



Capturing the Heart of the Region – how regional media define a community

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Abstract:

This paper examines the role regional media play in constructing a region's publics. It examines how journalists at one regional newspaper conceptualise the public and investigates how these concepts are played out through a series of articles from the same newspaper.

Key words: regional media, communities, readers, media publics

Introduction

Regional media play a central role in constructing and cementing the identity and culture of communities and their publics.¹ While it is generally accepted that media are a key institution in the process of identity formation, and that the images they portray are powerful and abiding (Hall, 1992; Carey, 1985), what is less evident is how this occurs in an empirical sense. There are few case studies which show how the media, at a day to day reporting level, do this. Although the significance of the metropolitan media's role in identity formation should not be under-estimated, it is at the regional level that the most powerful and abiding images of Australian regional identity are formed and entrenched in the public psyche via the media (Ewart, 1997; Ewart & Meadows, 2000). A community comes to recognise and hence know itself through its representation in local media. Part of this recognition process involves the establishment of a set of 'norms' for behaviour, appearance and characteristics, which are applied to both those within and outside the community. These 'norms' are played out through the texts of regional newspapers. Those who abide by them are included in the conceptualisation of 'the public' constructed by the media in applying these norms, while those who do not are excluded.

This paper argues these regional media constructions of identity are sometimes more abiding and powerful than those seen in metropolitan media, and even those

¹ A version of this paper was presented at a conference hosted by Central Queensland University's Bundaberg campus on August 20, 1999.

promoted by other cultural institutions. This is partly because of power of media generally, but it is also due to the unique place, space and role of regional media in a community. There is a large degree of trust granted to regional media by a community and its leaders, while at the same time regional communities often display a high level of distrust and even antagonism towards metropolitan media (Harrison, 1986: 5-7).² The way regional media constructs a sense of the public tells us a great deal about journalists' expectations about a community.

This paper relies on data from interviews with journalists at Central Queensland's *Morning Bulletin*, a Rockhampton daily newspaper owned Australian Provincial Newspapers (APN). The case study focuses on the media coverage of the disappearance and death of nine-year-old Rockhampton resident Keyra Steinhardt in April, 1999. This event was chosen because of the extensive coverage it attracted from the region's media, and also because it appeared to attract a high level of community response. The case study provides a specific example through which we can understand the media's role in the formation of regional identity and culture.

Theorising identity

Carey's (1989) exploration of journalism as a cultural resource and Hall's (1992) work on journalism's role in the circulation of dominant discourses provide a starting point from which to understand how identity is formed by the media. Carey has signaled the importance of all forms of media in the production of culture, and this paper takes the newspaper text as the "point of contact in which the participant encounters and lives the culture" (Real, 1989: 57). Newspapers such as the *Morning Bulletin*, which focus on the local and regional, have become a central site for the production and maintenance of culture (Hall, 1992). They produce certain information about their publics and regions, at times clearly indicating the values and meanings those publics should embody, and what it means to be a member of that region's public.

By repeatedly laying out expectations the media hold for the public, or more simply, by telling individuals how they are expected to act and think *as a public*, the media create the conditions whereby consensus amongst individuals about the desirability of particular values can be reached. In other words, the public is not an already formed reality to which the media respond. Rather, the public is brought into existence when individual readers come to recognise themselves in media stories and images, and consequently seek to possess the values and characteristics portrayed therein as a mark of their belonging to a 'public'.

Regional media create consensus narratives, which, as Meadows explains, signal to readers not only what they should be, but also how they should experience certain events (1998: 1). As such, regional media is the glue that holds people together in a public sense, binding individuals into a social collective or *media public*, and in doing so, performing the role of a key cultural institution. This binding occurs through the representation of the ideas, values and characteristics held to be typical of dominant groups.

The process of news-making means the discourses that are contained in the news are often thought to be directly reflective of the public. However, media discourses are often produced either by journalists or 'authorised knowers': a small, often elite group of people. The Keyra Steinhardt case study highlights how the media "make

² The 1986 Moura Mine disaster is just one example of this.

representations of regional identity available for their audience and reader and in turn how readers themselves enter into the 'flow' of media discourse in the form of self-representations" (Mules, Schirato & Wigman, 1995: 241).

Conceptualising the public

Readership, and specifically journalists' constructions of readership, is an area which has attracted some attention from media researchers who generally agree that regional journalists (like journalists in general) know very little about their readers or publics (Ericson, Baranek and Chan, 1989; Schudson, 1996; Hartley, 1996; Jacobowicz et al, 1994). Indeed, journalists often use the terms readers and the public interchangeably, and frequently refer to readers as being representative of the wider public. Schudson suggests "journalists, like other writers, address an 'implied audience' and it would be instructive to know more about how this image of the reader is constructed in the journalists' minds" (1996: 152). Taking up Schudson's challenge, this paper first sets out to discover how journalists at the *Morning Bulletin* construct or *imagine* the public as an implied audience. The paper then investigates what influence such media constructions of the public have on the content of news stories through examining the media coverage of Keyra Steinhardt's abduction and murder.

The dominant factor influencing journalist's perceptions of the public is the 'presumed' readership. That is, journalists make a number of presumptions, based on their own experience and that of their friends and colleagues, about the readership, and by extension, the public. They use readers and public as interchangeable terms, substituting one for the other, as if individual readers were already a 'public' and vice versa, as if a public already existed independently of the media. At the *Morning Bulletin* there was a collective imagining of the readers by journalists and the editorial hierarchy along these lines. The journalists routinely referred to the readers of their newspaper as 'the public', which enabled them to define a picture of readership that they believed was all-inclusive and representative of the wider public. For example:

[The reader] is someone who is interested in their local community and what is happening in the city and the region, I guess. I don't think I can generalise, but hopefully they are people from across the board, the general public. JA³

The all-encompassing definition of the readers as "the general public" constructs the readers as representing the broader public or the majority of the region's population.

Journalists believed the profile of their readers matched that of what they described as a 'typical' and 'average' Australian. They described 'typical' Australians as being hard working, down-to-earth people. Many journalists thought their readers were from rural backgrounds and that they possessed certain typical characteristics such as concern for each other, and a caring attitude. Mules, Schirato & Wigman's research indicated that in Central Queensland, regional media outlets have long portrayed an image of the region that is implicitly rural, despite the working class history of the area (Mules, Schirato & Wigman, 1995). Indeed, it might be argued that through the promotion of such values, the *Morning Bulletin* and other media outlets are responsible for keeping the city in its small town state, removed from the

³ Codes have been allocated to journalists because they requested that they remain anonymous.

metropolitan city and the presumed negative values of city-life (this theme is taken up later in this paper).

The values and characteristics of caring, concern and a strong sense of community were evident in the newspaper stories produced during the coverage of the Keyra Steinhardt abduction and murder. These values were also manifest in journalists' descriptions of the public as "decent", "down-to-earth" people. Journalists ascribed a high standard of morality and behaviour to the regional public, with little, if any, hard evidence on which to base this. Despite their daily involvement in reporting stories that transgress such attributes, the journalists assumed that people from the backgrounds they ascribed to the regional public would automatically be caring, morally upright people.

Journalists interviewed for this study garnered ideas of readership from a process that can be described as 'cultural osmosis'. That is, repeated daily intensive exposure to the opinions of editors, senior newsroom staff and colleagues, as well as family and friends, formed a picture of readers, which they then reproduced in interviews. For example:

My dealings with the public influence my view of readers. The public, they are our readers, and they are reading about themselves and what we have written about their lives. JB

The ascribing of certain values to the 'public' in turn circumscribes the way journalists write their stories. When covering 'unpalatable' issues, journalists were very careful about their choice of language so as not to offend what they perceived to be public sensibilities. Such practices were evident in articles about Keyra Steinhardt, when specific details about her abduction and murder were withheld, and replaced with generalisations. Some journalists said this was because such details would be considered 'unpalatable', and risked breaching accepted moral standards and codes of behaviour. On the other hand, the reported reaction from people outside the media (i.e. the 'public') to the disappearance of the child was quite detailed. Publication and discussion of the reaction to such events presumably does not fall outside the accepted standard of behaviour for journalists.

The construction, or imagining, of the public by these journalists holds some contradictions. There are obvious discrepancies between their representations of the public as discussed here, and the 'real' or 'actual' public. It is through the journalists' repeated representations of the public in ways that construct them as rural, down-to-earth, hard working, concerned people that Central Queenslanders come to not only imagine themselves, but to recognise themselves in these media representations. In fact, as Grossberg (1992) suggests, it is because of such repeated representations that publics are constructed as the product of difference and forced to identify with one side of a debate, usually the dominant side.

The Case Study

On Saturday April 24, 1999 Rockhampton awoke to the news that a nine-year-old has been "callously" abducted as she returned home from school the day before (Friday, April 23, 1999)⁴. For two weeks following the abduction local media was rife with speculation on a number of points: how could a young child be taken off the street while only metres away adults watched her beaten to the ground and placed in

⁴ The trial of Leonard John Fraser was held in Brisbane in September, 2000. He was found guilty of murdering Keyra Steinhardt and will be sentenced later this year.

a car boot⁵; and, how could such an event occur in the close community of Rockhampton; and where was the nine-year-old? These questions formed the basis of a series of articles that appeared on the front pages of the *Morning Bulletin* on no less than four occasions, with significant coverage on either page one, or three for almost every day of the two-week period. From the initial coverage of the abduction on April 24, 1999, to the closing chapters of the incident, several key themes were played out through the *Morning Bulletin*. It is in these themes that we find a key to unlocking the culture of Rockhampton.

These newspaper texts and the themes expressed in them, both reflect and construct the expected culture of the Rockhampton public in a number of ways. The themes were closely connected to, and woven around, the values and ideals that members of the Rockhampton public and community are expected to hold and the meaning they should make out of the abduction of the child. The themes on which the articles focused and their mode of expression, or the way the articles expressed those themes, for example choice of language and photos, elicited a strong response from the public. This was initially in the form of a massive reply to calls for information from the public, through community involvement in the search for Keyra, and later by way of an outpouring of emotion over her death, expressed for example through the establishment of a shrine of flowers.

The key themes played out in the newspaper articles were: *belonging*, or what it means to be a member of the Rockhampton public; *reality*, encompassing the loss of the community's innocence as a result of this event; *threat*, a theme closely connected to the latter theme, but where the moral values of the community are perceived as being in danger from outside forces; *caring*, covering the expressions of public concern and shock over the event; and *failure*, concerning the failure of the public to save the child. Key texts selected chronologically, with the first story published on April 24, 1999, show how these five themes were played out.

April 24, 1999

In the first front page story about the disappearance of Keyra, several key cultural themes were established. In establishing these themes, the initial story legitimised them, enabling journalists working on the series to raise and re-raise them throughout the duration of the coverage. Moreover, the development of these themes through their repetition in the media not only legitimised them as 'real' or 'concrete' examples of the culture of the community, but also led to a process of behavioural osmosis, whereby sections of the community embodied and acted out those values and ideals in their very public response to the abduction.

In the April 24, 1999 edition of the newspaper, themes included those of threat, caring, and reality. These themes and the articles in which they were expressed encompassed the danger such an event presented to the tranquillity of the community, the kinds of responses and therefore values and meanings that members of the public had made from this event, and the loss of the community's innocence because of the nature of the event. There was also some reference to the failure theme, which was taken up in separate articles in the same edition.

The page one headline "City in Shock amid arrest, frantic search" (Saturday, April 24, 1999) immediately entrenched the 'correct' and 'desirable' response to this story

⁵Reaction to this was overwhelmingly negative, and was evident in the letters to the editor section of The Morning Bulletin.

as "shock". This word, which was used frequently throughout the coverage, worked to ingrain a physical reaction as a value in the public's mind. The use of the phrase "City in shock" conjures up an image of communal rather than individual reaction to the event. Here, the individual reader is informed that, because the entire city is deemed to be in shock, the appropriate response, or even the desired response to the abduction by anyone at all indentifying with the city, is one of shock.

This theme is played out further in the first paragraph of this front page story: "Rockhampton was yesterday struggling to come to grips with the horrific daylight bashing and abduction of a girl in parkland beside a busy street". In this lead sentence "Rockhampton" is used to represent the entire community and its publics. The article continues: "The brazenness of the attack sent shock waves through a city which is still trying to cling to a friendly, big country town image". Here we are told that not only has the whole community been affected by this event, with the creation of a communal response to it, but the city's innocence has been threatened. The phrase "which is still trying to cling to a friendly, big country town image" gives rise to the threat theme.

Here the assumption is that Rockhampton, a "town" previously a quiet backwater, has somehow prior to this event resisted being dragged into the modern era where (unlike the smaller, provincial cities) crime and death are presumed to be daily occurrences. However, it is now suddenly faced with a threat to its "big country town image". This establishes an image of Rockhampton as ideally a safe, caring place, and that these are the values members of the Rockhampton public are assumed to embody. This theme is further developed with the use of the phrase "The brazenness of the attack" which suggests that someone has dared to go beyond the moral boundaries that control everyday behaviour, or at least the boundaries that control the behaviour of the Rockhampton public, making it such a caring place and a city that retains its country town image and attitude.

The theme of community caring is exploited to its full extent at the top of page one (Saturday, April 24, 1999). Here the use of large boxed quotes from ordinary members of the public imbues their words with added importance, reaffirming the sense of community concern and outrage: "I've been sick all night - I could not sleep. I prayed for her all night". Such comments reinforce the values that good, ordinary Rockhampton residents hold and how concerned they are about such an event. We are left with the image that Rockhampton is a nurturing, caring community, where such events, and the public's reactions to them, are considered extraordinary: "We are all parents. We are all mothers and fathers. We feel for those who are most affected".

Coverage of the incident on page two of Saturday April 24, 1999's edition elaborates the 'failure' theme with the headline "People ask: How did it happen?". This headline gives the impression that the public—a united force of residents of the community—and by association the readers of this newspaper, is asking this particular question. The failure theme is signified here through the phrase "how did it happen?", which is perhaps a rhetorical question, but one that still demands an answer. What is unsaid, but clearly inferred from the headline is that somehow the community has failed to protect one of its own. Of course, the journalists do not directly tell us that this is the desired response of the community to such occurrences, but repetition of this theme through key words and phrases leads us to believe it is.

The failure theme is developed further: "North Rockhampton residents spent yesterday trying to comprehend the events which took place less than 100 metres

from their doors. They gathered in groups along the Dean Street footpath and watched as police and SES [State Emergency Service] volunteers scoured the parkland from where the girl was abducted". Here we see a drawing together of the failure and caring theme through the phrases "trying to comprehend" and "They gathered in groups". We are left with the impression that the entire population of Rockhampton was gathered on the footpath, united in their inability to comprehend. It is as if there is a general lack of understanding concerning how this event could happen in this particular community. Perhaps the community's response to this event even grants it absolution in the face of the failure of its members to protect the girl. If any individual is to be considered a member of the Rockhampton public, the characteristics and values that are required towards the event are exemplified through the statement: "As much as anything else, they were horrified that it could happen to one of their own".

The choice of language also tells us about the character of members of the public prior to this event. That they could be appalled at such a happening, constructs them as good people with a certain level of 'decent' morality. This is followed by questions from one of those residents who asks: "Why did somebody not act? Why did someone not go to her aid? What is our town coming to?" Here we see the reality theme linked back to the death of the community's innocence. These lines read that the community rather than any individual should bear responsibility for failing to save Keyra.

The text and language of the newspaper (its discourse) indicate that prior to the disappearance of Keyra, the culture of this regional community embodied the values of care and concern. Furthermore, while seeming to be an aberration, the abduction could trigger a change for the better. The newspaper tells us that change involves a kind of awakening from a slumber, or a growing awareness that the "town" can no longer isolate itself from such events in a globalising world. It also suggests that there may be sinister forces at work, threatening the cohesiveness of the community. This can be seen in the phrase "what is our town coming to?". Previously unknown to all but a small percentage of the population, Keyra is suddenly embraced as "one of our own". Because of her disappearance and probable death, Keyra becomes a representative of all that is good in the town, while her disappearance represents the work of forces that threaten to destroy its tranquillity.

A solid mental picture of the expected reaction of the community to this event is starting to emerge, and this is further examined in a second story on page two of the *Morning Bulletin's* Saturday, April 24 edition. The article headed "Investigation relentless" again raises the questions of how and why such a thing could happen, which the story tells us are on "everyone's" minds. The term "everyone" is not explained, but because we have by now formed a picture of the entire community being "shocked" and "outraged" by this event, the "everyone" is assumed to be the public. This article further cements the values that the public should possess in relation to Keyra's abduction, through a drawing out of the events and the public's response to those events. This is partially achieved through the repeated use of words such as "shocked", for example in the lead paragraph of this story: "A chilling picture began to emerge yesterday of a crime which has shocked the region".

The placement of the stories in the *Morning Bulletin* in prominent areas and the large amount of space allocated to them, indicates the importance of the values and characteristics contained in the articles. These techniques reinforce the overall idea that to be a good citizen or member of the public we should subscribe to those values and meanings, regardless of our personal lives and how we might behave in them. In the same edition (April 24, 1999) on page three headlined "Resident:

Parkland 'an accident waiting to happen'", the community reaction or caring theme is further explored through use of terms such as "astonished" to explain the reaction of residents. This shifts community sentiment from anger and shock, the initial stages of grief through which individuals pass, to astonishment, and here we see the emergence of the 'threat' theme.

While the theme of 'threat' mainly centres around the park in its overgrown state as being a threat to children, we also find the theme extended to outsiders as a threat. This is evident in the sentence: "Mr Farrugia voiced that feeling [the astonishment of residents] when he shook his head in dismay and said: 'People will do anything these days'". This conjures up the somewhat mistaken belief that it is only now that such events occur and that somehow modern times have led to a change in the nature of people (for the worse). Somehow modern life is threatening the very foundation of the Rockhampton community.

In the same edition (April 24,) on Page 4 we see the headline "Community rallies behind SES volunteers" which plays out the caring theme to its fullest extent, while linking the qualities expressed in the caring theme to the belonging theme. This story tells us: "Tales of outstanding human effort and compassion dotted the gut-wrenching search efforts for the nine-year-old girl assaulted and abducted on Thursday". Here are the real characteristics that individuals should embody if they are to be considered full members of the Rockhampton public. Such worthwhile characteristics are further developed when we are told that "police officers on days off suited up and worked for free", and "People phoned police and media outlets for the latest news and to ask if there was anything they could do to help". Such interest and compassion, while painted as being heroic, does not appear to be abnormal. Rather it is the kind of behaviour expected from this community as a matter of course.

The normality of those involved in the search and the extraordinary community effort is further entrenched by the paragraph: "Mothers, a computer technician, a nurse, a bureaucrat and tradesmen among others, conducted a methodical search through dense scrub and grass – looking for clues, looking for the child". Here we are told about everyday people joining in the search and in doing so, expressing and embodying those worthwhile characteristics and values that make Rockhampton a caring community.

The *Morning Bulletin* articles weave a text that indicates, sometimes subtly, other times not so subtly, the values and characteristics that Rockhampton public is supposed to have. However, it is within the editorials that these characteristics are sharpened even further, and indeed made into myth. In the editorial of Saturday April 24, 1999, the community is characterised as united in mourning for the loss of one of its "precious daughters": "At the search scene, in the shopping centres, in workplaces, and at the girl's Berserker Street School, people wept; others prayed. The public shock reverberated through-out [sic] the town yesterday, and even affected those who didn't know her family". In this editorial the community is again reminded of the reality theme or loss of innocence: "There was disbelief that surely this could not happen in a prosperous, regional centre which has always prided itself as a great place in which to raise a family".

Here the region is painted as a place untainted by such crimes, despite the fact that murders, rapes and other such crimes do happen, and have been covered extensively by the newspaper in the past. Another example of the death of innocence theme is found in the statement "But the age of the child, the brazenness of the abduction, and its so-far tragic consequences have left many Rockhamptonites with

the sad realisation that the city finally had been stripped of its last remnant of innocence". The editorial then revives the theme of community acceptance and responsibility for this event: "Many people said they felt the emptiness that goes with failure. That we as a society and as a city had failed to afford this nine-year-old the protection she deserved and thus the future life to which she was entitled". While the newspaper appears to be echoing the public's feeling of responsibility, it was in effect directing responsibility back to the public. These themes, and the values and ideals they expressed, were further cemented in subsequent issues of the paper as the search for, and later the discovery of Keyra's body continued.

Tuesday May 4

The caring theme was by now well and truly established as a result of the choice of language contained in the earlier articles. Stories on page three of this edition (May 4, 1999) explored this theme further through descriptions of the search: "Land Hunt for Keyra on hold" explored the resilience of searchers (the public) through the paragraph: "Yesterday morning a volunteer – part of a group of 20 searching a creek near Kershaw Gardens – struggled out of three-metre-high grass, saying they were all getting tired but prepared to carry on if and when required". This theme is evident again in a story dealing with the community banding together in a time of crisis headlined: "Volunteers, public win accolades for efforts". Again the characteristics awarded to the search volunteers became characteristics of the public. They were also portrayed as being integral to the community's make up and almost unique to regional people such as members of the Rockhampton public who joined in the search:

Rockhampton SES controller Lyle Dobbs was losing his voice yesterday but managed to offer a big thank-you to his troops and the Rockhampton public after 11 days of searching for Keyra Steinhardt. He said that when they were needed, citizens and business houses had put their hands up in force.

The main interest here is how the public has now become a group of "citizens". It's as if the Rockhampton public has matured into citizenship because of the way they have pulled together in the search for Keyra.

Friday May 7 1999

The story headlined "Body found" sees a return to the 'caring' theme and a revival of the 'threat' theme through the reference to the lack of action. But the focus remains firmly on the reaction of the public, and the concern and care its members showed during the two week search for Keyra. In its editorial the newspaper moved the theme into grieving over the loss of the child and community innocence: "The reaction from Rockhampton and the rest of Central Queensland during the past two weeks has been an outpouring of emotion and support for the family and Keyra".

Saturday May 8 1999

The headline "Time to grieve" reproduces a presumed response by the public in terms of a directive: as a caring public, we are all required to grieve at this time. The story relates the placing of floral tributes at the site of Keyra's abduction by students, staff and other individuals in a very public outpouring of grief. The flowers stayed there for one month. For a week they were protected from the elements by a

tarpaulin erected by the State Emergency Service. The themes expressed in this story included developments on the 'caring' theme, with discussion of the shared sense of community grief and the community's coming to terms with the tragedy. This theme was further explained through details about the support Keyra's schoolmates were receiving from the community. This was evident in the following lines: "School principal Cecily Andersen said the messages of love from the community helped her, parents, staff and students go on. Hundreds of faxes and letters from throughout Australia have been sent to the school and students are making good use of the 20 teddy bears supplied by Big W".

As well as the community showing its support, corporate Australia also contributed by donating cuddly teddy bears. The theme of community support is further expanded and heightened in importance when the School principal is further quoted: "It's healing, the flowers and teddies have come to mean so much. They have been what's held the kids together. It has enabled us to keep going. This is the worst thing that can ever happen to the community". But it is within the preceding paragraph that this theme is realised to its full extent: "While a team of counsellors is helping the children – some with bad dreams and breathing problems – the community support is the key to the school's strength". Here we are told that it is only because of the huge outpouring of support from all sectors of the community that the school has been able to withstand this tragedy.

In stark contrast to this outpouring of emotion on page one of the *Morning Bulletin* there is a side bar that details the court appearance of the man accused of and charged with murdering Keyra. The contrast is apparent in the paragraph: "Fraser, unemployed, showed no emotion as Magistrate Trevor Black read the charges". This line creates a highly diametrical image. On one hand the wider public is grieving, while on the other the accused is not, remaining unemotional and unshaven (or uncaring) during the court proceedings.

Monday May 10 1999

The second last day of coverage of the incident sees the headline "Funeral Today" accompanied by a full colour photograph of the flower and gift tributes left at the site of Keyra's abduction. The public's concern is evident in the actions of the State Emergency Service whose members "stretched a tarpaulin over the tributes to protect them from the weather" and in "a constant pilgrimage, people of all ages converged on the scrub land, at the corner of Dean and Robinson streets, throughout the weekend to pay respects to the nine-year-old murdered school girl". The newspaper published some of the notes left to Keyra. The Queensland government also expressed its concern by donating \$30,000 towards a memorial for Keyra to be built on the site of her abduction. All of these descriptions and details constructed a sense of a communal culture with a distinct set of values and ideals.

Tuesday May 11 1999

The final instalment of what had become a two-week long outpouring of community anger, pride and love appears in the *Morning Bulletin's* Tuesday May 11, 1999 edition. The two-page spread on her funeral was headed "Goodbye Keyra". We saw ordinary members of the community along with those who knew her and those who searched for her, expressing their grief over the events. The article positioned the entire Rockhampton public as being moved by the funeral and even induced the image of a higher power also being moved by the events: "Yesterday morning it

seemed, the sky cried for Rockhampton". This theme is continued in the following sentence: "Residents of the city which had lost a precious daughter gathered to support family members who had lost their little girl". The caring was also reported to be felt nationally when the *Morning Bulletin* told the public that thousands of people across the nation were significantly affected by the nine-year-old's abduction and murder.

Conclusion: Constructing culture and community

This case study has identified five key themes which are closely connected to the meanings, values and ideals that contribute to the expected culture of Rockhampton and its publics. It is through the establishment and reiteration of these themes that the *Morning Bulletin* acts as a key cultural institution within the community. In the process of describing a series of actions and values from a few individuals, it establishes these actions and values as desirable, but also creates a public in the collective imaginary, by describing and defining selected individual actions as metonymic for the community. The *Morning Bulletin* fulfils its role as a cultural institution by constructing a culture—the meanings, values and ideals—of the community as a public through its representation of individual actions and speech, within the texts it publishes. In this process the *Morning Bulletin* not only maintains the idea of community and its sense of self and order, but also transforms the community by feeding back into the social behaviour of individuals into a media public. Halls' argument (1992) that the media produces and maintains the culture of a community is well and truly demonstrated in regional media such as the *Morning Bulletin*.

These portrayals of culture do not so much reflect, as actively construct the way good citizens should act and behave. By publishing reports of events in terms of *affects* such as shock, grief, and anger, the newspaper generates an illusion of direct, unmediated communication, loaded with moral imperatives on how one should feel about an event. In this way, the newspaper encourages individual readers to be part of a living, breathing and feeling community unified by emotional affects as a common experience. The repetition of the two main themes—caring and belonging—helps to create this *sense* of communal unity. Or, as Carey suggests, the media holds together the community in a "discontinuous world" (1988: 15). The "consensus narratives" (15) portrayed in this study, through the themes of caring and belonging, frame the experiences of the public in relation to this event and assist the public to come to terms with it. But it does so by actively creating a media public, which is summoned into existence through a process of 'media osmosis' between on one hand media reports and, on the other, individual and group action.

The representation of the community is, as Meadows (1998) suggests, a process by which the media manages cultural goods. This case study also shows that the discourses produced by the media are powerful and abiding (Hall, 1992). This power resides in the discourses about readership, community and publics produced by the journalists, but more importantly in the discourses produced in newspaper texts (written and composed by journalists and media workers) about the culture of the Rockhampton community and its members.

Hartley (1996) suggests that journalists construct news reports within a frame of reference that is centred around readership. In the Keyra Steinhardt case study, the frame of reference for all reports was the notion of community and public and the newspaper's readership was portrayed as an intrinsic part of this. This meant that the discourses of news reporting became intrinsically linked to the concept of

readership, and by extension the concept of the public, held by the newspaper. Through reading the newspaper the reader did not simply read about the abduction and murder of a Rockhampton school girl, but was interpellated into the imagined community of the public as one of its members. This public was imagined as a tight-knit group of people, embodying the spirit of rural Australia through their capacity to express care and concern.

The journalists interviewed for this study based their ideas of the public on stereotypical characteristics including the capacity to feel certain emotions and moral sentiments. These characteristics were then universally applied to an imagined readership to form what can be called a *media public*. The Rockhampton media public is linked to the idea of a ruralised community, whose sensibility is based on authentic emotions and moral sentiments, somewhat removed from metropolitan life. Here the community is imagined as down-to-earth, innocent and ignorant of the evils of city life, such as child murders. There is a symbiotic relationship between the journalists' constructions of a media public, and the kinds of themes they express in their stories. The construction of a ruralised media public strongly circumscribes what members of that public can do, the standards of morality and behaviour expected of them, and most importantly, the reactions members of that public should have to such events as the Keyra Steinhardt abduction and murder. Such reactions were part of the process of shaping the concept of regionality.

During the coverage of this event, individuals responded to the *Morning Bulletin's* expressions of care and concern for the community, drawing them into the media public. This led to the perpetuation of a media event in which the media reports triggered physical reactions by the public who became searchers, mourners, and participants in the event, which, in turn, led to more media reports, and so forth. Indeed, it is almost impossible to imagine the entire Keyra Steinhardt affair without its media coverage, as individuals came to recognise themselves as part of the public and by extension the Central Queensland community during the two weeks of coverage of the event.

As Grossberg (1992) suggests, newspaper texts construct their own audience. Many of the themes expressed in the newspaper articles discussed in this paper were a reworking of existing ideas and values held about the Rockhampton community. However, it was in the reworking and recirculation of these themes that they gained extraordinary power not only to represent the public, but in the way the public recognised itself and consequently reacted to those representations. The texts constructed a public which came, through the newspaper texts, to understand itself as a group of caring people. While the majority of the Rockhampton community did not know Keyra Steinhardt before her disappearance, the *Morning Bulletin's* coverage constructed her as 'one of our own' and as a member of the community. This point was well made by one journalist at the *Morning Bulletin*: "The news story is almost a parable."⁶

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