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# Australian Press Coverage Of The 1995 Mururoa Nuclear Test

*The 1995 Mururoa nuclear test was at once a regional, global and, in its Australian press coverage, a distinctly Australian media event. Press coverage reflects this interpenetration of regional, global, and domestic concerns. This paper analyses coverage in The Australian and The Sydney Morning Herald from three perspectives. Firstly, it places the coverage in the context of the total international news output of these newspapers in the week of the test. A comparison is made with British coverage of international news in the same week. Secondly, the nature of the coverage itself is analysed in terms of story type, main actors, story perspective, and sources. Thirdly, the paper examines the role of the South Pacific paradise myth as a backdrop against which events were interpreted.*

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This paper analyses coverage of the first Mururoa nuclear test and associated events in the Pacific by *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* in the period September 4-9, 1995. News events reported in this week included demonstrations prior to the test, including the French seizure of a Greenpeace ship which had been heading towards Mururoa, the explosion itself, and demonstrations and riots in Tahiti which followed the test. In the six-day period 51 Mururoa-related stories appeared in *The Australian* and 53 in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Three ways of looking at the coverage are utilised in this analysis. In the first instance, Mururoa-related stories are viewed in relation to the total international news output of the two newspapers. The prominence of South Pacific countries in relation to the overall Australian international news map is assessed. A comparative perspective is introduced by examining the extent of Australian coverage in relation to that in the United Kingdom. Secondly, the Australian press coverage itself is analysed in terms of story type, main actors, story perspective, and sources. Here the main interest is in the way a South Pacific event was transformed into what became primarily an Australian story. The third view examines the framing role of the South Pacific paradise myth in the coverage. It is argued that this myth acted as a

backdrop against which events were interpreted and that it ultimately inflected these interpretations in a way which supported the political status quo in French Polynesia despite the violation of the test itself.

Each view contributes to a descriptive account of Australia's press coverage of Mururoa and to some extent, for example in the documentation of news sources and of the "authorised knowers" (Ericson et al., 1987: 17-18) with respect to this event, allows us to explain the nature of the coverage. Each view also raises challenging issues about the reporting of international news events in a particular national context. The dominant way of addressing news-mediated relationships amongst countries has been via the notion of "international news flow". Yet this linear notion of news flow between nations is clearly an inadequate model in this case given the interpenetration of domestic, regional and global concerns.

The period of this particular study comprised part of the sample period for the international study "*Foreign news and global news flows in the 1990s*"<sup>1</sup> for which the author co-ordinated the Australian data (see Putnis et al., 1997). In the international study researchers from some forty countries analysed the foreign news that appeared in their country's media for sample periods in 1995 of September 3-9 and September 17-23. Each participating country selected at least three major media outlets (typically a minimum of two newspapers and a television station) and analysed their foreign news content using procedures set down by the international study co-ordinators. All items judged to have a clear foreign or international element which appeared in each newspaper issue or television news edition were included. This comprehensive approach meant that items of all sizes, including brief one paragraph stories, were included as were items on all topics.

The selected stories were each coded in terms of twenty-six variables including prominence (with each story classified as being either major, medium or minor), source (up to two sources per story), gender of correspondent, countries prominent in the story (with the possibility of indicating up to three countries per story scaled as "most important country", "second country" and "third country"), topic (up to three topic areas per story scaled as "main topic", "secondary topic no 1" and "secondary topic no 2" selected from twenty-four topic areas) and variables relating to the status and gender of the main actors in each story.<sup>2</sup> The media chosen for the Australian data were *The Australian*, the nation's major national daily newspaper, *Sydney Morning Herald*, the most

## The South Pacific In The Global News Map

important daily of Australia's largest city, and the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation's* (ABC's) 7 p.m. thirty-minute national news bulletin.

For the purposes of this paper, which focuses on the press and which is limited to Australian and UK data, two broadly comparable subsets of the total country data sets were constructed:

1. All items with a clear foreign or international element which appeared in *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* for the period September 4-9, 1995, there were 897 items in all.

2. All such stories in *The Telegraph* (UK) and *The Guardian* (U.K.) for the same period, there were 1013 items in all.

Of the Australian data set, 104 stories (or 11.6%) were related to the Mururoa test. In the British data set there were 54 stories (5.3%) related to Mururoa.

These two data sets were analysed so as to determine the extent to which various countries were represented in their respective coverage of international news. For this purpose (following Putnis et al., 1997) a prominence measure was constructed by assigning simple mathematical values to country references: three points were awarded when a country was ranked as the Most Important Country in a story, two points if it was the Second Most Important and one point if it was the Third Most Important. Scores were then aggregated and the resulting totals aligned by adjusting the British data to match the size of the Australian data set. This yielded *Table 1, Country Prominence Measure: Top 30 Countries*.

Table 1 compares the international news priorities of Australia and Britain. We can note, for example, that in both data sets international news stories which feature the home country are most prominent. Furthermore, in the survey period the United States and France had similar prominence in both Australia and the United Kingdom, though one suspects that a greater proportion of the stories involving France could be accounted for by the Mururoa test in the Australian data than in the British data. Beyond the top few rankings, the two patterns of country prominence in international news diverge significantly with regional interests coming to the fore. Significantly, Britain is 5.2 times more prominent in Australia than Australia is in Britain (see Sreberny et al., 1998 for further comparative analyses).

For the purposes of this study the following points can be drawn from Table 1:

- i) The South Pacific/French Polynesian region was 2.2 times more prominent in the Australian press than in the British press. This reflects the relative prominence of the Mururoa story. As indicated earlier the story accounted for 11.6% of the total international news coverage in the Australian data but only 5.3%

Table 1  
Country Prominence Measure: Top 30 Countries

| AUSTRALIAN DATA SET            |             | BRITISH DATA SET               |             |
|--------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------|-------------|
| Country Name                   | Total Score | Country Name                   | Total Score |
| Australia                      | 949         | United Kingdom                 | 1026        |
| United States                  | 731         | United States                  | 565         |
| France                         | 367         | France                         | 311         |
| United Kingdom                 | 345         | Europe                         | 153         |
| China                          | 189         | Germany                        | 143         |
| South Pacific/French Polynesia | 154         | Ireland                        | 134         |
| Japan                          | 120         | Bosnia-Herzegovina             | 99          |
| United Nations                 | 92          | United Nations                 | 93          |
| New Zealand                    | 90          | China                          | 91          |
| Bosnia-Herzegovina             | 71          | Italy                          | 87          |
| India                          | 63          | Russia                         | 87          |
| "World Community"/nations      | 52          | South Africa                   | 84          |
| Russia                         | 50          | Spain                          | 79          |
| Indonesia                      | 50          | India                          | 79          |
| Canada                         | 45          | Japan                          | 73          |
| South Africa                   | 43          | South Pacific/French Polynesia | 71          |
| Germany                        | 42          | Australia                      | 66          |
| Hong Kong                      | 37          | EU                             | 53          |
| Malaysia                       | 36          | NATO                           | 45          |
| Europe                         | 35          | Canada                         | 44          |
| Vietnam                        | 34          | Belgium                        | 40          |
| Asia, in general               | 32          | Pakistan                       | 38          |
| Spain                          | 31          | Sweden                         | 36          |
| Italy                          | 30          | Algeria                        | 31          |
| Israel                         | 27          | Austria                        | 30          |
| Papua New Guinea               | 26          | Kenya                          | 28          |
| Sri Lanka                      | 26          | Iraq                           | 27          |
| Serbia                         | 25          | Denmark                        | 27          |
| South Korea                    | 24          | New Zealand                    | 24          |
| Pakistan                       | 23          | Serbia                         | 23          |

in the British data. Such a differential is consistent with expectations with respect to regional bias in international news priorities (see, for example, Sreberny-Mohammadi et al., 1985) though it could also be influenced by the relative silence of the British Government in response to the French nuclear test when many other countries were protesting loudly.

ii) Despite the fact that the Mururoa test was by far the single most newsworthy event of the week, the United States remained by far the most prominent country in the news overall. More generally, Table 1 illustrates the point that the influence of extraordinary events, like the Mururoa test, on the overall pattern

## Coverage By SMH And The Australian

of international news needs to be balanced against other more constant factors including the dominance of the U.S. in international news, the influence of traditional cultural links (e.g. Australia and Britain) and the pattern of international links in particular areas of news such as business (where Asia is prominent in the Australian media) and sport (where, for example, New Zealand is prominent in the Australian media). Another way of putting this is to say that virtually all of the coverage of the South Pacific region (except for that of New Zealand and Papua New Guinea) can be accounted for by Mururoa related stories.

iii) Despite the general prominence of the South Pacific in this period, specific countries of the region other than New Zealand and, in the Australian data, Papua New Guinea, do not rate highly. Fiji and Western Samoa get one mention each in the Australian data and Western Samoa rates once in the British data.

We now turn to a more detailed consideration of Mururoa-related stories that appeared in *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* from September 4-9. In this six-day period 51 such stories appeared in *The Australian* and 53 in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. If we examine these bodies of text, separately and together, what characteristics and patterns of representation can be discerned?

It hardly needs saying that the coverage of the Mururoa-related events and their aftermath in the Australian press (and, even more particularly, in *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*) constitutes a very particular representation. The key players, or at least their prominence, in the Australian version of this drama, would be very different from those in the British, New Zealand or Fijian versions. The range of interpretative frames and the respective weight given to them would vary greatly from, say, the Australian version to the French version. There are also particular qualities associated with these events which lend themselves to the construction of multiple and competing articulations.

The tests inevitably brought into play large cultural and ideological rifts; much of the news was constituted by various reactions to and commentaries on the tests which competed for editorial space; many of the reported events, such as the demonstrations in Papeete and the Greenpeace missions to Mururoa, was specifically designed to maximise media coverage of opposition to the tests; at the same time the French authorities sought to control media access so as to better project their own official version of the test, the visuals of which were presented to the media as a pre-packaged (and pre-interpreted) video.

The Australian media's version of events grows out of many factors, some practical (e.g. where overseas correspondents are located), others related to the news values and priorities of journalists writing for an Australian audience, others related to the range of frames of interpretation available to journalists (or provided by sources), and still others arising from the mythologies and stereotypes evoked by these events.

Table 2 classifies the 104 stories appearing in *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* according to story type. In the first instance the fact that there were 104 relevant stories in the two newspapers in the six-day period should be remarked upon. This suggests not just the prominence of the story, but the way in which these newspapers construct their overall coverage in terms of multiple perspectives. There is no single story, no single angle (though there may, of course, be dominant ones) – rather each issue of each newspaper characteristically features various aspects of the story written by different often specialised journalists (e.g. science writer, environment writer, European correspondent).

It is noteworthy that only 19 of the 104 stories are event focussed in the sense that they are primarily concerned with describing an occurrence. The other 85 are concerned with interpretation, commentary and opinion. Journalism, at least in the quality press, is not so much about what happens as about who says what. This, of course, raises the question of who does and who does not get a say and what range of perspectives they offer.

Table 3 analyses the named actors appearing in the 104 stories by role. Only the first appearance of a particular actor in each story is counted. Hence, we see that politicians made 204 separate appearances out of a total of 299 named actor appearances. It is also noteworthy that Greenpeace workers made appearances on 20 separate occasions.

Table 4 analyses the named actor appearances by the nationality of the actor where this is given. It is evident that in the Australian media construction of the story the drama is very much an Australian one. Australia has more actors in this version than any other nation, including France. South Pacific actors only just exceed those in the "Other European" category. It might be said that it is not so much that these events projected the South Pacific and its people onto the world stage. Rather, through these events the South Pacific region became a stage for both a physical expression of French colonialism – the bomb itself – and a particular scene in an ongoing Eurocentric, but also global, discursive drama.

A further insight into the nature of the Australian coverage is provided in Table 5 which analyses the sources of the news

**Table 2**  
**Stories relating to the Mururoa Test:**  
*The Australian and the Sydney Morning Herald, 4/9/95 – 9/9/95*

|  | The Australian | Sydney Morning Herald | Total      |
|--|----------------|-----------------------|------------|
| News stories – event focussed                    | 11             | 8                     | 19         |
| News stories – reaction, interpretation focussed | 25             | 17                    | 42         |
| Commentary/editorial                             | 11             | 8                     | 19         |
| Letters  | 4              | 20                    | 24         |
| <b>Total</b>                                     | <b>51</b>      | <b>53</b>             | <b>104</b> |

**Table 3**  
**Named Actor Story Appearances by Role**

| Role  | No of Stories where actor role is present |
|---|---|
| Politician  | 204                                       |
| Government and military officials                                   | 30  |
| Experts (scientists and analysts not directly related to the event) | 22  |
| Greenpeace workers  | 20  |
| Community/business leaders  | 19  |
| Other minor actors  | 4   |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>299</b>                                |

**Table 4**  
**Named Actor Story Appearances by Country/Region**

| Country of Actor | No of Stories where country/region actor is present |
|------------------|---|
| Australia        | 118   |
| France           | 109   |
| South Pacific    | 24  |
| Other European   | 19  |
| Asian            | 8   |
| U.S.             | 5   |
| New Zealand      | 5   |



**Table 5**  
**News Sources of Mururoa-related Stories:**  
*The Australian* and *Sydney Morning Herald*  
 4/9/95 – 9/9/95  
 Maximum two sources per story

|                               | <i>The Australian</i> | <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> | Total |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------|-------|
| Own correspondent - Australia | 26                    | 20                           | 46    |
| Own correspondent - Papeete   | 14                    | 6                            | 20    |
| Own correspondent - Europe    | 10                    | 2                            | 12    |
| Agencies – General            | 5                     | 2                            | 7     |
| AAP                           | 2                     | -                            | 2     |
| AP                            | 1                     | 1                            | 2     |
| Reuters                       | 2                     | 1                            | 3     |
| Dow Jones                     | -                     | 1                            | 1     |
| The Times                     | 2                     | -                            | 2     |
| The Financial Times           | 1                     | -                            | 1     |
| Letter writer                 | 4                     | 20                           | 24    |
| Editorial writer              | 2                     | 3                            | 5     |

stories as indicated in the acknowledgments given with the stories themselves. It is noteworthy here that the newspapers own Australian-based correspondents provide in each instance the most stories. This reflects the focus in the coverage on Australian reaction and comment. Also noteworthy is the prominence of European perspectives in *The Australian's* coverage arising from the great use made of material supplied by the paper's European correspondent coupled with syndication arrangements with London-based papers in the Murdoch group.

As was noted earlier, only 19 of the 104 stories in the data set were event focused; the other 85 involved interpretation, commentary and opinion. The pattern of story perspectives, which doubtless reflects the range of main actors in the stories, is presented in Table 6. If we discount the letters which were nearly all "anti-France and/or pro-protest" we can note that 43 of the remaining 80 news items (or 54%) were "anti-France and/or pro-protest", 18 (or 23%) had mixed perspectives while 12 (or 15%) had "French perspectives and/or anti-protestor perspectives predominant". Despite community outcry against the tests, the French perspective managed to get through quite strongly particularly in European correspondent and agency reports. The use of global news sources ensured the presence of French

perspectives beyond those presented by French government representatives in Australia.

Table 6  
The Pattern of Story Perspectives

|  | <i>The Australian</i> |         | <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> |         | No of Stories |
|--|-----------------------|---------|------------------------------|---------|---------------|
|  | News Items            | Letters | News Items                   | Letters |               |
| Anti-France and/or pro-protest perspectives predominant            | 25                    | 4       | 18                           | 17      | 64            |
| French perspectives and/or anti-protestor perspectives predominant | 5                     | -       | 7                            | 1       | 13            |
| Mixed perspectives   | 11                    | -       | 7                            | 1       | 19            |
| Distinct perspectives not evident                                  | 6                     | -       | 1                            | 1       | 8             |
| Total  | 47                    | 4       | 33                           | 20      | 104           |

## Pacific Representations

Thus far the analysis has focused on the total set of Mururoa-related stories which appeared in *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* in the week under study. We now turn to stories which specifically re-present the South Pacific as a particular kind of place with respect to nature, culture and political landscape. We address just one aspect of this representation – the role of the South Pacific paradise myth. It is argued that the Australian media's presentation of key events – the demonstrations, the test itself, the riots and their resolution – and their interpretation were inflected by the South Pacific paradise myth in a way which ultimately acted ideologically to support the political status quo. The notion that the paradise myth can act in this way is not a new one (see, for example, Chanter, 1998). But the way it works itself out in the context of the Mururoa tests has a particular interest, if only because the context of French nuclear testing seems to stretch the myth's conservative functionality to the limit. The South Pacific paradise myth and the set of values and supposed lifestyles associated with it are an implicit and often explicit backdrop against which events and statements are interpreted. The myth

itself is rarely interrogated. Rather, events, actions and people are seen as either consonant with or violations of the myth.

The pre-test demonstrations in Papeete were seen as consonant with the myth. They were "noisy and colourful demonstrations" (*The Australian*, 4 September 1995). The participation of Australian parliamentarians was presented almost as a kind of holiday jaunt, as in the following story of two New South Wales MPs: (*The Australian*, 5 September 1995)

### **MP prepares to surf into action**

By Roger Maynard in Papeete

Armed with his surfboard and a letter of support from the NSW Parliamentary Speaker, Green MP Ian Cohen sailed out of Papeete yesterday to do battle with France.

Accompanying the veteran anti-nuclear campaigner was Labor Senator Tom Wheelwright and 10 other parliamentarians from as far afield as Japan and Italy.

They will spend the next 10 days at sea and hope to penetrate the 12 mile limit around Mururoa in an attempt to persuade the French Government to abort the resumption of its nuclear test program.

Mr Cohen, who earned his place in the history of anti-nuclear campaigning by riding his surfboard beneath the bows of a US warship in Sydney Harbour in 1986, hopes his board will come handy again this time.

He would not disclose his tactics short of confirming that he was prepared to take on the French navy in pursuit of his goal.

The actions of the French against Greenpeace and the nuclear test itself were, of course, seen as violations of the myth. The rough tactics of the French military were highlighted. The test itself, which in then Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating's words expressed "contempt for the countries and people of the region", was also an assault on nature. It turned "the placid waters of the Mururoa lagoon into white froth" (*The Australian*, 7 September 1995). As one letter writer put it:

Only the French could be in possession of a South Pacific coral atoll where it is always summer, the sea as clear as the air ... and defile it by exploding the most horrific weapons of war there. (SMH, 8 September 1995).

Yet there was a counterpoint to this view of the French as violators of the myth. For if the French could be projected as violators so too could protestors and supporters of the independence movement. In this latter narrative the French became not the violators but, indeed, the custodians of the myth.

Here, it is relevant to note that in their own widely circulated and publicised video construction of the Mururoa test, the French

sought to mobilise the Paradise framework for their own ideological purposes. The French propaganda sought to resolve the contradiction between the Paradise myth and its tests through a narrative of disruption followed by normality. The French projected themselves as minimising "necessary" disruption by shortening the test series and assuring the world that these were the last tests, a position for which they got a great deal of publicity (and implicit credit) in the Australian press. The event itself was presented in the genre of a travel video. As the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Andrew Byrne reported:

The French military in the Tahitian capital presented the scene like a holiday travel video. The three-and-a-half minute recording, watched in silence by the tightly packed gathering, opened with shots of a sun-kissed golden beach, swaying palm trees and the sound of the Pacific Ocean as its waves broke gently on the sand ... on the video there is a holiday feel as people are seen sitting on deckchairs waiting for the blast.

Byrne maintains a critical distance from the message of the video commenting that despite the holiday images:

The image the world will best remember from the film is the moment, a split second after the 20 kiloton device explodes, that the turquoise lagoon was transformed into a churning white mass. And later:

The final scene, in a crude attempt to convey normality on the island – reduced to swiss cheese by 30 years of nuclear blasting – is of apparently unconcerned staff riding mopeds and bicycles along a road.

(*Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 September 1995)

However, the video had, in large measure, done its work anyway. The headline to Byrne's article reads: "The palms swayed, the sun shone, the lagoon jumped". After this, we are led to believe, it was over.

Of course it wasn't over. The following day saw demonstrations and rioting in Papeete in what *The Australian* headlined as "Rebellion in Paradise" (September 9-10, 1995). This so-called "rebellion", like the tests, was projected as a violation of the Paradise myth. Indeed, *The Australian* (September 9-10, 1995) editorialised: "It is the violence in Tahiti that has caught the world's attention in the aftermath of the test. It seems almost incongruous that this Polynesian holiday island should become the scene of such a confronting expression of anti-French sentiment". Why incongruous, one must wonder, given the true history of Pacific Islander exploitation behind the "coconut curtain" (see, for example, Alcalay, 1993)?

While there were many reports suggesting that the French had, in the words of Australian Foreign Minister, "reaped what

they had sewed" and should bear responsibility for the Tahitian riots, there was also a recurring and ultimately dominant theme which cast the independence movement, rather than the French, as the most serious threat to Paradise. At the extreme, P.P. McGuinness of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, under the headline "Anti-nuclear, anti-colonialism protests threaten Pacific's stability" commented:

"It had to happen that the anti-nuclear testing hysteria would overlap with the smelly orthodoxy of anti-colonialism quite spectacularly in Tahiti, where a minority independence movement unleashed a wave of rioting, burning and looting in the name of protest against the French nuclear tests."

He goes on to suggest that "upheaval, violence, terrorism and eventual murderous indigenous dictatorship and poverty" are the realistic alternative to continuing French colonial rule (*Sydney Morning Herald*, September 9, 1996). The paradise myth, in the end, best served the interests of the French colonialists despite the violation of the nuclear test. While independence leader Oscar Temaru's successful calls for the end of violence were also publicised, the French remained, in this phase of the drama at least, the prime custodians of the myth and the guardians of the stability and "normality" which protected it.

This analysis of the coverage of the first Mururoa test and associated events in the Pacific by *The Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* suggests the inadequacy of the notion of news flow between nations as a way of modelling international news. The event was in the Pacific yet, given the international resources of newspapers, news relating to the event came from sources around the globe. While the event was in the Pacific the key player initiating the event was European. The event, as an international news event, inherited the complex relations of colonialism. The event was in their region but the independent nations of the Pacific played only minor roles. The event, as covered in the Australian press, became predominantly an Australian story because of Australian actors in the field and, even more so, because Australia itself became a stage for reaction and protest. The coverage (and the nature of the developing story) involved an interpenetration of domestic, regional and global concerns. A further important aspect of the coverage lay in the strong presence of the essentially external perspective of the "Paradise myth" which provided a discursive backdrop to the coverage of these events. It was argued, via a reading of the media text, that this myth functioned in the end to support the political status quo in the Pacific despite the violation of the nuclear test itself. Admittedly viewed with the

## Conclusion

benefit of hindsight, the text seems to presage ultimate acceptance of a Chirac-engineered post-test return to colonialist "normality". ■

## NOTES

1. "Foreign News and Global news Flow in the 1990s" is co-ordinated by Professor Robert Stevenson of the University of North Carolina and Professor Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi. A description of the project and a full list of participants is available from the web site: [www.sunsite.unc.edu/newsflow/](http://www.sunsite.unc.edu/newsflow/)
2. A detailed outline of the methodology for the international study is available from the project web site: [www.sunsite.unc.edu/newsflow/](http://www.sunsite.unc.edu/newsflow/)

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