Public journalism and press photography: Ritual, conflict and consensus

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Given its predilection for depicting the ritualistically affirmative and unifying moments of community life, press photography has more in common with public journalism than might first meet the eye. Public journalism, like press photography, seeks to promote the participation of ordinary people in consensus-building and community. Both give the impression of encouraging us as citizens to confront and challenge the problems and conflicts we confront in our everyday lives. But photographs have been known to fabricate unity and community. Does this suggest another, perhaps less salutary, link between press photography and public journalism?

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In this article I'd like to introduce what might appear to be a topic somewhat peripheral to the practices and precepts of public journalism (See Coleman, 1997; Lloyd and Hippocrates, 1997) -- that is, the topic of press photography. Apart, perhaps, from providing the opportunity for the occasional extended photographic essay based on a major project in democratic citizenship -- the photographic essay being sadly lacking in the Australian press -- public journalism would seem to have only a tenuous link to press photography.

While the press photograph captures the fleeting moment of an incident or expression, public journalism is a movement dedicated to community awareness and understanding of the issues that immediately affect its existence and well-being, as well as citizens’ involvement in actions and decision-making that will bring them closer to participating democratically in the social and political life of the community.

Nevertheless, press photography has more of an affinity with public journalism than first meets the eye. Press photography illustrates many of the claims made for public journalism as well.
as some of the problematics associated with it. Take, for example, page 6 of the Australia Day 97 Supplement to the Weekend Australian with its general heading ‘Reconciling two laws of the land’. Here Marcia Langton, in a rather ambivalent article, while declaring “we can live together amicably and share the country on the basis of respect, fairness and a willingness to negotiate” also makes some bleak observations about the impact of the Member for Oxley, Pauline Hanson, and suggests that “Aboriginal people are to settler Australian culture as alien creatures are to the American cinematic civilisation”.

The mood of Langton’s article, if not unrelievedly depressing, could hardly be accused of false optimism or hope. Immediately above this article, and taking up more than a third of the page, is a colour photograph. It shows two young male footballers, one white one black, broadly smiling and arm in arm following a victorious game. The caption states: “Brothers in arms... St Mary’s football club team-mates... celebrate earlier this month the team’s Australian record of 50 straight wins, surpassing the 49 consecutive wins by North Melbourne.” The photograph and the article, although not entirely contradictory, strike some discordant notes.

Langton concludes with hopes for reconciliation, a sentiment that resonates with the photograph. But most of her article is a multi-layered and relatively complex commentary on the racial and legal discords and challenges surrounding the native title. The photograph, on the other hand, is a simple, one-dimensional, emotionally charged affirmation of “brotherhood”. It sweeps aside the conflict, the alienation and the “whispering at the bottom of our hearts” in a buoyant exclamation of racial harmony and hope. There is nothing “alien” about the black footballer in the photograph which shows ordinary people coming together in celebration and unity of purpose: the ritualised conflict of the playing field has given way to a ritualised expression of concord and solidarity.

In fact, I would go so far as to argue that emotionally, performatively and symbolically -- and even in terms of empirically testable content -- the photograph has a greater claim to be a piece of public/civic journalism (or at least a partial reflection of full monty public/civic journalism) than does the Langton article. It promotes consensus over conflict; it involves ordinary members of the public; it points to the possibility of a brighter, more inclusive future for race relations in this country.

But it is only one photograph. Can similar claims be made for other press photographs -- for a body or “genre” of press photographs? To answer in the affirmative I first need to refer to a cultural approach to the study and analysis of news which has
Not yet been extended to the press photograph. This approach calls for the examination of news and journalism as ritual.

In his survey of mass communication and cultural theories, Carey draws attention to the ritualistic aspect of communication as the “celebration of shared, even if illusory, beliefs” (1989, p. 43). According to Carey, ritualistic communication brings people together in “fellowship and commonality”. News, therefore, does more than convey direct information: it confirms and affirms a way of life. It represents an “underlying order of things” (1989, p. 19).

James Capo takes the ritualistic element of news a step further, suggesting that the news enables audiences to “celebrate themselves, their culture and human heritage” (1985, p. 16). Here, Capo, like Carey (1989), Lule (1989) and Zelizer (1993) links ritual to the metaphor of news as performance or drama in the sense that news provides the opportunity for “participation in and identification with community life” (Lule 1989, p. 23). For Elliott, “ritual is less a communication about social reality than a customary performance giving symbolic expression to social relationships” (1980, p. 168).

More recently, in his “heuristic” overview of ritual and journalism, Ehrlich (1996) has shown how studies of ritual in journalism connect with both organisational news research and more interpretive institutional and cultural studies of news and journalism -- and indeed with public journalism itself, although in this instance the connection is at the organisational rather than representational and interpretive level.

Press photography is one area of news production that lends itself to the news-as-ritual approach. Press photographs invite immediate visual recognition and identification, created in part by their capacity to “personalise” issues and events (Hall, 1973, p. 178). They tend towards repetitiveness, and repetition is a key element in ritual. Here, mug-shots provide an obvious example, but stylistic and thematic repetition in more narrative or pictorial imagery can be found as in the example of rural figures in stark landscapes reproduced over the past decade in the national broadsheet, The Australian. Press photographs can also evoke a sense of special occasion, whether that occasion be the mundane portraiture of 'ordinary' people or the depiction of a 'history making' event or ceremony. In either case, too, there is an element of staging and posing -- regardless of whether the finished product is considered accurate or truthful.

Press photographs of ordinary or unknown people, often
in groups or as families, contain traces of family snapshots which besides depicting special family occasions and rites of passage also stimulate participation and “social interaction”, however fleeting, in the ritual of posing or “lining-up” for the camera (Chaney, 1993, p. 87). And it could be argued that just as family snapshots create a sense of identifying with and belonging to a group, press photographs operating on the wider stage generate a sense of cohesion and solidarity, not necessarily with a specific group but with sets of cultural beliefs, values and practices.

As already suggested with the example of the victorious footballers, the affirmative, positive, reassuring and familiar aspect of much press photography can be used as a counter to the conflict and violence-laden burden of news stories or the adversarial nature of many feature articles. This is nicely illustrated -- albeit a little more frivolously -- in the provincial newspaper, Northern Star (4 January 1991) in Lismore, New South Wales, which devoted a double-page spread to “Bright spots in a dull year”, the “bright spots” being photographs of children and animals in various delightful combinations.

The newspaper explained its choice: “The news was not always cheerful in the pages of the Northern Star in 1990, but there were some bright spots. Here is a selection of pictures taken by staff photographers that helped us forget the increasing tension in the Gulf (War), distracted us from the list of local names being bandied about in the ICAC (Independent Commission Against Crime) hearings, and enlivened the humdrum of daily life.” (In the year of the Gulf War I observed the acting pictorial editor of a major Australian daily arguing for the inclusion of a photograph of a young woman holding a giant cane toad on the grounds that it would be an antidote to the horror stories emerging from that conflict).

More needs to be said about what might be considered as an emerging sub-genre of press photography -- those images of ‘ordinary’ people (our footballers come to light again) seemingly discovered by the photographer quite by chance and representing a particular group deemed to be appropriately newsworthy. These are the hitherto (and thereafter) unknown individuals, partners or families who pose obligingly for the camera in kitchen, yard or workshop. We may not know these people but somehow they seem familiar to us -- well, in a way they are meant to be us, or people like us with whom we can easily sympathise or identify as they consider their redundancy notice, discuss care for their aged parents, or parade their children who might or might not be heading to a private school. More eloquently, Greg Dening (1998, p. 5) calls such identifications with the represented others, “the ethnographic moment”, in which “we see the other as we see
ourselves” as if through a “two way mirror”.

This photographic version of the ethnographic moment was observed in Australia by Craig (1994). But when Karin Becker (1992, p. 140) originally brought our attention to the “plain pictures of ordinary people” well-represented in the world’s tabloid press, she claimed that they pointed to a “deep truth” about humanity in general; the popular sentiment so induced could produce an anti-elitist, anti-authoritarian drive that encourages a form of “deconstruction” of traditional journalism, although presumably such deconstruction is not consciously and rationally articulated by tabloid readers, but rather experienced as an evasive reaction against the “bourgeois” values of the elite press.

Becker’s study raises a number of questions, the first being whether such domesticated and ordinary photographs are the main preserve of the tabloid press. I would argue that the reverse is now the case, with the tabloid press relying more on celebrity photography and the elite press seeking out the typical and the ordinary to illustrate their more featuristic articles (Griffin, 1997).

Chaney (1993, p, 101) in describing the visual output of photo-magazines and colour supplements calls this procedure “a dominant form of narrative based on a concern with the intimacies of ordinary lives”.

Another question emerges from Becker’s insistence that such photography lends itself to the deconstruction or undermining of dominant values. Couldn’t these photographs -- whether in the tabloid or elite press -- with their connotations of a deeper human truth be equally interpreted as upholding the classical ideology of a universal humanity endowed with inherent qualities rather than as a “progressive” inducement to resisting or deconstructing traditional news values and criteria?

Leaving aside the question of how progressive or conservative the photographic sub-genre of the ordinary might be, I think a case can be put for recognising a relationship -- albeit a sometimes oblique and partial one -- between, on the one hand, the ritualised press photograph with its propensity for affirming, democratising, uniting and dignifying ordinary humanity and, on the other hand, public/civic journalism with its rejection of conflict and chaos in favour of support for ordinary citizens’ democratic participation in community life and affairs.

But it may not be sufficient to conclude that news, including the news photograph, or for that matter, public journalism, expresses a common view of humanity and community or helps maintain social cohesion -- and leave it at that. As Chaney (1986), Elliott (1980) and Ettema (1990) have pointed out, news that operates in this way is more likely to uphold conservative values and support those in power who serve to gain from the promotion
of 'common' causes, unity, consensus, the imagining and dramatising of community.

According to Elliott news is ritualistic in the sense that it is an affirmation of "we-ness", a means of identifying ourselves in positive and reassuring ways in contrast to the "they-ness" or otherness of those classified as being outside the social consensus -- no two-way mirror here. At the same time, ritualistic news sets itself up as "cauterising" the social wounds and differences caused by conflict thereby ultimately ensuring social stability and solidarity -- all of which helps maintain existing power structures (1980, pp. 153-154).

But ritual is not always the handmaiden of power or conformity. Following the work of the anthropologist Victor Turner, some commentators (Chaney, 1993; Ettema, 1990) have shown that ritualised news can create a distancing or reflexive effect among both its producers (ie. journalists) and recipients (readers and audiences), thus limiting its power to uphold and legitimise the dominant social order and its values. To this can be added the by now somewhat trite observation that individual readers will decode texts in different ways depending on their various backgrounds and experiences.

This is what makes "definitive" readings of selected texts (such as the footballer photograph) by certified semioticians a foolhardy proposition. For example, an alternative, oppositional or just plain cynical reading of the footballer photograph, far from seeing it as an outpouring of racial harmony, might be inclined to ask if and why such a phenomenon is restricted to spontaneous (or perhaps even posed) moments of joy on or around the sporting field, and to what extent the "brothers in arms" attitude might extend to the clubhouse and the local pub or disco.

I have tried to put these different perspectives on news as ritual to the test insofar as they apply to additional press photographs of Aboriginal people.

Consider first a photograph that appeared on the lower half of the tabloid daily in Perth, The West Australian's front page on 28 February 1990. The photograph is a close-up of a white mother and young son dressed in bathers and large hats and standing together in a swimming pool. The mother is applying sun-screen cream to her son's nose. Both are smiling broadly. The caption above reads, "Andrew finds a swim beats the heat" -- an obvious allusion to a heatwave being experienced in Perth at the time. Nothing extraordinary here: the photograph, with its immediate emotional attraction based on ordinary people in an expected and
typical situation, fulfils the criteria of visual ritual already discussed. But what makes this image particularly meaningful is its relationship to the lead story which fills the top half of the page.

The headline for that story is, "Aboriginal gangs terrorise suburbs". The ritualistic element of the photograph, suggesting all that is clean, wholesome and worthwhile about "us", heightens the contrast between us and "them" -- gangs of young Aborigines who are terrorising the suburbs inhabited by people like the mother and son of the photograph and the readers of the West Australian. The lead story and headline pose the threat to the community -- our suburban community -- while the photograph depicts representatives of the community who are threatened. There is no "cauterising" of a social wound here; rather the excision and exclusion of those who are seen as a threat to the health and well being of the community "body" -- a body that will need more than sun-screen to protect it from terrorism.

This front page came to my attention because it featured in a study by Mickler (1992) of how the West Australian constructed a crime wave and associated moral panic along racial -- or racist -- lines. And yet while reproducing the whole of the front page in his article, Mickler does not draw attention to the photograph. Nor does Hartley (1992) who follows up Mickler's work in his book, The Politics of Pictures. This is not meant as cheap criticism of Mickler and Hartley whose uncovering of the West Australian's rather sleazy campaign was exemplary. Rather, it suggests that if we do in fact inhabit the "society of the spectacle" we should start looking at the whole picture.

A few years ago I investigated the content and use of news photographs of Aboriginal people during an early stage of the Mabo saga. Preliminary observations suggested that whereas verbal news accounts of Aborigines, Aboriginal issues, and race relations produce a mixture of broadly positive and negative inclinations, photographs relating to similar subjects display a much more positive bent. A content analysis of photographs of Aboriginal people appearing in the Rockhampton Morning Bulletin in Queensland during the first half of 1993 revealed that only two of the 38 photographs displayed could be described as clearly negative portrayals of an Aboriginal subject. These are images of the same person, a recaptured prisoner who had escaped from a local jail. Two photographs could go either way, depending on the viewer's predispositions. The remaining 34 photographs were unequivocally positive. A quarter of these showed Aborigines in harmonious and happy company with whites.

In June 1993 the Morning Bulletin published nine photographs of Aborigines, including three front-page
photographs. All were positive and accompanied positive stories. For the same period a total of 21 stories concerning Aboriginal people and issues were published without photographs. Of these, three could be considered positive and three neutral, while 15 were negative. Most of the latter were focused on 'Mabo-style' land claims with local relevance: "Mayor: Mabo out of hand"; "Aborigines claim Fraser Island"; "Group claims resort for all Australians" (ie. the Capricorn International Resort, Yeppoon in Central Queensland).

In 1993 and into 1994, the media had much to say about Aboriginal issues, especially as they related to the High Court's Mabo decision and the movement towards reconciliation. At the same time there was continued talk of threats and violence, particularly in Queensland with crime-scares and the violent demonstration following the death in custody of Daniel Yock.

My initial study of the Rockhampton Morning Bulletin suggests that while press stories are more likely to depict or connote Aborigines as constituting a threat or problem, press photography emphasises the "cauterising" or "healing" process. Press photography draws attention to the "reconciliation" side of the cultural and political equation. I believe a case can be made for attributing this to the photograph's ritualistic propensity to celebrate the ordinary, the human, and the united.

The question remains, however, as to whether the celebratory and positive 'message' of these press photographs can be interpreted as being socially responsible and worthy, or whether they reveal a kind of fabricated unity of purpose and interest which incorporates "them" but only on "our" terms. Perhaps in the long run one can only point to the multiplicity of meanings that photographs make available to different viewers in accordance with their own social backgrounds and value systems. But that does not rule out the possibility that some meanings are more assertive and dominant than others. And these are the meanings that, according to Greenfield and Williams (1987/8) in their critique of newspaper representations of Aboriginal women, "promote the process of cultural assimilation which, under the implicit but powerful banners of liberal individualism and social consensus, flatten out the social differences and conflicts between Aboriginal and other groups, families and individuals" (1987/8, p. 88).

In consideration of this point I turn to a final illustration -- a photograph that took up almost the whole page of a special front-page supplement of the Brisbane Courier-Mail of 1 January 1998 devoted to the Australian Bicentenary. This time the photograph shows two young women, one black one white, in bathers and at the beach kneeling next to a sandcastle complete with prominent Australian flag. The editorial beneath the photograph and the heading "Happy Birthday Australia" argues somewhat petulantly...
that Australians should not feel guilty about past treatment of Aborigines. In this case the photograph dramatically complements the theme of the editorial: guilt can be eliminated by inviting the 'other' to become a part of 'our' world.

Two weeks later the Courier-Mail headlined a story "Expo violence fear as blacks plan protest". Threats of black violence may continue, but the image of black and white beach girls united in the pursuit of leisure-time patriotism remains the "vision" of what can be achieved -- if black and white could only get together in a spirit of equality and harmony. Or should the last sentence end on a different note: if blacks could only assimilate to white cultural rituals thereby converting black "violence" to black compliance?

In quantifiable terms this article has had much more to say about press photography than public journalism per se. Nevertheless, I have tried to suggest the existence of a kind of virtual parallel text devoted to public journalism and a sub-text drawing linkages between certain aspects of press photography and similar aspects of public journalism. Like some press photography, public journalism seeks to promote the participation of ordinary people in consensus-building and community. Both give the impression of encouraging us as citizens to confront and challenge the problems and conflicts we confront in our everyday lives. The debates surrounding news -- and press photography -- as ritual might be offered as a reference point for those committed to the principles of public journalism.

NOTES

1. I have employed the term press photography throughout this article. In Australia it remains more widely used than the term photojournalism which is the American preference. (For a discussion of the connotations of both terms, see Griffin, 1991, pp. 75-76.)

2. The cultural approach to news draws on cultural studies traditions of textual analysis focusing on symbolic and ideological meanings largely determined by the contingent interactions of text, historical and social context, and readership (Hartley, 1982; Schudson, 1991).

3. The notion of press photography as ritual also draws broadly on cultural studies theories and methods. However, to date, when applied to press photographs, these have been mainly restricted to the kind of semiotic analysis first adopted by Barthes (1977) and Hall (1973) in their seminal essays on press photography (See Thwaites, Davis and Mules, 1994; Turner, 1990).

4. The Australian High Court's 1992 decision, which gave indigenous people the right to make certain land right claims based on native title, is generally known as the Mabo decision after Eddie Mabo, the Murray Islander who instigated the legal action that culminated in
the High Court judgment. (For a wide-ranging discussion of the Mabo decision and the Australian media, see Meadows, 1994)

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