

# Unusual Suspects: A Newspaper's Coverage of a Scuba Diving Rescue and Journalism's Role in Narrating Australia

## Abstract

Brisbane's *Courier-Mail* newspaper ran a fantastic story a couple of years ago about a couple left at sea behind by their tour boat, after going scuba diving. The story suggested American diver Allyson Dalton and her British partner Richard Neely ignored advice when they ventured away from a lagoon where the tour boat was anchored. But the focus was on *how* Neely and Dalton survived by treading water for 19 hours at Paradise Reef, part of Queensland's Great Barrier Reef, not so much (yet) on how fortunate they were not to be attacked by sharks. It would not be long, however, before that old journalistic maxim that implores practitioners to 'question every assertion, doubt every claim' shaped the reportage into an extended narrative about chequebook journalism, credibility, and culpability.

The scuba dive rescue story analysis presented here reflects contemporary journalism's role in the formation of ideas about cultural value and character, and in more complex determinations of who gets a participatory stake in the formation of national narratives. As such, the article concludes with some signposts toward a critical approach to journalism-centred studies of culture in Australia.

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## Introduction:

This article discusses a specific example of newspaper coverage of a scuba diving rescue-cum-chequebook journalism event in order to set it, conceptually, within two contexts: a) the social and cultural values ascribed in a few previous news stories dealing with survival in aquatic, outback, or merely adventurous Australia; and b) the ground that journalism studies should reclaim, from cultural studies, of analysing its own professional role in national narrative formation. Australia's history is replete with survival, near-miss, and disaster stories that make ideal news substance and journalism studies' reach into both the performative and practice-led comprehension of news narrative and its rationales should be, I would argue, distinctive from existing cultural studies accounts of news media narration under the rubric of ideology. As this article outlines, journalism and journalists stand in line with their public in terms of assuming the social and cultural values surrounding them.

*May 23rd, 2008. Great Barrier Reef, Queensland.* British scuba diver Richard Neely, 40, and his American partner, Allyson Dalton, 38, are left behind by their tour boat. After 19 hours in the water, Neely and Dalton are rescued. Within hours of their story breaking international media companies start bidding for the exclusive interview rights. Celebrity agent Max Markson bobs up as their negotiator but, by then, the Australian news media had plenty of narrative framework for telling stories about 'foreigners' or 'outsiders' who tried to conquer the bush or sea. Indeed, it is part of Australia's settler history that the narration was always fraught, and ambivalent in its adventurous spirit.

Postcolonial literary critic Rebecca Weaver-Hightower (2006: 304-306) says that this adventurousness also still has economic pragmatism as its underscore. She notes that the 'castaway' as a romantic or fictional figure and the object of reality TV survivor stories are symbiotic for this reason. Her reading of American 'castaway narrative' films such as Tom Hanks' less-than-cryptically titled, *Castaway*, as well as the *Survivor* TV series, has contestants competing for more than money. The Tom Hanks character and the TV survivors are competing for agency back home in their American 'nation-hood' (Morrison & Lacour, 1997), or for social capital to with which to deploy any economic gain.

Neely and Dalton's earnings from the media frenzy were deliberated upon and weighed against the cost to the nation of their rescue and this, in itself, became an angle that extended the story further along the international news attention span.

The journalists' command of the news genre, and the proclivities of the Australian mainstream toward suspecting 'outsiders' of attempting to take advantage of 'our' good natures and fortunes combined to fit Neely and Dalton into an active national conversation about 'queue-jumpers' and tourists with 'hidden agendas'. The *Courier-Mail* used language and photography to activate this sense of suspicion by moving the story through to doubts about the rescued couple's 'real' agenda, as if Neely and Dalton were indeed contestants on a reality TV show instead of two divers who were lucky to survive their sea ordeal.

Readers already attuned to the concerns of *Survivor* (*Caribbean, Samoa, Vanuatu*), to current affairs media cross-promotion and to the body of best-selling fiction about the 'monstrously uncanny' dangers of the Australian land and sea had been thrown the line on Neely and Dalton (Giblett, 2006:300).

A May 29 *Courier-Mail* story describes news organisations 'lined up to tie the couple to an exclusive deal', and tells of the couple jetting off to New York with 'celebrity agent Max Markson'. In a news sense, the story angle on day three of the coverage was Neely and Dalton blaming the Cairns dive tour company for not looking hard enough for them. Interview material reproduced in the stories supported a further inference that the couple were actually left to the sharks. General public suspicion about the exclusive deals and 'authorised' interviews kept pace with estimates of the Nine TV network's *A Current Affair* in Australia and London's *Sunday Mirror* newspaper payments for access to the rescued couple's first-hand tale. Australian and international readers were already switched into a formula of contradictory representation predicated on the notion of 'one of us' provoking an adversarial public sphere out of the ambiguity of reported facts.

Schappelle Corby's drug smuggling sentence still has that effect, in terms of news values, seven years on.

The young Australian woman tourist was arrested in Bali after a boogie board packed with four kilograms of marijuana was seized by customs officers. Corby was portrayed in the news as innocent before a foreign legal system, but also culpable by the apparent omissions in her account of events to the world's media (Little, 2006; Goc, 2009). Etched much deeper in public memory, though, were stories about 'outsider' or 'strange' people venturing into the Australian landscape and living to tell the tale. Crucially, the central figures in these stories returned to their nation-homes as not only fortunate survivors, but also tradeable media commodities. Paradoxically, journalists took an especially sceptical view of those who locked them out of access to interviews by trading their exclusive rights to rival media companies, for this very reason.

News of a dingo taking Azaria Chamberlain from a tent at an Uluru campsite in 1980, and of the 2001 kidnapping and presumed murder of British backpacker Peter Falconio in outback country near Alice Springs are the headlines. In both the Chamberlain and Falconio stories, there were antagonists cast in those contradictory terms of survivor and suspect, just as there were with Neely and Dalton years later. Baby Azaria's mother, Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton (then Chamberlain) was convicted and jailed for life for the murder of her daughter, but released and pardoned after serving four years of the eventually quashed sentence. Peter Falconio's girlfriend and travel companion, Joanne Lees, returned home to Britain as clouds of media and public suspicion gathered back in Australia around her narrow escape from the killer bushman, Bradley John Murdoch. About 20 years apart, the two women had been symbolically and, at several points, publicly condemned by the news media, by journalists attempting to gain access to the first-hand accounts yet hampered by fiercely vigilant publicity agents, and by and fervently popular opinion based on constructions of the bad mother' and 'bad woman' (Goc, 2009). A continuous narrative of loss-gain and survival-death pitted Chamberlain and Lees against the intransigence of the bush that is so much a part of dominant white Australian cultural ambivalence about land and belonging, and the enduring doubts about who *really* belongs.

Chamberlain and Lees became, as did Neely and Dalton on their scuba diving trip, the unreliable witness 'outsiders' who told two incredible tales for cash. In all three stories, journalists made precise use of language and primary sources to make this economic exchange value correlate with

representations of veracity and plausibility. Page two of the first *Courier-Mail* story about the diving rescue ran the headline, 'Survivors tell of watery hell' as the story relayed Neely and Dalton's memories of 'dark hours' and a 'determination to survive'. The word 'hell' here connotes a less frightening prospect than the mention of sharks. While the implicit reference to shark attacks was already framing the story, the journalist's copy gestured to spectacular public fear of the much-maligned creature. 'Sharks were a constant threat during the ordeal', one story said, but 'they were not discussed'.

A decade earlier, another diving couple stranded at sea in the Great Barrier Reef were taken by sharks, with the tragedy becoming the basis for the film, *Open Water*. But that cross reference comes later in the coverage. A British dive tourist on the boat that day, Rebecca Sharkey, makes the *Courier-Mail*'s spill to page two (May 28) when she says she overheard Neely and Dalton 'discussing a plan to find a manta ray and other exotic marine life'. A public still absorbing the shock death of Steve Irwin by stingray, while making an underwater film at the reef, would greet this information with at least some doubt about their story, given 'The Croc Hunter' himself was killed by a ray. Sharkey's recollection of the dive instructor's 'strict instructions' that 'it was a really really safe spot in this lagoon, just don't go outside it' seemed to support the portrayal of the couple as suspiciously fortunate for having crossed the line and survived. The dive company manager's comment, in the same story, that 'the detail of what happened will come out in time' gave some hint that the sequel would (for once) be better than the current event.

Suspicion circles the up-till-now miracle couple again, so that the reader continues. 'It emerged the rescued divers took a water bottle and shark repellent device with them' and 'wore full-length thick wetsuits with hoods in the tropical 23°C waters of the Great Barrier Reef'. Two of the journalists assigned to the first rescue story find an interview subject who casts 'fresh doubt on rescued couple's story' by handing over the diary he kept on the dive boat as it searched through the night for Neely and Dalton (Wray & Michael, 2008: 4-5). British backpacker Michael Paton is pictured on the front page in the foreground of a calm water lagoon, at low tide, above an inset photograph of Neely and Dalton sitting in wheelchairs. The inside news pages are spread with photographs of fellow passengers, said to be 'clearly overjoyed'. The pages show Paton's open, hand-written diary, captioned,

'Anxious wait ...the story of a dive trip that went wrong was recorded in the diary of fellow Pacific Star diver Michael Paton'. His first-person account does mention sharks, along with frantic searches and relief at radio news that the couple survived.

Significantly for future media representations of survival in Australia's wild interior and underwater environments, the trope of suspicion was deployed earlier in news of the infamous Chamberlain and Lees cases. Lindy Chamberlain and Joanne Lees were cast as 'outsiders', then, who also behaved badly or inappropriately by not showing enough emotion. Even though the Chamberlain and Lees stories influenced how the Neely and Dalton rescue would be mediated years later by an ambivalent news discourse, the newspaper itself made no overt reference to those particular dynamics. Explicit references were made to 'the tragic disappearance of Thomas and Eileen Lonergan on a dive off Port Douglas 10 years ago' (Editorial 28/5/08). Yet, the *Courier-Mail* journalists' reporting of the far more fortunate 2008 couple's rescue was constrained by a 'chequebook journalism' deal for the exclusive interview. It meant the options for covering the story would, inevitably, cast doubt on what and who to believe. A story based on an interview with Dalton's brother says that, 'the couple are believed to have been paid by US media outlets for interviews'. The same page re-runs parts of an interview with Neely published in an unnamed British newspaper where Neely tells someone (unclear who) that 'his shark fears were heightened' by watching *Open Water*.

### Conclusion: Critical Signposts

Critical projects in journalism have identified patterns of framing and interpretation used in American, Australian, and British news stories about ordeal, disaster, or tragedy (Kitch & Hume, 2008; Lule, 2001; Hanusch, 2009; Hoerl et al, 2009; Wardle, 2006; Zelizer, 1990). In Australia, the rescued scuba divers coverage samples something of how the news media works a broader cultural tendency to doubt the testimonies of particular kinds of witnesses. This point relates to a discussion of journalism as itself an observer of culture (Zelizer, 2004) that is simultaneously critical of, and complicit with, assumptions about those caught in the discursive muddle of

those ‘like us’ and that other lot. In Britain and the United States, the discussion of journalism’s agency within the politics of cultural representation has engaged more explicitly with text as the critical site of exchange between reporter and reader, than has been the case specifically with journalism studies in Australia.

Elfriede Fürsich (in Boston, 2008) and Greg Philo (Glasgow, 2007) discuss, in their separate articles, the merits and limitations of textual analysis applied to news stories in regional settings. Philo (2007: 175) argues that text-based only studies of media “are limited in the conclusions that can be drawn, since their analysis does not include the study of key production factors in journalism or the analysis of audience understanding”. For Fürsich (2008: 2), “only independent textual analysis can elucidate the narrative structure, symbolic arrangements and ideological potential of media content”. In stories where the fact of survival itself weighs heavily on the continuous narrative of country and culture, then others cast as ‘outsiders’ or ‘alien’ who might call on its mythic constructions of goodwill and social justice, both critical assumptions about mainstream journalism can be made at once, and yet coherently.

A popular news story about the rescue of two scuba divers who defied death by drowning, or shark attack, and hired a celebrity agent to sell their story conveys Australian journalism’s penchant for doubting the claims of the lucky few who cheat death – or worse, sign exclusive deals with rival media outlets. People become mediated *winner*s or *loser*s based on factors that make economic sense, and are yet confusing when spotted under the brighter searchlight of national narratives of character and culture.

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