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Bad News About Palm Island?
Press Accounts Of An Indigenous Community

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"Excuse me, but don't you think it's a bit rude to photograph those fellas while they're drinking under the tree there, without them knowing?"

Most accept that newspaper representations significantly affect how we think and what we believe. We have clear evidence of the power of the media generally -- from the English Civil War when revolutionary ideas were thus shared and acted upon, through to contemporary media-produced moral panics (Thompson 1998) that help us to reaffirm values which are under challenge, through to how stereotypes are created and perpetuated (for example, Duncan 1996). Associated stereotypes of the journalists then follow -- the idealistic students (Thornton 1997), the investigative journalism of John Pilger (1998) or the team of Andrew Ollie who initiated the thoroughgoing Fitzgerald Royal Commission (1989) into government corruption in Queensland, Australia. On the other hand we have the "paparazzi" who, for some, killed Princess Di, and the conflicting pressures upon journalists in how they report, given the need to sell papers, hold attention and keep their jobs in an industry well-known for its cut-throat labour relations (Ewart 1997).

But it is not enough to document from a distance how what is written about the indigenous community of Palm Island, is linked to the complexities of the print media industry. We may start with analysing the industry's roles in racism, reconciliation and the need to come to terms with the sub-standard conditions of many Aboriginal communities, but it is no longer acceptable for researchers to write and judge indigenous issues without
direction from and collaboration with those concerned (for example see guidelines for Health (NH&MRC 1991) and Psychology (APS 1995)). Without locating the research in the needs of those researched we are in danger of duplicating some of the evils identified in critiques of the media - exploitation or the creation of moral panics. So how are we to proceed?

In this commentary I examine some of the inevitable relational complexities (Selby 1999) between those who represent and who they are. I take these complexities to be central in defining an appropriate space for understanding newspaper representations of Australian indigenous communities, in this case tropical Palm Island, a community of 3,000 people. In this space we find the editors, freelance and waged journalists, letter writers and the different members and groups on Palm Island. Here I also find myself and my relationship to the communities under question, including, the community of journalists.

I have ten years of Palm’s local mainland newspaper’s reportage as well as ad hoc representations in National and International publications. I have identified significant themes, such as juvenile justice and financial accountability of community council, and key stories, such as the return from the USA of the remains of the kidnapped “circus aborigine” Turnbo. My purpose here is to prepare the ground for us to examine these stories and themes with respect to the newspapers and Palm Island. The other important task, which must remain beyond the purposes of this commentary, is to examine the range of authors of the newspaper clippings -- their relationship to the industry, to Palm Island and to researchers who write about them.

To analyse these clippings systematically is to document a complex relationship between the community and newspapers, a relationship which has a strong bearing on the contemporary struggles within the community for autonomy and identity (Castors, Kyle and Selby 1999). At the same time, I must take seriously the parallels between how newspapers come to represent and how research comes to represent. How might I, as a researcher, not fall foul of the traps into which journalists may stumble? Thus I was repeatedly told, when on the island in 1998, that the media is very “negative” in its representations of Palm. How then can I make sure that my work will not also be seen as negative? What would that mean?

For many on Palm, the "negativity" of the media seems like a truism, consistent with the documented history of representations of race, ethnicity and indigenous Australians by white Australia (see Meadows 1997; Reynolds 1999; and Watson 1993 for different examples). My first response, given a commitment to collaborative planning in research, was to offer to
document how the local newspaper, the *Townsville Bulletin* represents the Island. I already had five years of clippings for another project and could use research money to get another five years. Those I spoke with on Palm liked this suggestion.

At that time, media representation was a particularly sensitive topic in the Palm community. Late 1997 had seen a crew of English journalists visit the island. They were welcomed, borrowed Council and personal documentation of life on Palm, filmed extensively, including a significant wedding on the island, interviewed individuals about a range of things including some of the pressing problems faced by Palm Islanders and photographed many aspects of community life. The journalists also learned a little about cultural spiritual forces, including the *Hairy Man* as an instigator of death.

After what had seemed a very positive collaboration with the journalists, the article which came out as the cover story in the *Sunday Times*’ colour supplement of 1 February, was experienced as very negative on Palm. "This Sceptred Isle. It’s the most violent place in the world...", the headlines ran (1998). And the article began with a re-created account of the *Hairy Man* getting a young man to commit suicide. A further blow came when later in 1998 the Guinness Book of Records described Palm as the most violent place on Earth outside a war zone and the place where everyone dies young (p.204, under "Danger Zones").

Bolstered by inaccurate statistics on youth suicide and murder derived from the earlier *Sunday Times* article, this later account was then held up by the Australian national and local press as a source of authoritative information. On the strength of it, some mainlanders became reluctant to visit, and in the case of one school, a headmistress vetoed her staff from visiting for an overnight sporting event.

As a result, Palm Islanders became more dubious of visitors, more "jealous" of their home (Castors et al 1999). However some saw a light at the end of the tunnel, in that Australian governments might now be shamed into doing more for Palm Island. Certainly since then some perceived more government officials and more projects around, although not without some ambivalence felt. Indeed, what this exemplifies the significant role played by the media in getting information out about the conditions on Palm Island, thereby providing a link in the tenuous movement against a history of disempowerment and oppression toward agitating for improvement and for the basic amenities enjoyed by most other Australians. (See Giddens 1999 for discussion of the ambivalently-felt role of the media in democracy.)

In terms of the experience of these events, the Community Council which governs Palm reacted quite differently to the
Guinness Book of Records publication than they had to the Sunday Times article. Both were talking points. The first time round people talked of despair. The oldest man on the island happened to die. The school principal described a rise in disruptive and unsettled behaviour of the children (as when other such articles had appeared). And whether coincidently or not, there were three suicide attempts soon afterwards. Second time around, the council directly challenged the Guinness Book of Records. They have been given an apology, but legal compensation remains unresolved.

Some say that it was good that it started to rain hard just after the Guinness Book of Records came out, so the sense of escalating and brooding dissatisfaction was dampened and did not erupt into violence. In fact, just at this time, Palm Island was hosting the North Queensland Indigenous rugby league tournament. The young Palm team ran onto the rugby field in that age-old fashion of intimidatory sportsmanship shouting "Watch it, we are the most violent people on earth", turning cultural despair into empowerment.

These and other articles have provided important moments in recent Palm Island history. At the same time we cannot assume that all that is written is read and assimilated in the same way. Even significant articles may be poorly distributed. For example, The Australian featured a full-page article about Palm Island on April 26 1999. National and international participants to a major Psychology conference in Sydney had read it, but the two Palm Island delegates to the conference had not.

In addition, Palm perceptions about negative and positive images in the press are clouded by a more searching analysis. A worker at the Women's Centre, an author and poet in her own right, told me she only remembered one positive image of Palm in the Townsville Bulletin. This was of a little girl presenting a bouquet of flowers to the Queen. Her story was puzzling. Given present indigenous preoccupations with invasion and British imperialism, this image might have been negative for some. Moreover, the Queen's visit was over 20 years ago. During that period there have been many syrupy images of Palm children in the Bulletin. Perhaps the real source was the then recent Sunday Times article mentioned above, which all had seen as negative, and which had an inset photograph of this event? Yet this was fitted into my informant's perception of the Townsville Bulletin's treatment of Palm.

It seems, not surprisingly, that the Townsville Bulletin is not read widely on Palm. Its effect is to inform outsiders about Palm. Sometimes this is done in an ironic way, for example when in 1998, the Monday weekly commentary was scathing about Palm Island, in a column clearly intended to shame mainstream Australians
(Boston 1998: 8). But of course, read from an Island perspective, it provided only more reason to feel ashamed, neglected and beyond hope. Maybe few on the Island even knew of this article’s existence -- certainly no-one referred to it with me.

While they may not be consumers of newspapers, it is a commonplace on Palm that the press and journalists are closely associated with power. Thus throughout the ten years of clippings we can document how factions fighting over power and authority on the Island used the Townsville Bulletin journalists to further their cause. For example, one woman invited journalists to a significant community meeting, but the then Chairman of the local council sent them back off the Island.

What we have then is a view of the media and its relationship to Palm of some complexity. The impetus for my analysis was that the representations of Palm are "negative". Intuitively obvious maybe, but in fact it becomes unclear what this might mean. For example, initial analyses show how the reportage of Palm, including many special features and editorials, are much of the time very supportive of Palm Islanders and in sympathy with Palm’s attempts to get the State and Federal governments to act on their behalf. But how can we judge when a piece will count as "positive"? When the Queen smiles at a little girl? When an editorial is hard hitting in its criticisms of the government's inaction over Palm? When the emphasis in covering the return of Tambo’s remains is presented as a significant feature of Reconciliation in Australia between indigenous and non-indigenous? And what if the policies of multiculturalism seem to have changed for the better how journalists write? What if researchers are hard-pressed to concur with a sense of the blanket negativity of the press?

Underlying all these questions is a more important consideration about why such stories, articles and events become common knowledge on Palm, and what function they serve through gossip and political agitation. No-one commented on some of the "positive" stories, reserving their discussions with me for the negative. On reflection we have here some general sensitivity to negativity which demands analysis, while we also of course have the questions around why they wish to talk in this way to me.

I have touched on an analysis which takes "negativity" as a central preoccupation. But there is another axis of concern. This is derived from two features. Firstly, and related to the comments above, the analysis involves reading and discussing people whom the senior researcher often knows, has worked with or about whose views and status in the community she has some insight. Secondly, Palm Island is a relatively tightly-knit community...
(see for example, Castors et al 1999). This means that any feuds, scandals, tragedies and so on, cannot be escaped from. All know each other and there may be little privacy or capacity to control what is said about you or about how you are represented to outsiders. Both these factors are highly significant in the management of how an analysis proceeds including the relationship of the researchers to individuals and groups on the Island. This leads to the theme of the enmeshing of any analysis of Palm with the current concerns of Islanders.

In considering this it is of interest that the majority of the clippings name individuals, sometimes in ways which mean you can track their stories over time. Should we document who and which families are referred to and how? The stories range from political struggles within the Island as well as with State governments through to criminal histories, including crimes of violence and death. Mightn't a renewed focus on these stories reopen old scars? Not necessarily. In discussing named people, we would be consistent with the community's new and quite overt determination to develop an historical vision of itself. Thus at present, there is a plan through the community-controlled Vision Plan to employ someone to create and maintain archives on the island about the island. Individualised stories -- struggles, tragedies, shaming moments and points of pride are to be documented, discussed and responded to.

This endeavour to document and thus repossess the community's history may have an obvious intrinsic worth. But it may also be considered through the conceptualisations of Appfelbaum (1999), in her analyses of "deracinated" migrants or the dispossessed, coining the term "cultural orphans". She emphasises the importance of how refugees need and are better off if their new "foreign" lives can be linked to their pasts, so allowing some thinking about the trauma of the transition. These are painful processes, and fraught with ambivalence. How bearable is the insight into such systematic loss of cultures and traditions which went into creating the former penal settlement of "Mission" Palm? Alcohol misuse may be the symptom of such pain (Castors et al 1999), while without finding ways of thinking about the losses, how can there be retrieval of heritage and integration into the present? In a small way, documenting lives and families over a ten-year period or more could be seen as part of that discursive exercise described by Apfelbaum.

Positive though this may sound, hard questions remain. To what extent can relative outsiders document and comment on people and their families as they are depicted in newspapers they may not yet have even read? Have we moved too from any notion of the confidentiality routinely afforded to research participants?
What are the demands we place on Palm collaborators to help us think this through — collaborators who are often already overburdened with community responsibilities (See also Selby 2000)? We are no longer analysing newspaper clippings from a position of disinterested objectivity. Our analysis requires close working through with and constantly keeping in mind what we know about Palm and individuals there.

In many other media analyses, the values of the researcher need not be under scrutiny, because they are obvious: for example, to demonstrate the role of the media in creating the phenomenon of "Hansonism" (Louw and Loo 1997). But when one is a member of the dominant culture scrutinising the representations of a highly disadvantaged and vulnerable population, the rationale and integration of our interpretations into the community’s concerns needs continual clarification. This is so even in a context of understanding that in some ways there is no such thing as a "community" — homogenous in vision and need, without schisms and struggles over authority. How then we are affected by the community as well as by the clippings will form part of the analytic outcome.

In summary, I have cited a number of orientations to a study of the newspaper clippings about Palm Island. Most usual would be a documentation of the themes which emerge from a careful reading of the texts which can be used to gain insight into life on Palm Island in relation to newspapers and broader cultural values and preoccupations. This would include its relationship to governments, its factions and the uses made or attempted through the media for particular internal struggles. It would include the discussions about violence and criminality and some of the history and attempts to reconcile Palm’s origins as a "dumping ground" for nuisance or superfluous indigenous people with some measure of progress and autonomy (Watson 1993).

Secondly I have flagged a need to examine the notion of "negativity" of the press in its representation of Palm Island, since this is a term of significant currency on Palm and a prime imperative for the study. Thirdly I have referred to the over-riding task of analysing the data while engaging with the concerns and present realities on Palm Island to the extent that we are able to understand and engage with these. Indeed, the task started when I responded to expressed Palm concerns. I have written elsewhere (Selby 1999) about what is required in a methodology of working across divides of great oppression and (dis)advantage.

Cutting across these approaches I have pointed to the value of documenting the lives of individuals and families as represented in the press. This would furnish the possibility of those individuals responding to how and why they are represented. It would also
JANE M. SELBY: Bad news about Palm Islands ... serve as a contribution to a current project on Palm, by them, to document their history and reflections on community development and the processes which enable and impede this.

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