

Not the last word: point and counterpoint

## You had to be there to believe it

Chris Goddard

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*There are events and there are events that are reported in the media. How the media decide to report an event is reflected upon in this paper. Using case examples, the paper stresses that media coverage may describe but one part of an event, leaving other stories untold.*

The first session of the cricket in Melbourne last Boxing Day was more like a one-day match than a Test. Australia struggled all day against the West Indies, finally making 215, but the first couple of hours saw several wickets and a six. At one stage the Australians were 27 for four and Curtly Ambrose was on a hat-trick at three wickets for eight runs.

Boxing Day at the MCG has to rate as one of the greatest sporting events in the world. There were almost 73,000 people there and, as usual, quite a lot of the action was in the crowd. Balloons and beach balls frequently appeared around the site of the old Bay 13 and were chased by police and security guards alike. Human ingenuity, someone once said, knows no bounds. Even in Bay 13 this is true. As soon as the security guards and police burst them, new balloons appeared, this time filled with shaving foam. It is hard to remain dignified in a dark uniform covered in foam as thousands laugh.

Pele described soccer as a 'beautiful game'. Cricket is also a beautiful game, for different reasons, not least because it allows time for reflection. One of our favourite pastimes has long been dreaming up headlines for the next day's papers. Really good suggestions can be phoned through to *The Age* or *Herald Sun* but are never used. Sub-editors must justify their existence, after all, and would become unemployed if members of the public were allowed to write the headlines. Even my greatest invention (devised to capture some productive bowling by Gladstone Small) - 'Large bag for small Gladstone' - was totally ignored by the media.

Attending events that will be described in detail in the newspapers is an interesting and instructive experience. The language that will be used is hard to predict. Greg Baum's descriptions (*The Age*, 27 December 1996), for example, were colourful: '...Curtly Ambrose decapitated Australia...', '...on a hayfield of a pitch...'

We spent some time discussing how the innings of Greg Blewett might be described. For those of you who were otherwise occupied, he scored 62 runs (the highest score of the day) in a little under four hours, faced 154 balls and struck four boundaries. In our view, he was lucky to survive that long. He 'French cut' several balls and he rarely looked in control, even allowing for the desperate circumstances the

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Australian team faced. Other descriptions chosen included 'fortunate', 'out of his depth' and 'bemused'. The newspapers the next day saw events somewhat differently.

Ron Reed (*Herald Sun*, 27 December 1996) suggested that 'Greg Blewett can get his passport ready for the South African tour after four vigilant hours for 62'. Mike Coward in *The Australian* (27 December 1996) described Blewett's innings as a 'cameo of note'. Malcolm Conn, in the same newspaper, wrote that Blewett 'top-scored with a clever and controlled 62'. Peter Roebuck, a thoughtful and entertaining cricket writer, saw Blewett demonstrate a 'new-found flexibility' in 'a long and slow innings' (*The Age*, 27 December 1996). The batsman, according to Roebuck, 'drove with a straight bat and pulled crisply'. At times like these I wonder whether I was seeing the same game.

No story is the inevitable product of the event it reports; no event dictates its own narrative form. News occurs at the conjunction of events and texts, and while events create the story, the story also creates the event.

(Manoff, 1986, cited in Eldridge, 1995)

There are some stories even more important than cricket. In October 1996, the Pastoral Response Office of the Roman Catholic Church in Melbourne brought out to Australia Ray Wyre, a British 'expert' in the treatment of child molesters. (Regular readers will remember my aversion to the term 'paedophilia' (Goddard 1996).) The Catholic Church has a major problem with child molestation, not the least because its response to the abuse of parishioners by priests has been perceived, correctly in my view, as tardy and inadequate.

On 9 October, Ray Wyre gave a press conference with Father Mark Coleridge, a Catholic church spokesman. In spite of the early hour (early for journalists, at least) the media session was very well attended. As the press conference unfolded, once again I found myself reflecting upon the angles the print media would take in the following day's papers.

*The Age* ran the largest story of the three papers most readily available in Melbourne. Under the headline 'Church seeks advice to stop child abuse', Sian Watkins' report was devoted entirely to background and the views of Ray Wyre and Father Mark Coleridge. Watkins' report also included a box summarising some of Wyre's views on 'paedophilia' and 'hebephilia' with Wyre clearly given as the source (Watkins 1996). Watkins' report covered 12 column inches over three columns with an extra four inches given to Wyre's summary.

The main points summarised by Watkins from Wyre's comments were that: churches and other community groups needed to be more active in prevention; churches should encourage police involvement; active steps were needed to reduce abuse because of the deficiencies in the responses of the criminal justice system; people working with children need to be held accountable; and that the church now understood that child sexual abuse was a crime (Watkins 1996). Father Coleridge was reported as describing: Wyre's visit as part of a 'courageous' response by the church; other steps by the church such as the creation of the Pastoral Response Office and closer appraisal of those applying to become priests; and the 'determination' of the church to deal with the problem (Watkins 1996).

The *Herald Sun* coverage was smaller and rather different. Bruce Brammall's report, under the headline 'Newsletter under fire', and accompanied by a photograph of Wyre and Father Coleridge, opened with the sentence:

A senior Catholic Priest yesterday labelled the newsletter of a sex abuse support group 'violent'.  
(Brammall 1996)

Brammall's report went on to describe: Father Coleridge defending the church funeral held for a child abuser; Father Coleridge defending his refusal to read Broken Rites' newsletter; and Father Coleridge attacking the media coverage of the funeral (Brammall 1996). Brammall's report over two columns totalled five column inches, placed under the photograph which covered six-and-a-half column inches over two columns. The purpose of the press conference, and Wyre's name, were mentioned only in the last two sentences of the report.

*The Australian* also covered the press conference. Stuart Honeysett's report, 'Priest attacks "violent" abuse journal' also led with Father Coleridge's denunciation of the newsletter.

A Catholic priest branded a newsletter by a support group for victims of clergy abuse as 'violent' because it launched 'personal attacks against the living and the dead' during an angry confrontation in Melbourne yesterday.  
(Honeysett 1996)

Honeysett's report went on to describe: why the media conference 'turned nasty'; why Father Coleridge refused to read the Broken Rites' newsletter; why Father Coleridge described the newsletter as violent; and what the newsletter reports on (Honeysett 1996). Honeysett's report, over three columns, covered just over five column inches. The second of six paragraphs reported that the media conference was '...held by the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne to announce the arrival of an international expert on sexual abuse' (Honeysett 1996). No mention was made of Wyre's name.

For those of you still reeling from my journey into quantitative research in this reflective column, I have an admission to make. As is often the case in quantitative research, what I have been measuring requires some qualification. The *Herald Sun* column is wider than *The Age* and *The Australian* column. A *Herald Sun* column is two inches wide, while those in *The Age* and *The Australian* are approximately 1¾ inches wide.

Nevertheless, *The Age* gave more coverage to the media conference but did not mention the interjections of Broken Rites nor the responses of Father Coleridge. *The Australian* and *Herald Sun* concentrated on the exchanges between Coleridge and Broken Rites, which were clearly seen as more 'newsworthy' than the arrival of an overseas expert.

Before taking this analysis any further, I have a further declaration to make. I did not attend the media conference as a disinterested observer. I have acted as a consultant to the Pastoral Response Office of the Catholic Church in Melbourne. I have also met Ray Wyre on a number of occasions.

The first point I wish to make is that the actions of Broken Rites' members cleverly used the conference called by the church to gain publicity for their cause. Of course, this is not an uncommon tactic, although it is not as common as perhaps it should be in the child welfare field. Child abuse does not have its own section in the newspapers, unlike finance or sport. Perhaps dissent and conflict are required to get it into the news even today.

The central point, however, is that all these things (and more) did happen at the media conference. What is perceived to be 'news', of course, may be judged differently from journalist to journalist, and from newspaper to newspaper. The coverage of the media conference demonstrates this clearly.

Whether it's cricket or child sexual abuse, observers will see the 'play' differently. The former, of course, is only a game, in spite of some views to the contrary. (Harold Pinter, for example, described cricket as 'the greatest thing that God created on earth' and 'certainly greater than sex' (Pinter 1980).) Child sexual abuse by priests is no doubt older than cricket but, until recently at least, was less commonly reported in the media. Child molestation was treated by many as merely, or even less than, a game.

The proverb tells us that 'seeing is believing' but, perhaps, one has not only to be there but also to believe in order to see. As Saint Augustine said, 'Unless you believe, you will not understand'. In the case of the Catholic Church, however, belief in the Church meant not to see the abuse of children nor to understand the terrible spiritual damage done to the child victims.

Manoff (1986, cited in Eldridge 1995), as noted above, suggests that while events may create the story, the story that follows also creates the event. Health and welfare workers need no reminding that one event may create many stories. Some of those stories are still to be told. □

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