journalists, this researcher believes that the term news fatigue is perhaps more accurate, as the journalists’ rejection of frequently occurring events appeared to be based more on hard news values than a genuine lack of compassion.

Nevertheless, compassion or news fatigue plays an important role in the selection of fatal events. Events which happen again and again somehow lose news value. Such events, according to journalists at the *Herald* and *The Australian*, included famine in Africa, bus crashes in India and ferries overturning in Bangladesh or the Philippines.

“You just get a bit immune to the buses going over cliffs in China and India, ferries going down in the Philippines or Bangladesh. If a bus goes over a cliff in the Swiss Alps, with English tourists on it, that’s considered to be more of a story than a bus going over a cliff in India with Hindu pilgrims on it,” Journalist SMB said.

As Journalist SMA said, such frequent events lacked surprise value, and therefore news value. Journalist SMF pointed out there was almost an expectation that disasters would happen in Third World countries, which made them less interesting. These observations resonate with Christensen's (2004) finding that political and social disturbance was a sort of habit in the Balkans and Africa, and if such events happened in these places they were deemed less newsworthy than if they happened in places which were usually stable.

Yet all these events which journalists cited as happening too frequently usually occur in countries which are culturally quite distant. For example, hurricanes occur in the United States every year, yet each one is generally reported at length, as opposed to typhoons in Japan (Hanusch, 2005). In other words, it may suggest that the threshold is simply lower for events which occur in culturally dissimilar places. From journalists' responses it appears that news fatigue can be overcome and work in a story's favour if the event occurs in a country where many cultural links exist. The importance of distance in causing compassion fatigue, or even denial, was also raised by Cohen (2001) in his analysis of the denial of suffering. Cohen argued that the term compassion fatigue may not encompass all that is at work here, as he believed that the repetition of images of suffering did not necessarily cause exhaustion or fatigue – after all, he argued, there was no such thing as love fatigue, or parents becoming immune their child's suffering. “The problem with multiple images of distant suffering is not their multiplicity but their psychological and moral *distance*” (Cohen, 2001: 194; emphasis in original).

In fact, Höijer (2004) argued that, much like journalists, most scholarly literature also assumed compassion fatigue existed in the audience. However, her own survey data suggested the situation was not quite as straightforward, and there existed different levels or threshold between men and women as well. Using Boltanski's (1999) three forms of emotional commitment as a starting point, Höijer (2004) developed four types of compassion: tender-hearted, blame-filled, shame-filled and powerlessness-filled compassion. As the other three forms involve more personal engagement with the suffering, powerlessness-filled compassion may be seen as perhaps the entry point to compassion fatigue, as here spectators believe they are powerless to do anything about the situation, likely leading to the denial Cohen (2001) refers to.

Conclusion

When reporting about death from abroad, Australian journalists have relatively clear guidelines on which deaths from which countries are worth covering. While the old throw-away lines of: “One Australian is worth five Americans, 20 Italians, 50 Japanese, 100 Russians, 500 Indians and 1000 Africans” (Romei, 2004: 5), may not be applied literally, they nevertheless give a good indication as to journalists' thinking in this regard. Journalists, assuming that people want to know about people who are like them, show clear preference for covering deaths that Australians can relate to, be that in terms of the victims' nationality, country of the event or the circumstances of the death. Thus journalists stay within their own cultural realm when reporting foreign

news. Some in-depth discussions with journalists on the factor of compassion fatigue further revealed that while such fatigue certainly exists, certain circumstances can work against it and in turn work in a story's favour. One such factor is cultural proximity – if a similar event keeps occurring in, say the US, it can lead to extended coverage of such an event. However, if the nature of repetitive events is such that systemic problems are deemed to be at fault, the circumstance can prompt journalists to cover the issue in more depth, even if it is in a culturally distant country.

In line with the findings of other studies in the field, Australian journalists had a clear preference for accidents, violent deaths and natural disasters, while scant coverage was given to natural deaths, suicides or deaths from diseases. Yet the pictorial coverage of even the violent events was relatively undramatic. While one would expect photos of people who died in wars or accidents to be relatively graphic, the coverage in *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* was quite sanitised, with only a very small percentage of photos displaying the bodies of the dead. However, editorial policies differed slightly between the two newspapers, with *The Australian* relatively open to showing graphic photos, while at the *Herald*, editorial directives advised journalists to avoid showing death.

Walter et al. (1995) had argued that predominantly unusual deaths made the headlines, and this assertion was proved right in the study, as the vast majority of deaths were as a result of accidents, violence and natural disasters. Yet we need to clarify Walter et al.'s general assertion that death was highly visible in public discourse by differentiating between the presence of stories about death and the display of death in visual terms. In terms of the number of stories, death is highly visible, as newspapers published roughly 2.5 stories per day which included death in their foreign news section. However, in terms of graphic death, photographic coverage was extremely low, with only 1.8 per cent of stories showing graphic details such as blood, and only 6.3 per cent showing dead bodies. Thus, we are able to somewhat reconcile the two seemingly opposing views of Aries (1974) and Walter et al. (1995). While death appears regularly in Australian newspapers, the sanitisation of its photographic representation also suggests that graphic death is still somewhat of a taboo in the news and thus almost invisible.

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