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RESEARCH ARTICLE



The proximity filter: the effect of distance on media coverage of the Christchurch mosque attacks

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ABSTRACT

The intense media coverage in New Zealand and Australia of the Christchurch mosque attacks exhibited significant disparity in editorial decision-making between the two countries. This research interrogates the different approaches taken in newsrooms and how these differences were manifested in broadcasts and publications. New Zealand media were focused largely on empathetic coverage of victims and resisted the alleged gunman's attempts to publicise his cause while their Australian counterparts showed no such reluctance and ran extended coverage of the alleged perpetrator, along with material ruled objectionable in New Zealand. It finds the editorial focus in each case exhibits the effect of proximity, identified in literature on empirical ethical decision-making as a factor in applied ethicality. The authors conclude that a proximity filter was used by New Zealand media who identified the victims as part of their own community, but the events of 15 March 2019 were seen as 'foreign' by Australian journalists who used perceived distance as justification for extremely graphic content.

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Introduction

From the outset, media coverage of the Christchurch mosque attacks began to exhibit marked differences in editorial decision-making on each side of the Tasman Sea. While New Zealand frontline journalists and newsroom staff situated their thinking with the victims and the Christchurch community, their counterparts in Australia took a less empathetic stance that focused on the alleged gunman's actions and motives.

This paper measures the degree to which proximity to events influenced the nature of media coverage. It draws on personal interviews by the authors with news executives, content analysis and comparison with past coverage of major traumatic events to demonstrate that proximity – a recognised element of ethical decision-making theory – did play a pivotal role in editorial decisions relating to the mosque attacks.

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Literature review

Proximity has been recognised as a contributing factor in ethical decision-making. Jones (1991) included proximity as one of the six elements (along with magnitude of consequences, social consensus, probability of effect, temporal immediacy, and concentration of effect) that contribute to moral intensity. Jones's model is of particular significance because it is issue-contingent and applied to singular events. Moral intensity was the construct Jones developed to capture the extent of issue-related moral imperative in a situation. He described *proximity* of the moral issue as 'the feeling of nearness (social, cultural, psychological, or physical) that the moral agent has for victims (beneficiaries) of the evil (beneficial) act in question'. To demonstrate, he quoted a militiaman for one of Beirut's factional forces explaining his reasoning that as long as the victims are strangers, the killing doesn't bother him: 'Those I do not know, I don't care about'. Although there have been variable findings on the effect of proximity on moral intensity (Craft 2013), Mencl and May (2009) found that in intense situations a combination of proximity and empathy were strong factors in ethical decision-making. Both factors were present in the Christchurch attacks. Carlson et al. (2009) conclude that the dimension of proximity can have a significant impact on the moral judgment of a situation – the closer in proximity an individual was to the situation, the greater the perception of ethicality.

The concept of proximity has been identified as a primary news values for many decades (Oppegaard and Rabby 2016). It goes under a variety of names but fundamentally has two elements. One is cultural proximity, sometimes called ethnocentrism (Galtung and Ruge 1965), relevance (McQuail 1983; Harcup and O'Neill 2001) or identification (Schultz 2007). The other is geographic proximity (Oppegaard and Rabby 2016).

Moreover, in the digital era, a new form of proximity has emerged: what might be called virtual proximity. It has developed because digital communications technology has magnified the sense of closeness people feel to events by investing them with a sense of personal connection and physical proximity even if, in reality, the events occur thousands of kilometres away (Meyrowitz 2005).

Proximity – cultural and geographic – not only affects the prominence given to a story, but the way in which the media treat the story. Ethicist Karen Sanders asked a Spanish journalist what criteria were used to judge whether a picture of a dismembered body should be published and was told the criterion was distance. As the dead were foreigners, the image was considered acceptable. Her examination of media decision-making on stories of death, disease and destruction also chronicles the reverse situation: journalists and editors displaying restraint and compassion over local victims (Sanders 2003). In the aftermath of the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria, media professionals in Melbourne spoke of what they said was the need to make decisions about content based on the fact that their audience were likely to be affected directly or indirectly by the tragedy. This consideration influenced their choices of images, the kind and amount of graphic horror they were prepared to publish, and the language in which they couched their stories. It also influenced their assessment of when it was timely to begin publishing stories about failures by the authorities in responding to the fires, since they took the view that to do so when the local community as a whole was still grieving would have been a violation of taste and decency likely to generate a hostile reaction (Muller and Gawenda 2011).

The theory is given added weight by an official government review of the 2014 Martin Place siege in Sydney in 2014. In that terrorist incident, Man Haron Monis held 18 hostages in the Lindt Café. Three people, including the gunman, died in the incident. The *Joint Commonwealth-New South Wales Review of the Martin Place Siege* published in January 2015 found (p. 69) that ‘media reporting about the situation was measured and responsible’. It cited examples such as radio presenters pulling callers off air if they expressed racist or inflammatory anti-Islamic views. Media conveying public messages about Monis’s actions during the siege were cautious in their choice of language. Monis made attempts to secure media attention, issue demands and speak directly to people such as the Prime Minister or journalists via the media.

The report concluded: ‘The cooperation provided by media outlets with NSW authorities ensured these attempts were unsuccessful and the messages he did broadcast on social media were not further broadcast on mainstream media’.

The present study places the issues arising from proximity at the centre of its analysis of coverage of the Christchurch attacks on 15 March 2019 by the New Zealand and Australian media. It reveals some stark differences, notably in the attention paid to victims, the range of stories published, the topics chosen for publication and the language used. It also shows that the considerations evident in the aftermath of Black Saturday and the Lindt Café hostage crisis were present after Christchurch but applied with noticeable differences on each side of the Tasman.

Methodology

Identical keyword searches of the Factiva database were conducted to compile datasets of metropolitan newspaper coverage in New Zealand ($n = 178$) and Australia ($n = 118$). The search period for the latter was restricted to three days of coverage while the New Zealand coverage was extended to a week to include reports of the national commemoration/funeral services and progress on gun control. Statistical comparisons have been limited to the first three days of coverage in each jurisdiction.

Online coverage by newspapers on 15 March was not included in the New Zealand analysis because much of it took the form of constantly updated feeds in formats similar to Twitter (e.g. Sourcefabric’s liveblog). Scheduled broadcast coverage in New Zealand of the shootings was not included in the analysis because free-to-air television networks suspended their schedules and carried non-stop coverage from shortly after the shootings until after 10pm on 15 March and resumed with extended coverage the following day. Radio broadcasters similarly suspended scheduled programming for continuous coverage.

Open-form interviews were conducted with news executives (six in New Zealand and two in Australia). They were questioned on initial coverage, attitudes to the use of streamed video and the alleged gunman’s online manifesto, on-going coverage and effects on staff. In addition, a New Zealand Broadcasting Standards Authority workshop to discuss broadcasting standards following the attacks was attended by one of the authors.

The paper separately examines coverage in each country, then draws comparisons to determine whether there were significant differences. It concludes with a discussion on the ethical imperatives that should drive coverage of events like the Christchurch massacre and whether news organisations on each side of the Tasman Sea met these standards.

New Zealand media response

The first media coverage of the attacks was the gunman's own live-streamed video on Facebook. The social media platform claimed fewer than 200 people saw the live video but, although Facebook stopped 1.2 million derivative recordings being posted on its site, 300,000 slipped through its filters and attempts to prevent further propagation were only partially successful (Timberg et al. 2019). In early September copies of the 17-minute video – many of them cropped to avoid automated moderation systems – continued to circulate on the Internet (Ensor 2019). The alleged gunman sent the manifesto to the Prime Minister's office minutes before the first attack began. Within 10 minutes of the attacks, it had been sent to newsrooms and five minutes later links to the video began appearing in journalists' email inboxes. Broadcasters and news websites warned the public not to view the video.

Police were alerted to the attacks at 1.53 pm and two minutes later posted a tweet that there was 'a critical incident' in Deans Ave. Twitter was to be the principal method of police communication with the public – and the media – in the first two hours following the attacks.

At 2.11 pm the newsroom of *The Press* posted its first report on the Stuff website and 11 minutes later a 21-year-old *Press* videographer began describing the carnage he found at the Al Noor mosque. This marked the beginning of New Zealand mainstream media's non-stop coverage that saw TVNZ 1 and MediaWorks Three free-to-air television networks and many of the nation's radio networks suspend normal programming until late into the evening. Both television networks despatched anchor teams including their most prominent journalists – John Campbell (TVNZ) and Patrick Gower (Newshub) – from Auckland to Christchurch within an hour of the attack. All mainstream media despatched additional staff to augment Christchurch-based teams. Statistics collected by Newshub over the 10 days following the attack indicate the concentration of coverage. In that period, it broadcast 47 hours of television news coverage on the Christchurch attacks, including 316 live television crosses and 582 radio bulletins, pre-feeds and headlines. More than 40 crosses were made to international television broadcasters and more than 25 crosses to international radio networks.

Mainstream media news websites moved to live coverage utilising Twitter-like messaging via systems such as Sourcefabric/liveblog, an open-source Czech-based journalism tool which, unlike Twitter, allows newsroom executives to monitor messages before they are posted on a news website. Newspaper-associated websites attracted the greatest number of users with both stuff.co.nz and nzherald.co.nz attracting almost 12 million unique browsers at the height of coverage. The number of page impressions was unprecedented, peaking at 60.2 million impressions for Stuff and 46.6 million for the New Zealand Herald website, according to Nielsen ratings. Content analysis of the immediate aftermath of the attacks is problematic due to the 'rolling coverage' nature of reporting on the first day. Retrospective critiques have, in any event, been dominated by a single issue – 'giving oxygen' to the alleged shooter's white supremacist doctrine. A key editorial decision confronting newsroom executives at the beginning of their coverage was whether to publish or broadcast the live stream video and the 'manifesto' posted on the 8-Chan messaging system.

Some organisations published a screen grab still frame from the beginning of the video immediately before the mosques were attacked. TVNZ twice broadcast a three-second clip of the attacker loading a shotgun and walking from his vehicle towards the mosque. However, rolling coverage by Sky News New Zealand (a rebranded subscription service feed of Australian-sourced content) contained significantly more of the video which ran until the feed was shut down by Sky Television New Zealand and replaced with Fox Sports News shortly after 8 pm on 15 March. The edited clips included:

- The alleged attacker raising his gun (with the number 14 – a white supremacist symbol – on the stock) to aim at or fire on individuals in the doorway to the mosque and on the street. The sound and recoil of the firearm are recorded.
- Petrol canisters in the boot of his car.
- A soundtrack of him panting, swearing and talking out loud.
- Images of his face.

Both TVNZ and Sky Television New Zealand were the subject of complaints to the New Zealand Broadcasting Standards Authority. The complaint against TVNZ was not upheld. The Sky Television decision is discussed later in this paper.

The live stream and social media postings including *The Great Replacement* (the alleged gunman's 17,000-word 'manifesto') immediately alerted New Zealand news executives to the role that publicity was to play in the attack.

The chief news officer of *Newshub* (MediaWorks' news service), Hal Crawford, said no-one wanted to 'give oxygen' to the alleged shooter, who had been arrested only 21 minutes after the first attack. 'It was a matter of striking a balance, without playing his games'. The head of content at radio network *NewstalkZB*, Nadia Tolich, said her immediate reaction was 'Damn you. We're not going to fall for that'. She said the alleged attacker's claim that he had chosen New Zealand because it was regarded as a safe place had also prompted an immediate reaction: 'I thought: How dare you stop us from being who we are'. News executives across New Zealand's news organisations reached the same conclusion: coverage should concentrate on the victims of the attacks and minimise reporting of any aspects that could further the alleged gunman's white supremacist aims or self-aggrandisement. Tolich said there was an innate response 'to concentrate on the heart of the story – the victims'. The head of news at TVNZ, John Gillespie concurred: 'The story was the victims'. For most of the first week of coverage, journalists were mindful of the fact that the victims had yet to be buried. Editorial decision-making in each outlet was a collective process. Mark Stevens, editorial director of *Stuff*, recalled: 'From the small to the big, none of the decisions were made in isolation. Everything was discussed, whether it was tone, images, language or what we were running'.

All also exhibited a similar duty of care toward their staff. Reporters and photo/video-graphers in the field – including at least three under the age of 21 – as well as office-bound personnel (many of whom had seen the live stream video and images of the dead and wounded) were offered immediate counselling from specialists brought into the news-rooms. Counselling services were still being offered to staff six months later. A survey of Norwegian journalists who covered the attacks by Anders Breivik in 2011 concluded that those who had been confronted by ethical dilemmas – and the Christchurch attacks produced numerous such challenges – were more likely to have suffered

post-traumatic stress symptoms. Equally, however, they may also experience post-traumatic growth as a result of having dealt with such issues. That study (Idås et al. 2019) noted that, according to post-traumatic growth theory, the experience of growth is a result of a learning process characterised by reflections and discussions in the aftermath of an incident.

TVNZ's John Gillespie highlighted a particular issue that arose in the two hours after the attacks. He claimed there was a 'police comms vacuum' that prevented him from getting information about the safety of his field staff. A TVNZ team was stationed at Christchurch Hospital, outside the cordon set up by police and in open ground. Gillespie had tried to determine whether there was more than one attacker because he was aware of an emerging terrorist tactic of striking the hospital treating victims of an initial attack. He had been unable to get information from police to satisfy himself that his staff were safe. At the same time there were erroneous social media messages from members of the public that shots had been fired at the hospital and at a city school. A news executive from another organisation said that 'everyone was just feeling their way' in the first two hours.

Most information from police to media appeared to be via its Twitter feed until Police Commissioner Mike Bush held a press conference at 4 pm, followed by the Prime Minister. A police Twitter feed was problematic for journalists because it denied them the ability to (a) engage directly with senior police officers and (b) to raise issues not covered by the tweets. Consequently, most direct information to media in the first two hours came from eyewitnesses, including the apprehension and arrest of the alleged gunman, which was video-recorded by a passing motorist. The South Island bureau chief of Radio New Zealand, Belinda McCammon, said that had it not for being able to speak to people who had been in the mosques, 'we would have been in the dark'. Eyewitnesses made unprompted calls to media organisations. A man who witnessed the attack in Deans Avenue saw the attacker leave before running into the Al Noor mosque and observing multiple fatalities. He telephoned NewstalkZB but was questioned off-air until staff were able to confirm an attack had occurred. Before he was interviewed on air, the eyewitness was briefed to limit his answers to statements of fact and not to engage in any personal commentary.

The hours following the attacks marked the first phase of coverage – journalism's fundamental who, what, when, where, and why. This was reflected in the Saturday editions of the nation's newspapers before the second phase – the appearance of the accused in court – briefly turned attention to the alleged gunman. The third phase saw New Zealand media honouring the lives of the victims and the suffering of survivors and their families. Introspection and an interrogation of New Zealand values and society's ongoing reaction marked the fourth phase, which also addressed the political response to the attacks and international recognition of the empathetic leadership displayed by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. The fifth phase was coverage of the burial of victims and the national commemoration service. The sixth phase is ongoing and continues to deal with the consequences of the attacks. It will be succeeded by a further phase – coverage of the trial of 28-year-old Australian Brenton Tarrant on murder and terrorism charges – in June 2020. Five major New Zealand media organisations that are members of the Media Freedom Committee have agreed a set of protocols to govern their coverage of the trial.¹

Throughout the first six phases, New Zealand media treated the victims, survivors, their families and the Muslim community at large with compassion and respect, mirroring a

changed attitude by New Zealand society in the wake of the attacks. The media approach was even retrospective. Following a single complaint, NewstalkZB removed a web commentary by one of its show hosts that had been critical of a policy granting Muslim women privacy at a Christchurch municipal swimming pool. It had been on the NewstalkZB website for two years (RNZ 2019). RNZ's Belinda McCammon reflected a common view among journalists when she said no-one wanted to make things worse for the Muslim community. 'The boundaries were set pretty early in the piece', she said. 'We have now been dealing with the families for a long time and know when to talk to them and when to leave them. We are determined that we are not going to do grief porn'.

The imperatives highlighted by media executives during interviews are reflected in an analysis of New Zealand metropolitan newspaper content over the week following the attacks. Of a total of 178 articles, 68 (38%) were centred on the victims. A further 49 (27%) examined the social impact of the attacks. Only 15 articles or eight per cent of the coverage focused on Brenton Tarrant, the man accused of the attacks.² Forty-one stories (23%) carried headlines containing emotive terms, the most graphic of which were 'butchered', 'bloodbath' and 'slaughtered'. The word 'evil' appeared in three headlines but, conversely, 'love' was in six headings.

An in-depth analysis of selected articles revealed an empathetic approach to coverage of victims, their families and the New Zealand Muslim community. Coverage of the effects on wider New Zealand society was introspective and, at times, retrospectively critical. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern became a strong focus and was depicted as symbolising the compassion felt by many New Zealanders and as a leader determined to rid the country of the military-style weapons that had led to such a high toll of death and injury. Articles about the accused were at pains to avoid references that promoted white supremacy or which 'normalised' the portrayal of him. Most articles minimised use of his name.³ His appearance in court the day following the massacre introduced a continuing constraint on New Zealand media under court sub judice rules.

Australian media response

A focus on the extreme violence of the attack and its gruesome aftermath, strong condemnation of the attacker, and the influence of the attack on Australian politics were dominant themes of Australia's newspaper coverage. Notably the amount of attention paid to the victims as people – as opposed to corpses – was equalled by the attention paid to the alleged attacker and his so-called manifesto. All the Australian newspapers ran extensive backgrounders on the attacker, and all published some extracts from the manifesto, mostly in paraphrasis with a few verbatim fragments.

There was a pattern to the verbatim extracts chosen. They consisted of contemptuous statements by the alleged attacker for what he called the apathetic and apolitical nature of the Australian people among whom he grew up; references to what he claimed to be his European background, culture, identity and blood; statements that advocated white supremacy or promoted nationalist and racist sentiment, and statements that attacked Muslims as terrorists, 'invaders' and 'Islamic slavers'. Many of the stories dealing with the manifesto were written in a tone of condemnation in which the alleged attacker was described as 'evil', 'delusional' or 'deranged'. Some included statements from figures of authority,

such as the Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, who described the document as ‘a work of hate’, as a way of reinforcing this tone.

It was in the depiction of the attacks themselves that the starkest differences appeared. The old Fairfax mastheads – *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age* and *The Australian Financial Review* – were comparatively restrained. Their written reports described the attacks in general terms with few references to specific acts of killing or shooting. Their video links from the attacker’s bodycam was cut off before the shooting started. By contrast, two of the main mastheads of News Corporation – the national broadsheet daily, *The Australian*, and the Melbourne tabloid, the *Herald Sun* – went much further. Each assigned a reporter to watch the entire video and describe what he saw. The result was a shot-by-shot account of the attack on the Al Noor mosque and of the shootings as the alleged attacker left the scene.

The Australian’s story also contained brief excerpts from the alleged attacker’s soundtrack, including statements of regret that he didn’t kill more people, and in which cries for help from one of the victims could be heard. *The Herald Sun’s* story resorted in two places to onomatopoeia: ‘bang bang bang ...’, one for each of the shots fired. This story described a victim falling to the tiled floor and followed the terrorist into various parts of the mosque where more shootings were described in unsparing detail. It described an attempt by one worshipper to tackle the terrorist, how the terrorist shrugged him off and ‘lets out a hail of bullets into the man’s body, killing him instantly’. At another point it said: ‘More shots spew forth from the semi-automatic weapon into the bodies of defenceless people lying on the floor’. It noted the times that various actions took place, reinforcing the impression that this was the bodycam footage rendered in written form. It also contained a soundtrack of the alleged attacker talking to himself and to his imagined audience. A separate *Herald Sun* story contained a link saying, ‘Horror video inside New Zealand mosque’.

Asked about their approaches to the ethical issue of depicting violence, the editors-in-chief of *The Age* and *The Australian* gave broadly similar reasons for their decisions but arrived at remarkably different conclusions. Each referred to his reader’s expectations: the need to meet but not violate them. For Alex Lavelle at *The Age*, the experience was salutary. Although the paper’s written accounts were comparatively restrained, they contained a link to the video. ‘We had graphic content warnings on the video before you could see it. We cut the video off before he went into the mosque. So we didn’t show any shootings. All we showed was him getting out of the car, getting guns, walking around the corner and then [later] driving off.’

We should have said what the video showed. We got a huge amount of backlash and criticism from that story on the assumption that we had shown the whole video. We had a lot of complaints about ‘how could you show this monster shooting people’. We had a warning about graphic content but we didn’t say that the video was 15 seconds long and stopped before the shooting.

For Lavelle, there were business as well as ethical considerations in his decision-making.

We have to think about protecting our brand. I play safe in this area and don’t push the envelope too far. Would people cancel subscriptions if there was a huge backlash? People doubting our motives and our methods? And do you really want to show an unhinged terrorist shooting people, and does that encourage other people to do the same thing? We have moved away from reach as our main strategy, in terms of getting as many clicks as possible. I’m sure if you

said, “Watch the whole video – go for it”, in terms of clicks we would have had a huge number. But that’s not our business model. We are trying to be an ethical and responsible publisher providing journalism that people want to pay for.

Christopher Dore, editor-in-chief of *The Australian*, also said he had grounded his decision-making in reader expectations. ‘When you have graphic images you have to decide whether to use them, and whether you are going to be causing offence to your readers. That’s certainly the consideration when producing a newspaper and certainly on the front page’. But the requirement to tell the story and to take into account the historic significance of events could override readers’ sensibilities.

When you look at imagery through history, whether it’s Lee Harvey Oswald being shot or Kennedy being shot or the Vietnam War, these are news stories that define a moment and help us come to grips with it. In the newspaper, we ran that shot of him in his car. There is no way you can’t run the image of the person who commits such a terrible crime. To choose not to run it would be perverse. What would be the purpose of not running an image of the perpetrator of such a horrific crime? To not show his image would be to not tell the story. Now, I understand if some of our readers think they don’t want to see his image or be confronted with that. I understand that from a reader’s perspective.

The Australian did not published any footage from inside the Al Noor mosque, and online the video footage had been cut off at the same point that *The Age* cut it. However, Dore said it was necessary for society to confront the horror of these events in order to understand them.

When images of beheadings started to emerge, I got a lot of criticism for putting images of those on the front page. For me, this is the only way you can capture how shocking these characters are and why governments need to react to it. It’s really important but the question is, where does taste come into it? How are your readers going to react to it? That comes down to the placement on the front or inside and so forth. They become the issues for me.

Referring to the shot-by-shot account, Dore said:

Chip le Grand [a reporter] watched the entire video and he wrote a piece which was exceptionally well received in which he describes without any particular emotion what he saw. It was an incredibly powerful piece that just explained it. If he’d been a witness on the ground, it’s what he would have written. He was witnessing it on a video.

Dore said he had received no complaints from readers about this or any other aspect of the paper’s coverage.

I’ve been through a number of controversies around the papers I’ve edited and I have tested this theory a few times: no matter what newspaper you’re editing, your readers tend to understand the context of the newspaper. They understand what you are, how you present things.

On the issue of the manifesto, both editors were concerned not to give the attacker a platform. Dore said:

We ran about ten little pieces from the manifesto. None of them were actual quotes. They were paraphrases. We decided not to quote directly from it, but we had to explain what he was talking about in it.

Lavelle at *The Age* took a similar approach.

One peculiarly Australian aspect of the story gained a significant amount of attention: the ‘egging’ of Senator Fraser Anning, a right-wing extremist who found himself in Parliament because of certain idiosyncracies in the federal electoral system. He blamed the victims for their fate on the ground that this was the inevitable consequence of immigration. At a public forum, a young man tried to crack him on the head with an egg. While Anning’s comments were roundly condemned by political leaders across the country, the amount of attention paid to it reflected the febrile nature of the political debate about race and immigration in Australia.

A lot of attention was also paid to policing, legal proceedings and security: the arrest and court appearance of the alleged attacker, heightened security around mosques in Australia, and a shift in focus among Australian security agencies to the risks posed by white supremacists. Only 9 (8%) of the 118 stories analysed focused mainly on the victims, including an account by a survivor from inside the Al Noor mosque who reportedly said, ‘There were bodies all over me’. This typified the stories about the victims: they were mainly about bloodshed, injuries, disfigurement, body recovery, graves being dug, and other topics focused on the physical horror involved. There were few stories focused on the victims as people, except for one account by the brother of a victim who described to a Melbourne radio station seeing his brother killed via livestream. And on the Monday after the attacks – 18 March – *The Australian* published a page of tributes to the deceased, and other papers had front-page coverage of the floral tributes and gathering of people outside the Al Noor mosque.

The Australian also published a story about Christchurch under the heading ‘City of the damned’. Christopher Dore was asked about this in the context of a discussion about a newspaper being in touch with its audience. The question to him was: If you had been in Newcastle [which also has a history of earthquakes], would you have run that story? He replied: “You need to be aware of who your readers are. So, that headline? The story itself? No. Absolutely. I agree that’s an example of a story that you definitely wouldn’t publish in the city where it had happened. If the victims are likely to be reading your newspaper, then you have to think about how they are going to receive it. As you go with distance, that becomes less and less of a consideration, but in this day and age, from a newspaper in Sydney you can offend any city in the world, so you have to be alive to that.”

The coverages compared

The most striking feature of the comparison between the New Zealand and Australian media coverage of the Christchurch attacks was the gulf in the amount of attention paid to the victims. In the New Zealand media, 34% of stories over the first three days were focused on the victim. By contrast, in Australia only 8% of stories were victim-focused.

And it was not just about numbers but content. While the New Zealand media tended to concentrate on the victims as people, the preponderance of the Australian coverage was about them as victims of violence. The New Zealand coverage was replete with interviews of survivors, individual stories of worshippers who never returned home, reaction from family members, the attacker’s taunting of the victims, heroic acts by worshippers and

others who tried to stop the attack, funeral plans and release of bodies, and thumbnail tributes to the dead.

The Australian newspapers' attention to the victims was more limited – similar in its contours to the New Zealand approach but with less attention to the families and the wider community. It consisted of an eye-witness account from inside the mosque by a person who said there were 'bodies all over me'; survivors' accounts of their escape; pleas to the authorities to release the bodies; preparation of graves; reaction from bereaved families; heroics by a worshipper who tried to distract the gunman and was killed. There were also a few more empathetic stories: about Victorians massing in the streets of Melbourne to express solidarity with the victims; about the floral tributes and crowds outside the Al Noor mosque; about Flinders Street in Melbourne being lit up and crowded with people mourning. *The Australian* also published a page of thumbnail tributes.

The media on each side of the Tasman devoted similar amounts of attention to the attacks themselves, accounting for 16% and 13.6% of the stories in New Zealand and Australia respectively. But, again, the raw numbers do not capture the stark differences in the way they were reported. In Australian newspapers, the reports of the attacks themselves varied widely from the restrained approach of the old Fairfax titles [now owned by Nine Entertainment and including the New Zealand *Stuff* titles], which contented themselves with general descriptions, to the bloodthirsty approach of two News Corporation titles, *The Australian* and the *Herald Sun*. Each of these papers assigned a reporter to watch the attacks unfold on the alleged attacker's videocam and then describe what they saw. The *Herald Sun* even resorted to onomatopoeia to increase the sense of horror. The editor-in-chief of *The Australian* said it was necessary for society to be confronted with the shocking nature of these events in order to get some understanding of what had really happened. He also said that the paper had received no complaints about any aspect of the coverage.

By contrast, senior journalists in New Zealand newsrooms reviewed the streamed video and conferred on how it should be handled. Each newsroom came to the same conclusion: Little or none of the footage – and certainly none after the opening few seconds – should be published on websites or broadcast. To do so would violate principles relating to violent graphic content and would further the aims of the alleged attacker to gain maximum publicity of his deeds. Newsrooms posted internal emails warning staff not to view the video. A number of those who did see the content were reduced to tears (Nadia Tolich, *News-talkZB*). News reports warned the public against viewing it before it was ruled objectionable by the country's film censor and effectively banned.

The Australian media also paid far more attention to the alleged attacker and his self-styled manifesto than did the New Zealand media. Unsurprisingly, given the fact that he was an Australian, there were seven backgrounders on the alleged attacker and five articles focused on the manifesto. This was not reproduced at any length. The stories generally consisted of short verbatim fragments in what were otherwise paraphrased accounts. No New Zealand media outlet was recorded as having stories focused on the manifesto in the first three days. A censor's ruling that the manifesto was objectionable later rendered reproduction of any of its content in New Zealand unlawful.

Another notable difference was in the amount of political content. Only 3% of the New Zealand coverage had a political focus; the corresponding figure for Australia was 16%. Almost half of it had to do with the revolting remarks of then-Senator Fraser Anning

in which he blamed the victims for their own fate on the basis that this is where immigration finally leads. There was an immediate and hostile reaction from Australia's political leaders, and a youth took matters into his own hands by trying to crack an egg over Anning's head at a public forum. The attacks also fed into political debate surrounding the New South Wales state election campaign as parties assured the electorate that there would be no weakening of the State's gun laws. By contrast, New Zealand coverage reflected broad community and political acceptance of the need for changes to the country's gun laws.

Finally, there was one particular story which illustrated as vividly as anything else the difference between publishing directly to the suffering community and publishing at a distance. This story, carried in *The Australian*, was headed 'City of the damned', and was a backgrounder on Christchurch and its earthquakes. Asked if he would have published this had the attacks occurred in Newcastle, which also has had earthquakes, he unhesitatingly said he would not. He said that newspapers had to be in tune with the feelings of their communities and to publish that story in the city of the tragedy would have shown that the paper was not in tune with its community.

Regulation

Regulators in each country displayed different approaches to determining the effects of graphic content. This may owe more to fundamental differences of approach than to the influence of proximity, but an open question remains over whether sensitivity has been diminished by distance.

The New Zealand Office of Film and Literature Classification moved swiftly to ban both the livestream video and the alleged attacker's online manifesto. The Chief Censor, David Shanks, declared both 'objectionable' immediately after the attacks and took the unusual step of explaining his actions on breakfast television. On 25 March he formally issued a 13-page ruling on the manifesto and an eight-page ruling on the video.⁴ No such prohibitions were imposed in Australia.

The broadcasting regulators in both New Zealand and Australia examined the coverage by their respective television networks. The Australian Media and Communications Authority (ACMA) produced the results of its inquiry in July 2019⁵ and the Broadcasting Standards Authority (BSA) produced adjudications on complaints against two networks in August 2019.⁶

The ACMA's own-motion inquiry focused on three broad issues of its own choosing:

- (1) Did the Australian television coverage comply with the provisions of the codes of practice that exist to provide audience safeguards?
- (2) Did the coverage raise questions about the adequacy of those safeguards?
- (3) Do the codes of practice provide sufficiently robust community protections to deal with this kind of material?

The BSA ruled on a complaint from a member of the public code-named UJ, who complained specifically that the coverage on Sky News New Zealand (SNNZ) breached the violence and law and order standards of the Pay Television Code of Practice.⁷ The complaint is significant because it demonstrates why the proximity filter is a justifiable form of

restraint: This was content produced in Australia – without that filtering – but broadcast in New Zealand to an audience whose sensibilities were not taken into account.

SNNZ stated in its submission that it took a direct feed from Sky News Australia without the capacity to alter or modify what came through from Australia. UJ responded that by relying on this as evidence of exculpation, SNNZ were ‘effectively saying they can’t control the content of live news channels’. The Sky News case is of particular relevance to this paper because it provides a basis for directly comparing the way the two regulators dealt with the issues raised, since the performance of Sky News Australia fell within the purview of the ACMA.

The BSA found that the broadcasting of three specific clips breached the violence and law and order standard. The first showed the alleged attacker raising, loading and firing his gun on multiple occasions; the second extended this footage to include a frozen image of the alleged attacker’s face, and the third featured a soundtrack in which the alleged attacker is speaking, presumably to the audience of the live-stream, providing a commentary on his actions. The words spoken by the alleged attacker were also reproduced as sub-titles.

Fatal to SNNZ’s exculpatory argument was the BSA’s finding that while SNNZ had limited editorial options to control what was broadcast, it could have cut the channel altogether or tried harder with Sky News Australia to change the feed. In balancing considerations of harm likely to be caused by the broadcast against public interest considerations, the BSA found that footage showing the alleged attacker attempting to kill or injure people, without any masking, blurring or pixelating, was highly disturbing and distressing. It found that the cumulative effect and increasing intensity of the footage was disturbing and alarming, and it found ‘most disturbing’ that the alleged attacker’s monologue, broadcast with sub-titles, gave voice to, and amplified, his message. It upheld the complaint and ordered SNNZ to pay \$NZ4000 in costs to the Crown.

It did not, however, uphold a second complaint brought by ‘NT’ against Television New Zealand⁸ over broadcasting of part of the livestream. *1 News at 6pm* had twice broadcast a very brief clip that showed a man’s hands holding a weapon and reaching for two weapons in the open boot of his car. White writing on the weapons was not legible and the man’s face could not be seen. The clip was brief, carefully edited, and was preceded by warning to viewers. The BSA found these specific warnings and extensive signposting ensured audiences were sufficiently informed about the disturbing nature of the content. It said the clip ‘provided information to audiences, but which did not contain explicit graphic or violent content and did not promote or glorify the actions of the attacker’.

Taking into account the unprecedented nature of these attacks in New Zealand, the Authority found that the alleged harm did not outweigh the important right to freedom of expression and the high level of public interest in the broadcast. The Authority’s intervention in upholding the complaint would therefore represent an unreasonable or unjustified limit on the right to freedom of expression. This ‘public interest defence’ when raised in law is a balancing act (Robertson and Nicol 1992) and it is clear that the balance on broadcast coverage has been struck differently on the other side of the Tasman.

The ACMA found there was a clear public interest in Australian audiences being ‘appropriately informed’ about what it called ‘an extremely significant public incident’.

It focused on requirements in the TV industry's codes of practice – each of the commercial, subscription and public sectors have their own – that broadcasters should:

- (1) Exercise care when selecting material to broadcast.
- (2) Restrict the broadcast of distressing content to that which can be justified in the public interest.
- (3) Include a warning before broadcasting distressing content.

Sky News, Seven and Nine all showed footage of someone being shot at. Ten showed footage of gunfire more generally. All four – Seven, Nine, Ten and Sky – used moving footage from the terrorist's bodycam. The ABC was the most cautious. It used stills from the bodycam.

SBS showed largely unedited footage from overseas in which the smoke from the gunfire was the only thing obscuring the view of people who had been shot.

The ACMA identified eight excerpts from the alleged attacker's bodycam and survivor mobile phone footage which 'potentially showed or implied the killing of a person or showed people who had just been killed'. Of Sky News in particular it stated that Sky used a combination of some still images and video/audio excerpts from the alleged attacker's bodycam, including gunfire directed at a person. It made no specific finding about whether this, or any of the material broadcast by the other five networks, did or did not breach the relevant code. It made no finding as to whether any of the coverage did or did not 'appropriately inform' the Australian public on this matter of high public interest. It considered that there was 'some material that raises questions' about whether there was compliance with the broadcasting codes of practice. 'This is especially so where video footage of shooting at people was shown'. The report is open to the interpretation that the threshold for violence acceptable for broadcast in these circumstances is footage that does not show someone actually being shot.

A further issue that caused the ACMA concern was what it called the high degree of repetition of certain high-impact depictions within a short space of time. It stated that 'excessive and gratuitous repetition may not be proportionate to the public interest and may have the effect of heightening distress or offence to the audience'. These high-impact depictions included actions that killed a person, strongly implied that a person would be killed, or a person who had just been killed. It concluded:

Given the level of responsibility shown by the broadcasters and the unique circumstances of this incident, the ACMA considers that finding individual contraventions of the codes would have little regulatory or educative benefit. Instead the ACMA considers that this investigation would more usefully prompt a productive conversation with the industry about whether its codes are adequately framed to deal with this type of material in the future.

The ACMA would conduct discussions with broadcasters about these matters. It raised the possibility that the codes of practice might be reviewed.

The BSA conducted a closed workshop with media representatives in September to background its two rulings, discuss media experiences during the incident, and raise future changes to media guidelines. Following the workshop, media executives indicated

they were not in favour of new guidelines that impinged on editorial decision-making that had generally served them well.

Conclusion

Coverage of traumatic events presents journalists with a host of professional and personal dilemmas and each event brings its own challenges. Kay et al. (2011) have found that the journalist's role as caretakers of the public interest becomes less clear-cut when the community experiences devastating trauma. That is no more so than when the journalist is a member of the community in question.

This analysis of coverage by New Zealand and Australian media of the Christchurch mosque attacks suggest that a proximity filter was applied by local newsrooms. New Zealand news executives expressed the same common link identified by Bridgette Nacos (2003) in her analysis of U.S. coverage of the 9/11 attacks: a we-are-all-in-together sentiment. It was articulated by Prime Minister Ardern's description of the victims of the Christchurch attacks as 'They are us'.

Content analysis points strongly to the conclusion that New Zealand coverage was driven by identification with and empathy toward the victims and their families. The Australian nationality of the alleged gunman was a key factor in the emphasis of coverage in that country, but distance removed consideration of the well-being of those directly affected by the incident from news judgement. A stark illustration of this was the willingness of two major newspapers to publish graphic shot-by-shot accounts of the Al Noor shootings, which contained material that, in the words of one of the editors involved, confronted people with the horror involved. However, it is likely from what this editor also said that the perceived need to confront people would have given way to considerations of offensiveness and violation of standards of taste and decency had the newspaper been publishing to its own community. It was also notable that much of the Australian coverage was written in an unflinching tone that would have seemed heartless or even ruthless had it been published directly to the affected community.

This 'defence of distance' is disturbing because, in the age of digital communication, it is illusory. Australian coverage was readily accessible in New Zealand and posted on social media platforms in ways that overcame paywall restrictions. While there was some recognition of this by the Australian media, it clearly did not restrain them from publishing material that the New Zealand media steered clear of.

The potential harm from this is exacerbated by the fact that the alleged perpetrator has yet to stand trial. New Zealand media are bound by sub judice rules relating to the right to a fair trial and have observed those restrictions on publishing. Ethical considerations aside, media outside the jurisdiction of New Zealand courts are not bound to follow them and have not always done so. Similarly, censorship restrictions that prevent New Zealand media from publishing any of the content of the alleged perpetrator's manifesto have not been applied to Australian coverage.

New Zealand media appear more sensitive to the proximity of their neighbour. When the conviction in Victoria of cardinal George Pell on sex offence charges was suppressed pending a second unrelated trial in 2018, the suppression was observed by New Zealand

media. This study suggests the geographic and cultural nearness of the two countries, and the reach of the Internet, should see the boundaries of the proximity filter extended.

Notes

1. The guidelines can be found at: <https://www.publicmediaalliance.org/collaboration-for-responsible-coverage/>.
2. The total number of classifications was 181 as a small number of articles fell under more than one central classification.
3. Prime Minister Ardern vowed never to utter his name but media, duty bound to use his name at least once in any stories about his appearances in court, could not avoid its use entirely. They reported receiving complaints from members of the public who believed media should follow Ardern's lead.
4. <https://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/news/featured-classification-decisions/>.
5. *ACMA investigation into coverage by Australian television broadcasters of the Christchurch terrorist attack*, Australian Communications and Media Authority, Canberra, July 2019. Accessed at <https://www.acma.gov.au/-/media/Broadcasting-Investigations/Investigation-reports/>.
6. *UJ and Sky Network Television Ltd – 2019–030* (19 August 2019), Broadcasting Standards Authority, Wellington. Accessed at <https://bsa.govt.nz/decisions/all-decisions/uj-and-sky-network-television-ltd/>.
7. <https://www.bsa.govt.nz/broadcasting-standards/broadcasting-code-book/pay-television-code/>.
8. *NT and Television New Zealand – 2019–028* (19 August 2019). Broadcasting Standards Authority, Wellington. Accessed at <https://bsa.govt.nz/decisions/all-decisions/nt-and-television-new-zealand-ltd/#searched-for-NT+and+TVNZ>.

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