

## 'The Snowtown we know and love': Small newspapers and heinous crimes

KRISTY HESS AND LISA WALLER

School of Communication and Creative Arts, Deakin University, Geelong, VIC, Australia

### Abstract

*This paper examines the role of small newspapers in Australia when bizarre and shocking crimes are committed locally. These crimes often attract intense media attention that casts a net of shame across entire townships through their representation as places of fascination and fear in the public imagination. We take a practice approach in the tradition of Pierre Bourdieu to explore the complex editorial considerations, news judgements and community responsibilities small newspapers must negotiate when covering these stories for local audiences. This study focuses on three towns in regional Australia that have been represented in metropolitan and international news media as 'dead zones' after shocking crimes: Bowral in NSW, Snowtown in South Australia and Moe in Victoria.*

**Keywords:** Snowtown, Moe, backpacker murders, media power, crime, regional newspapers, social capital

### INTRODUCTION

The rural hamlet of Snowtown is synonymous with one of Australia's worst serial killings. In May 1999, the remains of eight bodies were found in barrels of acid inside an abandoned bank in the town's main street. The tiny South Australian community became infamous immediately. As journalist Peter Horan described it '... evil had put Snowtown on the map' (Haran, 1999, p. 8). Regional radio reporter Andrew Male reflected on the media coverage of the murders in his blog for the ABC.

From the media's perspective and by extension, that of the general public, the whole messy affair became known as 'Snowtown'. That's understandable. Snowtown fits neatly in a headline. Most people in South Australia know where it is and there's just enough distance from the main audience in Adelaide to create a comforting sense of 'otherness' that generates a bit of dramatic tension. (Male, 2010)

Headlines in national newspapers highlight the mark of shame placed on Snowtown: 'Town's image bloodied' (1999), 'Place of great wickedness' (1999), 'The day the sky fell in at Snowtown' (1999), 'Snowtown horror' (Haran, 1999), 'Vault of death' (Phillips, Pudney, Merriman, Steene, & Mell, 1999). In 2011, the film *Snowtown*, based on the story behind the killings, premiered at the Adelaide Film Festival. Its release coincided with

the 12-year anniversary of the killings. Chairman of the Snowtown Community Management Committee Paul McCormack, said that while he was pleased the film did not portray the community of Snowtown in a negative way, the town was tired of being associated with the killings:

None of the victims or perpetrators were from Snowtown, only one murder was committed there and the bodies in the barrels were moved to the town's disused bank building only shortly before their discovery. (Fenton, 2010)

This paper focuses on the role of the small regional newspaper in reporting of heinous crimes. Specifically, it examines these newspapers' editorial considerations, news judgements and community responsibilities in the coverage of three of Australia's most infamous cases including the Snowtown killings, the Backpacker Murders in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales during the 1990s, and in Victoria, the bizarre circumstances surrounding the death of toddler Jaidyn Leske near Moe in 1998. We consider the news media's ability to define reality as a form of power (Carey, 1985; Couldry, 2009; Couldry & Curran, 2003) and highlight how regional newspapers combat negative representations of their communities in the metropolitan media. This paper suggests that along with primary news values, a sense of community and localness shapes regional newspaper coverage of these stories. An

apparent invigoration of trust in the local newspaper and its role as a community leader will also be explored.

### THE MEDIA'S POWER TO IMAGINE

There is a rich vein of literature that discusses the media's ability to shape and define reality as a potent form of social power (Carey, 1985; Couldry & Curran, 2003; cf. Entman, 2010; Hall, 1992; Silverstone, 2007). Anderson (1983) argues that society has become so large and complex that people can no longer be personally familiar with it, so instead they rely on the news media as their window on the world. Anderson has coined the term 'imagined community' to describe this 'dramatisation' of society that the media presents. In this view, news is not a true reflection of 'the events of the world out there', but constructed through the collective cultural codes of those employed to do this 'selective and judgemental work for society' (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976, p. 14). News values are arguably the most powerful of these collective cultural codes for defining reality (Galtung & Ruge, 1981; cf. Hall, 1973; Tuchman, 1978). For example, Noelle-Neumann (1993) says there is a shared set of assumptions that all news people have on criteria for acceptance of stories by audiences. Evensen (2008) lists these as conflict, consequence, prominence, timeliness, proximity, and human interest. Lang and Lang (1981) distinguish between 'low threshold issues' and 'high-threshold issues' in news. Low threshold issues are those that people experience personally in their everyday lives. High threshold issues are those of which they have no firsthand experience, so what they know comes to them indirectly through the media. They argue that the news media has the greatest influence on such high threshold issues because they are the major trusted source of information. Large news media organisations are therefore highly influential in imagining reality for their audiences in areas such as foreign affairs (Zucker, 1978), Australian Indigenous affairs (Meadows, 2005) and crime (McCormick 1995). While scholars agree the media has a power to define, Couldry (2000) suggests there are times when people question their trust in the media because they experience a conflict between their knowledge that

'this is what happened' and their assumption that a different version of it (the mediated one) must also somehow be 'reality' (p. 51). Resolving it means questioning the media's naturalised authority.

### ROLE OF THE REGIONAL MEDIA

A key difference between country and metropolitan newspapers is that country papers have more direct relationships with their readers because they tend to cover low threshold issues that involve local people, places, events and issues that affect their everyday lives (Griffiths, 1998). Their role in advocating for and promoting their communities is another distinguishing feature (Bowd, 2003; Ewart, 2000; Ewart, Meadows, Forde, & Foxwell, 2005; Jeffres, Lee, Neuendorf, & Atkin, 2007; Kirkpatrick, 2001). Research also indicates that regional communities feel an affinity with their local media outlets, while there is significant animosity towards metropolitan media (Harrison, 1986). Small centres rely on the local media's representation of their citizens' characteristics, behaviour and values, and public issues and events as the main means for recognising and 'knowing' the community. Ewart argues the process of establishing and maintaining a set of powerful norms of behaviour, appearance and characteristics for community members and 'outsiders' is 'played out through the texts of regional newspapers' (Ewart, 1997, p. 109). Meadows (1998) describes the regional media's methods of constructing social norms as 'consensus narratives' (p. 1) which not only convey these social codes to audiences but also instruct them in how to respond to events. He says the regional media can be understood as the glue that binds community members into a social collective or 'media public' through its representation of these norms.

The role of the regional media in generating this sense of community has also been linked to the concept of social capital. While there are a plethora of definitions of social capital, it has been used to highlight the relationship between smaller newspapers and the development of community identity, civic pride and collective involvement (Bowd, 2009; Ewart, 2000; Ewart et al., 2005; Kreuters, Young, & Lezin, 1998; McManamey, 2004; Mersey, 2009; Putnam, 2000). We take a cue from the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to consider

social capital as one of several resources used to create or maintain positions of power. He uses 'capital' as a metaphor to describe these resources which manifest in four forms: economic capital; labour, time and money, cultural capital; embodied and/or objectified in the form of cultural goods such as art work and institutionalised such as academic qualifications), social capital; beneficial social connections and symbolic capital; resources available on the basis of honour, recognition, prestige (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu also refers to 'habitus' (or the structure of dispositions, tastes, practical know-how, second sense) that along with capital equips social actors in particular social spaces or 'fields' (Bourdieu, 1977; Lawler, 2004) in their quest for distinction. Bourdieu argues an accumulation of social capital generates 'an extraordinary concentration of symbolic capital' (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 79) and a delegation is often formed within a social network to represent the group or speak on its behalf with the aid of the collectively owned social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Scholars have begun to consider how this might apply to the regional newspaper with social capital serving as a resource of power for a newspaper as a community leader and as an entity (Hess, 2010), a point which shall be further explored in this research.

#### THE CASES

##### **Snowtown horror: A place undeserving of its infamy**

Details of the horrific Snowtown murders came to light on May 20, 1999 when police found six black plastic barrels containing the remains of eight people in a disused bank in the town. The discovery was followed by the excavation of two more bodies buried in a Salisbury backyard. Later, police linked the 10 bodies with that of another man found in a shallow grave at Lower Light, north of Adelaide in 1994, and a man found hanging from a tree in Adelaide in 1997 (Debelle, 2003). Four men were convicted over their roles in the killings, including the sadistic mastermind John Justin Bunting, a former abattoir worker who is serving a life sentence. The case was shrouded in an unprecedented level of secrecy – no fewer than 220 suppression orders prohibited reporting of aspects, including the barrels' colour (Puddy & Edwards, 2011; Fewster, 2011).

Some metropolitan newspapers portrayed the people of Snowtown as the innocent victims of the crime and used news frames of 'lost innocence', and 'intrusion of the quiet life'. However, most coverage associated Snowtown with horror and evil. The local newspaper, *The Plains Producer*, took a different approach to its initial coverage of the story with the front-page headline: 'Our Snowtown: A town rallies to clear its name' (1999). It published other stories such as 'Snowtown residents become reluctant participants in a media frenzy as "circus" comes to town' (1999) and an editorial 'Country people always pull together in the hard times' (Manuel, 1999, p. 3).

##### **Another body in Ivan Milat's killing fields**

The Backpacker Murders is the name given to the serial killings of seven backpackers – two Britons, three Germans and two Australians – who were found to have been violently murdered and buried in shallow graves in the Belanglo State Forest in the NSW Southern Highlands in the early 1990s. The discovery sparked one of the biggest murder hunts in Australia and eventually led police to road worker Ivan Milat. The killings made Belanglo State Forest a leading site on Australia's map of horrific murder scenes. Milat, who lived in the Southern Highlands hamlet of Hilltop, not far from the forest and about 15 minutes' drive from Bowral, was found guilty in July 1997 and sentenced to seven consecutive life sentences and a further 18 years without parole. In August 2010, other human remains not connected to Milat were discovered at Belanglo. National newspaper headlines included 'Grisly find reopens wounds of Milat's killing field at Belanglo State Forest'. In November 2010 a nephew of Ivan Milat was charged with the murder of 17-year-old David Auchterlonie. The murder was committed in the forest, close to where the backpacker killer's victims were found. *The Sydney Morning Herald's* headline said 'Milat link to Belanglo's latest grisly murder case' (Jacobsen, Fenely, & Cook, 2010) and *The Australian* announced it as 'Another body in Ivan Milat's killing fields' (Minus, 2010). The forest was described in the media recently as 'the notorious killing fields on the Southern Highlands of NSW' (Cuneo & Fife-Yeomans, 2010).

### Jaidyn Leskie: A little boy lost in a lost town

Victorian toddler, Jaidyn Leskie, was kidnapped and murdered in 1997. Despite leads, and the arrest and trial of a prime suspect, his murder remains unsolved. Jaidyn was kidnapped from the house of his mother's boyfriend, who was babysitting at the time. The circumstances around his disappearance and death were complicated by a pig's head being thrown at the house, other vandalism on the evening of the toddler's disappearance along with an alleged prank about the boy's whereabouts (Silvester, 2006). Jaidyn's body was found on January 1, 1998 at Blue Rock Dam near Moe (Gleeson, 1999).

Griffiths (1998) argues the metropolitan media portrayed Moe as 'rotten', moving beyond the reporting of the toddler's death to describe the 'tragedy' of Victoria's Latrobe Valley, a collapse of country-town innocence and a perceived growth of anti-social behaviour. Metropolitan news headlines included: 'The Valley of the Dole' (Tippet, 1997), 'Tragedy unfolds in a town long neglected' (McCaughy & Bodna, 1997) and 'Jaidyn Leskie: A little boy lost in a lost town' (Heinrichs, 1997). Griffiths says the negativity accumulated until 'bizarre' became a shorthand way of representing not only the crime, but the locale and its people (Griffiths, 1998). In contrast, the local paper, the *Latrobe Valley Express* provided a voice for the community by publishing a lift-out entitled 'Moe under the microscope: A detailed look at a town under fire' (1997) which featured 11 pages of community response to counteract the negative coverage of Moe. The coverage played a significant role in shaping local readership reaction – first by separating itself out from what were seen as problematic aspects of metropolitan journalism, notably invasiveness and sensationalism (Griffiths, 1998).

### METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to understand the practices of regional newspaper editors in the reporting of heinous crime. Cottle (2003) argues if we want to understand why media representations assume the forms that they do we cannot rely upon readings of media texts alone, no matter how analytically refined and methodologically sophisticated these may be. This paper explores the lived experiences of

senior editorial staff responsible for local newspaper coverage to develop precise understandings of the decisions and considerations which shape media practices in this context. We draw on the scholarship of British media studies academic Nick Couldry, who has proposed the study of 'media-related practices' as a useful theoretical framework for investigating precisely how the media shapes different areas of social life (Couldry, 2004). Couldry says the way to begin such a study is to find out what people say and what they do in relation to the media. Further, Bourdieu's tradition of field-based research takes a practice approach that provides the theoretical tools of 'habitus' and 'capital' used to analyse these local newspaper practices (Bourdieu, 1986).

Three newspapers were selected which included Snowtown, Bowral/Belanglo or Moe as part of their circulation footprint. *The Plains Producer* is weekly newspaper based in Balaklava, 100 kilometres north of Adelaide. Snowtown is located less than 25 kilometres from Balaklava and is included in the newspaper's circulation area of about 2500. *The Southern Highlands News* is published three times a week and is the only paid circulation paper in the Southern Highlands of NSW, located 100 kilometres from Sydney. It has a weekly circulation of 8100. The district encompasses the Belanglo State Forest. *The Latrobe Valley Express* has a Monday–Saturday average circulation of 35,090 and is published twice a week. It serves the wider communities of Traralgon, Morwell and Moe.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the current editor of the *Southern Highlands News* Mark Bransdon, the former editor of the *Latrobe Valley Express* Lynne Smith, who was responsible for leading the newspaper's coverage on the Jaidyn Leskie story. At *The Plains Producer*, the editor Terry Williams and managing editor Andrew Manuel were interviewed along with the former managing editor, Margaret Manuel, who was at the helm of the newspaper when the bodies in barrels were found in Snowtown. Data from the interviews were then open-coded and analysed for descriptive themes.

### FINDINGS

Five themes were identified that provide insights into the participants' experience of covering these

crimes and how they understand the role and responsibilities of their newspapers in presenting these stories. New media was not a consideration here as in most cases the crimes occurred before the explosion of the internet and print editions continued to take up most resources at each of the newspapers. The themes are news production, competition, advocacy, relationships with community and norms and identity.

### News production

All the editors emphasised that the day-to-day news production practices of small papers shaped their approach to covering the crimes in different ways to their metropolitan cousins. The practices they identified include non-daily publication, having small numbers of journalists and limited financial resources. One stressed that while metropolitan papers devoted many pages to the crime story, it was important for the local newspaper to reserve editorial resources for other community activities, or what the literature describes as 'low-threshold issues', to create a 'sense of normality'. Direct relationships with both sources and readerships emerged as a crucial factor. Participants said local journalists rely on their community sources for information, and knowing their readerships' needs and expectations provides strong editorial direction.

The *Plains Producer's* first stories on Snowtown were published almost a week after the story broke in the metropolitan media. The then general manager of the paper, Margaret Manuel, said its initial coverage was informed by news production practices to some degree because the metropolitan media had already covered the 'hard news' and they had to find a different news angle. The time lag in publication was also seen as beneficial. Andrew Manuel said it had provided the paper's coverage with the 'benefit of hindsight'. The newspaper is headquartered in Balaklava, which was also a factor. Margaret Manuel said: 'Because we don't live in Snowtown it is also harder to report ... In Snowtown we only have five to 10 people that the journalist knows, but in Balacklava it would be half the town' (Manuel, personal communication, 2011, March 12).

A lack of journalism resources affected the *Latrobe Valley Express's* coverage of legal issues

associated with the Jaidyn Leskie case. Lynne Smith highlighted the array of potential legal problems many small newspapers face: 'We all have defamation insurance, but it is expensive. We don't have resources, we don't have budget to do this. We err on the side of caution rather than be bold' (Smith, personal communication, 2011, March 18).

### Competition

In *On Television*, Bourdieu (1996) argues that competition drives the field of journalism. News outlets compete for audiences and advertisers using a number of strategies. These include breaking stories ahead of their rivals, which is underpinned by a range of journalism practices, including keeping up with the press pack so no news others may cover is missed. Bourdieu focuses on competition between large, national and international media outlets and describing the habitus, or second sense, of metropolitan journalists in knowing what and how to report news. One research participant expressed this competitive trait when she described the thrill of beating metropolitan news outlets to a story. Smith said the *Latrobe Valley Express* was keen to compete with its metropolitan cousins:

Competition to get the story first is very strong, we love nothing better than to get a story over a daily newspaper ... We wanted to get a good angle, we wouldn't give away a tip on anything – we wanted the story first. (Smith, personal communication, 2011, March 18)

However, others offered different understandings of competition. All expressed an 'us versus them' attitude towards the metropolitan media, but for most this was to differentiate their reporting practices, rather than participating in direct competition for stories. They saw themselves as catering for their own highly specific audiences rather than being in direct competition with daily papers. A strong distaste of city news media did emerge. Mark Brandson of the *Southern Highlands News* voiced frustration over a larger fellow Fairfax newspaper not sharing information but expecting his publication to provide it with information and resources upon request:

You don't get the heads-up. When they had that latest find of bones in Belanglo, the cops

were down there for a few hours before we even heard about it ... we find things out second-hand and the [*Sydney Morning Herald*] already been down there and we're supposed to be sister papers if you like, and nobody calls us until they want something. (Brandson, personal communication, 2011, January 12)

Participants contrasted the antics of the highly competitive metropolitan press when it descends on a small community with the local paper's approach. Margaret Manuel said working alongside the metropolitan media was one of the greatest challenges of covering the Snowtown case. She described the news teams from the city in terms of their large numbers, their tendency to flock together, having time and resources to wait around and as completely focused on getting the story. She said when there was an announcement or event they went into 'an absolute frenzy': 'They hung around in packs in the town. We never do that. There's too many other things to do. Too many other stories that we have to cover'. She identified 'competition' as a difference between their publication and the city press: 'We don't try to compete. Very rarely do we get a scoop unless it's because we know the people directly (Manuel, personal communication, 2011, March 12).

### Advocacy

Advocating for and promoting their communities has been identified as a key feature that distinguishes country newspapers from metropolitan publications (Bowd, 2003; Ewart, 2000; Ewart et al., 2005; Jeffres et al., 2007). Ewart (2000) has also argued that regional communities rely on the local media's representation of their citizens' characteristics, behaviour and values as a main means for recognising and 'knowing' the community. Research participants from the *Plains Producer* and the *Latrobe Valley Express* stressed that the metropolitan media's negative representations of their towns were in sharp conflict with local people's self-image and understanding and caused them considerable distress, which she said was evidenced by letters to the editor. The descriptions of their newspapers' role can be interpreted as a challenge to the power of daily newspapers' mediated

'realities' of Snowtown and Moe in particular, through their own coverage of the events.

The role of the newspaper as a leader and a voice for the community was described as a core editorial value at all three papers. In this way the newspapers appear to utilise the collective social capital of the community, as Bourdieu describes, to represent and speak on its behalf. All editors indicated the reputation of their communities had been damaged by metropolitan media coverage, which Lynne Smith described as 'like having a group of piranhas descend on the town'. They recognised their leadership role sometimes involved stepping away from traditional, objective reporting to taking a stand on behalf of their readers. As Smith explained:

We were concerned about the picture being portrayed about the community so we got together and ... decided we would put out a special edition about Moe because everyone was trying to get their views across, from the mayor to ... residents. They were all saying, 'Hey, this is not fair. There's lots of good things about this community, why are they painting such a bad picture of us?' They wanted us to do something. (Smith, personal communication, 2011, March 18)

Williams highlights the importance of this advocacy role for his newspaper:

It doesn't matter if it's about reporting Snowtown or whatever. Newspapers are seen as community leaders, as advocates. We have a really important role to help the community through tough times in a way. If we can use our papers to do that, then so be it. We still have to be accurate though, in what we report. (Williams, personal communication, 2011, March 12)

### Relationship with the community

Participants provided evidence of their publications utilising and accumulating significant symbolic capital, generated by their advocacy role and the positive sense of community they achieved with their coverage of the crimes. Their comments suggest that reaffirming community identity, collective involvement and civic pride enhanced the newspapers' power and status as a

community leader and as an entity. The editors stressed the sense of reader ownership of their local newspaper and expressed a sense of responsibility and empathy for their readers when stories such as these broke. Both Smith and the *Plains Producer* team described the overwhelming public support they received for their coverage. Margaret Manuel comments:

We normally get complaints over the littlest of things, like a spelling mistake on the crossword page, but it was humbling to know we didn't get anyone criticise us over it [coverage], only praise. We sold out of papers. (Manuel, personal communication, 2011, March 12)

Smith offered a similar view: I think our coverage enhanced our reputation. The feedback was excellent. We covered it fairly and presenting the special feature. You couldn't get a copy of the paper here through hell or high water (Smith, personal communication, 2011, March 18).

However, significant differences in economic and cultural capital between the town of Bowral in the genteel Southern Highlands of NSW and the socio-economically disadvantaged centres of Moe and Snowtown emerged through the analysis. This difference can be understood as the main reason for the editor of the *Southern Highlands News* expressing less concern than other participants about damage to the town's reputation by big media reporting. Bowral is well known for its wealthy residents, tulips, antiques, gourmet food and specialist bookshops. This generates a concentration of symbolic capital which can be understood to have insulated its reputation both inside and outside the local community, despite Milat being a local and the forest nearby described in national and international media reports as 'Milat's killing field'.

Editor Mark Brandson said the murders have 'sort of changed the town's reputation a little bit', but 'it's got so much going for it that people don't think about it too much'. He acknowledged that Milat was a local, but pointed out that he came from a small hamlet with a different socio-economic profile to Bowral:

The forest ... [is] a little bit out of the way from here ... so it's not like it's on our

doorstep ... Bowral is regarded as the snobby part with all the expat Sydneyites and things. And the ones with more money and things, hence all the coffee shops and the other towns [in the district] are more working class if you like. It's an interesting blend of socio-economic. (Brandson, personal communication, 2011, January 12)

All participants emphasised that they had higher levels of responsibility and accountability to readers compared with their counterparts on city dailies. They said this shaped their approach to telling the stories of these shocking crimes. Williams explained:

A reporter in the big city can hide behind their anonymity, come to a place, do it over and never have to face those people again. Even in their own city they can hide behind the front desk and not have to confront their demons in a way. [At a small newspaper] it's not what goes in the paper sometimes it's what stays out. That's not journalist creed, perhaps, but it's a fact. (Williams, personal communication, 2011, March 12)

Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' can be used to consider the particular dispositions or practical know-how required in a regional media context. Participants described their reporting practices as grounded in the intimate knowledge of the community that drives their 'news sense' on an everyday basis. Manuel said:

A lot of what we do and our approach to these stories is done subconsciously, because we live in the community and we know how people feel. We don't often consciously think about the best way to handle it – we just do it, it's just, you know, a knowledge you have of the community.

### **Norms, sanctions and identity**

Reinforcing norms of collectiveness, civic pride and camaraderie were important to the editors. Through these narratives that featured strongly in their coverage, the local newspapers can be understood to have reaffirmed the locally 'imagined' community, guiding their readers in how to respond to the events themselves as well as the national media's depiction

of their towns. As Meadows (1998) has observed of regional media, by reinforcing their towns' positive self-image and binding community members into a social collective, the newspapers maintained a set of powerful norms of behaviour, appearance and characteristics for both community members and 'outsiders', such as the metropolitan media. When asked why *The Plains Producer's* first article featured the headline 'Our Snowtown', Williams replied: 'I think it's a way of tucking them under your wing a bit. They are out there and we are there to support them, that's what country folk do' (Williams, personal communication, 2011, March 12).

Williams reflected on the newspaper's coverage of an incident in 2009 when Snowtown suffered a further blow to its reputation. A man had gone on a rampage in Snowtown, driving his car directly at a motorist standing next to his truck, before driving his car into another vehicle and then slashing the throats of its two occupants. Four people were taken to hospital with injuries. Williams said the local newspaper responded to the big media's angle with a double-page spread counteracting the negative attention with a page dedicated to facts about the bizarre event and another page featuring stories under the banner 'The Snowtown we know and love' where reporter Parker (2009) writes:

With a swarm of media descending on the town, locals were concerned for their community's reputation, overruling it all was the strong sense of community – a town wanting to be known and recognised for its merits rather than its past (p. 15).

Margaret Manuel also discussed the community's reliance on the newspaper's representation of its citizens' identity, behaviour and values. She said it helped them to cope with the big media's representation of their town:

I thought it was important to say that country people pull together in the hard times, it's the good part about living in the country. People accept each other because they have to. They are so small and connected. (Manuel, personal communication, 2011, March 12)

Manuel also recalled that a local woman had tried to capitalise on the Snowtown murders by

selling fridge magnets, which was condemned in the newspaper. It highlights the newspaper's power to patrol the boundaries of accepted norms and behaviour for a community (Meadows, 1998). She said it was unlikely the woman had proceeded with the proposed enterprise after the newspaper published a critical story: 'That went down like a lead balloon. We wrote a story but I can't remember the details. We would not have supported that' (Manuel, personal communication, 2011, March 12).

## CONCLUSIONS

As Couldry (2002) suggests, there are times when people experience a conflict between their lived experience of issues and events and mediated versions of the same things, which leads them to question and challenge the media's power to represent 'reality'. The editors interviewed for this study said their readerships were outraged and frustrated by the metropolitan media's depiction of their towns as sites of evil. They looked to their local media to contest these big media portrayals and the newspapers responded by reinforcing the positive characteristics, norms and values of their local 'imagined community'. They utilised the collective social capital of the citizens they represent and the mood of solidarity generated by the 'city versus country' divide. Advocacy journalism practices and special editorials are examples of the small papers' power to reassert locally mediated definitions of 'reality'. These practices can also be understood to have contributed to enhancing the newspapers' reputations which translates into a form of symbolic capital. This is evidenced through the praise and support editors said they received from readers and apparent circulation increases in the weeks after the initial stories surrounding each crime. There is also evidence of the editors' habitus guiding their decisions on coverage and journalism practices with comments such as 'We don't often consciously think about the best way to handle it – we just do it, it's just ... a knowledge you have of the community'.

Differences in economic and cultural capital between the affluent town of Bowral and the more marginalised centres of Moe and Snowtown meant their representation as places of fascination

and fear had a greater impact and was more challenging to counteract at the local level. The Backpacker Murders took place in close proximity to Bowral, closer than the distance between Snowtown and *The Plains Producer's* headquarters in Balaklava. Yet the Belanglo State Forest appears to be beyond the imagined perimeter of the Southern Highlands community. There are no neighbourhoods or streets in this dead zone which need to be 'tucked under the wing' of the local newspaper in a show of solidarity and support. This sense of distance and disconnection from the forest and the murders is amplified by Bowral's strong self-image and public identity as a sophisticated place with socio-economic power. This research acknowledges that while small newspapers do not have the power to overturn the negative representation of their communities in the international and national news media, the evidence suggests they do have the authority to instruct their readerships in how to respond to the events themselves and the big media's representation of their communities. Small newspapers throw off the big media's framing of their towns as places of 'great wickedness' by reinforcing the community characteristics and values readers 'know and love'.

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