AFTERSHOCK

A cultural analysis of the Canberra Hospital implosion

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

Kaaren Blom

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Abstract

The death of a child spectator at the implosion of the Royal Canberra Hospital on 13 July 1997 was an accident that had a profound impact on the local community, prompting a significant discursive response. The hospital had long been domesticated in the imaginations of those who formed its ‘community’. It was situated within a complex web of social and cultural relationships that bound people to the building as a place with particular claims on their sense of self, their sense of community and their sense of place. The prospect of its demolition by implosion, six years after its 1991 closure, caused both anguish and excitement in that ‘community’. Promoted as a public spectacle, the implosion was planned as an orchestrated collision between past and future that would enable an instantaneous obliteration of the past in order to create a site of future opportunities. When it resulted instead in a failed demolition and the death of a child, the reversal of popular expectation precipitated not only shock, grief and guilt, but also a widespread state of ontological instability.

As the reverse of the intentional, the accidental is aligned with the resistant, the oppositional, the contested and the anarchic. Seen by some as a reified agent of opposition, the hospital appeared to have exercised resistance in an excessive manner, unleashing a powerfully disruptive force that escaped the restrictions that ought to have kept it in check. The implosion was a traumatic event that violated people’s assumptions about their world and themselves. Its aftermath was a time of uncertainty and blurred boundaries, in which discursive attempts to make sense of the disaster can be seen as attempts to make sense of death itself. The spectacular entertainment was swiftly reframed as ‘sacrifice’ and ‘disaster’, the media and the public readily appropriating archetypal, mythic narratives to assist them in the co-production of a textualised, dialogic attempt to discursively reconstruct their fractured body politic. The post-implosion discourse not only articulated people’s concerns with identity, community, history, memory and power, but also expressed a profoundly metonymic relationship between the hospital body, the child’s body and the civic body.

If a certain fascination with death and disaster had contributed to the event’s popular appeal before the implosion, it was compounded by feelings of guilt and shame in the event’s tragic aftermath. Those feelings, shared by public and journalists alike, were given expression in the mediated discursive space of The Canberra Times and other media outlets, resulting in an extensive rhetorical performance of witness, therapy and argument. The inscription of the texts
and images that were produced around this event stabilised the response to it in such a way that it could be examined in the future. In this thesis I use the diversity of voices that are held together in the discursive web that forms the textual fabric of this study’s empirical data, not to create a historical, single-perspective narrative, but to go some way towards re-creating the event, and the immediate response to it, by allowing that discourse to be re-voiced.

As the product of extensive cultural labour on the parts of those who produced it, the implosion discourse, of which this thesis is now a part, stands as a significant corpus of commemorative work. This discourse is evidence of an engaged polity – one that transcended the passive role prescribed for it of an audience as consumers of entertainment to become, through its own labour, agents, creators and performers of meaning. My central thesis is that it is in this cultural performance that the true practice of ‘community’ can be discerned.
Introduction

Context

Sunday 13 July 1997 was a glorious, sunny, winter day in Canberra. It seemed the perfect afternoon for the estimated 100,000 people (a third of the city’s population) who took up positions around the shores of Lake Burley Griffin to witness the demolition by implosion of the Royal Canberra Hospital. Among the crowd was the family of 12-year-old Katie Bender, who had made a detour on their way home from church to watch the promised spectacle.

The event, as it turned out, did not go as planned, for the hospital proved rather more resistant to destruction than those who had plotted its demise had anticipated. The first attempt failed, and after a lengthy delay even the second attempt resulted in only a partial demolition of the buildings. It did, however, result in a sizable amount of building material being expelled from the site to a distance of up to a kilometre. Rather than an implosion, it appeared that Canberrans had witnessed an explosion. Furthermore, not only had the explosion failed to demolish the hospital, but one piece of that expelled debris had travelled almost half a kilometre across the lake, striking Katie Bender and killing her instantly.

In this thesis I undertake a cultural analysis of the event, its location, its audience and its key performers, exploring the cultural meanings that circulated both before and after the implosion. Taking the event itself as the organising site for this research, I trace the vectors of interpretive and responsive activity along which and by which the event was transformed from spectacle to tragedy.

Historical background

Built in the early 1940s, for most of its life the Royal Canberra Hospital was the city’s only hospital. It is not surprising, therefore, that many Canberrans experienced a profound ‘lived connection’ with the hospital (Crang, 1998:103). The hospital occupied a prime location on the Acton Peninsula, on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin in the heart of the city (Figure 1). In 1991, however, after a study commissioned by the ACT Government determined that it was no longer economically or functionally viable, the hospital was closed. Its buildings were put to various other community uses, including student accommodation, and were gradually stripped of all equipment.
In 1992, an action group, the Canberra Community Action on Acton (CCAA), was formed ‘for the retention of Acton Peninsula for community purposes including the structurally-sound and valuable buildings of the former Royal Canberra Hospital; promoting the development of appropriate new uses for these buildings; considering and advising on the acceptability of longer-term plans for the precinct; and the protection to the maximum extent possible the natural, cultural and heritage values of Acton Peninsula’ (Australian Heritage Council, n.d.). This group was opposed to any change of purpose for the hospital site on Acton Peninsula, and significant numbers of Canberrans agreed, some 60,000 people signing petitions to that effect.

However, a change of purpose was indeed being planned for the hospital site. Since the enactment of legislation to enable the self-government of the Australian Capital Territory in 1988, the management of areas of land within the Territory had been variously ascribed to the
Commonwealth or to the ACT Government. The Acton Peninsula, with its hospital, was the responsibility of the latter. The ACT Government saw the removal of the hospital buildings as a means of removing a source of social unrest that had simmered since the hospital’s closure. The minutes of a 1995 Liberal Party strategy weekend, leaked to the press after the implosion (Figure 2), revealed not only that the party had referred to the intended demolition as a ‘bombing’, but that the buildings were seen as a ‘living reminder’ of the hospital’s closure and a source therefore of ‘sentimental baggage’:

![Figure 2 Extract from minutes of ACT Liberal Party strategy weekend](as reproduced in The Canberra Times, 16 July 1997, p.1)

After the 1996 federal election, the Commonwealth Government was determined to commence work on the promised National Museum of Australia. Chief Minister of the ACT, Kate Carnell, was keen to swell her government’s coffers with the profits to be made by land development. A ‘land swap’ was agreed, with the Commonwealth exchanging another lakeside development site at Kingston for the Acton Peninsula. As part of that agreement, the ACT Government was given a deadline of late 1997 to clear the hospital site (Carnell, 1997).

Meanwhile, community opposition to the change of use for the hospital site continued; indeed, it became something of a catalyst for broader disquiet among a polity that, in the years between the hospital’s closure and its eventual demolition, suffered an estimated 10,000 job losses from the Commonwealth and ACT Government services. For the first time in its history, Canberra was no longer a town in which the public service was the major employer. This resulted in a profound identity shift for the local population that was brought about only with a significant degree of upheaval.

Extensive public opposition to the hospital’s closure suggested that the buildings’ eventual demolition would be strongly contested. The widespread anxiety felt at the loss of this long-
standing public building, despite its being aesthetically undistinguished and functionally outmoded, can also be read as emblematic fin de siècle fear of the unknown and unease about change. It was a time, Huyssen claims, when an obsession with commemoration became apparent in Western cultures, produced by a widely-felt ‘desire to anchor ourselves in a world characterised by an increasing instability of time and the fracturing of lived space’ (2000:28).

In Canberra, the prospect of the hospital demolition seemed to concentrate a widespread sense that neither self-identities nor social and material worlds could be relied upon to continue – a loss of ‘ontological security’ (Giddens, 1990:92). For the ACT Government, therefore, it was imperative that the land exchange proceed as quickly as possible so that a source of community opposition and unrest could be removed. At some point it was decided that the demolition of the hospital could be turned into an entertaining event for the local population by conducting it as an implosion rather than by conventional means.

The event

Once the decision to demolish the hospital had been made, the date chosen for the demolition – 13 July 1997 – was promoted as a festive occasion, featuring the implosion itself as a spectacular and community-focused entertainment. The choice of time – a Sunday lunch time – ensured that the maximum number of interested people would be able to participate in the event. The hospital’s location, on a peninsula jutting into Canberra’s Lake Burley Griffin, meant that everybody would be able to access a viewing spot. So festive was the event intended to be that a local radio station ran a competition, whose lucky winner was to press the plunger that would detonate the charges.

While the public came with their picnic lunches and cameras, members of the ACT Government toasted the event with champagne from high in a nearby hotel that provided a bird’s eye view of the hospital. With an election only seven months away, they were hoping for a spectacularly successful entertainment that the electorate would remember favourably as one of the key achievements of this political term (Guthrie, 1997:A14). However, when the implosion failed to

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1 Since 11 September 2001, those fears have crystallised in the West into fear of the unknown (and imperfectly understood) ‘other’ in the person of the terrorist, and particularly of the terrorist’s appropriation of the ‘event’.  

4
be successfully concluded many spectators were secretly (and others not so secretly) glad to see the hospital defy its government-decreed condemnation.

The people

Drawn to the event by the inevitable part they played as its ‘audience’, were those people variously constructed as the local ‘community’. At this point, it is appropriate to pause and consider the terms with which an engaged populace can properly be described in a study such as this one. Terms such as ‘community’, ‘public’ and ‘audience’ are all problematic, for they imply an essentialised and uniform character that I do not wish to suggest is applicable to the people involved in this event. Indeed, the very concept of ‘community’ is critiqued throughout this thesis, in which people are variously, but cautiously, positioned as community, audience, public, witnesses and authors. I do this mindful of the hazards of appearing to essentialise those players, but wanting to acknowledge that there is evidence of cooperative discursive activity that can only be the product of people working together with some shared purpose.

In relation to the hospital, people are also constructed as ‘workers’, and the performance of labour is a recurring trope in this study. The hospital features as a past and present workplace, once for healthcare and now for demolition workers, but work as employment is only one dimension of the extensive ‘work’ that is performed around the hospital. There is the work of protestors, the work of all those with tasks to perform on the day of the implosion and then the tasks of response, of meaning-making, of mourning and of commemoration.

This, then, was a populace that evolved in response to the transformation of the event. Gathered beside the lake waiting for the implosion to occur, people configured themselves as an audience, their membership achieved ‘through mere attention’; while afterwards, many people’s engagement took on a more active and reflexive form as they began to self-organise through discourse (Warner, 2002:77). The authors of the texts and images that form this study’s empirical data have witnessed and borne witness – many with reluctance and anger as well as with sorrow. For some, the instinctive response to this breaching event was to blame; for others, it was to mend. Their evolving character as ‘audience’, ‘public’ and ‘community’ is dwelt on at some length in Chapter One, but is threaded throughout the thesis.

Responses to the event

The demolition by implosion of the Canberra Hospital was an event designed to be spectacular, but which resulted in tragedy. It was an accident that resonated, and continues to resonate, with multiple, conflicting significances for the Canberra community. Just as events occur at particular
points in time and space, so do the audiences that form in anticipation of, and in response to, their occurrence. When an event is transformed into a disaster, its audience is likewise transformed, and just as the transformation of the event is ‘accidental’, so is the transformation of the audience. Thus the audience may be described as being ‘accidental’ in two senses. Firstly, they are witnesses to, and even survivors of, an accident; secondly, what they witnessed was not what they had gathered to witness, that is, it is only by accident that they are witnesses at all. For some in the audience, like the Benders, even their attendance may be described as being ‘accidental’, their family not having set out purposely to watch the implosion.

However, at the time of the implosion, most of the spectators were unaware of how terribly wrong it had gone. Although people had seen debris raining down into the lake, it was only later that they learned that a child at a distance of 430 metres from the site of the implosion had been killed by a piece of flying metal. For many families that news was accompanied by the sickening realisation that they, too, and especially their children, had been exposed to mortal danger. In the weeks immediately following the implosion, people struggled to make sense of the event, to search for someone to blame, and to explain to themselves their part in an event that had tragically become the occasion of a child’s death rather than merely that of a hospital’s demolition.

*The Canberra Times*, Canberra’s only major daily newspaper, invited readers to contribute their stories to the newspaper, and over the following couple of weeks published some 70 Letters to the Editor and some longer opinion pieces that related to the implosion. There were also substantial pieces of writing contributed by *The Canberra Times*’ own journalists, and interstate newspapers featured the story along with analysis of what it meant for the Canberra community and even the nation as a whole. As Greenberg argues, these news media are sites in which we may find evidence of how communal processes of meaning-making are performed:

As a claims making arena where the cultural meanings of circumstances and events are constructed, news discourse provides a rich source of data for examining how everyday issues or events come to be defined as ‘social problems’, and offers clues as to how meaning will be negotiated and understood by the public. (2002:182)

It may not have been a disaster on a global scale, but the Canberra Hospital implosion nevertheless occasioned a rich vein of cultural expression, not dissimilar to that generated by communities affected by much more widespread or profound crises. This is particularly apparent in the post-implosion Letters to the Editor, where, while people’s opinions were still in flux in the aftermath of the event, writers argued for various normative positions, using a range of rhetorical strategies. These texts, which form a large part of the empirical data for this study,
explore the significance of both the material and the symbolic dimensions of the event, as does the thesis itself.

The thesis also considers other texts, including editorials, opinion pieces, cartoons and photographs. The visual material is given special consideration, given the primacy that the spectacular was accorded in the preparations for, and aftermath of, this event. The thesis also notes the significant non-textual responses to the implosion that were performed in its aftermath. Such responses often 'speak' more eloquently than do texts of the unspeakable silence and profound inarticulateness that tragedy inflicts upon those whom it affects most deeply. The cognitive, affective and active dimensions of such responses are therefore also considered.

While this accident may have been only a minor disaster in global terms, nonetheless, the significance of even a ‘minor’ event may be great for a particular community and it is the significance that the Canberra community attached to this event and its aftermath (testified to by the extent of their ongoing engagement with it) that renders this event a suitable subject for investigation. For many of its participants, this event was one of those catalytic occurrences following which the world was no longer the same – a ‘difference that made a difference’, to appropriate Bateson’s phrase (1972:272). This thesis will defend the ecological validity of the small and the local as appropriate subjects for study, arguing that when closely examined, they reveal a wealth of characteristics that are consistent with those that are discovered in studies of much larger and more far-reaching events.

Canberra people asserted their own knowledges of the event, relayed stories of their personal experiences of the implosion, and made their own interpretations of the event, insisting on the validity of lay or non-expert analysis. Taken together, these sense-making activities seem to be evidence of a communal insistence on the primacy of unofficial perspectives informed by popular morality. This is consistent with, and pre-figures, aspects of the British public’s reaction to the royal family’s perceived lack of public response to Princess Diana’s death six weeks later (Mirzoeff, 1999:245; Davies, 2001:101). In both instances the media endorsed these popular assertions by giving them space/voice. There were no grand narratives created in the aftermath of Katie Bender’s death, but there were passionate debates about the cause and the resolution of the failed implosion, quiet commemoration, and the shared construction of modest stories. This study explores how and why certain stories of the implosion were told, how knowledge of the event was created, and the ways in which a discourse around the implosion evolved.
METHODODOLOGY

This thesis takes as its originary point the implosion as ‘event’, and it regards that event, despite its apparent uniqueness, not as contingent, but as essentially characteristic of its particular place and time. It regards the implosion as a socio-cultural phenomenon that ‘contains all the threads of which the social fabric is composed’ (Mauss, 1966:1). Despite the problematic nature of any presentation of ‘community’, I will argue in this thesis that the possibility of community thoroughly informs the post-implosion discourse. Through studying the rhetoric it produced, this thesis traces the evolution of a ‘community’ that is itself produced by the implosion event. That community is positioned as audience, as witness, and as author; each modality of response being characteristically different but intrinsically related.

I approach this project from several different angles, each of which invites a unique method of interpretation. The intention is not to arrive at, or to formulate, some sort of synthesis, but to hold the subject up to the light in such a way that different understandings may be facilitated by each angle of observation. These different approaches together form a patchwork of heuristic devices. Such an approach is no longer unusual amongst qualitative social science researchers. Indeed, some go beyond the two-dimensional trope of the patchwork, into a three-dimensional model of multi-faceted exploration. It is an approach that Richardson describes as ‘crystallisation’, claiming that it goes further than the well-established strategy employed by qualitative researchers, that of triangulation, in attempting to counter the biases and limitations of the researcher’s single, vulnerable perspective (2000:935).

As no single point of view can fully illuminate the implosion event, an approach that considers the many facets that a ‘crystallised’ strategy presents for examination maximises what can be said about the phenomenon in question, while avoiding some of the limitations of too narrow a theoretical perspective. Even so, the field of critical hermeneutics reminds us that all research is interpretation, no knowledge is authoritative, and no description is value-free (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000: 285-286).

Many people sought to engage publicly in their sensemaking, through writing Letters to the Editor of The Canberra Times. The empirical materials that form my data set are cultural texts and productions, and records of personal experience produced, for the most part, in the immediate aftermath of the implosion. I have also accessed articles written by journalists prior to the event to illustrate the contested and ambiguous social and cultural context in which this event was to occur. Most materials were sourced from The Canberra Times in the month that followed the implosion, in that liminal period when the social turmoil that resulted from the event
was at its most expressive. Unlike conventional content analysis, the sampling strategy employed in this study was governed by theoretical and thematic considerations.

Using the Letters and other published materials allows for the expression of ‘multiple voices.’ I am mindful, of course, that the editorial selection process has already taken place – that is, that these Letters to the Editor have already been subjected to gatekeeping by the Letters editor. This filtering is then compounded by my selection, or determination, of what will be included or excluded in the final analysis. Nonetheless, and because I believe they form a ‘conversation’ when considered together, I find it helpful to think of the Letters as a whole, as an organic entity, or indeed as a text, not merely as a series of texts. Sanders suggests that texts, like textiles, be thought of as ‘weaves of presences and absences’ (1988:141) – a trope that usefully reminds us that there are at least as many voices or positions absent from the ‘text’ before us as are present. I spend some time considering the unspoken voices in the implosion discourse.

The diversity of voices that are held together in the discursive web that forms the textual fabric of this study’s empirical data are used then, not to create a historical, single-perspective narrative, but to go some way towards re-creating the event, and the immediate response to it, by allowing those discourses to be re-voiced. In re-visiting the verbal and visual discourses of the implosion, my intention is not simply to stand back and describe what I find, but to re-experience the discursive climate that the event engendered.

The context in which the Letters to the Editor were written must also be explored, and that involves more than a mere tracing of the implosion’s historical antecedents. The texture of the event itself is rendered rich for exploration precisely because it went wrong – it was the dimensions of risk and disaster that transformed it from a predictable occurrence to an unexpected phenomenon. As Wark says:

> In the flash-gun glare of the event there is a moment in which to peer through the rent in the fabric of the spectacle, to glimpse unexpected and powerful relations between things that the division of intellectual labors would normally consign to different patches of the crazy-quilt of knowledge. (1994:28)

As disasters go, this was a small and contained one. However, I argue that what is revealed by such an inspection is not dissimilar to the relations that can be glimpsed through the torn fabric of much larger, even global, events. To ensure that as many aspects of this event are considered as possible, the mode of exploration in this project must be one that facilitates a many-faceted inspection. My general objective is to theorise the practices of response engaged in by people who shared a particular experience, observing how they worked together, in a
textually mediated fashion, to negotiate a set of meanings for that experience. To this end, I use the techniques of critical discourse analysis to analyse Letters to the Editor and other published writing, and to embed that analysis in a broader exploration of the cultural context in which the Letters were produced (and in which the implosion was conducted).

Such an exploration requires the investigation of sociological, cultural and psychological dimensions of risk; of the diverse nature of audiences/publics-communities, particularly as they respond to risk/accidents/disaster; and of the rhetorical nature of the discourses that develop around such events as communities seek to make sense of them. The problematic nature of ‘knowledge’ – more properly thought of as ‘knowledges’ – is also a component of this exploration. The nature of spectacle, and of the visual more broadly, are also fundamental to this study. Issues of responsibility, trust, and truth emerge when examining the ways in which the social contract can be seen to have been breached in this instance, where the agency that invited the public to witness the spectacle that it created was the same one that the public trusted to exercise a duty of care in its actions involving that public. The event occurred in a context that was culturally complex, rich and thick. Thus it is apparent that the texts that were generated by this event, and the broader discourse in which that production occurred, cannot be considered in isolation from other aspects such as social relations, the environment and institutional structures (Gergen and Gergen, 2000:1031).

This thesis accommodates ‘a proliferation of voices’ and ‘a plurality of perspectives and interests’ (Grosz, 1986:204), and is broadly informed by cultural studies approaches. Wark describes cultural studies as having ‘pragmatically picked the eyes out of a whole range of specialised knowledges which might help create a practical knowledge organised around the horizon of the event’ (1994:ix). Couldry argues that ‘[c]entral to the tradition of cultural studies has been the argument that culture and particularly popular culture must be taken seriously as a site of meaning, creativity, agency, and identity’ (2006:2). In this thesis I have attempted to identify the ‘practical knowledge’ that participants in the implosion event created discursively in their own efforts to find meaning, agency and identity in the accident’s aftermath. I have therefore used whichever critical approaches seemed to best facilitate a richly detailed exploration of this event and the public’s responses to it. My approach is influenced by feminist research strategies that validate the personal and the particular, but does not take as its model the work of any individual feminist theorist.

Although all the empirical data for this study is in the public domain, the sensitivities of its subject matter impress upon me the necessity of remaining mindful of the complex ethical dimensions of my research methods as they are put into practice. I aim, following Kirsch’s advice, to be at all
times sufficiently critical of my motives as well as my practices, avoiding the ‘interpretive dilemma’ that arises when as researchers we fail to ask ourselves the critical question of whose interests are being served by our research (1999:45-46). Here also I am guided by the approach of feminist ethicist, Gilligan, whose focus on an ethic of care is centred in an appreciation of what it means to exercise both personal and communal values (1982). Insofar as the thesis itself performs an act of commemoration, I hope it will be read as an artefact of political activism that seeks to express ‘solidarity with, and agency on behalf of, the traumatised other’ via ‘the practice and analysis of cultural memory’ (Hirsch and Smith, 2002:13).

Analysing the historical ‘moments’ or periods in which qualitative research has taken place, Denzin and Lincoln identify the period from 2000 onwards as the ‘seventh moment’ which is ‘concerned with moral discourse’ and which ‘asks that the social sciences and the humanities become sites for critical conversations’ about democracy, freedom and community. ‘Qualitative research,’ they add, ‘is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world.’ Interpretive, material practices ‘make the world visible’ and ‘transform the world’ (2000:3). Such an approach is entirely in tune with my preference for a critical and feminist perspective on the research problem that I have posed. In fact, I would argue that the writers of the Letters to the Editor which form my data are themselves engaged in just such a ‘moral discourse’, concerned as they are with questions of ethics, propriety, and values and what it means to define themselves as a community.

Much feminist theory, such as Grosz’s and Gilligan’s, was shaped by the same influences that contributed to the articulation of critical theory, and both could be said to have been motivated (at least initially) by the recognition that ‘the world was in urgent need of reinterpretation’ (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000:279). In this study, I have tried to stay true to the ‘requirement to doubt’ that is fundamental to all critical theory: the necessity for the researcher to present her subject as problematic and to turn the same critical spotlight on herself (Patterson, 1997:425). Although I do not place my own lived experience at the centre of this study – it is not intended to be a work of autoethnography – I do recognise the relevance of taking a reflexive position, given that the experience about which my subjects are writing is one that I, too, shared. Indeed, this thesis can be seen as a delayed expression of the same sense-making instincts that impelled people to write to *The Canberra Times* during July and August 1997. I locate myself in this study as part of the audience, part of the ‘we’, who experienced the event. My voice appears in the analysis, the voices of other subjects providing the empirical data on which I reflect. To this extent, the study takes an ethnographic approach.
Using archival research to access all of the material published by *The Canberra Times* in response to the implosion tragedy, I have employed critical discourse analysis and rhetorical criticism to analyse the texts, focusing most closely on the Letters to the Editor and other writings produced in the event’s immediate aftermath. The thesis also examines a range of texts produced by journalists, including editorials, opinion pieces, cartoons and photographs. Despite employing a predominantly textual analysis, this study tries to avoid perpetuating the literary critical approach that focuses on the analysis of content, divorced from its social context, as is often the case when audiences are located as ‘interpretive communities’ (that is, readers) of media (texts).

I have chosen not to interview people about their responses to the event, as I am interested in the public, not private, expression of those responses. For my interests, the immediacy of the response is also important, rather than a response delayed by several years. The empirical data is a sufficiently rich resource that reveals multiple aspects, not only of the event, but of the perspectives of those who were its audience. While applying my own interpretive expertise to this media audience, I do not mean to imply any disrespect for that audience’s vernacular understanding. To do so would re-enshrine ‘the positivist assumption that the world contains immutable truths that can be discovered only through specially trained enquiry’ (Jensen and Pauly, 1997:160), and effectively abandon the cultural studies project of commitment to research as political action. Rather, I attempt in this study to use audience research as a means of bearing witness, as Jensen and Pauly suggest:

> We all create and sustain explanations and assumptions in order to construct identities, form alliances, make sense of things, and impose meaning and order on to the flux of experience. Audience research ought to bear witness to other people’s understandings, struggles, and purposes, and to our own desire to do justice to their stories. (1997:168)

At the same time, this study treats the key players as the ‘actors’ in a network of sorts. Although actor-network analysis (for example, Latour, 1999; Law, 1999) is not an interpretive approach that I will apply systematically in this study, I will use some of its key terms where I find them useful. Insofar as the hospital and the populace alike were enrolled by the organisers into participating in the event, the scene was set for the implosion after the manner of actor-network theory. The participation of the material element was ensured by its conscription and that of the social element by persistent invitation – their coming together, and hence, their relationship, was contingent on the work of the ACT Government. The result was that a network was established. Just as actor-network theory suggests that the texts and images that are produced around an
event are ‘inscriptions’ that stabilise the response to the event in such a way that it can be examined in the future, so may the empirical data that forms the basis for this study be viewed.

This study draws on Wark’s strategy for analysis of the everyday as it is modified and mediated by virtual, telecommunicated experiences, in which he suggests that media representation operates as a ‘vector’, or carrier, of cultural signification (1994). It is an approach to cultural analysis that enables the delineations of an event to be traced from their superficial appearance to their deeper, cultural significance. Such a theoretical approach to both the event itself and to the local community’s response to it is highly appropriate to the cultural analysis of a complex, semiotically rich event. This approach is supported by a range of other interpretive strategies, such as frame analysis, that I deploy to produce a multi-faceted interpretation of the implosion event.

Morley suggests that intellectual progress is better thought of as multidimensional or ‘inclusive’ rather than linear, with new insights being incorporated into the old ones, rather than replacing them entirely (1999:196-197). It is a perspective on the development of understanding that meshes well with my preferred approach to this many-faceted research subject. I found that the most rewarding views were obtained by viewing my subject through several different lenses, each of which contributed to a richer, more comprehensive, understanding. With each new lens, I learned to view my subject differently and became less inclined to think of it as something that could be essentialised or revealed as having one true form.

The event that is the subject of this study was characterised by movement, with two opposing forces in operation – one centrifugal, drawing matter inwards, and the other centripetal, forcing matter outwards. Obviously, the prime instance of this opposition is to be seen in the act of demolition itself, that was intended to be contained and inwards-moving but which instead broke its boundaries and moved chaotically outwards. However, similar movements can be discerned elsewhere in the study. The intentional logic behind the event, for example, can be thought of as working towards a convergence (Handelman, 1998) – a bringing together, not only of people, but of the disparate threads of their various histories. With the implosion a Newtonian equal and opposite reaction was triggered and the apparent entity of the implosion audience was fractured and scattered, destroying at the same time the illusion of the possibility of any such thing as a ‘community’.

Another powerful movement courses through this analysis. Cutting straight through the centrifugal and centripetal movements of the event is the deadly trajectory of the accident, the ‘incident’ that, far from being incidental, is central to the community’s experience of this
occurrence as tragedy. The vector, therefore, is particularly powerful and pertinent as the central methodological trope employed in this study, for it embodies a line of access that creates its path by slicing through the fabric of meaning, enabling not only destructive, but also interpretive, entry.

In contrast to the richness and complexity of the event itself, this thesis is lightly scaffolded onto simple, chronologically structured foundations. What is explored is an event that was located in a particular time and place, and which progressed through the stages of preparation, conduct and aftermath. While that simple chronology is unavoidable, I do not intend to suggest that there is a comparably simple, linear or logical causality in that sequence. Chronology alone would provide an inadequate schema onto which to map the multiple meanings that the event had for the many people who related to it as audiences of various kinds, and a simply chronological organisation to the arguments of this thesis might be misleading rather than useful. Interpretations of the event require it to be understood, rather, as occupying an unfolding and evolving multidimensional ‘space.’ This is the sort of space that was created dialogically by the work of the lay and media communities who sought to establish particular and competing meanings for this event.

Central to this analysis is a consideration of the ‘accidental’ nature of the event and its audience. The incident that transformed the event into both accident and tragedy – the wayward, unruly ‘flight of shrapnel’ that killed a child – cut a trajectory through the event just as the fatal metal cut through the air. Something that should not have been, an unplanned extrusion – the redundant material intended as debris – forced itself from the physical and ontological periphery of the occasion to take a central position. That which had been ‘incidental’ to meaning-making, by becoming instead an agent of accidental death, transformed the event from that which could be dismissed as merely failed spectacle to that which demanded engagement as the death of an innocent and vulnerable child. No exploration of the respective natures of this event or its audience can be conducted without first considering the accidental natures of both.

The eruption of that which should not have been, the accident, made itself felt, not only in the attendant audience, but beyond it in the wider community. It was an effect that overflowed, bubbled over from the immediate, proximate audience to the wider public beyond, so that within 24 hours the ‘fallout’ of the event was being felt by the whole ‘community’. Like a nuclear accident, it did not take long before those who had no involvement in the event itself felt its tragic effects. The event had been orchestrated as one of civic significance, and therefore, in some senses, all the city’s people were implicated in its scope. The event’s tragic failure, even though an accidental breach of the social contract, damaged the social fabric and brought about a
disjuncture in the popular imagination. In its aftermath, some in the community turned to textual expression as a strategy to restore ontological security. The resulting texts revealed both the fault lines along which the community had fractured and that same community’s capacity to heal itself by imaginatively restoring (or mending) those breaches.

In this study I will argue that the community that coalesced around the event was altered by the catalytic nature of that event – the audience for an entertainment becoming first the witnesses of an accident and thence a ‘community of sufferers’ (Fritz, 1961:684-689). I argue that a state of what I will term ‘ontological instability’ can be precipitated in a population by such a catalytic incident, regardless of its scale. An event is a tragedy not by virtue of its scope, but by the extent of its conformity to certain archetypal characteristics. Further, I suggest that the greater the degree of that conformity, the more powerful an imaginative hold it will have as a frame or ‘interpretive shortcut’ (Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan, 2002:8) for those who seek to interpret events after the fact.

My research is also informed by theories of text construction (text structure, coherence, functional-use dimensions, and the part played by non-linguistic knowledge in the sense-making process); semiotics (the ‘language’ of the implosion, its organising metaphors, and paradigmatic structure); structuralism (the investigation of conceptual structures according to which people perceive and attempt to make sense of information); and social perspectives (which account for the public’s responses as socially-situated products and processes).

A central research problem addressed in this study is the ways in which communities or publics work to make sense of certain phenomena for which they are repeatedly ontologically unprepared – disaster and risk. As happened in the case of the Canberra Hospital implosion, events are often defined as having been risky when they result in one or more deaths. Had those deaths not occurred, the event, itself unaltered in any other dimension, might not have been defined ex post facto as a risk. In the aftermath of such events people often agree that they should not have been taken by surprise, and yet such is repeatedly the case.

**SYNOPSIS**

The thesis begins, as did the event, with the physical preparation of the site, and the psychological preparation of the community. Both are made ready in somewhat parallel processes that required many months of work. Chapter One considers the material and place-based dimensions of the event and reads certain material artefacts, particularly the hospital itself, as texts and as actors.
Just as public opposition to the demolition had been a political threat to the government, so the apparent exercise of agency by a non-human actor, the hospital, was a trope with which many observers of the hospital implosion grappled. The hospital seemed to have resisted the control which the government had sought to impose on it by decreeing its destruction. As a reified agent of opposition, the hospital exercised that resistance in an excessive manner, unleashing a powerfully disruptive force that escaped the restrictions that ought to have kept it in check. ‘Anything out of control is always a potential threat, and always calls up moral, legal, and aesthetic powers to discipline it’ (Fiske, 1989:69). That disciplining of the unruly was largely performed discursively in the aftermath of the event’s tragic outcome.

In Chapter One, the work-based identities of past and present workers on the hospital site are considered as part of a larger exploration of the hospital as a significant contributor to people’s sense not only of place but of self. The nature and behaviours of the audience that was in attendance at the implosion are also considered in this chapter, as is the metonymic relationship between the body of the hospital and the body of the child. Although there is no direct comparison made between the two, there is a clear association made between hospital and child and not only because a part of the former caused the death of the latter. Rather, this metonymic relationship is implied in the ready transference of victim status from the hospital to the child.

Through semiotic analysis of a selection of photographs, diagrams and cartoons, Chapter Two considers the visual dimensions of the event which were central to its commodification and memorialisation. Noting the importance of touristic, consumerist and memorialising practices to this community, this chapter documents the transformative shift that occurred in the implosion audience from spectators to witnesses. A consideration of the work of journalists as key players in the interpretive community prepares the reader for the more detailed textual analysis that follows in the next chapter.

The focus of Chapter Three is the community’s response to what happened. Although the event drew responses from further afield than its immediate geographical and temporal vicinity, it is the responses that were produced by the Canberra community immediately prior to and after the event that are the focus of this discourse analysis. The implosion aftermath was a time of moral panic, of uncertainty and blurred boundaries. Certain agents of social control attempted to insert themselves authoritatively into that space. The work – or ‘practical accomplishment’ (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998:13) – of re-integrating society was, however, just as surely performed by the sharing of moral beliefs and norms in the Letters pages of the city’s daily newspaper. On those pages, uncertainty and fear were expressed alongside decisiveness and confidence, offering readers a variety of possible response strategies.
Using techniques of critical discourse analysis, I analyse not only Letters to the Editor, but also other texts produced in response to the implosion. The resulting discourse or conversation is observed, over time, to make use of certain rhetorical strategies and to rely on certain cognitive and affective strategies. The Letters to the Editor pages operate as sites of self-disclosure, on which the Letters perform a confessional function. They can be regarded as fulfilling a ritualistic purpose. ‘Rituals or expressive symbolic acts, whether they are witch-hunts, rites of passage, or lynchings, are produced by the same causal mechanisms. They are socially organised responses to uncertainty caused by strains in symbolic boundaries’ (Rose, 1999:224).

Chapter Four deals with representations of emotional, cognitive, moral and active responses to the event. Community responses to certain other disasters are briefly considered in order to test the generalisability of some of the observations made of Canberrans’ responses to the implosion. Regardless of the scope or the scale of the disaster, it appears that certain types of responses may be predicted. The memorialising instinct is one such response, and the ways in which it was manifested in this instance are considered in this chapter.

In the early chapters of this study, I note how the implosion event was increasingly constructed as a community ‘good’, and how opposition to the hospital’s demolition was increasingly sidelined in the media. In Chapter Five I observe that the conceptual frames by means of which people prepared themselves to think of the event in certain ways beforehand appear to lay the groundwork for the possibilities of response afterwards. Such frames determine the ‘kind of stories’ told in the media, which in turn help to determine the ways in which people ‘perceive, and feel about, public matters’ (Corner, 2000:392). The frames that appear to hold the strongest appeal for those seeking to interpret the event are those conforming to archetypal models with clear, normative purposes. More broadly speaking, media systems as a whole determine how contemporary experience is ‘themed, classified and imaged’ (Corner, 2000:394).

The frames, or interpretive lenses, through which the implosion may be viewed are primarily performative in function. From such a perspective, the implosion can be readily interpreted as ‘drama’, with actors/characters/players, scenes, plot/narrative/action and resolution. The actors are both material (the people, the government, the hospital) and semiotic (the various conceptualisations of the occasion and its aftermath). The frames of ritual and drama include those of carnival, sacrifice, disaster, fantasy, myth and tragedy. The other major frame that is that of risk – a frame that is primarily cognitive in function, requiring a more considered than intuitive engagement.
In Chapter Five, therefore, I explore what it is about disaster and risk that make them so difficult to contemplate and to prepare for in advance, and to make sense of in retrospect. I consider what it is about certain events, especially those promoted as spectacles, which contributes to that ontological difficulty. I explore the ways in which communities of people work together to formulate, retrospectively, such sense of disaster as they can make, and consider whether collaborative sense-making practices differ to those employed by individuals. This thesis addresses the nature of risk and disaster and the particular challenges they pose to communities (rather than to individuals) who are faced with comprehending them – in order to take either forensic or deliberative action (that is, to explain and thus understand the past or to plan for the future). I am interested in the strategies which communities of people use to represent such events to themselves, particularly those narrative strategies they employ when they ‘play back’ the events by publicly constructing stories about them.

Therefore, because it is the public, rather than private, context that interests me, I examine only those sense-making activities that take place in the public domain – those that are broadcast, published, or in some way promoted to others. The literature tells us that the public (communities of non-experts) continues to assess and appraise risk differently than experts, despite longstanding efforts to ‘educate’ and encourage it to think about risk in more so-called ‘rational’ terms. The experts’ attempts to address society’s lack of risk preparedness usually consists of promoting technical solutions, and this itself is evidence of a disjunction between the technological and the emotional perspective. It seems to me that this continued failure to align expert and non-expert perspectives is underpinned by a fundamental disparity in emotional commitment to the questions that risk and disaster pose. Communities are more likely to consider that their feelings are valid components of the risk equation than experts are, and this leads to a deep gulf which dialogue must strain to bridge.

The ways in which certain communities respond to the experience of shared risk (that is, having communally been exposed to a common threat to their safety) could be expected to be indicative and characteristic of their common cultural bonds, if such bonds could be said to exist in a contemporary, complex and postmodern society. Indeed, people’s efforts to make sense of the risk they faced may be understood as a search for whatever it is that they value in common with others, in which some aspects of ‘culture’ may be said to be found. In this thesis I propose that people respond collectively to risks and disasters in ways that at once display and help to form those values that are publicly ascribed to them as a ‘community’. While times of crisis prompt communal introspection and discourse on the nature of such values, it is within the nature of the crisis event itself that deeper cultural antecedents of these ‘community’ values are to be found.
Finally, reflecting on these explorations, I conclude that it is the labour of producing response that is the real achievement of this ‘audience’ – the shared-experience community of journalists and public who are its co-producers. The meaning and memory work that they do, both before and after the implosion, restores agency to people who had felt helpless when faced with the tragic and accidental outcome of an event over which they had no control. The achievement of this polity is not the restoration of an illusory utopian ‘community’ but the collaborative production of an accrued cultural narrative that enables meaning to be established and ontological stability to be restored.
Introduction

At its most fundamental level, this thesis concerns itself with the demolition of a building of civic significance that was accompanied by the accidental death of a child spectator. These two destroyed bodies – hospital and child – were not only causally but also figuratively related. Therefore no analysis of this event can ignore its material and bodily dimensions. With the scene for the implosion having been set in the Introduction of the thesis, in this chapter I introduce the key performers, arguing that the material elements play as integral a performative role as do the social elements in the implosion performance. As Risan argues, ‘[i]n networks of humans, machines, animals and matter in general, humans are not the only beings with agency, not the only ones to act; matter matters (1997).

My analysis of the material dimensions of this event begins with the preparations for the implosion and the state of anticipation that was engendered in the community at that time. My starting point is the hospital site itself – a heterotopic place that was at once a locale with a specific set of functions and an embodied signifier. In its lifetime, the hospital was part of a particular network of medical and allied health practitioners, support staff, patients, families, medical technologies and purpose-built facilities, in and around which complex cultural meanings circulated.

The materiality of the event was not limited to the hospital buildings, however. Public engagement with the event as an entertainment brought forth a host of associated material paraphernalia – the equipment required for photography, picnics, transport and commemoration. Not only did many of these everyday, mundane objects acquire new significance in the event’s tragic aftermath, some were applied to forensic purposes. In addition, the audience called into being for this occasion was itself a physical presence whose materiality was central to the event and its consequences. The importance of that audience’s ‘being there’, and its peculiarly ‘accidental’ nature, are also dealt with in this chapter.

Preceding the implosion were generations of affiliation between the hospital and its community (whether configured as staff, patients, or collective ‘owners’), a relationship that the ACT
Government specifically alluded to in its invitations to attend the event. The community protest that was generated by the hospital’s closure and promised demolition was indicative of how integral it was felt to be to many people’s identities. The Canberra Hospital was demonstrably a locality that was ‘densely storied’ for local people (McLeod, 2004:353). In the lead-up to its demolition, several of the hospital’s former staff were prompted to recall its place in their identities and in their lives, while workers engaged in the hospital demolition also shared what that work meant to them. The performance of recollection was important preparatory work for the community on the eve of the hospital’s demolition. Unlike the behaviour expected of them as ‘audience’ on 13 July, this work of reminiscence was ‘a spatial practice in which performativity plays a key role, it is not a passive consumption process’ (Bagnall, 1996:240).

Other workers ‘performed’ various roles during the implosion event and in its aftermath: police, emergency workers, counsellors and the like. The work of journalists was central to this event, as it is to this study. Their authorial performances (and those of other writers) are dealt with more fully in later chapters. In this chapter, journalists are considered as workers, as producers of certain kinds of labour, just as are those who worked in the hospital. Katie Bender, too, is identified as a ‘performer’, her public social role prior to her death having marked hers as a particularly accomplished, but also socially compliant, female body.

In this chapter I propose that culture was popularly incorporated in the bodies of the building and the child. I examine how this was done through an exploration of their discursive construction by the media and the community as they responded collectively to this event. The body as trope, given its clearest expression in the frequent anthropomorphising of the hospital, is challenged by the behaviour of the actual body that refuses to perform as directed. That resistance to direction is key to understanding why this event was experienced as so ontologically unsettling by its audience, and why the performance of response would be so widely engaged in in its aftermath.


The implosion was intended as the means of clearing the hospital site on Canberra’s Acton Peninsula in preparation for its future use as the location of the long-promised National Museum of Australia. Control of the site had been removed from an interested, local community that had personal and cultural investment in the hospital and transferred to a broader, national polity in order that the cultural interests of the latter group could be imposed on the site.

As the intended location for the institutionalised presentation of the nation’s increasingly vigorously contested history, Acton Peninsula was already redolent with conflict. There had
been conflict over the hospital’s closure and demolition, there soon would be conflict over the implosion and its fatal aftermath, and there would be, in the future, conflict over the form and content of the national museum. Indeed, the museum would become a key site in, and one of the catalysts for, Australia’s so-called ‘history wars’, with the country’s Prime Minister not only engaging in the battle, but endeavouring to engineer its outcomes (Marcus, 2004; McCarthy, 2004). The significance of this for the present study is its resonance with the post-implosion debate over meaning, significance and truth – in other words, over what should constitute the implosion ‘history’.

Even today the erasure of the hospital and the imposition of new buildings on the site have not entirely removed all evidence of that site’s troubled history and, palimpsest-like, their traces may still be seen and felt. Tumarkin describes places transformed by tragedy as ‘traumascapes’, observing that some places have their ‘traumatic histories printed onto them’ (2005:14).

Regardless of the uses to which they are later put or the buildings that are afterwards erected on them, ‘places of loss and trauma are never empty or blank’ (2005:225). It is immaterial whether those buildings are deliberately mundane like shopping centres or self-consciously flamboyant like the National Museum of Australia, and whether they are intended to efface or to commemorate the trauma that preceded their construction. Such sites continue to be ‘filled with meaning and history’ (2005:225). Haviland makes a similar claim, that commemorative sites are indexical of that which they have been established to remember: ‘the place bears the trace of the event that is commemorated’ (2004:287).

Back in 1997, however, the site was to be made a tabula rasa, on which new histories could be written. The ground was prepared both literally and metaphorically for this momentous event. The Canberra Times covered the preparations for the hospital’s demolition, its artists producing graphics illustrating how the implosion would take effect (see Figure 24) and its photographers given access to the site to get shots of the explosives being laid (see Figure 5).

Given that governments are typically regarded as having custodianship of ‘cultural heritage as a representation of the past’ (Middleton, 1999:118), the ACT Government, as the proponent of the

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2 For example, on 27 November 2006, nine years after the implosion, a memorial to the hospital was unveiled by the Chief Minister, Jon Stanhope. The memorial, designed to ‘keep alive memories’ and incorporating the original foundation stone, was dedicated, not on an anniversary of the hospital’s demolition, but on the 15th anniversary of its closure (ACT Government, 2006).
destruction of the hospital, was seen by many in the community as being in breach of that social contract.

The demolition of the former Royal Canberra Hospital was one of the main issues discussed at an ACT Liberal strategy weekend at Rydges Eaglehawk Resort, NSW, in December 1995 and leaked to the media. Under the headline ‘What are the big issues to be faced in the remaining two years of this Government’ response number 31 in the leaked document stated: “Bomb” the Acton Peninsula buildings. The buildings currently act as a living reminder of the “closure” of the RCH and all the sentimental baggage which that carries. The buildings should be demolished (the word bombed was crossed out) as soon as possible and the proposed Museum be allowed to get under way’. (Dawson and Ludlow, 1997:9)

While some in the community continued to accord symbolic value to the hospital after its closure, for the government of the day, the hospital’s capital no longer lay in the social domain, but had been transferred to the economic domain, where the hospital site now had value as a ‘trade’ in a proposed ‘land-swap’ deal with the Commonwealth Government. The hospital’s exchange-value now exceeded its use-value, but that exchange-value was contingent on the shift from the social (or popular) domain to the economic (and political) one. This swap would give the Commonwealth a prominent and picturesque site for the National Museum of Australia, and the ACT Government a profitable, high-density residential development site along the lake foreshore at Kingston. This transaction could only be enacted if the ACT Government deemed the hospital’s social capital to be inferior to its economic potential, and if the value of the latter prevailed.

The hospital site was thus an entity whose physicality could be capitalised upon – commodified and traded (Jagger, 2000:53). For the ACT Government, however, the body of the hospital had to be effaced before the value of the site could be realised. The hospital’s social usefulness had been discounted by those who had the power to realise this determination in financial and physical terms (that is, by closing and then demolishing it). Six years on from its closure in 1991, the hospital’s value now lay in its non-existence, rather than in its continued existence.

On the other hand, those in the community who opposed the closure sought to rehabilitate the hospital’s validity and even its viability by continuing to assert its usefulness long after its closure. Independent Member of the Legislative Assembly, Michael Moore, was quoted in The Canberra Times just five days before the implosion as saying, ‘It could have at least been retained as a community hospital, and I believe the subsequent growth in private hospitals bears this out’ (Cooke, 1997b:3). Some argued that, even if not restored to its former function, the
The fabric of these buildings is sound – probably in better condition than the Rocks area buildings in Sydney, which were once slated for demolition but now, recycled, are a great asset and tourist attraction to that city (Davey, 1997:17). For others who opposed the demolition, the hospital’s value did not lie so much in its physical form as in its significance as a site of secular spirituality and its unique \textit{genius loci} or spirit of place:

\begin{quote}
Has anyone really considered the implications of destroying a wonderful place where people may receive excellent respite and palliative care? Why not view the land as being of benefit, and exceptionally suited to patients, visitors and staff – if only for their wellbeing. What price human dignity? (Watson, 1997:15)
\end{quote}

While such contestation makes it apparent that the hospital was a heterotopic site, capable of accommodating and sustaining a multitude of incompatible readings, it was at the same time a site that was a source of shared meaning. As an institution of long standing in the Canberra community, the hospital was a place that had become ‘time-thickened’ with the accretion of particular repeated behaviours that provided ‘an anchor of shared experiences between people and continuity over time’ (Crang, 1998:103). More than a mere ‘place’, the hospital, to paraphrase Middleton, was a ‘representation to which people ascribe meaning,’ and thus able to be perceived as a text, and interpreted semiotically (1999:121). As Orum argues:

\begin{quote}
We are emplaced not only, or merely, because of special sites; but those sites, those places, become special because, in fact, they are the locations where our sense of who we are is constantly reaffirmed. (2005:4)
\end{quote}

The emotional and social significance of such elements within the built environment as schools and hospitals accrues by the exercise of functions well beyond their nominative service provision. Just as ‘cities function as a physical celebration of social activity’ (Middleton, 1999:117), so do hospitals, which are places of ‘felt significance’ (Pred, 1983:49). Just as ‘the city acts as a repository of people’s memories, recalled events and accumulated cultural symbols’ (Middleton, 1999:117), so does the hospital, whose functions are social as well as medical. Those functions are the very stuff of life – birth and death, hope and fear, joy and grief. Retired nurse, Barbara Jackson, wrote a lengthy valediction to the Canberra Hospital which was published the day before the implosion. In it she expressed a deeply-felt sense of the hospital’s place in a physical, social and emotional landscape:

\begin{quote}
Like many Canberra residents, the hospital has been the place where life has played out its full cycle. It has been a part of my life and many others, in sickness and in health, as the backdrop of the Annual Women’s Fun Run or boat races on the lake, from the joy of birth to the sorrow of death. Its death will also be dramatic and sad. (1997:C5)
\end{quote}
Memoirs such as Jackson’s operated as counter-discourses to the official narrative of the hospital’s obsolescence.

Although some observers saw people’s opposition to the hospital’s demolition in the interests of ‘progress’ as a refusal to accept an irresistible modernity (exemplified in such practices of economic rationalism as outsourcing), it was more than this – it was an opposition to a loss of identity and the removal of a significant site of social memory. Not only before the implosion, but also afterwards, several Letters to the Editor took issue with contemporary economic management practices, linking them with a lapse in the Government’s duty of care for its community. Ultimately some would claim that this governmental negligence was also responsible for the death of a child.

The symbolic import of hospitals may be attributable to a community’s ideas about local identity, sense of place, communality and even an ideological commitment to the provision of public health care (Brown, 2003:490). Hospitals also attain significance by virtue of those aspects of people’s lives, of their identities, that they assist those people to commemorate. Those aspects may even be the best dimensions of our characters, the most cherished ‘part of our inner landscape’ – indeed, even ‘the lost, significant parts of ourselves’ (de Botton, 2006:121). Little wonder, then, that the hospital’s imminent demise was felt strongly, even by those who may have been puzzled to have found themselves feeling such a sense of loss. Perhaps the anticipation of loss prompted feelings of attachment that had not previously been realised – after all, ‘the strength of our attachment to places … is often revealed in the emotions generated by the actual, or potential, loss of those places’ (Orum, 2005:11).

Discussing architecture that defies immense physical forces – bridges and lighthouses, for example – de Botton suggests that it is our admiration for such achievement that contributes to our sense that the architectural work is beautiful: ‘the impression of beauty we derive from an architectural work may be proportionally related to the intensity of the forces against which it is pitted’ (2006:205). Perhaps it could equally be claimed that people who attributed a certain

3 Foremost among these was the letter from then leader of the Australian Democrats, Senator Cheryl Kernot, which The Canberra Times titled, ‘Some things are worth paying for’ (1997:17). Kernot linked the hospital implosion with the bridge collapse that had occurred the following day at the Maccabiah Games in Israel, claiming that both accidents were attributable to the policy of outsourcing government services.
beauty to the hospital may have done so due to its many generations of defiance against the destructive forces of accident, disease and death.

While some in the crowd that day were prompted to recall the births that had taken place within the hospital, others would have been reminded of the deaths of family or friends that it had also been the hospital’s mission to watch over. The day after the implosion, recalling the colleagues with whom he had watched the event, deputy editor of The Canberra Times, Crispin Hull, wrote:

In our group several had been born at the hospital. We had experienced hope and fear there. We thought about our lives and those of people close to us. Motor-cycle accidents; births; disease and death. We thought about chance. (1997a:5)

However, the hospital as institution is partly responsible for the modern distancing of death from the personal or the familial sphere, sequestering it away and making it subject to the operations of a range of professionals. The hospital’s implosion literally brought death into the community’s midst, restoring death to a central place in people’s consciousness.

Jackson’s recall of the hospital as ‘backdrop’ to other, non-medical, events of significance in her own and others’ lives – fun runs and boat races – is a reminder that the hospital was also a feature of the urban landscape, not just a health facility. In their cultural production of ‘place’, many Canberrans located the hospital as both geographic and social marker. Moving from ‘backdrop’ to the foreground of their minds on those occasions such as ‘the joy of birth’ or ‘the sorrow of death’ (Jackson, 1997:C5), the hospital’s fundamental function in people’s lives ensured it a primary position in their affective relations with the city’s built environment. As Hayden argues:

Urban landscapes are storehouses for … social memories, because natural features such as hills or harbors, as well as streets, buildings and patterns of settlement, frame the lives of many people and often outlast many lifetimes. (1995:9)

4 Cordelia Hull’s memories of her daughter’s birth at the hospital infuse her memoir of the implosion (1997), which is discussed at length in Chapter Three.

5 The hospital had a strong claim on its place in the urban landscape, Acton Peninsula having been designated for hospital use by none other than the city’s designers, Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin (Australian Heritage Council, n.d.).
Sited on the lake foreshore (in fact, sited on a low hill which became a promontory only after the lake was filled in 1964), the hospital was readily visible to Canberrans as they went about the various leisure activities that were focused on and around the lake. Ironically, more than 50 years after its construction, that same feature of the hospital’s ready visibility would make the prospect of its public demolition both feasible and attractive (Figure 3).

![Figure 3: Acton Peninsula after the implosion](photograph by David Crosling, *The Australian*, 15 July 1997, p.6)

The relationship that many people, whether staff or patients, had had with the hospital is one that can quite properly be characterised in the terms used by Bachelard in his delineation of the ‘poetics’ of domestic space, in which he argues that houses are ‘physically inscribed in us’ and that they live in our ‘dream-memory’ (1964:15). Just as houses are possessed by their owners, so the hospital was felt to be owned by those whose relationship with it was passionately and deeply felt. Dant suggests that ‘[m]aterial objects might not accurately be described as having “a

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6 The foundations for the Action Peninsula Hospital began in August 1940 and the first hospital buildings erected on the site were constructed between 1941-43. The foundation stone was laid by the Minister for Health, the Honourable Sir Frederick Stewart, on 28 January 1941 (Australian Heritage Council, n.d.).
life of their own” but once possessed, they share the life of their owner” (1999:145). While it may not be usual for civic buildings to occupy the sort of place in people’s hearts usually reserved for their homes, the hospital seemed to inspire just such a response in some people. The meaning it held for former theatre nurse, Jenny Wetselaar, is not adequately explained as a mere place of employment: ‘I trained there, I worked there for 20 years, and I loved it with a passion’ (Burgess, 1997:4).

There is a pervasive sense of ownership of the hospital in these memoirs, such that might more often be displayed in people’s recollections of their own domestic, private places. To the extent that many of their families’ most private experiences (birth and death) may have taken place there, the hospital was ‘inhabited’ by its local community; and as Bachelard observes, ‘all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home’ (1964:5). Over time, this public institution had been domesticated by being appropriated into personal histories. Strong place attachment is produced through such accrued biographical experience (Altman and Low, 1992). More than this, place is part of us, not independent of us. ‘Identities and behaviours are both space-forming and space-formed, that is, inextricably intertwined with geographies in complex and contingent ways’ (Warf and Waddell, 2002:324). Material locations do not just hold memories – we are actively organised and structured into social groupings according to our location in space. As Urry has claimed, ‘social life is fundamentally organised through space’ (1990b:272).

*The Canberra Times* continued, meanwhile, to document community opposition to the implosion, some of which was expressed by its most senior staffers. In an editorial published on 4 June (1997c:8), Crispin Hull expressed his unease at the way in which the implosion was being turned into an entertainment (Figure 4):
Figure 4  ‘An unwanted circus’ (Crispin Hull, The Canberra Times, 4 June 1997, p.8)

Like his colleague, Robert Macklin, a month later (Macklin, 1997c:3), Hull expressed disapproval of what he saw as the impropriety of the competition to detonate the charges. That concern was separate from, and in addition to, any concern as to whether the hospital ought to be demolished at all. While he questioned the logic of making the event an entertainment, it appears that his concerns were related only to people’s sensibilities, rather than to their safety.

However, read after the event, a chilling prescience is apparent in Hull’s vocabulary: ‘Many people will be horrified’; ‘who gets to detonate the explosion’; ‘simply insensitive’; ‘The day those buildings fall will be one, if not of sorrow, then at least of remembrance for many Canberrans’; ‘obliterate its memory’; ‘a mistake’. Hull focuses on those aspects of the proposed demolition that he sees as being wrong, one of which is its being ‘regarded as ‘entertainment’. He depicts the demolition of the hospital as socially, historically and politically insensitive; compounded by a further error of judgement in making the event ‘a circus’ (1997c:8).
The term ‘circus’ is resonant with perjorative allusions. As entertainment used to distract a population from that which might otherwise concern them in the political sphere, a ‘circus’ (as Juvenal described it) is the calculated tool of a manipulative and cynical government. A more modern colloquial use also applies the term to occasions on which nothing goes to plan, to events run by ‘clowns’. Reportedly, one ironic caller to talkback radio used the word in this latter sense, saying, “It was supposed to be a carnival but it was certainly a circus” (Dore, 1997:15). Indeed, the event was promoted as something very similar to a ‘circus’. The promised spectacular dimensions of the entertainment, combined with the sanctioned over-turning of everyday rules and practices, were bound to ensure broad appeal.  

As 13 July approached, a tone of quiet resignation increasingly pervaded the newspaper’s coverage of the lead-up to the event. Despite chiding the local radio station that was promoting the event for the ‘callow’ tenor of its advertising, columnist Robert Macklin now admitted that, nonetheless, he ‘wouldn’t miss it for quids’ (1997c:3). In doing so, he expressed the very ambiguity that characterised many Canberrans’ emotional and intellectual responses to the impending demolition: a mixture of disapproval and fascination. Such a response was not surprising, given the hospital’s age and place in Canberra’s social history, paired with the community’s small-town readiness to be entertained by something out of the ordinary.

At that time, cuts to both Commonwealth and ACT Government departments, resulting in the loss of approximately 10,000 jobs, meant that Canberra was experiencing something of an economic and social depression:

Canberrans feel that governments have let them down in recent years, and Sunday’s events compounded their resentment. One talkback radio caller said yesterday: “Canberra has been assaulted by … the local and federal governments, and this is the last issue …”.

(Dore, 1997:15)

7 The destruction of property is not usually socially sanctioned – the activities of vandals and graffitists, for example, are typically regarded as criminal. So for a government to turn an instance of such destruction into a social occasion may be regarded as an unusual lapse of social control, were it not a time-honoured means of providing a potentially hostile community with an outlet for its aggression.
THE EVENT AS COMMODITY

During the hospital’s operational life, Canberrans had related to it primarily as workers and as patients; in other words, in a productionist orientation. Once it was slated for demolition, the hospital became the object of other sorts of labour related to its dismantling and the blasting technologies that were to be applied to that demolition were tasked with the additional purpose of facilitating a public spectacle. At that point the productionist orientation was superseded by a consumerist orientation, with the public now encouraged to engage with the hospital as a site of entertainment and nostalgia, rather than as a site of healthcare. In short, the socially-sanctioned meanings of the site were to be generated in a context of leisure rather than in one of work.

Both domains – the productionist and the consumerist – compete to be regarded within identity theory as the primary site of meaning generation. The latter suffers from a Marxist legacy that sees consumption only as a passive (and therefore, less worthy, less meaning-ful) activity. Nonetheless, it has been long understood that consumption practices have ‘identity-value’ and are used to express social differentiation (du Gay, 1996:82). Those in attendance at the implosion may have experienced the satisfaction of feeling themselves surrounded by a crowd of like-minded others – a satisfaction that Urry suggests is achieved when one feels that one’s taste is validated by the choices of others:

The satisfaction is derived not from the individual act of consumption but from the fact that all sorts of other people are also consumers of the service and that these people are deemed appropriate to the particular consumer in question. (1990b:277)

Certainly, as consumers of the event, they were incorporating that which they consumed into their everyday lives, and in doing so, producing meaning (du Gay, 1996:86). De Certeau claims that the signifying practices of consumers are invisible, tracing ‘lignes d’erre’ (literally, wandering lines) or trajectories that are not accessible to the strategic or panoptic gaze of the powerful producers of the commodities in question. He argues that these trajectories of consumer practice traverse ‘work’ and ‘non-work’, resulting in ‘these two areas of activity flow[ing] together’ (1984:29-40). The practices of Canberra people as they related to the hospital in work and non-work contexts followed such trajectories, some made visible in the textual form of published reminiscences. An occasion planned as a community event requires consumers’ individual social trajectories to intersect simultaneously in time and space. Therefore, those who chose not to attend, those for whom this was an event to be avoided (being, for various reasons, ‘not to their taste’) were also choosing to avoid that intersection of trajectories that occurs when an experience is simultaneously shared with others.
Both the hospital and the implosion event were re-appropriated. The hospital itself, having been stripped of its purposive identity, had been made available for transaction in the inter-governmental land swap deal and was thereafter commodified by being reduced to component parts of varied value – steel, bricks and rubble. The promotion of the implosion turned a historic event into a commodity available for consumption, packaged and promoted to its consumers, the event’s potential audience, not only by the Government but also by event sponsors, local radio station Mix 106.3. The station’s media release was quoted by Robert Macklin:

Join us at Lennox Gardens, one of the best vantage points from which to watch the implosion, set down for 1pm. We've got your seat ready! So get your family together, pack your picnic rug and head to Lennox Gardens for a truly spectacular event. (1997c:3)

A key rhetorical strategy employed in this invitation to attend the implosion was the normative suggestion that the public would have an emotional engagement (‘fond memories’) with a site that had ‘played such a significant role in Canberra’s health care’ (Section Publications, 1997). Although it is ironic that such engagement should only be invoked on the occasion of the buildings’ demolition, this is nonetheless an instance of heritage being used as a unifying principle to ‘construct’ community and of being ‘associated with and articulated through, emotions, memories and imagination’ (Bagnall, 1996:243).

Bagnall problematises the reading and consumption of museums and heritage sites, arguing that too often critics assume a simplistic transfer of nostalgia between objects and consumers. She claims that the consumption of historic sites is more complex than this, involving emotional, imaginative and physical mapping, and that key to visitor engagement with sites is what Ang (1996) has termed ‘emotional realism’ – recognition at the emotional rather than at the cognitive level of the ‘truth’ of an experience (1996:228-229). Although the hospital was neither museum nor heritage site, its place in local history ensured that people would engage emotionally, imaginatively and physically with it, and that their own histories would bring the requisite degree of emotional realism to that engagement. While such a response is the objective of the historical simulacra that are commonplace in contemporary museums, the Canberra Hospital site was able to genuinely ‘generate emotionally authentic responses’ (Bagnall, 2003:88).

The danger of the hospital having generated such a response, however, is that it may be experienced as a negative rather than as a positive thing. In addition to the carefully crafted and bounded reminiscences, unbidden responses may also be called forth. The emotional engagement may also be more powerful than some people care to experience – several Canberra Times correspondents claiming that this had been their reason for not attending the implosion. Prior to the implosion, the site had been marked by strongly expressed contestations
as its future was debated both in the community and in the courts. That sort of emotional engagement was not officially sanctioned, and there was no reference in the invitation to the protracted public protest at the hospital’s closure. Those who took up the Government’s invitation to attend the event were directed to consume the occasion in a strictly prescribed way – it was to ‘bid farewell’ and to ‘say good-bye’ (Section Publications, 1997).

THE ANTHROPOMORPHISED HOSPITAL BODY

Well before the implosion date, the hospital’s status as one doomed to die was emphasised by the anthropomorphic and organic metaphors used in the two most popular analogies used to describe it – one likening it to an old lady and the other to a bull. The former is doomed by biological (and hence, unarguable) age; the latter by socially-determined (and hence, arguable) function. The logical flaws inherent in both of these analogies are implicitly identified; in the first instance, by those in the community who saw the possibilities for an extended life span and purpose for the hospital buildings; and in the second instance, by those who disagreed that the demolition was a fit subject for a public entertainment. In retrospect, these voices of opposition appear uncannily prescient:

The fabric of these buildings is sound – probably in better condition than the Rocks area buildings in Sydney, which were once slated for demolition but now, recycled, are a great asset and tourist attraction to that city. (Davey, 1997:17)

and

It may well be, as Chief Minister Kate Carnell says, that implosion is the best option for removing the old buildings. But then to reason that it must be acceptable to turn the demolition into a circus is a mistake. (Hull, 1997c:8)

Thus we see evidence of some resistance to the officially-endorsed view that the hospital’s demise was a fait accompli. However, as the demolition date drew near, resignation to the inevitability of the event began to prevail over continued opposition. Independent MLA, Michael Moore, typified this sentiment:

All three of my children were born there, so of course I have an emotional attachment, but we have reached a point where there is no use in pushing any further … If the fact that we are making an event out of the implosion raises some money for worthwhile charities, then some good will have come out of it. (Cooke, 1997b:3)

As the hospital was dismantled/dismembered, its identity (largely synonymous with its function) was simultaneously reduced to the sum of its useful parts, in much the same way that a sentient
animal (such as a bull) is reduced, by butchering, to a collation of accessible parts (‘cuts’), no longer with an identity as a whole: ‘once the building was down, debris would be sorted; the steel would go to Sydney for reprocessing and rubble would be used for road-base’ (Redmond, 1997:1).

Spokesmen for both the contractor and the government-owned corporation tasked with the management of the project described the process thus, imagining an efficient resolution to a task that had thus far been carried out with satisfying precision:

The Royal Canberra Hospital is all but prepared for its final curtain call on Sunday at 1pm; … 225kg of explosives to be detonated had all been laid … in 280 positions; … it had taken him and his team five weeks to prepare the site …; once the plunger was pushed it would take about 30 seconds to level the buildings …; the tower block will be imploded first and 10 seconds later Sylvia Curley House will be imploded …; a series of sirens will sound before the demolition, at 12.45, 12.55 and 1pm. (Redmond, 1997:1)

It seemed that the hospital was to be brought into submission by the sheer power of numbers. The problem which it had posed would be resolved by the application, not merely of brute force, but of science. Thus a pseudo-scientific veneer was applied to the activity, bolstered by the technicist belief that mastery lies in the ability to quantify.

Such efficient (and, incidentally, productive) destruction was anticipated with not a little self-satisfaction as these specifications were enumerated and the by-products itemised. Here, the implosion is promoted as efficient, timely, neat, predictable, and indeed, fruitful. The speakers’ words are suffused with the belief that precision will result in predictability. This event is going to be a victory for those who have engineered the feat.
The smaller of the two photographs on the front page of *The Canberra Times* on 11 July was captioned, ‘The building awaits its fate’ (Figure 5). Although the small photograph tells the reader that the hospital is still whole, the larger photograph above reveals what has been going on inside the hospital walls. The relative sizes (and positions) of the two images makes clear which of the two the newspaper regards as most newsworthy. The hospital is depicted both narratively and graphically as being now of lesser importance than its agents of destruction. Gutted of all the accoutrements that both served and signified its purpose, the hospital had been stripped of its former identity. By this time, two days prior to the implosion, it had become merely
a ‘site’, a group of ‘buildings’ including a ‘tower block’. Only the nurses’ quarters, by virtue of
carrying a personal name, retained its identity and continued to be referred to as ‘Sylvia Curley
House’.

The following day, 12 July, the hospital’s doomed status was again reiterated on the
newspaper’s front page: ‘Like a toro in a Spanish bullring, old Canberra Hospital has been
stabbed and speared and battered into submission. It now awaits a professional coup de grace
to put it out of its misery’ (Grose, 1997a:1). However, just as the toreador must ensure that his
own victory is not lessened by any suspicion that his opponent is less than worthy, so is the
strength of the hospital remarked upon in the lead-up to the implosion. The hospital had posed
a challenge to the demolition team by revealing itself to have been very strongly built: ‘inside
each upright is a steel girder with 5cm-thick facing sides and two more layers of concrete
sandwiched between the girder and steel facing plates’. It was the pre-cutting of every steel
column on three floors of the hospital that made ‘the whole structure sink a couple of millimeters
and lean two degrees off vertical’ that prompted Grose to use his analogy with the bull in a
bullfight: ‘[t]he tough old bull had been “pre-weakened”’. Warwick Lavers, the project manager,
was quoted again, asserting the inevitability of the victory of the laws of physics: ‘[t]he building
doesn’t have a lot holding it up at the moment, quite frankly’. Citing yet another number as
evidence of what has been required to vanquish the hospital’s physical strength, Rod
McCracken, the shot-firer, said, ‘I think they’ve used over 200 bottles of oxyacetylene’ (Grose,
1997a:1).

A preoccupation with death and destruction thus imaginatively coloured the tone of much that
was written in the lead up to the implosion. The event, even in anticipation, and despite its
excited promotion, seemed to capture a pessimistic zeitgeist that prevailed in the city at the time.
Given both the hospital’s longevity and its raison d’etre, it is not surprising that the metaphor of
choice among journalists describing the hospital’s demise was the organic one of birth, life and
death. The resulting mood among the community at large, and perhaps, later, among the
spectators in particular, was one of guilty anticipation. What appear, afterwards, as prescient
expressions of impending disaster were no more than apt expressions of the prevailing sense
that while what was being prepared was an act of destruction, it would nonetheless be both
precise and impressive: ‘[d]emolition experts are aiming for a clean, fast kill when Royal
Canberra Hospital goes down at 1pm on July 13’ (Cooke, 1997a:1).
A tendency to attribute life and agency to the hospital was also evident in the Government’s own promotion of the event. In an email\(^8\) circulated to all sections of the ACT Government Service on 4 July, the hospital was cast as the subject of the community’s ‘fond memories’, as one to whom it was fitting to ‘bid farewell’ or ‘say goodbye’:

> If you have fond memories of Royal Canberra Hospital, July 13 will be the last opportunity to bid farewell to the hospital buildings. All Canberrans are encouraged to come and say goodbye to these buildings which have played such a significant role in Canberra’s health care. (Section Publications, 1997)

The inclination to anthropomorphise was sustained after the implosion, with the attribution of sentience to the hospital implied by those who ascribed the implosion’s fatal consequences to a sort of vindictive action on the hospital’s part:

> A blast which was supposed to land the hospital in its own footprint had instead thrown a rain of rubble on the population it had once nurtured. The last act of a building which had been dedicated to health was to wreak death and injury. (Waterford, 1997:4)

> ‘It was built to save lives but when they pulled it down it killed someone’. (Nicole O’Rourke) (Eyb, 1997b:C2)

**Sylvia Curley: the compliant female body**

Alongside the hospital, and likewise marked for implosion, stood Sylvia Curley House, the hospital’s nurses’ residence, named after the hospital’s founding deputy matron. Sylvia Curley, then aged 98, was interviewed for her reaction to the impending demolition, the newspaper describing it as ‘a personal loss’. Sister Curley, however, expressed the opinion that ‘many sisters and nurses would feel satisfaction for the service they gave and not be too upset over the destruction of the nursing home [sic]’ (Clack, 1997c:4). With that acceptance of authority (or fate) that comes with a long life of service, she puts the public good above her own ego.

Indeed, earlier in the year, one of the demolition contractors had identified Sylvia Curley House as being a particularly ‘suitable candidate for the technique’ (Warden, 1997b:3). This was a building that was expected to be amenable to the designs of those who were planning its implosion.

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\(^8\) One of 48 such emails distributed by the Government’s public relations unit, as revealed during the inquest (Madden, 1999).
destruction (rather like Sister Curley, herself – a model of female servitude, docility and compliance), and to facilitate the occasion’s being a safe, community event.

The significance of Sylvia Curley House lay in its retained name, and hence, identity; and was heightened by the fact that that identity was both female and still living. Thus, although the analogy of the ‘old lady’ used for the hospital would in this instance be even more pertinent, the application of such an analogy to Sylvia Curley House was in fact redundant, as the building was already endowed with a particular human identity.

Others did not feel so equable at the prospect of destroying Sister Curley’s namesake while she was still alive. Cordelia Hull imaginatively empathised with Sylvia Curley, noting that to have a building named after one is to make that building itself something of a memorial:

I’d read somewhere that the woman who gave her name to the doomed nursing home [sic] was still alive. Aged 98, as old as the Queen Mum. We were destroying her monument before she herself had left us. That’s sick, I thought, as I trained the camera on her monument’s last minutes. I wonder what’s she thinking, this Sylvia Curley? Did anyone think of her before they ordered it gone? (1997:C3)

Here the matriarch of Canberra’s nursing community is imaginatively likened, due to their being the same age, to the Queen Mother, who is affectionately, and pointedly, domesticated as a ‘Mum.’ The destruction of Sister Curley’s eponymously named building now appears wrong, even tempting fate in its willingness to ignore the social convention of showing due respect to the elderly.

The analogy goes deeper, too, to a sense of the particular relationship that women, as mothers and nurses, have traditionally had with hospitals. While not suggesting that contemporary hospitals are gendered places, such was demonstrably more so in the years during which the Canberra Hospital was in its prime. With males predominating in the specialist roles of doctors, the remainder (and the majority) of the health workers on site were female nurses. Aside from the connections that many women forge with their local hospital through years of mutual caring for injured, unwell and dying family members, as the place in which many of them give birth, the hospital is also the place in which women ‘become’ mothers.

‘What time is it?’ said the youngest from her tree top. ‘Won’t be long now. Come down and I’ll take your photo in front of your birthplace. It’ll be gone in a minute.’ It hadn’t struck me till then, the enormity of the occasion. How many other Canberra mothers were here in this crowd, telling their children the same thing – your birthplace’ll be gone in a minute? We
were saying goodbye to part of our history. Canberrans don’t have much history, not to call our own. (Hull, 1997:C3)

Despite Cordelia Hull’s reference to people’s lack of historical sensibility, on this occasion many people were conscious that it was their personal and private ‘histories’ that made the hospital meaningful for them, if not the public history that was embodied in the architectural artefact that was the building. These people were determined that the spectacle of the implosion would not function, as Debord (1967) has suggested spectacle is intended to function, to make them forget that history. What was significant for this crowd was not the building itself, but its catalytic function as an enabler of ‘community’. It was one of those places that had provided ‘an anchor of shared experiences between people,’ a ‘lived connection’ that bound the community together (Crang, 1998:103). Hull recognises, on behalf of others like her, that this is thus a farewell to a significant location within Canberra children’s identities—although a loss of place perhaps felt more in the breach than in the observance.

The fact that the ‘real’ Sylvia Curley was still alive undoubtedly heightened the pre-implosion tendency to anthropomorphise the building. That tendency was strengthened afterwards, as expressed by former theatre nurse, Gail Bennett: ‘I feel that Sylvia Curley House is still alive. She refused to go down. That shows how strong she is’ (Burgess, 1997:4). Like all good nurses, Sylvia Curley was not easily to be deterred from the performance of her duties.

**The Body Politic: Performative Roles**

Sunday 13 July 1997 saw the people who had comprised its one-time community clustered around the hospital, as if in a final embrace. They were united in the body of the ‘audience’, sharing a focus on a single event. Their physical proximity to the hospital can be read as representative of their emotional and moral response to it as an institution. Such unity is an illusion, of course, because this body of people, although comprised of a third of the city’s population, was not a singular or cohesive entity. However, a belief in the possibility of community was the premise both for the Government’s invitation and for the activities of the Letters writers – for what other purpose was there in sharing their opinions and attempting to influence others of their positions if there was not a ‘community’ to be swayed or energised or outraged by their statements?

The inevitability of the implosion spectacular had been, publicly at least, firmly established well before 13 July. The Government had weathered the storms of union opposition to the demolition – ‘Unions picket hospital demolition site’; ‘Local truckies back on site as row ends’ – and the remaining voices of opposition were now, for the most part, querulous rather than strident –
‘Why destroy that fine old hospice?’ Two years later, at the conclusion of the inquest into Katie Bender’s death, the coroner noted the participation of two long-time community activists:

Mr J Kershaw and Mr N Haberecht of the Canberra Community Action on Acton Inc. were granted leave in accordance with section 53 of the Coroners Act 1956 to appear as they demonstrated sufficient community interest having urged Government, both Commonwealth and Territory, for a number of years earlier not to pursue the Acton demolition project. In fact CCAA had petitioned Mr T Kaine MLA Minister for Urban Services to halt the project as late as Friday, 11th July 1997. (Madden, 1999)

However, on the day of the implosion, despite a ‘last ditch appeal’ to the National Capital Authority (Clack, 1997d:4), not a single Letter to the Editor on the subject was published, and a third of Canberra’s population presented themselves expectantly, as a group, before the prospect of a singular spectacle. Despite that unity of physical presence, individual motivations in being present undoubtedly differed – some were there to be entertained, some were there to bear witness, and some were there to protest (Figure 6).9

Figure 6  ‘Our history blown away’ (photograph by Andrew Holland, 13 July 1997, collection of the National Library of Australia)

9 It may be noted that even the protestors were also picnicking.
Very few were there to take part. Those roles were reserved for the demolition team, the media, and one conspicuous member of the public, Sue George – who had submitted herself to the chance of conspicuousness by entering a competition, and who had won the right to press the plunger that would trigger the detonation (Figure 7). Even she spoke of her unease prior to the demolition, not sure at the eleventh hour that she wanted to be remembered for destroying the hospital.

Figure 7  Sue George (uncredited photograph, The Australian, 15 July 1997, p.6)

Work-based identities

While the prospect of the hospital’s destruction was being anticipated as a day’s entertainment by many Canberrans, it prompted more sober thoughts among others. Some, particularly nurses and retired nurses, felt prompted to share their recollections of the time they had spent at the hospital: “Farewell to the former Royal Canberra Hospital”. I suppose it was the clipping that I had ripped out of the paper that started my musings and the wish to tell a story’ (Jackson, 1997:C5).

The public notice was the prompt, not only to Barbara Jackson’s memory, but to a desire to give testimony or witness to the hospital (and thus, to her identity within it) as it was, before it was no more. ‘Identity is the name we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in narratives of the past’ (Rosh White, 1998:180). This involved not merely the indulgence of nostalgia, but also the exercise of that discursive process that Hall refers to as ‘the narrativisation of the self’ (1996:4) – the construction, within discourse, of an identity. Such shared stories provide a city with its own ‘narratives of cultural identity, embedded in the historic urban landscape’ (Hayden, 1995:13). It is our ‘identity’ that connects us as individuals to our ‘group’.
Personal histories such as Jackson’s recalled a workplace of particular significance to its employees and patients, the camaraderie of those employees, and, throughout, the meaning that attached to their work as they dealt every day with life and death, issues that most people confront only on unusual (and typically, highly-charged) occasions. Reminiscences like these are indicative of an identification with work as the source of a person’s self-identity (du Gay, 1996:9). Faced with the impending destruction of the site at which and in which that identity had been both formed and located, Jackson and her peers experience a threat to that identity such as occurs when crisis precipitates uncertainty about those things that had been assumed to be ‘fixed, coherent and stable’ (du Gay, 1996:1).

Their identities as health workers are asserted in the face of the imminent destruction of their former workplace. They respond to that threat of dis-location not with uncertainty, but by articulating identities that are positive and rich. Their lives are recalled as happy, successful and socially beneficial – there are no complicating memories of failures, disputes or disappointments such as characterise the workplace as it is commonly understood. In these recollections, the world was simpler but happier – and that is about to be lost to them forever. This rather unidimensional picture, recalled so unproblematically, suggests that this is a workplace and a period in people’s working lives that has been constructed by nostalgia. It is a picture that also supports Hall’s claim that every ‘identity’ creates for itself an artificial internal unity, deliberately, even if unconsciously, excluding the Other – that which is marginal or excessive or lacking in itself (1996:4-5).

The primarily social nature of the service work performed by health workers draws others (the consumers of that service) into a sphere in which certain identities are determined for both. The impending implosion prompted some of those consumers to reminisce about memorable occasions on which the trajectories of their life histories had intersected with those of the hospital:

I recalled a university friend who was in Canberra Hospital for 18 weeks with a broken femur. On sunny days he was wheeled outside on that splendid peninsula and we sneaked him in some beer and dope. He needed it. I thought about 26 years ago as a nervous first time father. (Hull, 1997a:5)

To a large extent, a hospital is experienced by its clients through their bodies. They attend hospital as subjects of medical care or as visitors to others who are its subjects. In either case, people must ‘subject’ themselves to the regime of the hospital, with its prescribed and proscribed hours of attendance, rules of behaviour and strict hierarchies of expertise and authority (‘beer and dope’ being proscribed commodities for patients in Sister Curley’s hospital!). The hospital
that is recalled in these reminiscences was a society and a world unto itself and to enter that world was to submit to its conventions. To enable their conditions to be managed, clients were thoroughly subjected and rendered passive.

For hospital staff, like Jackson, their experience was recalled in both domains – as recipients and as providers of health care; and further, as residents, for whom all aspects of life could be experienced within its walls:

I was born at Canberra Community Hospital in 1946 … Just after Queen Elizabeth was crowned I was admitted to the Children’s ward for a tonsillectomy … I had one more trip to Canberra Community as an adolescent …

and

It was here in the Sylvia Curley House dining room, at my graduation, where I was proposed to. (Jackson, 1997:C5)

Like Jackson, the woman on the left in Figure 6 has identified her multiple, lifelong associations with the Royal Canberra Hospital (RCH) on her protest placard, which reads, in part:

BORN RCH
PATIENT RCH
TRAINED RCH
WORKED RCH

In sharing these private histories, their authors made claim to a perspective on the hospital that most readers could not challenge because they did not (and henceforward, cannot) share it. It is a highly privileged and singular perspective, contingent for the most part on employment at the hospital during the early years of its establishment. It is also a hierarchical perspective that privileges the position of certain employees above others. There are no reminiscences from gardeners or cleaners or cooks or any other behind-the-scenes staff, whose work is an equally valid contribution to the hospital ‘experience’, (particularly to the creation of its nurturing ambience), as is that of the nurses’ and doctors’.

Life was decidedly scary as a junior nurse, and many months were spent in the pan room. The new hospital was under construction at the time and the orthopedic ward where I was first assigned was full of new migrants. They seemed to fall off the buildings with alarming regularity. I cannot remember ever querying this fact, and to this day it intrigues me. The influx was so great that we were offered Italian lessons so we could assist the young men.
As the new hospital neared completion and was too high to fall off, the numbers dwindled and Italian instruction ceased. (Jackson, 1997:C5)

It is important to acknowledge that the hospital workplace these employees recall is one that is no longer recognisably congruent in material terms with the contemporary hospital, either. Medical infrastructure aside, today's hospitals are staffed by a multi-racial and gender-balanced workforce that is literally less ‘uniform’ than its counterpart of the past.

Figure 8  Barbara Jackson, centre, at Canberra Community Hospital on 15 January 1964  

Were she still the matron in today’s Canberra Hospital, Sister Curley would find it much harder to distinguish her staff from their patients. The starched caps and dresses, stockings and polished lace-up shoes seen in Figure 8 have been replaced by polo shirts, culottes or shorts and jogging shoes.

One evening, nearing the completion of my training, I was involved in trying to rescue a disturbed patient who subsequently fell from the outside window ledge, several storeys above the ground. It was dramatic and sad. I was reprimanded later for my torn stockings, yet the inquest commended my bravery. (Jackson, 1997:C5)

The Canberra Hospital that is being recalled in these reminiscences is one where identity was more clearly ‘marked’. The social identity of nurses such as Jackson was a ‘contingent
construction’ (du Gay, 1996:4), dependent upon the continuance of its conditions of existence for its maintenance. By 1997, whether the buildings that housed the Canberra Hospital were demolished or not, that workplace was already long gone.\(^{10}\) For workers of Jackson’s generation, work and production were understood to be sources of identity in ways that are not nearly so widespread in today’s world in which identity derives increasingly from practices of consumption and leisure (Tomlinson, 1990).

These are not the reminiscences of workers who were alienated from their own labour and who found no personal satisfaction in its performance. These are workers who appear to have found their most profound expression of self in the work they performed. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, their employment at the hospital was an ‘identity bestowing situation’ (du Gay, 1996:31). Furthermore, as the locale in which their habitus was expressed, the Canberra Hospital itself appears to have been a fundamental part of their unconscious operations as social actors, taking for granted, along with their colleagues, certain assumptions about the validity of their work and life choices. To this extent, the hospital is recalled as something closer to ‘home’ than to ‘work’. Although not all who recalled the hospital blurred its material with its social dimensions – “It’s not the building, it’s the wonderful life we had,” said former senior nurse, Regina Slazenger’ (Clack, 1997c:4) – and although most nurses quoted in the press were mourning a loss that was more complex than that of a simply place-based identity, the loss of place was certainly fundamental to their grief. Some attempted to cushion that experience of loss by sharing it, as Beryl Hoffman intended: ‘It’s very sad, but I’m still going to go down to the Yacht Club and partake. A lot of old staff are going to go down there; we’re going to commiserate with each other’ (Mapstone, 1997:4).

Decades before it became fashionable in managerialist discourse to align ‘culture’ and ‘identity’, the Canberra Hospital – at least, as it is represented in Jackson’s narrative – exemplified that ideal of a workplace which enabled ‘the self-actualising capacities of individuals to become aligned with the goals and objectives of the organisation for which they work’ (du Gay, 1996:41). Fearing for the future of health care in the wake of the hospital demolition, Regina Slazenger predicted, ‘We will get Kentucky fried medicine’ (Clack, 1997c:4), a sentiment echoed less graphically by Sylvia Curley: ‘They forget the patient [today] and it worries me. They forget the

\(^{10}\) In August 1989 the steering committee for the redevelopment of ACT public hospitals had found that many of the hospital buildings were ‘functionally obsolete’ (Clack, 1997d:4).
important thing, they forget the patient’ (Clack, 1997c:4). In contrast to the idyllic workplace of the ‘old’ hospital, and as if to illustrate the fearful consequences of the anarchy that these retired nurses seemed to believe prevails in the uncaring, contemporary workplace, it was claimed after the implosion failure that ‘an unemployed man with no blasting qualifications was hired to help place explosives in the hospital buildings’. To make matters worse, this man ‘said work was behind schedule and the site was the most disorganised he had experienced’ (Nicholson, 1997c).

While its focus on past workers had been on the nurses who staffed the hospital, The Canberra Times also gave its readers insights into the practical concerns of other workers who had been engaged on site immediately prior to, and during, the implosion. Several of the demolition contractors were interviewed both before and after the implosion; their identities, too, bound up with the performance of their roles as technical experts. Asked by someone what he would do if the implosion was not a success, project manager, Cameron Dwyer, ‘smiled nervously, and said, “We would have to go and sneak out of here very quietly”’ (Abjorensen, 1997d:4).

Also on hand were many others with official roles to play on the occasion. Some had roles whose significance only emerged in the aftermath of the accident – some whose performance is only ever triggered by an event’s malfunctioning. The audience on the lake foreshores could see the police in their water launches, patrolling the exclusion zone on the lake; the radio announcers whose station was one of the event’s sponsors were broadcasting from an outside broadcast unit; and there were, as always at such events, police and St John’s Ambulance officers among the crowds. After the event, some sought to minimise the role they had had to play, and many regretted their part in it. None more so than Sue George, the woman who had won the right to push the plunger to detonate the implosion. Ambivalent about her prize prior to the implosion, she was distraught afterwards, and sought counseling (Kerin, 1997:6).

After the implosion, there was almost silence from the contractors, but the voices of other workers came to the fore. Not only those such as the unemployed man quoted above, who took the opportunity to articulate a critical perspective on the management of the demolition, but emergency workers, police, and counselling services spoke to the media in response to requests for their particular perspectives on the event. The implosion was an event, a critical incident, that precipitated a public discourse that did not wait on the provision of expert or official opinion. It was a ‘fertile discursive moment’ (Parameswaran, 2006:44). Central to this discursive work were the journalists for whom such work is an everyday professional performance. Professionally habituated to the belief that the world is explicable, they find the possibility that it might not be a particularly profound threat to their journalistic identity.
While the newspaper’s editor maintained his 11 conventional distance from his readership, *The Canberra Times* journalists conceptualised and presented themselves as one with the social body, their community, the imagined community that they helped to construct with their use of the first person plural, ‘we’. In the implosion aftermath, these journalists aligned themselves with ‘their’ public, as co-contributors to the discourse that was being created. This was highlighted by the newspaper using the sibling of one of its journalists as a guest contributor (Hull, 1997:C3). Such a strategy may enhance readers’ identification with the newspaper, with readers feeling that trusted journalists have shared their vulnerability in a time of crisis (Fisher, 2001:18).

The audience in attendance

It is not the intention of this study to essentialise the ‘audience’ or the ‘community’ that engaged with the implosion event. However, the sheer physicality of the synchronous presence of an estimated 100,000 people, gathered on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin, ostensibly with a single, shared purpose of viewing the hospital demolition, is evidence of a certain unarguable materiality. This crowd was a sufficient material force that its novelty warranted comment and photographic depiction in its own right (Figure 9). If there was ever a time when the city’s population could be referred to as ‘an audience’, it was that afternoon.

![Crowd by the lake](image)

*Figure 9  Crowd by the lake (photograph by Andrew Meares, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 July 1997, p.2)*

11 Although different journalists performed this role throughout the period of this study, they were all men.
An important characteristic of the implosion audience was its social nature. As Abercrombie and Longhurst observe, ‘people attend public performances as least partly for the sense of a relationship with other people in the audience’ (1998:66). To join with others as members of an audience satisfies a basic human instinct, and this was one of those rare times when the gathering appeared to be of one mind: an occasion of ‘collective cognition, orientation and behaviour’ (Middleton, 1999:126). As Brian Richards recalled, ‘There was a strong sense of community in the crowd I was in … there were a lot of people … sharing their experiences of the hospital. It was very festive’ (Eyb, 1997a:C2). There is a comfortable (and comforting) sense of solidarity with others in Richards’ words. It is the sense of solidarity that Rorty says is strongest ‘when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as “one of us”, where “us” means something smaller and more local than the human race’ (1989:191). From such expressions it would seem that the predictions of those who had planned that this event be a celebration of community were well-founded. Indeed, in the hours immediately prior to the implosion, as people gathered in innocent anticipation of a simple entertainment, confident that they knew what to expect, they may have self-consciously constituted themselves as a ‘community’ in its simplest terms. This ‘community’, brought together to physically congregate in certain designated locations was able to take on the appearance of a unified entity, to produce a simulacrum of a socially cohesive society.

In the event’s tragic aftermath, by contrast, many of that community’s internal divisions would become apparent. When the implosion was aborted, the crowd began to disperse and people returned to the individuality of their separate lives. Any illusion that they had been unified by some common bonds because of what they had collectively experienced was soon dispelled as they fractured along the lines of argument about responsibility and culpability for the accident that shortly followed. However, to the extent that those lines of debate were then pursued in public discourse, in the sort of ‘conversation’ that Gee refers to (1999), the implosion audience (and others) re-convened as a discursive community, energetically negotiating a range of meanings to restore some ontological stability to their worlds. In contexts of profound social upheaval such as this was, nothing that has once been revered is necessarily safe from critical scrutiny, and the exercise of discourse may be acutely politically threatening. In the event’s aftermath, the body politic erupted assertively out of its passive categorisation as ‘audience’, thus threatening the status quo. Hegemonic discourses of ‘morality’ and ‘common sense’ would be required to discipline the threatening (and offensive) body of oppositional public opinion (Fiske, 1989:99-100).
The audience as performers

Audiencehood may also be understood, not as an exceptional experience, but as ‘constitutive of everyday life’ – ‘in contemporary society, everyone becomes an audience all the time’ (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 68-69). From such a perspective, not only is life ‘a constant performance’ and the world a spectacle, but the boundaries between public and private, touristic and mundane, are eroded (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998:73-81).

The contemporary audience is drawn ever more closely into performance, commonly seeing themselves, in fact, as performers (Lasch, 1979). Those who, like Cordelia Hull, took photographs of themselves and their families as they waited for the implosion to occur, were recording their participation in the event, not merely their attendance at it. Afterwards, sharing their stories of how they experienced the event, Canberra people affirmed that performative role: ‘Canoeing couple tell of their narrow escape’ (Dargaville, 1997:2); ‘No-one could have stopped us going’ (Hoy, 1997:10); ‘My dad saved us’ (Corbin, 1997:12).

Just as fans engage in ‘semiotic productivity’ when they attach meaning to commodities, and in ‘enunciative productivity' when they communicate that meaning to others (Fiske, 1992:37-38), so did the Canberra community as it related to the hospital. Their meaning-making and meaning-sharing behaviours were similar to those of fans, although it is doubtful that any in the audience would have thought of themselves in this way. Nonetheless, the Canberra community as it was configured in this context, was formed via the conduct of that communication, just as communities of fans are.

Like the earliest reflexively-constructed audiences of ancient Greece and Rome, this locally configured audience gathered voluntarily in a designated public place (or rather, several officially-designated viewing locations) to view a highly organised secular event that was to be ‘performed’ by people with specialised roles. The implosion audience, true to that type, was ‘localised in place and time’ and ‘had a potential collective life of its own, based on a common background and the shared experience of the moment’ (McQuail, 1997:3). Rather than the event itself realising the potential of that ‘collective life’ (as intended), it was the fatal outcome of the implosion and the event’s failure to perform as scheduled that saw its audience metamorphose from an actual, physical presence of witnesses by the lake into the mediated (and virtual) community of Letters writers. Naturally, the latter audience was not solely comprised of members of the former audience. Some in the community who were not present at the implosion nonetheless felt compelled to write – many, it is true, in order to make a comment
on the politics of the situation – but others out of empathy and a desire to participate in the communal meaning-making.

Others will have participated in the collaborative discourse because drawn to it by the undeniably popular appeal of ‘disaster’, which has elements habitually associated with the mythical: the strong moral dimensions, the adherence to rules of narrative, the strongly visual/aesthetic dimensions and the engagement of the emotional response. In many respects these audience behaviours do not differ from those observed in several of the key studies of audience media consumption that concerned themselves with entertainment (for example, Ang, 1985; 1996; Morley, 1986; Radway, 1984). When the experience of ‘audiencehood’, already bound up with our very identity construction, is combined with the experience of disaster, a particularly potent situation results (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998:36-37).

The audience, therefore, is also engaged in the performance of work. Media audiences have often been subjected to strategies designed to turn them into something else, something more organised, more recognisable as a community, more responsible, responsive, biddable. Chief among these has been the attempt to turn the audience into ‘the public’. The public, conversely, has been subjected to a campaign, initiated more than 300 years ago, to turn it into an ‘audience’ (Hartley, 1992:119). Certainly, there is a strong expectation today that ‘being an audience is tantamount to being a citizen’ (Shimpach, 2005:344-345), with the attendant expectation being that the benefits enjoyed by audience membership imposes reciprocal, civic obligations. The exercise of those obligations requires work, but so do the pleasure-yielding activities (picnicking, sight-seeing, photographing) that more often come to mind when the audience is thought of as ‘consuming’ that which it convenes to enjoy. My observations of audience behaviours in this study certainly position the audience as performers of certain kinds of work (audiencing, witnessing, authoring) rather than as merely passive consumers of a given experience. However, insofar as that experience was ‘accidental’ the implosion audience had no choice but to accept what happened.

The accidental audience

While accidents occur all the time, the implosion was patently more significant than an everyday accident; primarily, but not only, because of its tragic outcome. Perrow defines an accident as being ‘an unintended and untoward event’ (Perrow, 1984:63). Further, it must involve damage that interrupts the ongoing systemic function of those people or objects which are damaged. The system that is disrupted he divides into four parts, which he labels in increasing order of complexity: units, parts, sub-systems and systems. Damage to units or parts Perrow calls
‘incidents’, and damage to sub-systems and systems, ‘accidents’. He draws a further distinction between accidents which involve component failure, but whose sequence is predictable, and accidents which involve system failure, whose sequence is not predictable (Perrow, 1984:70).

Although his repeated use of the term ‘system’ in different contexts makes this a somewhat confusing typology, Perrow’s valuable contribution to the field of risk analysis is his observation that many accidents, by virtue of their predictability, can be thought of as ‘normal’ accidents (1984). He also categorises accidents according to their likelihood and their outcome, producing a matrix on which events can be identified as high or low probability and high or low consequence. According to this typology of accidents, the implosion was a High Probability, High Consequence event, and as such, should have been anticipated and guarded against. Much of the angry and ironic comment following the event alludes to the widespread failure (individually and organisationally) to take sufficient precautions in preparation for the implosion.

It is also possible, building on Perrow’s theoretical elaboration of the ‘normal accident’, to conceive of the Canberra community on this occasion as an ‘accidental’ audience. I propose that an accidental audience is ‘accidental’ in two senses: firstly, as witnesses to, and even survivors of, an accident; and secondly, insofar as what they witnessed was not what they had gathered to witness; that is, it is only by accident that they are witnesses at all.

An accident can also be thought of as having made victims of its audience. In these instances, the spectacle which has drawn the audience brings death to one or more of its spectators, in which case, the survivors become an accidental audience. This was the case with the hospital implosion, but more often occurs in various motor sport and air show accidents. The resulting accident is then itself often transformed into a spectacle for consumption by another, removed, mediated, audience. Increasingly often, the documentation of the accident is undertaken by one or more audience members, whose ostensible intention had been to record the planned rather than the accidental spectacle. (However, it may be speculated that today, some among the audience at events such as airshows, at which the chance of a spectacular accident is higher than usual, hope for an opportunity to capture a spectacle on their domestic video camera which will be not only memorable, but also marketable.)

12 The crash of the first plane into the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001 was (uniquely and accidentally) captured on film by a French documentary maker while filming a New York Fire Department
Some spectacular events are conducted in the deliberate knowledge that witnesses will be present; indeed, their witnessing the event is central to its political meaning, significance and power. The attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 are the pre-eminent contemporary examples of such an event. The public self-immolation performed by Buddhist monks during the Vietnam War is another well-known instance of this phenomenon. Any such protest depends for its effect on an audience whose presence has been calculated.

It may seem to be a contradiction in terms to talk about a ‘deliberate accident.’ To the agents who planned the September 11 attacks, the outcomes were not accidental but calculated. To the audience, however, its unanticipated nature marks their involvement in such an event as ‘accidental’, even while they may agree afterwards that the event itself should not be categorised as an ‘accident’, given the later revelation of the agents’ apparent intent. Unwilling to wait for the eventual findings of an inquest into the causes of the implosion failure, many people who were present at the event set about making competing claims as to the cause, and hence, as to whether or not the outcome could properly be regarded as ‘accidental’. In these efforts, some were assisted by their own unwittingly forensic collection of material evidence of the event.

THE BODY OF EVIDENCE: PRESERVING MATERIAL EVIDENCE OF THE PAST

To warrant an exemption from the fate of demolition, a building must possess exceptional characteristics that earn it certain cultural capital, which in turn, can purchase it an extended life span. Sadly for this building, even many who opposed its destruction agreed that on aesthetic grounds, the hospital’s claim to significance would have been difficult to defend. Thus the hospital’s aesthetic deficits conspired to make it even easier for the ACT Government to not only rewrite the hospital’s identity, but to erase it.

crew out on a routine call, but the second crash was filmed by hundreds of New Yorkers (neither uniquely nor accidentally) who seemed to have the war correspondent’s learned ability to keep filming even while the viewfinder was presenting them with the most horrific images. Western societies, affluent and media-savvy, today exhibit a powerful instinct to record as their primary responsive mechanism. Zelizer contends that the practice of taking photographs to record trauma became ‘a standard response to later traumatic public events’ following the United States’ army’s practice of soldiers photographing what they found as they liberated the Nazi death camps (2002:700).
However, when material objects are valued by their owners, their aesthetic qualities may be irrelevant. ‘It is through being recognised as having a value, despite their lack of function and even aesthetic appeal, that objects … are desired, and are taken into possession’ (Dant, 1999:145). Beryl Hoffman, a past president of the hospital auxiliary, hoped to keep alive staff members’ memories of their daily interactions with the hospital’s physical body – its bricks and mortar – by acting as unofficial conservator of hospital memorabilia, keeping many of the following items at her home:

A window from the old hospital’s chapel, a sundial, a collection of paintings, minutes of countless meetings, several commemorative plaques and a tiny silver bell donated by a former secretary to then Canberra Community Hospital. (Mapstone, 1997:4)

As further evidence of the commodification process, people who wanted a souvenir of the hospital were encouraged to buy especially salvaged bricks, the Chief Minister describing it as “a great way to keep a little piece of Royal Canberra Hospital” (Brough, 1997b:2). As saleable commemorative items, these bricks served as synecdochic signifiers of both the old hospital and the occasion of its destruction, with proceeds intended for the neo-natal unit in another Canberra hospital. On 13 July, Mix 106.3 promoted the purchase of these souvenirs to the lakeside waiting crowd. The intended function of these bricks as mementos mori would be overlaid with a further level of significance in the event’s tragic aftermath.

These benign, officially-sanctioned mementos may also be contrasted with the lethal, unsanctioned debris that was soon to shower down over the spectators. Two years later, the coroner’s report noted that ‘an item of steel weighing 16 kilograms was later retrieved from Lake Burley Griffin on the southwestern foreshore adjacent to the Yacht Club’ (Madden, 1999), a distance of several hundred metres from the hospital site. The coroner’s report was discussed in the ACT Legislative Assembly during the debate that accompanied a no-confidence motion in the Chief Minister, put by the Leader of the Opposition, Jon Stanhope. Several members quoted the evidence of Dr Krstic, a defence scientist, to the inquest: ‘I’d like to say that it is purely by the grace of God that that shoreline didn’t look like a battlefield, actually’ (Stanhope, 1999).

Meanwhile, on the day of the implosion, Canberra Times journalist, Ian Warden, renowned for his sardonic perspectives on life in the national capital, devoted most of his ‘Reflections’ column to the impending implosion. With his usual irony, and a sense, shared with Cordelia Hull, that his Canberra readers lacked a strong sense of history, he attributed the decision to demolish the hospital to their unhealthy and incomprehensible preference for tidiness and an absence of reminders about the past:
In a young city, and in accelerated times we never seem to have the foresight to imagine that the Canberrans of 2050 might appreciate the chance to live among some ruins, refurbished or abandoned, of Canberra’s past. Every year we knock down or transform a building or a place because, built or planned in the 1950s, ’60s or ’70s, we think it too young to have any historical significance. (1997a:28)

Figure 10  ‘Destructive tendencies’ (cartoon by John Tiedemann, The Canberra Times, 13 July 1997, p.28)

The John Tiedemann cartoon accompanying Warden’s column depicts the hospital being swept under a carpet, a choice of metaphor that captures both this desire for tidiness and a willingness to forget the past by removing its material evidence (Figure 10). As Tumarkin claims, ‘[p]urposeful destruction of urban fabric, whether in peace or war, is always an act of barbarism, yet no amount of contempt can undo the fact that destruction is an integral part of urban life’ (2005:180). Integral it may be, but urban renewal is always a contentious practice, displacing some citizens (and their interests) in favour of others. On the other hand, the decision to publicly fund the preservation of some urban infrastructure may be equally debatable, as ‘saving a public past for any city or town is a political as well as historical and cultural process’ (Hayden, 1995:13). The opposition to the destruction of the Canberra hospital demonstrated that the decision not to preserve that past is just as controversial. If we build ‘to keep a record of what matters to us’ (de Botton, 2006:123), then what does it signify when a building whose purpose has for so long been central to its local community, is designated for demolition? Of course, the ironies to which Warden alluded were compounded by the fact that these buildings were being
demolished to make way for the new National Museum of Australia. ‘Real’ heritage was being destroyed to make way for a simulacrum, a constructed site for the purveying of culture and history as consumable commodities.

Warden speaks of a characteristically postmodern phenomenon – the loss of the durability and fixedness of people and things. As Bauman says, the aim of postmodernity is ‘to forbid the past to bear on the present … to sever the present from history’ (1996:24). In such a context, time no longer operates as a vector, being fragmented into self-enclosed episodes that have no past and no consequences (1996:24-26). This decontextualisation of time lends itself all too well to the disembodiment of agency that is its parallel objective. The result is events that have no precedent or consequence and for which no agents are accountable.

Bauman describes four ‘types’ who typify the postmodern pursuit of meaning (as ‘the pilgrim’ typified the modern quest for identity). They are ‘the stroller’ (or flâneur), ‘the vagabond’, ‘the tourist’ and ‘the player’ (1996:26-32). The tourist seeks the experience of novelty, but a clearly delineated and safe experience, with no surprises. The implosion event therefore disobeys these expectations of postmodernity, just as it disobeys the laws of the physics of implosion. It unarguably leaves lasting consequences and demands the engagement of its participants’ consciences. It is novel and surprising – but neither predictably nor safely so. In order that it be interpreted, both its past and its agents are drawn in to a publicly-conducted analysis (an ‘inquest’ of sorts). This stands in high contrast to the postmodern refusal to attach significance or consequence to the event.

On the other hand, the implosion can also be read as a prototypically postmodern event – an anarchic performance of decentring, deconstruction and dispersal. Its refusal to conform to the prescribed ‘rules’ of implosion marks it as a mutant event, while its departure from the prepared script shows it to be anti-narrative. Although the event itself was resistant to interpretation, individuals valiantly offered their own interpretations in scripts that form the petits-histoires that are this study’s empirical data. Individuals also sought meaning by acting to conserve for the

13 The Museum was not to be a copy of the Hospital, of course. However, its architect, Howard Raggatt, was to be accused in the popular press of ‘copying’ the design of Berlin’s Jewish Museum, a strategy intended to disparage him for implying that there were parallels to be drawn between the Holocaust and the genocide of Australian Aboriginal peoples. See Marcus (2004) and McCarthy (2004) for discussions of the National Museum’s perceived ‘challenge’ to the Howard government.
future evidence of the hospital, its implosion and their part in the event. This instinct to conserve resulted in there being a ‘body of evidence’ for the inquest, comprised especially of film and video recordings. That documentary evidence was supplemented by material evidence collected by teams of police, including divers who retrieved large pieces of debris from the lake — thereby performing a re-collation of the hospital’s dispersed ‘body’ for forensic purposes.

THE CHILD VICTIM

There is necessarily a relationship between the destroyed bodies of the hospital and the child. It is a causal one, as the destruction of one resulted in the death of the other. The child killed in the implosion, Katie Bender, aged twelve, was the youngest child of Croatian parents, a student in Year 7 at St Clare’s College, and an active member of the Kardinal Alozija Stepinac Canberra Queanbeyan dance group. It was this last characteristic that was to become the defining one in media depictions of Katie.

Figure 11 Katie’s dancing shoes (photograph by Gary Schafer, The Canberra Times, 17 July 1997, p.1)

\[14 \text{ The largest piece of debris recovered weighed between 15-20kg and was found 760m from the blast site (Kazar, 1997c:5).} \]
Katie’s dancing shoes were used metonymically as part of a memorial display at the Australian Croatian Club, as photographed for the front page of *The Canberra Times* on the morning of her funeral on 17 July (Figure 11). Noting that such a display is an example of Arendt’s ‘transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things’, on which humanity depends, Kitch goes on to claim that media texts can perform a ‘reification of emotions’ in much the same way that candles and other memorial artefacts do (2003:215). Such a reading would see not only the journalistic work of *The Canberra Times* performing this social function, but likewise the Letters to the Editor.

Katie’s shoes are emblems, not only of her self, but of all that folk dance symbolises in our culture (and in hers) – traditional social values and structured affective expression (Sherlock, 1993). Folk dancing such as that performed by Katie’s group is something of a contradiction in terms; it has an oxymoronic character – it is an artifice, representative of, rather than naively expressive of, the simple joys of an idealised ethnic past. Its practices are subject to strict discipline. That is not to say that the children who perform in the dance group are, to borrow Hall’s term, mere ‘cultural dupes’ (1980), who bring no interpretive capacities to the text of the dance they faithfully repeat. Media representations of Katie’s participation in the activity, however, tend to depict it as unproblematically innocent, joyful and obedient.

The significance of Katie’s membership of this traditional dance group is that it marks hers as a civilised body. Although only twelve, Katie’s dancing signalled her mature capacity for self-controlled social performance. She was a child who was already exhibiting a willing submission to social and cultural norms governing bodily expression. As such, Katie could be readily identified as belonging in those ‘long-standing mythic structures of exemplarity moulded by conservative notions of … femininity’ (Davies, 2001:31). Furthermore, in a society ‘devoted to the celebration of bodily excellence’ (Dutton, 1995:170), Katie’s accomplishment as a dancer enhanced the physical capital she already exhibited due to her youth and attractive appearance – all characteristics which the hospital, in comparison, failed to display. ‘Katie will continue to dance in the hearts of many Canberra people touched this week by her tragic death at the weekend’ (Kazar, 1997b:1,4).

The paradox of dance, like the paradox of the hospital, lies in its capacity to at once liberate and institutionalise the body’s physical expression. Dance is a form of disciplined expression that requires the dancer to ‘move in the way expected’, enabling the performance of the ‘desired image’, which conforms to aesthetics, convention and audience expectations (Sherlock, 1993:40). The unruly performance of the implosion was, by contrast, an undisciplined,
unscripted, undesired and unexpected departure from the 'disciplined' and 'choreographed' conventions of demolition.

The culture embodied in the hospital can thus be read as resisting its planned, but imperfectly executed, destruction. The 200 metre exclusion zone marked an area that was nominally prohibited to spectators – but this prohibition also extended to the body of the building itself. The hospital body broke free of the regimented destruction that the implosion sought to impose upon it by exploding outwards, transgressing the proscribed territory that surrounded it – the so-called 'exclusion zone'. In doing so, it was seen by some spectators to exercise an almost anthropomorphic 'agency': '[t]he last act of a building which had been dedicated to health was to wreak death and injury' (Waterford, 1997:4).

The 'accidental body' of the child victim lacked the power to assert its own meaning. Instead, Katie Bender was inscribed by the Canberra community with a particular set of meanings that endowed her with a performative role in death, akin to that which she had had in life. Both the child's and the hospital's destroyed bodies have been deprived, not only of life, but of the opportunity to realise their potential. In death they have become 'fixed' in ways they were not in life. Once destroyed, however, their bodies are rendered available to (cultural) consumption and become in some ways more available for flexible symbolic renderings – they are released into symbolic space.

The child's identity, violently thrust from the private into the public domain, also becomes the subject of public speculation and construction. The 'real' child is no longer available to the community (and there is some distinction between her community and the community to be made here); indeed, it is only in death that she has become 'known' to them at all. This renders her all the more available for the transcriptions of a community eager to make her, in death, the perfect victim; as in life, she is depicted as having been the 'perfect child'. By the community's efforts she is 'perfected' in both roles, becoming, in their words, an 'angel', a 'star' and 'everything that was good wrapped in a pretty little package' (Brough, 1997c:2; Kazar, 1997d:2).

It is not only the aesthetics of consumer culture that equate beauty with goodness and ugliness with evil. In both Western and Eastern culture there has been a long association between beauty and virtue (Russell, 2000; Thomas, 1997). Beauty is desired and pursued; ugliness is avoided, and where possible, eliminated. In the ethics of aesthetics, Katie's beauty is contiguous with her moral goodness, whereas the hospital's plainness, its conspicuous lack of architectural distinction, mark it as warranting demolition. Katie's innocence emphasises the tragic quality of her death, and because she did not deserve to die the very purity of her moral
status also makes her the perfect victim. If there can be said to be an aesthetics of victims, Katie is closer to being an ideal type than the hospital, because she is so much more deserving, in such a scheme, of our affective response.

Ultimately, the most unsettling of the ways in which the body as trope is challenged by the real body is via the death of that body. Death poses several challenges to culture’s habitual representations of the body; one being the foreclosure of the body’s potential – and this is particularly the case in the death of a young person. The arguable viability of the hospital’s body was settled once and for all by its demolition – intended to achieve not merely its death, but its obliteration. On the other hand, the child who was the implosion’s only victim (and that singularity is part of her potency as victim) actually enters into an identity after death that carries a symbolic weight she would not have been required to carry in life.

Those in the community who were describing Katie as an ‘angel’ were engaging in a hagiography that made her less, rather than more, real to that community. A week after the implosion, Cordelia Hull’s reminiscence of the event (discussed in more detail in Chapter Three) was specifically designated by The Canberra Times as being ‘a mother’s view.’ In it, the author imaginatively likened Katie Bender to her own 12-year-old daughter. It is a powerful piece that restored (imperfect) humanity to the imagined child – and Hull intuitively recognised that it is in the community’s imagination, as in her own, that Katie now lives. Hull’s ‘Katie’ is not ‘an angel we never knew’ (Kazar, 1997d:2), but a real adolescent, perhaps like Hull’s daughter, even inclined to capriciousness, but loved and indulged by her family – a real child, not an ethereal construct (1997:C3).

**THE DAMAGED BODY**

That Katie’s death must have been spectacularly horrific to witness (in contrast to the disappointing lack of spectacle in the hospital’s failed demolition) is only hinted at in the brief references to people having offered local television stations ‘graphic’ video footage of the tragedy (Macklin, 1997a:3) and to a visiting Melbourne family’s expressed intention of suing for ‘damages for nervous shock and distress’ after having been standing near Katie Bender when she was killed (Canberra Times, 1997:4). That response is condemned as ‘foreign’, as befitting ‘outsiders’, in one Letter writer’s opinion:

> [To] pour salt on the wounds – I hear of some lawyer from Melbourne yelling ‘Sue! Sue!’ … if you want to sue for everything under the sun, then nick-off to America and play their game, because it’s not how we do things in this land down under. (Murdoch, 1997:10)
References to the injuries suffered by Katie Bender were made elliptically. Readers were told that she ‘died instantly’ and that ‘emergency workers and police on foot were at the scene in less than a minute but could do nothing for the girl’ (Clack and Abjorensen, 1997:1). The debris expelled from the hospital in the botched implosion was described as ‘chunks of razor-sharp metal shrapnel and masonry [which] rained down on spectators’. Attributing an imagined reaction to witnesses of the accident, these journalists continued:

Those around her watched with horror as metal and masonry began landing around them, leaving several with bruising and cuts. Nine others were treated at Canberra Hospital for shock, bruising and lacerations and some stayed overnight. People packed several-deep across the water on the grass bank between Flynn Drive and the lake watched in horror as flying shards of metal sliced towards the crowd, sending people running for cover. (Clack and Abjorensen, 1997:1)

Two references were made to a camera having its tripod ‘smashed from under it’ and a man whose car was damaged by debris was interviewed:

Steve Thompson, of Wanniassa, had his Ford parked some 70m back from the water where a huge piece of cast iron, probably from a plumbing fixture, sliced into his car bonnet … ‘I’d hate to think what would have happened to anyone who got in the way of that,’ he said. (Abjorensen, 1997b:1)
In the background of this photograph the National Library can be seen, indicating that Thompson’s car was parked at a comparable distance from the hospital as Lennox Gardens. The graphic display of the damage to the car (which also featured on page 2 of The Sydney Morning Herald on the same day) enables readers to imagine only too well ‘what would have happened’ to the child who was ‘in the way of’ just such a piece of debris (Figure 12).

To graphically describe such injuries could seem to repeat the violence and be regarded as gratuitous by many readers. The Rogers Commission that investigated the 1986 failure of the Challenger space shuttle was careful to avoid mention of the bodily damage sustained by the seven astronauts, focusing instead on technological minutiae. However, it has been claimed that it did so less out of delicacy or respect than in order to ‘reinstate a national faith in technological existence’, essential to the maintenance of the United States’ space program (Larabee, 1994:8). Katie Bender’s death was not overlaid with the same ideological and political weight that those of the Challenger astronauts were required to bear. In this instance, it is more likely that local media were motivated by respect for the Bender family to avoid detailing Katie’s injuries at this time. A similar purpose was thus served, not in the defence of any nationally significant political agenda, but in defence of social cohesion – an agenda that The Canberra Times had already signaled as being of foremost importance in this case (see Hull (1997b:8), discussed more fully in Chapter Three).

While the newspaper’s journalists could not altogether avoid it, the Letters writers avoided mentioning the bodily dimensions of the tragedy at all. They resolutely avoided speculating on the horrific manner of the child’s death, insisting instead upon a concerted effort to discover an explanation for this unexpected event. It was only in reports at later dates (such as during the inquest) that certain details about Katie’s death and the missile that caused it were publicised.
Finally, Katie’s coffin, photographed being carried from the church by her pall-bearers, is the last visual depiction of her in the media in this immediate, post-implosion period (Figure 13). The funeral brings to a close the initial, dedicated period of public mourning. The coffin’s smoothly perfect wholeness hides from the viewer’s gaze the destroyed body within, and also refuses or rebuffs such speculation. Thus, while protecting both Katie and the viewer, it continues the textual work that has already begun to erase the horrific image of her death from the public’s imaginative ‘view’. Instead, many people turned their attention to the question of how to appropriately commemorate the child. This chapter’s discussion of the embodied aspects of the implosion event would not be complete without reference to the material forms that this commemoration took.

**IN PLACE OF THE BODY: THE MEMORIAL**

Today, Katie, who touched the earth so lightly as a dancer, is commemorated with solid granite boulders at the spot where she died (Figure 14). Her memorial is not an ‘arbitrarily placed monument’ (Haviland, 2004:287), because it marks the place at which she was killed. In doing so, it forever claims that space as in some way hers.
Katie’s memorial, while substantial, nonetheless blends into the lakeside landscape, approximating the appearance of a rocky outcrop such as those which abound on the Monaro plains to Canberra’s south.\textsuperscript{15} The boulders speak of the eternity that is found in the indestructible permanence of mineral matter, not of the fragility and impermanence of human life. They speak in the vernacular not of the conventional Christian memorial (although a cross is set into the face of the foremost rock) but of a secular and naturalistic aesthetic. While the museum across the lake is, architecturally speaking, very much a product of its time, Katie’s memorial is timeless and appropriated directly from the natural world. The memorial’s solid and substantial presence is remarkable for the extent that it turns its back on the conventional memorial lexicon\textsuperscript{16} adhered to by the first, unofficial, anonymously-erected memorial that

\textsuperscript{15} Given that Canberra’s lake is artificial, and everything in that landscape created, there would seem to be no good reason not to erect a cross or something similar, other than out of a desire to have the memorial not draw attention to itself. As it is sited within the Parliamentary Triangle, the design of the memorial would have had to have been approved by the National Capital Authority.

\textsuperscript{16} Such as exemplified in almost all roadside memorials, and characterised by crosses, flowers, pictures and toys.
appeared at the site overnight and which featured in more than one newspaper photograph (Figure 15), its epitaph seized on by sub-editors: ‘Katie: in memory of an angel we never knew’.

![Memorial to Katie Bender, July 1997 (photograph by James Nomarhas, collection of the National Library of Australia)](image)

**Figure 15**  Memorial to Katie Bender, July 1997 (photograph by James Nomarhas, collection of the National Library of Australia)

**CONCLUSIONS**

In this chapter I have shown that not only was there a longstanding affective relationship between the hospital and its community prior to the implosion, but a significant discursive relationship as well. The hospital was, in Dant’s phrase, a ‘mediating object’ – an artefact that was treated by people as having not just meaning, but ‘particular cultural significance’ (1999:153). As an iconic element in the local built environment, the hospital featured in many Canberrans’ lives and the significance of its place in the formation of their identities was actively recalled in anticipation of its demolition. In later chapters of this thesis, the tenor of responses to the implosion will be shown to originate in people’s active engagement with meaning-making activities that centred on the hospital in the lead-up to 13 July 1997.

The hospital and the populace alike were enrolled by the organisers into participation in the event: the participation of the material element was ensured by its conscription and that of the
social element by persistent invitation. Their coming together on this occasion was contingent on recent work by the ACT Government, but was predicated on a widely felt connection that long pre-dated this event.

The implosion was designed to create an absence or a lack in the physical and social landscape (Couldry, 1999). It was designed to achieve a loss, and the failure of the implosion to be successfully conducted was actually its failure to successfully achieve total erasure of the buildings. The immediate ontological achievement of the botched demolition, even before there was any awareness of the fatal accident that it caused, was therefore to destabilise belief in the workings of agency. This was its power to unsettle and to create uncertainty. The long preparations and the extensive promotion came to worse than nought, producing not a triumph but a tragedy.

This was an event that moved off its projected trajectory, that was ‘de-railed’. It resulted in an unpredicted, unwelcome and tragic outcome. Rather than operating as a remedy for widespread social unrest at the hospital’s closure, the implosion was the catalyst for much deeper social divisiveness. The texts and images that were produced both before and after the implosion are inscriptions that stabilise responses to the event in such a way that they can be examined in the future. This was an event that people self-consciously had prepared to commemorate, encouraged to do so by the example of others in the media and by the specific terms of the Government’s invitation to attend. That commemorative work was altered in purpose after the fact – the photos and videos, the bricks purchased, the shared recollections – became memories, not only of the lost hospital, but of the tragic death of Katie Bender. The implosion was a failure both as an exercise in engineering and as an object of consumption. Its tragic outcome had the result of marking both the site and the audience with the signs of trauma.

The anthropomorphising of the hospital in both the media and the Government’s own publications encouraged a particularly social identification between the building and those people who accepted the Government’s invitation to attend the event. One result of this was that there was a high degree of awareness prevalent that ‘the physical body, its parts and its functions, symbolically represents the social body’ (Rose, 1999:222), which meant that the event’s failure was readily interpreted as a breach of that social fabric. Dant reminds us of McLuhan’s treatment of ‘the material things humans create for themselves as an extension of their bodies’ (Dant, 1999:63). If the anthropomorphism of the hospital encouraged this conceptualisation of the building as an extension of local people’s bodies, or at least, of the social body, it also set up a disturbing awareness that there were elements of self-harm characterising the proposed demolition of that building.
In pre-implosion memoirs, the hospital and many of its one-time staff were often described using feminised metaphors of nurturing that not incidentally also implied submission, passivity and compliance. The building’s refusal to conform to the dictates of the mechanical fate that had been prescribed for it signified also a refusal to comply with the expectations that such descriptions set up for it. That ‘refusal’ contributed in no small way to how deeply ontologically unsettling the implosion failure was felt to be.

I have proposed in this chapter that people’s repeated engagement in the communal activities of attendance and discursive response must prompt a mindful, careful application of the concepts of ‘community’, ‘audience’ and ‘public’. Despite these terms being problematic for the ease with which they lend themselves to uncritical essentialising and totalising, they nonetheless remain useful ways in which to describe what the evidence shows was a significant extent of synchronous, but not unanimous or uniform, performance. Further, it is apparent that people themselves were motivated by the appeal of the ideal of ‘community’ in choosing to engage with this event and that this was a significant aspect of their shared meaning-making practices in its aftermath.
Chapter 2

Imag(in)ing the event: visual discursive practices

INTRODUCTION

Where the previous chapter focused on the embodied dimensions of the implosion event, this chapter considers the visual dimensions of the event as these were manifested in the mediated public imagination and in the work of amateur and professional photographers, illustrators and cartoonists. In this chapter, I will show that these visual aspects are inseparable from the event's commodification and the consumerist and touristic practices of its audience.

An event promoted as a spectacle must by definition be visually rich. Indeed, the visual is the key organising metaphor for this event. Cast as a ‘spectacle’, a ‘must see’ event, the implosion was the object of ‘speculation’ – it was anticipated visually in the public mind’s eye. People were drawn to this event by what they expected to ‘see’, and many prepared to capture that vision in order to re-visit it in the future, so that they might have evidence of having been in attendance at one of the city’s historic milestones. My analysis of the Canberra Hospital implosion therefore considers the many visual dimensions of the event and the visual data that it generated.

Despite having been commodified as an object for trade and disposal, the hospital nonetheless continued to be viewed proprietorially and nostalgically by the implosion audience. Imaginatively anticipating the hospital implosion, Canberrans prepared to see something extra-ordinary, a ‘once-in-a-lifetime’ spectacle, and furthermore, to capture that spectacle on film for future reference, as a ‘souvenir’ that would enable an imaginative return to the sight/site. It is in that desire to ‘capture’ the vision of the implosion (and the final view of the hospital) that the imagining of this event begins to be linked with consumerist behaviours. Campbell (1987) has observed that the imaginative exercise of anticipation – an insatiable pleasure-seeking by means of daydreaming – is central to modern practices of consumerism. The visual objectification of the gaze by means of photography enables that gaze ‘to be endlessly reproduced and recaptured’ (Urry, 1990a:3). However, while the photograph facilitates the re-experiencing of the event for its beholder-recorder, it is only ever from the same perspective as that chosen at the moment of recording: ‘the image – and the photo in particular – re-enacts an act of seeing’ (Kress, 1988:144; italics in original).
On the appointed day, people sought out the best viewing points, spreading themselves out around the lake in a radius from the single focal point, the hospital. The city’s media and political elites had access to optimal viewing locations. The object of such intense scrutiny – the outcome of the implosion – was apparent to all. Afterwards, it seemed that everyone had an opinion – a point of view – about what happened. However, not everyone believed that the discursive post-mortem should be so lengthily or publicly conducted, more than one Letter writer urging his fellow citizens to ‘get things in perspective’ (Bourne, 1997:10; Hodges, 1997:10).

Canberrans performed not only as ‘audience’ but also as ‘tourists’ on this occasion. An ordinary and familiar building became extra-ordinary and un-familiar with the prospect of its novel demolition. Drawn to gaze upon this novelty, people came equipped with cameras to record the spectacle; they made special plans to attend the event; some even went ‘out of their way’ to be there. These are the behaviours of tourists – a community of ‘tourists’ in their own town. Rather than being drawn to a geographically distant site, Canberra people on this occasion were drawn touristically to the very centre of their city – an area commonly referred to colloquially as its ‘heart’.

With the failure of the event to be concluded as promised with a successful demolition, and with the resulting death of a child spectator, the local population was once more re-configured, now taking on the role of ‘public’ – of a community focused on a political and social issue that concerned them all. Whether or not they actually saw what happened to Katie Bender, their presence at the event whichoccasioned her death made many Canberrans frame themselves as ‘witnesses’. Perhaps a sense that they shared the witnesses’ moral obligations to report publicly on what they had seen drove some to express themselves in forums such as The Canberra Times’ Letters to the Editor. Others responded, as required by conventional witness practice, to the police call ‘to pass on witness accounts, including details of photographs and video footage they may have of the incident’ (Kazar, 1997a:2).

The media were the agents or ‘vectors’ (Wark, 1994) of the event’s promotion, and in its aftermath, the facilitators of societal ‘de-briefing’ (‘Tell us what you saw’). The Canberra Times’ journalists, members of the journalistic ‘community’, are also part of the Canberra community.

17 In theories of perspective in Western Art, the focal point – that point at which all sight lines converge – is called ‘the vanishing point’, a nice irony when the object of this exercise was the erasure of that which was being viewed.
Some of these journalists identified themselves very strongly in their responses first and foremost as members of the local community, disclosing personal feelings and experiences that they might usually have avoided making public in the interests of maintaining a professional distance from their stories. This was an instance in which the media’s ‘social presence’ (Couldry, 2006:6) has to be understood as a personal and particular presence, not merely (even if also, unavoidably) as an institutional presence. The particular function of the media as an interpretive community and the particular relationships of its journalists with its readers, viewers and listeners, are integral to this study. The media’s interpretive function was also fostered via the medium of the pictorial elements of the implosion story. The centrality of visual images to the operations of effective news rhetoric has been observed by many theorists. It is summed up in McGregor’s claim that ‘perhaps the most dominant news value of our times is visualness’ (2002:3).

Finally, it is the ‘sensual immediacy’ of visual imagery that distinguishes it from other textual forms (Mirzoeff, 1999:15) and which produces the powerful impact that makes some images unforgettable. With the implosion’s failure, the eagerly desired image of the hospital collapsing in on itself remained unrealised, and in its place Canberrans found themselves face to face with unlooked-for images of a child’s death. The terrain between the desired and the actualised image is explored in this chapter.

‘AN UNWANTED CIRCUS’: PROMOTING THE EVENT

Just as the hospital had to be physically readied, so the community had to be psychologically prepared (by being imaginatively enabled) for the implosion. Vigorous promotion of the event as a community function had gone some way to forestalling the public’s continued expressions of opposition to the loss of a community facility. To make the destruction of the hospital more palatable, the implosion was construed in these promotions as an artefact of popular culture – an event for the multitudes to share in freely, hosted by a munificent government. The promotion had to entail, in Fiske’s terms, ‘the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system’ (1989:23).

Two years later, in prefacing the Executive Summary of his report into the death of Katie Bender, the ACT coroner, Shane Madden, stated:

Before I give a brief summary of some matters which I consider are significant and consistent with my statutory functions it is necessary to state one particular factor that stands out throughout through the whole of the Inquest. A primary consideration that
should never be overlooked in this whole Acton demolition exercise is one of a matter of fundamental importance. The Acton Peninsula was a construction and demolition site utilising heavy machinery in an industrial project. It was a task assigned to persons with an expertise in those processes. Those persons had been appointed by the ACT and TCL [Total Care Limited] on the basis of their professional experience. There was no need for any public official to become involved in any way in that process. There was set in place by the ACT and TCL what one at the time hoped to be a proper chain of accountability and responsibility. There was no need for any public official or civil servant to create or turn the project into a media promotion. It was inevitable that there would be such an occurrence as mere curiosity on the part of the public would have enticed them to visit the demolition site on that day. But to have as many as 48 emails despatched by a government organisation describing themselves as Section Publications not having any knowledge of implosions and explosives and the inherent dangers of such methods and then for a radio station to offer incentives as a promotion of the project also having no knowledge or expertise in the potential dangers that might arise is nothing less than a disgrace. Persons in government and a commercial radio station were advocating the attendance of the public at an industrial project which had significant dangers not knowing fully the hazards or consequences that might follow. On any global view of all the evidence it was a total abrogation of responsibility to the safety and well being of the general Canberra community to have adopted such a position. (1999)

Today, as it did in 1997, the ACT Government uses the facility of its email distribution list not only to advertise job vacancies and distribute public notices, but also to promote community events. Such events may be advertised more than once – but rarely more often than twice. For a government to have circulated 48 emails in promotion of the implosion is therefore quite extraordinary. The audience that gathered to watch the implosion on 13 July 1997 was certainly an exemplar of that public that is called into being ‘not as a self-regulating assembly, but as a product of publicity’ (Hartley, 1992:119).
FAREWELL TO THE FORMER ROYAL CANBERRA HOSPITAL

On Sunday 13 July 1997 at 1.00pm, the tower building of the former Royal Canberra Hospital and Sylvia Curley House will be imploded to make way for the National Museum of Australia, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Centre.

If you have fond memories of Royal Canberra Hospital, July 13 will be the last opportunity to bid farewell to the hospital buildings. AllCanberrans are encouraged to come and say good-bye to these buildings which have played such a significant role in Canberra’s health care.

Mementos of the former hospital will also be available. For a gold coin donation to the Newborn Intensive Care Foundation, the Lions Club will be distributing specially labeled bricks removed from the former hospital buildings in the last few weeks.

The best views of the site will be from the South side of Lake Burley Griffin, in and around Lennox Gardens, from Black Mountain Peninsula and from Acton. For the safety of viewers, access from both land and water to Acton Peninsula will be restricted, and roads and bicycle paths to the Peninsula will be closed. Visitors to Hospice patients will need to contact hospice management prior to the day.

All proceeds raised from the sale of bricks and profits from the Lions Club catering facilities will be donated to the Canberra-based charity, the Newborn Intensive Care Foundation.

If you are the supervisor of staff who don’t have access to CC-Mail it is your responsibility to ensure that they receive this information. Please forward it as appropriate.

Electronically distributed by Publications and Section Publication

4 July 1997

Figure 16 ‘Farewell to the former Royal Canberra Hospital’, 4 July 1997.
This message (Figure 16) from the Government legitimates the event as an object of consumption. It operates as an artefact of the ‘consumption rhetoric’ that Campbell argues is necessary to facilitate a community’s ‘purchase’ of an occasion – a ‘purchase’ that will be demonstrated by their attendance at the event (1998:236).

As the coroner observed:

The demolition by the implosion technique had never been implemented in the Australian Capital Territory and was relatively novel in Australia. The implosion method of demolition by its very nature would excite the interests of the public as a spectacle. The attraction of a large spectator group was an automatic consequence of such a demolition. The simple curiosity of human nature is such as to be sufficient to generate an interest in this method of demolition. (Madden, 1999)

The anticipation of an event is fundamental to the character of the experience. Just as, for tourists, the experiences of travel may be anticipated in pleasurable daydreams (Urry, 1990a:3), so the Canberra audience prepared for 13 July by imagining the experience of the implosion. Local television stations played footage of successful implosions that had been conducted in other countries, and Canberrans were assured that they, too, would experience just such a spectacle. Later, the same pictures were used to reminded them of how the hospital implosion should have looked (Figure 17):

![Figure 17 Demolition of St Vincent’s Hospital convent, Melbourne, in 1992 (The Age, 15 July 1997, p.A2)](image)

With an election due some six months after the hospital’s demolition, there were claims afterwards that the Chief Minister, Kate Carnell, ‘had chosen the spectacular implosion method because the creation of a government-endorsed gala event would help in her re-election campaign’ (Guthrie, 1997:A14). Regardless of the truth of this claim, the event had certainly been comprehensively appropriated by the Government for its own promotion. It was an instance of the state exercising its monopoly on violence, legitimising an action that, performed
by others in non-sanctioned contexts, would be regarded as hostile (Benjamin, 1996). Just as elections themselves can be regarded as spectacles whose dramatic purpose is the display of ‘consent’ (Habermas, 1989), so the implosion event was planned to engineer a shared, and unifying, experience of ‘community’ for the Canberra public.

Reporting on the implosion aftermath for readers of The Australian, Christopher Dore’s analysis of Canberra’s social climate shows why such a unifying event may have seemed timely:

As a town, Canberra’s spirits had already been low. It is the only capital city apart from Darwin still in recession, gutted by the new Coalition Government that was swept to power nearly 18 months ago with a mandate for small government. Thousands of public servants have lost their jobs since, and the real estate market is showing no signs of recovery.

It is a small town struggling for a fresh identity and keen to shrug off the poor reputation federal politicians had inadvertently nurtured over the years. (1997:15)

THE EVENT AS SPECTACLE

What may, for the community, have previously been a distracted appreciation of the hospital was certainly concentrated by the prospect of its demolition. Although none of the hospital’s supporters claimed architectural merit as grounds for its deliverance, even many of those who admitted they found the hospital aesthetically distasteful were nonetheless reluctant to see it destroyed because of all the memories it held. For some, the significance of the hospital meant that the prospect of its demolition was one they could not face: “My sons were born there,” said one man. “I couldn’t go and watch that” (Dore, 1997:15).

Beyond the emotional connection, as taxpayers, as employees and as ex-patients, Canberrans’ relationship with the hospital was a proprietorial one:

Canberrans don’t have much history, not to call our own. Most of it is shared with the nation – the nation that paid for it all while we smug, fat-cat, out-of-touch Canberrans got the benefit. That’s what we’ve been told these 80 years. But this building was our own, not the nation’s. We weren’t obliged to share this building with the nation. It was ours. And we were about to destroy it. (Hull, 1997:C3)

The audience of spectators thus turned a ‘possessive gaze’ (Berger, 1972) upon the hospital, ‘consuming’ it visually (Urry, 1990a) as they looked their last upon it. Conscious of that finality, many were also keen to ‘capture’ that which was about to be forever lost to them – both the hospital’s materiality and the event’s momentariness. Scores of keen photographers
intentionally and carefully chose their locations and set up their cameras on tripods to ensure that they would not miss what they knew would be a historic sight.

Like *flaneurs*, who, even when appearing to be strolling purposelessly, are actually actively engaging with their environment, so many in the audience that day who may have appeared to be merely opportunistically picnicking or socialising, were actually deliberately in attendance to bear witness to the hospital’s dying moments. As sightseers, they were engaged in the touristic ritual of paying respect to that which they had come to see (MacCannell, 1973:589): “I said to my wife this is going to be a once-in-a-lifetime thing – we'll never see anything like this again” (Dore, 1997:15).

This audience’s engagement with the event was purposive – people were there with a mind to *attend* to the event. They were prepared (and preparing) to remember, many using their cameras to ‘fix’ a significant site in their memories (Sheller and Urry, 2004:207). The implosion was to be an object of spectacle, framed by thousands of camera viewfinders. A characteristic practice of modern tourism, this photography would enable the touristic gaze to be ‘endlessly reproduced and recaptured’ (Urry, 1990a:3). Such future reproduction of the captured image serves more than a merely nostalgic purpose, the photographs that tourists take being mementos that serve as ‘ontological anchors’ (Redfoot, 1984:306).

Having been thus prepared, this audience was also well equipped to recall the event afterwards. Many Canberrans were able to relate detailed observations in articulate narratives, some choosing to do so via the Letters pages of *The Canberra Times*, and others offering submissions of evidence to the inquest:

The Inquest heard evidence from 47 witnesses and received 753 exhibits with an additional 82 documents being marked for identification. The transcript totalled almost 9900 pages. (Madden, 1999)

As well as attracting those who had made deliberate plans to attend the event (for example, Cordelia Hull and her daughter, who returned from interstate for that purpose), the impending implosion captured the attention of casual passers-by, attracted by the crowds or by the last-minute radio announcements. Among these was the Bender family:

Katie Bender, the 12-year-old girl tragically killed while watching the Canberra hospital demolition that went wrong, had not planned to attend the spectacle on Sunday. “We were on our way back from Mass,” her elder sister, Anna, 20, told the Herald yesterday. (Papadopoulos and Peatling, 1997:1,2)
In the lead up to the day, the audience’s anticipation of the spectacle was engaged by several modes of visualising the controlled collapse of the hospital buildings. Firstly, there was the application of the technicist imagination that produced diagrams that illustrated how the implosion would work. These focused not on the production of a spectacular sight, but on the successful conduct of impressive engineering (see Figure 24). Secondly, the expression of the commemorative or historical imagination was actively encouraged by *The Canberra Times* in its publication of reminiscences that restored the hospital, imaginatively, to its hey-day. Thirdly, the touristic or spectacular imagination was at play, producing (even if only in the mind’s eye) the familiar and aesthetically pleasing image of a tower dropping gracefully and compliantly into its own footprint. Ironically, the almost magical aspects of a successful implosion worked against too close an engagement with the mechanics of its operation. Most spectators would have been more pre-occupied with anticipating the sight they had been led to believe they could expect, rather than with any concern about the details of ‘how’ that would be achieved.

If there were unpalatable overtones of aestheticised and legitimised violence in this entertainment, the voices of those who had raised such concerns (‘an unwanted circus’; ‘destructive tendencies’) had been drowned out by those who were eager for the spectacle to begin (‘old hospital gets set to go out with a bang’). The majority of spectators were not prepared to have their anticipated pleasure spoiled by dwelling on what the implosion was going to mean for the minority among them for whom the event was anticipated as a ‘personal loss’. Nor, as journalist Ian Warden bemoaned, was much attention given to the broader possible social and historical consequences of the event. It was something to be enjoyed purely and simply for its appearance – a true spectacle, which, as Fiske observes, ‘involves an exaggeration of the pleasure of looking. It exaggerates the visible, magnifies and foregrounds the surface appearance, and refuses meaning or depth’ (1989:84).

No more argument would be entered into. It was now time to enjoy the sheer spectacle of the implosion performance. Like the Government, all the promoters of the event were keen to ensure a large audience by stressing the spectacular and unique nature of what would happen. As the hospital was positioned on one of Lake Burley Griffin’s peninsulas, there were several sites around the lake from which it was easily visible. As most of the land around the lake is parkland, it was also easily accessible by large numbers of people. The ‘best’ of these sites were usually listed in the implosion promotion:

> The best vantage points are on the opposite side of Lake Burley Griffin at the rear of the Albert Hall, the Hyatt Hotel and Canberra Yacht Club. (Announcement on page 1 of *The Canberra Times*, 13 July 1997) (Clack, 1997a:1)
The best views will be from the south side of Lake Burley Griffin in Lennox Gardens, the Yacht Club and around to Attunga Point, or the north side of the lake from Black Mountain or Acton Park. (Media release from Chief Minister, Kate Carnell) (Brough and Peatling, 1997:2)

Katie Bender’s family chose the first-mentioned of these sites, Lennox Gardens, from which to view the implosion.

Neither before nor since had such an overwhelming proportion of the city’s population joined in simultaneously participating in a single event. As Peter Learmont’s photograph (Figure 18) illustrates, there were so many people crowded onto the lake foreshores that they themselves constituted a spectacle worth recording. Like the French bourgeoisie who were similarly depicted in Georges Seurat’s *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* of a century before, Canberra people came together on this occasion with a shared intention of pursuing a communal pleasure. Here indeed was ‘a crowd witnessing itself in visible space’ – a public bounded both by the event and the shared physical space in which they had gathered (Warner, 2002:50).

![Figure 18](image)

**Figure 18 Spectators on the lake foreshores**

18 Lennox Gardens is in the middle distance.
In the cruellest and ghastliest inversion of the day, some in that crowd became witnesses to another ‘spectacle’ – one so ‘awful’ that emergency services personnel sought to ‘shield’ them from it:

[District Officer Ron] Weston describes the scene as ‘shock and confusion’. Off-duty police, firefighters and nurses arrive quickly. Two off-duty police are hurt. ‘The majority of people were stunned at the realisation of what had happened’, Weston said. People are on the ground being treated. Only four minutes have passed. Emergency workers and police try to shield the crowd from the awful spectacle. (Clack, 1997e:C2)

Most in the audience, however, were unaware of the accident. As Norman Abjorensen reported the following day:

Death had gate-crashed the festivities, but very few were aware of it. As the sightseers trudged back to their cars and the picnickers packed their lunch boxes away from a dozen vantage points around Lake Burley Griffin, only those people in the immediate vicinity were alerted to the fact that something had gone horribly wrong. Most people who saw the flashing lights of police vehicles though they were just part of the traffic control. (1997b:1)

Many people headed home with a sense of disappointment at the failure of the hospital to be successfully and completely demolished. After all that anticipation, they were conscious of a failure of entertainment:

Staff from radio station MIX 106.3 have been counseled after they were abused by motorists as they battled traffic at the end of Sunday’s Royal Canberra Hospital disaster. [M]otorists yelled abuse at staff in the station’s marked vehicle. ‘There were a few smart people who were yelling things like “Nice promotion fellas” … [T]he team that ran the broadcast did not find out about the tragedy until after they had gone home. (Wallace, 1997:2)

“We waited until 1 o’clock [the scheduled time for the implosion] and thought, oh yeah, it’s been a fizzer ….” (Dargaville, 1997:2)

Many in the audience were disappointed that they had not witnessed or been delivered that which they had been promised they would see – a spectacular and successful (complete) demolition by implosion. The audience would have had images of successful implosions in the forefront of their minds, and such images are what they would have been hoping to capture on their own home cameras.

Modern demolition is truly wonderful. As a spectacle it is the opposite of a rocket launch. The twenty-storey block remains perfectly vertical as it slides towards the centre of the earth. It falls straight, with no loss of its upright bearing, like a tailor’s dummy falling
through a trap-door, and its own surface area absorbs the rubble. What a marvellous modern art form this is, a match for the firework displays of our childhood. (Baudrillard, 1988:17)

(While the Canberra Hospital so disappointed its spectators in its failure to neatly implode, the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, by contrast – and apparently by accident, rather than by design – imploded almost perfectly, as if illustrating Baudrillard’s description.)

It is interesting, given Baudrillard’s analogy, that the demolition team at the Canberra Hospital had sought to increase the visual spectacle by adding an ‘appetiser’ of fireworks to the implosion event. Had they been intending to signal the imminent, much greater, spectacle of the implosion, or were they merely seeking to borrow from the lexicon of public entertainment that most democratic (because so equitably visible) of spectacles, the fireworks display? Rather than heralding an impressive implosion, the fireworks actually caused the demolition to be delayed, and some speculated afterwards that this may have contributed to the implosion’s failure:

At 1.05, the pyrotechnics went off, rockets spearing up into the sky and exploding in brilliant flashes with small pieces of roof and debris being hurled skywards – but no blast. On the bridge, the circuits were dead. Anxious faces looked at one another before a hasty inspection was carried out, personnel scurrying back into the building that should not have been still standing. As explosives chief Rod McCracken explained, the firework display had apparently dislodged some concrete which had fallen on the control cable and broken it. This was quickly found and repaired. (Abjorensen, 1997d:4)

The view from above

Separately located from the people by the lake was another, self-consciously engaged audience of politicians and media gathered high in a lakeside hotel building. The Chief Minister, some of her colleagues 19 and invited media turned into spectacle the population who had gathered below (as directed) on the lake foreshores. Those on high could view the spectacle of Canberra-as-audience (or electorate-as-audience) while having an eagle’s-eye view of the implosion from a

19 Deputy Chief Minister and Attorney General, Gary Humphries, watched the event with his family on board one of the police launches, but Trevor Kaine, Minister for Urban Services, chose to stay away. Whether he did so out of distaste for the event or due to his widely-publicised disaffection for the Chief Minister cannot be said.
location where they were well-removed from potential harm’s way. While the population gazed their last upon their possession (the hospital), those in the tower gazed upon a population that was in several senses ‘theirs’. It may be an exaggeration to claim that they had located themselves in a Foucauldian panopticon – the controllers (politicians) and the monitors (media) of the population gathered obediently below. It could nonetheless be observed that some in this audience secured for themselves a privileged viewing position (a ‘dress circle’ view) while the majority jostled for the best spot in ‘the stalls’ (Figure 19).

![Figure 19 Looking towards Lennox Gardens from Commonwealth Avenue Bridge](photograph by James Nomarhas, 13 July 1997, collection of the National Library of Australia)

Thus the audience for this event was, in several fashions, under surveillance, very much in keeping with the visual monitoring of the public that characterises contemporary Western urban life (Mirzoeff, 1999:1). They were also there at the media’s behest, the media having helped to turn this event into a spectacle by encouraging people to ‘see’ it as such (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998:113). Politicians, media and audience were all party to this occasion, their
combined attendance serving to legitimise the event (and afterwards, to render them complicit in the day’s outcomes).

TOURISTS IN THEIR OWN CITY

On 13 July, the singular nature of the event being held in their midst transformed those Canberrans who attended from residents to tourists. The prospect of the implosion had rendered the familiar unfamiliar, thus creating the opportunity of having a touristic experience without leaving home. This was an occasion when people could temporarily adopt the touristic practices of ‘consumption of place and desired experience’ (Middleton 1999:121). Like tourists, who leave their homes and usual routines, Canberrans prepared to break with their regular ‘practices of everyday life’ and ‘engage with a set of stimuli that contrast with the everyday and the mundane’ (Urry, 1990a:2). Applying Campbell’s observations of the fundamental roles played by day-dreaming and anticipation in modern consumerism (1987) to the practices of tourism, Urry argues that tourism is the ‘paradigm case’ of the imaginative pleasure-seeking involved in contemporary consumerism (1990a:13). The attractiveness, indeed the undeniable pull, of such out-of-the-ordinary experiences is established partly by their demonstrable popular appeal, as expressed by Anna Bender: “We saw a whole lot of cars, practically the whole of Canberra, so we thought we’d stop and have a look” (Papadopoulos and Peatling, 1997:1,2).

The community was invited to gaze at the hospital for the last time, and to gaze, as well, at its spectacular demolition. It is a gaze that Urry (after Foucault) describes as ‘socially organised and systematised’ (1990a:1). Canberrans were encouraged to attend this viewing, and directed as to where and how to position themselves in order to optimise their gaze. It is in just such a fashion that tourists are directed to view sights (and sites) of significance:

Join us at Lennox Gardens, one of the best vantage points from which to watch the implosion, set down for 1pm. We’ve got your seat ready! So get your family together, pack your picnic rug and head to Lennox Gardens for a truly spectacular event. (Macklin, 1997c:3)

As an aside, it could be noted that as the subject of this study the audience is also now re-produced by the ‘analytic gaze’ of this thesis (Alasuutari, 1999:6).
As an invitation to consume both place and experience, this press release bids its audience to engage in characteristically touristic practices. The prospect of pleasure derives not only from the event’s novelty, but from the event’s location, removed from everyday surroundings (Urry, 1990a:2-3) and requiring, as a result of that remove, particular provisions (exemplified by the ‘picnic rug’). Essential to the touristic experience is the separation between the everyday and the out-of-the-ordinary. Different senses must be exercised and the pleasures must also be different. A ‘division between the ordinary and the extraordinary’ must be apparent (Urry, 1990a:12). What would otherwise be an ‘ordinary’ family picnic is on this occasion to be rendered ‘extraordinary’ by its coinciding with ‘a truly spectacular event’.

Further, this particular event is being used to promote what Dyer refers to as the ‘feeling’ of utopia (as distinct from ‘utopia’ itself) – a ‘sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realised’ (1977:273). Dyer proposes that the central thrust of all entertainment is utopianism, and the categories of abundance, energy, intensity, transparency and community that comprise his utopian typology are all in evidence in the implosion event (1977:277-278). What was promoted to Canberrans on 13 July 1997 was an occasion on which they could not only experience the exotic, but imagine themselves to be a happy, unified community.

Tourists are variously motivated to seek particular experiences and, as fans do, actively engage in meaning-making. Semiotic engagement with place, or reading places as sign systems, is encouraged by the experience of being a tourist (Culler, 1981). Of particular relevance in this instance, given the spiritual significance popularly attributed to the hospital, is MacCannell’s analogy between modern tourism and the pilgrim’s search for the sacred (1976). As a community of ‘tourists’, the implosion audience passed through the stages of pilgrimhood identified by Turner: initial separation from their usual place of residence; liminality in which usual social ties are suspended and replaced with a sense of community during the shared experience of the sacred; and finally, reintegration with the original social group (1973).

The experience of tourism is necessarily separated from that of work. By the time of the implosion, the hospital had been closed for some years, in which time it had been stripped not

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21 It may be noted at this point that the hospital was farewelled earlier on the morning of 13 July with an ecumenical service (Brough and Peatling, 1997:2).
only of its nominal and figurative function, but also of its functional apparatuses. It was no longer a ‘working’ hospital. By the time it became the centerpiece of a community entertainment, it had become clearly (functionally) separated from its former, nominative role. Those in the audience who persisted in thinking and speaking of it still as ‘the Royal Canberra Hospital’ can be cast as framing a resistant reading to that which had become the Government’s official line – that this was merely a public building which had become excess to requirements. In fact, as a catalyst and focal point for oppositional activity, the hospital had become a political nuisance.\footnote{Some of the exasperation that this public opposition engendered in Government ranks is captured in that phrase, ‘Bomb the hospital’, as revealed in the implosion’s aftermath (Dawson and Ludlow, 1997:9).}

However, a popular tourist activity is the inspection of the lives and workplaces of others – in this instance, that activity was displaced into the pages of \textit{The Canberra Times}, where some of those lives, and glimpses into the hospital as the workplace it once was, had earlier been relayed (for example, see Jackson, 1997:C5). More recently, readers had been given access via the paper’s pages to the hospital as worksite of the demolition team, granted an insider’s perspective on the preparations for the implosion (for example, see Figure 5).

\textbf{AUDIENCE PRACTICES: WITNESSING}

The intention to perform ‘witness’ that preceded the implosion’s failure was apparent in the publication of reminiscences by hospital staff which publicly articulated the significance of the hospital in a form of public valediction. The intention of so many people to record the event on film is also evidence of the desire to bear witness, combined with a sense of wanting to ‘memorialise’ the hospital. Cordelia Hull’s story of her experience of the implosion (discussed more fully in Chapter Three) is characterised throughout by a preoccupation with the visual aspects of the event: she and her daughter discuss whether to move elsewhere for a better view, her daughter climbs a tree in order to see what is happening, and Hull wants to take her photo in front of the hospital while it is still standing (1997:C3).

Family photographs are typically taken on those relatively rare occasions, such as birthdays and Christmases, that the contemporary family observes together, consuming not only celebratory food but their leisure time together. On this occasion many families, like Cordelia Hull’s, sought to place on the record, by means of photography, particular relationships between certain
individuals and the hospital – to capture the two together for the last time, as evidence of a one-time connection. Reminiscences by ex-hospital staff published in The Canberra Times (such as Jackson's) were typically accompanied by a photograph of the person with the hospital in the background, the grammar of such compositions indicating the relationship of the one with the other.

![Three generations saddened by hospital’s end](image)

**Figure 20** ‘Three generations …’ (photograph by Graham Tidy, The Canberra Times, 19 July 1997, p.C2)

Although the three people in Graham Tidy’s photograph (Figure 20) are identified in the accompanying caption as Inta Burden and Nicole and Jessica O’Rourke, their depiction in silhouette turns them from identifiable individuals into generic ‘everywomen’, who stand for the broader community and exemplify not only its relationship, but also its response, to the hospital. Mrs Burden had trained as a nurse at the hospital, and her daughter and grand-daughter were both born there. The three stand holding hands, symbolising the generational and affective links that bind families and communities together and that form the basis for their personal histories. The figures in the foreground depict familial cohesion and interpersonal connection, social values that the hospital in the background is fated no longer to facilitate.

On the other hand, some Canberrans had expressed reluctance to attend the implosion out of a sense of being witnesses to something they did not want to be party to – the destruction of something significant and highly charged. One Canberra woman who did not attend the implosion, but came to visit the place where Katie Bender was killed, explained her decision to a journalist at the site: ‘Mrs Horrocks said she “couldn’t stand” to watch the attempted demolition
on Sunday because her husband had been treated at the hospital’ (Woodford, 1997:2). To those who felt this way, the communal gathering on 13 July was negatively rather than positively charged, with almost ghoulish overtones. There was certainly a moral tone to their objections to the crowd’s participation that had nothing to do with any concern for safety.

Afterwards, many spectators realised that they had been ‘witnesses’ to something other than that which they had planned to see. The instinct to tell one’s story thus became more prevalent in the broader community after the implosion, as many Canberrans turned to the therapeutic strategy of narrative to help make sense of an event that had become a tragedy.

In its invitation to the community to share their responses to the event (Figure 21), The Canberra Times used the idiomatic expression, ‘What did you see on Sunday?’ – an informal usage that nonetheless betrays the privileged status of the visual perspective when giving evidence. The notice was a request for evidence, hoping to discover something as yet uncovered by the investigation (‘Perhaps you saw something that others didn’t’), as much as an invitation to emotionally debrief (‘How did it affect you?’).

![Figure 21](image)

In response, people spoke as ‘witnesses’ in the legal sense of giving evidence (to which they were prepared to append their names) as to their experience of what had actually happened:

- On Sunday, at Commonwealth Avenue Bridge, my family was narrowly missed by a 4kg piece of the Royal Canberra Hospital. (Arundell, 1997:8)

- Rocks fell into the water just 2m in front of us. (Tony Stefanou) (Ryan, 1997:C2)
I thought something had gone wrong straight away because stuff was landing in front of us only metres away. As the dust was settling I started hearing sirens and the sirens got closer and closer and then they stopped. Then an ambulance came rushing up the road. (Paul Downey) (Ryan, 1997:C2)

Photographs record not only presences but absences and erasures as well, as the photographs of the damaged remains of the hospital indicate. They also record evidence of failure, as does the sequence of stills and diagrams in Figure 22 that sadly parodies the ideal implosion narrative shown in Figure 17.

Figure 22  ‘Canberra’s deadly demolition’ (The Sydney Morning Herald, 15 July 1997, p.2)

**MEMENTOS MORI**

Huyssen describes contemporary society’s fever of ‘musealisation’, in which our profound unease at the loss of temporal and spatial stability expresses itself in a pervasive desire to record, to ‘fix’ in time that which is ever slipping away (2000:24). Memory, he says, is ‘always transitory, notoriously unreliable, and haunted by forgetting – in short, human and social’ (2000:38). Society’s efforts to stabilise the past are aided in particular by the camera and the video camera, although even their products are not unproblematic.

The evidentiary nature of photography meant that after the implosion the film footage and photographs that thousands of people had produced became mementos of a forensic nature. Whether submitted to the public domain by being formally tendered as evidence to the inquest, or retained in the domestic sphere in personal and private collections, and whether or not such photographs actually captured Katie Bender’s accidental death, those images nonetheless

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23 Robert Macklin noted, with some distaste, that some people had reportedly offered just such footage to local television stations – one person seeking $500 for ‘graphic material’ (Macklin, 1997a:3).
worked (and undoubtedly continue to work) as triggers for memories of that death. Not simply souvenirs, such photographs thus become almost literally *mementos mori* in the way that Sontag (1977:15) and Barthes (1980) both argue that all photographs do.

‘The Photograph does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*’, Barthes observes (1980:85; capital and italics in original). The photograph is proof not of what is, but only of what was. He feels that such photographs induce a type of ‘madness’ by proffering unarguable evidence of ‘being’ that threatens ‘to explode in the face of whoever looks at it’ (1980:117); the ‘explosion’ being the realisation on the viewer’s part that the visual evidence before him or her is not proof of the subject’s continued existence. The photographs of the hospital implosion capture just such an ‘explosion’ – not only figuratively, but literally. In the photograph of a person we know to have died, says Barthes, we ‘observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake … the photograph tells me death in the future’ (1980:96).

Many photographers, focusing on the hospital buildings in the background, would have captured evidence of the splashes of water in the lake where debris had fallen, but not been aware that they had done so until their films were developed. Such evidence of what happened was only captured by accident. As Mirzoeff observes, ‘the visualisation of everyday life does not mean that we necessarily know what it is that we are seeing’ (1999:2). Several observers of the implosion, such as Ivan Hoy, reflected afterwards that they had not understood the implications of what they had witnessed: ‘When I saw the chimney fall to the right, I thought, “that’s wrong, it should fall in”’ (Ryan, 1997:C2). 24

The reproduction of implosion images in the press (and simultaneously in hundreds of private homes as people had their photographs developed) caused the event to be replayed or repeated, again for public consumption. When replayed, people saw more clearly – because they now knew to expect it – such evidence as the splashes caused by debris falling in the lake, which can be clearly seen in Andrew Hollands’ photograph (Figure 23):

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24 In the same fashion, photographer Jeff Christensen was reportedly unaware that in one of the 80 or so photographs he took of the burning World Trade Centre buildings, trapped workers were visible leaning out of upper floor windows. It was others who noticed and then enlarged and cropped Christensen’s photograph, resulting in one of the defining images of the September 11 tragedy (Basheda, 2001:27).
In photographs such as this one the dark cloud of smoke suspended in mid-air visually echoes the iconic post-destruction Hiroshima cloud, an allusion that many people would have apprehended, even if sub-consciously. The hospital site itself, of course, now became the most painful *memento mori*:

Acton Peninsula will never be the same again. No more will I glance fondly at a once-familiar landmark when crossing Commonwealth Avenue Bridge but, rather, avert my eyes.

As far as I am concerned, the area is now desecrated for ever. (Carter, 1997:17)

**VISUALISING EVIDENCE: ENABLING TECHNOLOGIES**

As routinely happens on such occasions, the city’s keenest professional and amateur photographers had sought out their sites early in order to eliminate the anticipated intrusive elements that other audience members present to those who want an uninterrupted view of an event. (In photographs of the crowd, such as Figure 18, several camera tripods are clearly visible.) Photographers’ work is wholly preoccupied with the visual – with the search for the best angles, most interesting perspectives, and correct exposures. Every sight is made an object of spectacle when ‘framed’ as such by the viewer (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998:79) and many
had competed to find the ‘best location’ from which to gain an optimal perspective on the implosion.

When, in due course, the ACT coroner called for the submission of evidence (the official and legal equivalent of *The Canberra Times*’ journalistic request for people to relate ‘What did you see on Sunday?’), the fact that so many people had captured the event on film meant that the coroner’s court was deluged with submissions. The inquest opened on 17 March 1998 and sat for 118 days, formal evidence concluding on 11 November 1998. It was to prove an inquest that made particular demands on the capacity of the coroner’s court to visualise evidence. In his report, the coroner detailed the novel advances in technology that were able, for the first time, to satisfy those demands:

- Televisions were attached to the walls for public viewing, five 21 inch computer screens were placed strategically around the court to be utilised by the Coroner, the Counsel Assisting, and the members of the profession.
- Over 30,000 pages of Exhibits and 2000 photographs were scanned and loaded onto the computer. The Counsel Assisting the Coroner had control and was able to display, on every device, any of these items at any time. Counsel also had the ability to play videos with the picture being broadcast to every device in the court.
- Transcripts were provided daily and loaded onto the PC as well.

This was the first serious attempt within the Magistrates Court to apply modern technology to a lengthy and complex case. (Madden, 1999)

Long before the advent of the various analogue and digital technologies that enabled the hospital’s demolition to be recorded for posterity, the architects’ and engineers’ plans for the buildings had been committed, by pen, to paper. ‘Planning’ is another frame that is central to this event, and is also one in which a visual term is metaphoric for cognitive activity. The implosion did not ‘go according to plan’, the contractors claiming afterwards that there were no plans of the old hospital that would have revealed details of the building’s construction. In the month following the implosion, largely as a result of Freedom of Information requests made by *The Canberra Times*, plans were not only found to be readily available but to have been supplied by Totalcare to the tenderers (Grose, 1997b:1,3). Rather than the implosion not having ‘gone to plan’, it became apparent afterwards that there had been a failure by the demolishers to acquaint themselves with those plans.

Prior to the implosion, the logistics of the hospital’s de-construction had been dealt with in the press in detail sufficient so that readers could imagine they had been given some insights into
the mechanics of the impending implosion. Afterwards, it was apparent just how inadequate those insights had been, for it seemed that no-one could explain why the implosion had gone wrong. In the aftermath of the implosion, the search for the ‘missing’ plans served only to underscore the failure of due process in the management of the demolition. The fact that it had never been brought to public attention that the demolition crew was working with no plans of the hospital, may have been an indictment of the project management. It was widely felt to be another source of communal guilt, for the ‘community’ had focused only on the entertaining aspects of the demolition, not the technical aspects. Like relying on the Government’s advice to attend an event at which thousands of people had been seriously endangered, people realised that they had abrogated their own responsibility to inform themselves about the situation in which they elected to place themselves.

DEPICTING THE IMPLOSION: AN ANALYSIS OF VISUAL DATA

Given how central visual aspects were to this event, pictorial representations form a key part of this study’s empirical data. ‘Images are bearers of ideological meanings no less than verbal – or all other – texts …’, says Kress (1988:133). In analysing some of these visual representations, I have been guided by Kress and van Leeuwen’s approaches to the semiotic analysis of images, based as they are on Halliday’s work on language as a social semiotic (1996; 1998). ‘Like writing, visual communication also occurs in context, and thus it may also be regarded as a complex social act’ (Kostelnick, 1993:243; italics in original). ‘Reading’ pictures (as distinct from ‘recognising’ pictorial forms) requires comprehension of certain codes and an appreciation of cultural, conventional and immediate contexts. It is an activity that entails a ‘profoundly learned response’ (Kostelnick, 1993:244-245).

Diagrams

The implosion narrative was taken forward by means of various visual representations just as it was by verbal ones. Technical pictures (for example, architectural plans and engineering drawings), especially, employ certain discipline-specific pictorial conventions that situate their readers within a certain ‘visual discourse community’ and which may serve to exclude those not ‘learned’ in their codes (Kostelnick, 1993:250). In anticipation of the event, The Canberra Times produced a diagram (Figure 24) to illustrate and explain ‘how’ the demolition would be effected. In it, the event is conceptualised, technicised and narrativised. The accompanying text is emphatically punctuated by the auxiliary verb ‘will’ – a use of the simple future tense that indicates that this is an authoritative view, a definitive explanation of a technical certainty. All such technical diagrams (because despite its pictorial elements, that is essentially what this is)
speak to the viewer/reader with authority. They also suggestively erase the possibility of error by de-humanising the process they depict. The diagram is ‘read’ left to right, with the ‘given’ (that is, current status) information – the hospital depicted as currently standing – on the left, and the ‘new’ (that is, future status) information – text describing the obliteration of the hospital – on the right. Above it all is the bold assertion of the illustration’s title: ‘Hospital history to become rubble in 30 seconds’.

Figure 24  ‘How Royal Canberra will come down’ (*The Canberra Times*, 25 June 1997, p.1)

Three weeks later, the same graphic was modified by *The Canberra Times* to illustrate the failure of the process (Figure 25):
Unlike the first diagram, whose elements it appropriates, the narrative of the second diagram does not ‘read’ simply from left to right. With the failure of the hospital to be successfully demolished, the ‘new’ information requires a return to the ‘given’ (that is, the hospital is still standing), and thus the reader is encouraged to follow a circular movement in this illustration, enhanced by the positioning of the heavy, centrally-positioned arrow that directs the viewer back from right to left, against the direction of reading flow. The accident that has resulted is thus shown to be an aberration, a departure from the pre-determined narrative direction spelled out for this event in the former diagram.

In the first diagram, the position of resolution (the lower right hand corner) is occupied by text describing the idealised result of a successfully concluded event (‘The building folds down within a pattern of blasts following the pre-planned footprint’). In the second diagram, the concluding text is positioned mid-way along the bottom of the diagram (in other words, part-way returned to
the beginning, if read clock-wise) – a position not of resolution, but of indetermination, of irresolution (‘Parts of the hospital were left standing’.) This is no longer a diagram of certainties, but one of questions. Despite the second diagram’s explanatory intentions, the viewer/reader is left unsure of the reasons why things happened the way they did.

A strong dynamic is created in both diagrams with the use of arrows indicating direction, movement and the passage of time. The arrows are the pictorial equivalent of the verb, ‘will’. The direction of the arrow in the first diagram is left to right and upwards, all indicating a positive and forward movement, while the direction of the arrow in the second diagram is right to left and downwards, indicating a negative and backward movement. The arrow also graphically represents a vector.

‘Diagrams, maps and charts are most often found in contexts that offer the kind of knowledge which, in our culture, is most highly valued – objective, dispassionate knowledge, ostensibly free of emotive involvement and subjectivity’ (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996:126). These diagrams, however, also incorporate pictorial elements, which are associated with explanation at its most elementary level – the level of emotional involvement with the subject matter. The Canberra audience that was being educated about the implosion method was, at the same time, also being imaginatively and emotionally engaged in the event. When the event failed to go to plan, resulting in tragedy, it was, of course, front page news (Figure 26).
Figure 26  ‘Blast Horror’ (The Canberra Times, 14 July 1997, p.1)
Everything that went wrong is summarised in two words, the weight and size of which loudly proclaim their significance for readers of *The Canberra Times*. This is the style of headline conventionally reserved for tragedies and disasters, and on this occasion its ‘blackness’ is underscored by the large photo of the remains of the hospital that occupies the remainder of the top half of the front page. The front page location of this story, paired with its emphatic headline, signals the frame for this story as one of ‘horror’. The photograph itself confirms the claim of a disastrous outcome to the event, displaying in landscape view the entire mangled body of the hospital, with smoke and dust rising from it, and buildings awry, some in mid-collapse.

As a narrative, the photo tells readers a significant amount – for example, the large splash apparent in the water in the right foreground is dangerously close to the two spectator craft that can also be seen in the water. This tells readers that some in the audience have come close to being hit by debris that has been expelled from the demolished buildings. The photograph therefore compounds the headline’s demand that readers respond emotionally to what has happened (that is, with ‘horror’). It is a fine example of Kress and van Leeuwen’s claim that the newspaper layout ‘is a truly bodily aspect of the text, an interface between our biological and our semiotic selves’ (1998:201) for it works both affectively and cognitively.

Before the reader panics at the sight of this terrifying headline, however, the newspaper superimposes it with a highly visible, but ‘quieter’, quote from the social agency that is the authority in instances of disaster, the police. Detective Constable Mark Johnsen is quoted, ‘Thank God there weren’t more people seriously injured’. Although the expression ‘Thank God’ is used commonly enough to be understood as a colloquial expression that intends no real reference to a deity, the editorial decision to use the quote in so immediate and prominent a position sends a message to readers that the extent of this tragedy has been limited only by a miracle, and that such fateful occurrences are beyond human control. The newspaper’s framing of the disaster is thereby moved, if only ever so slightly, away from the political (that is, the humanly manageable) towards the realm of the natural (that is, the humanly unmanageable).

This page also exemplifies the division into ‘ideal’ and ‘real’ that Kress and van Leeuwen propose in their approach to the analysis of the structure of newspaper layouts (1998:193-194). In layouts in which top and bottom are polarised (as in this instance), the top presents the ‘ideal’, the essence of what has happened, while the bottom presents the ‘real’, the details. By using the photograph (the ‘ideal’) in the top half of the page, *The Canberra Times* suggests that, on this occasion, it is more important for its readers to be presented with the essence of the story (visually) first, and the details (textually) later.
The process of designing the layout of a newspaper page involves determining not only how the elements that are combined on that page should be ordered, and how they should cohere, but also what salience should be attached to each. Salience is judged ‘on the basis of visual cues … the greater the weight of an element, the greater its salience’ (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1998:200). This front page displays a heavy (and thus, highly salient) headline which is almost matched, visually, by the size and predominantly dark tones of the accompanying photograph. Together, it may be assumed, the two elements sum up the story.

In the bottom half of the page, far less weight is given to the elements of the ‘real’ as they are accommodated within the space that remains after the newspaper’s standing commitments to advertisers have been honoured. The most salient element, beneath a headline that is next in weight to the banner head, is the photograph of the ACT Chief Minister, Kate Carnell, a person more accustomed to occupying the top half of the newspaper’s front page than being reduced, as here, to a diminutive and powerless position in the lower right hand corner. Although she is ‘under attack’, the paper’s readers are assured that she is, however, taking action – she has ordered a ‘14-day probe’. Finally, following the headline of least weight on the page (although this is balanced by the story’s text being bolded) is the first of the many pieces of journalistic analysis that this event will require: ‘Day out goes tragically wrong’. By allocating the beginning of this article to the front page, the newspaper profiles the other valuable service its journalists can perform for their community in times of trouble – they can not only report the news (as is done in the other two articles on this page) but they can explain it, too.

Photographs

Photographs facilitate a relationship between the viewer and the subject. Made visible through the media, a victim may, like a celebrity, become a ‘familiar stranger’ (Gitlin, 2001:22). As is the case with celebrities (Turner, 2004:8), the private life of a high-profile victim may be made an object of investigation. As press coverage of the implosion proceeded, the victim, Katie Bender, became ‘known’ to the wider Canberra community primarily through the media’s use of her photographs as ‘visual eulogies’ (Kitch, 2003:218). Readers also got to ‘know’ Katie through the reported comments of family, neighbours, friends and other members of Canberra’s Croatian community, and later, through reports of tributes made at her funeral, at which, for example, her older sister Anna was reported as saying, ‘She was a peacemaker. She didn’t like to see people fighting. And she’d always make people laugh’ (Papadopoulos and Peatling, 1997:1,2). Indeed, in both of her photographs supplied to the media (Figures 27 and 28), Katie’s engaging smile draws the viewer to identify with the human dimension of the implosion tragedy – the dimension that is neglected in the diagrams featured in Figures 24 and 25.
One of these two photographs of Katie is a typical school photo, in which, looking studious, she has her hair tied back and wears spectacles and school uniform. The other is an informal pose in a garden setting, in which she is laughing, long hair over her shoulders, a ribbon in her hair.

Figure 27  School photograph of Katie Bender (uncredited, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 July 1997, p.1)
Both photographs belong to familiar lexicons. Readers would have recontextualised these images with ease because they would have recognised the everyday settings of both: the school and the home. Most families have such photographs of their children, and most newspaper readers would have been familiar with the contexts of their production. The photographs thus attain an added dimension of power through the ‘processes of recognition, validation and reinforcement’ (Livingstone, 1999:96-97) undertaken by their audience – processes that are essentially processes of identification.
The poignancy of these images is established by the viewers' awareness of the girl's tragic fate. A cruel dialectic is set up between the fact of the image being present before us while the child herself is no longer. This painful recognition forms the 'sting' or 'punctum' that Barthes claims wounds the viewer of such images (1980:27). Mirzoeff explains the same phenomenon thus:

A photograph necessarily shows us something that was at a certain point actually before the camera's lens. This image is dialectical because it sets up a relationship between the viewer in the present and the past moment of space or time that it represents. (1999:8)

Having planned to capture the hospital’s last moments on film, the post-implosion audience instead spent time reflecting on the photographs of the accident’s young victim. The ‘loss’ which the event’s audience had prepared itself to feel was thus transferred from the hospital to the child. Although nostalgia for the unrecapturable past may always contain elements of grief for the loss of life, this audience was ontologically unprepared for that to become so literally the case in this instance.

Notably, the print media exhibited a marked preference for one of these images of Katie. The school photograph was published only once, in The Sydney Morning Herald, while the family photograph was used on every other occasion in this period, and continues to be used by The Canberra Times on occasions such as anniversaries of the event. The preferred reading of Katie as folk dancer rather than as student (natural/innocent/exotic as opposed to schooled/learned/ordinary) is underscored by the media’s preferred visual depiction of Katie. The image in the latter photograph is consistent with the conventions that govern the representation of innocence in textual forms, while the school photograph is not, belonging as it does to an entirely other genre of representation. The media thus displayed a preference for the representation of this child victim as playful and innocent rather than as serious and knowing.

Kress and van Leeuwen observe that a fundamental difference between drawings or diagrams and photographs, especially close-ups, is that the latter create ‘an imaginary relation’ between the entity represented and the viewer (1996:121). The photographs of Katie Bender in Figures 27 and 28 both invite the viewer to identify with the child. Her smile, the frontal perspective (in which the viewer is positioned as ‘face to face’ with the subject), and her open posture engage the viewer, inviting an empathic relation. She is smiling, not just at the photographer, but at the viewer. In publishing these photographs, the newspapers also invite their readers to enter a relationship of identification with the child victim. In fact, Kress and van Leeuwen go further to claim that in such images, ‘the participant’s gaze … demands something from the viewer’ (1996:122). A relationship of reciprocity is created that is not required (‘demanded’) of viewers in images in which there is no eye contact between subject (or ‘participant’) and viewer.
The majority of photographs illustrating the implosion and its aftermath were of this latter type. Most that featured people showed them engaged in their own business (for example, Sue George ready to press the plunger, spectators, police, ambulance officers, the Bender family leaving the hospital) – absorbed in the roles they variously performed in the implosion story. The detached viewer observes these photographs from a distance, objectively – they are presented to illustrate the human face of that story. Only rarely are other participants in the event presented to the viewer face to face, inviting our identification, and when this occurs, it is because the people involved are presenting us with evidence of what could equally well have befallen ‘us’.

For example, in Figure 12, Steve Thompson, his sunglasses on his forehead so that we may see his eyes, looks directly at the camera while holding the piece of metal that pierced his car bonnet. He leans slightly forward, enabling the photographer to neatly encompass him, the metal debris and the gash in his car’s bodywork. Like his direct gaze, Thompson’s posture is a gesture of connection with the viewer, demanding imaginative engagement.

![Figure 29](image)

**Figure 29** Jim Cunningham and Amanda Staier (photograph by Peter Wells, *The Canberra Times*, 21 July 1997, p.2)

Also giving evidence to the newspaper’s readers, Jim Cunningham sits protectively behind, and with his arm around, Amanda Staier (Figure 29). She smiles somewhat hesitantly at the viewer,
but he is unsmiling and looks not quite directly at the camera, his gaze distant. Their experience as near-victims of the implosion is detailed at some length, the couple using the newspaper to extend their thanks to other canoeists and the water police who came to their rescue after they rolled their canoe to avoid being hit by a piece of hospital debris. The canoe sustained a gash in its base where the flying material impacted. Their relative perspectives on their experience of the implosion can be read as encapsulating what could crudely be characterised as the polarity of Canberrrans’ positions on the matter, and are summarised in the accompanying story’s final paragraph: ‘Despite her ordeal, Ms Staier was philosophical. There was no point attributing blame, she said. Mr Cunningham was not quite so forgiving. “I felt angry,” he said’ (Dargaville, 1997:2).

There is one other key player who is photographed frontally, demanding a relation with the viewer. Given the number of photographs of the Chief Minister that *The Canberra Times* may, it is assumed, have had on file, it is interesting to analyse the one that was chosen for publication on the one occasion on which that was done. The day after the implosion, Kate Carnell is pictured on page 1, looking up at the reader from beneath a headline which reads, ‘Carnell, under attack, orders 14-day probe’. The picture is captioned, ‘Kate Carnell last night’, suggesting that her serious and beseeching pose is one that was photographed specifically for this purpose. It is not the usual pose of a powerful and wilful head of government. Mrs Carnell (and, by extension, *The Canberra Times*) is submitting herself here to the authority of the community’s judgement.

![Image of Kate Carnell last night](uncredited photograph, *The Canberra Times*, 14 July 1997, p.1)

Figure 30 ‘Kate Carnell last night’

![Image of Mrs Carnell ... nervous](uncredited photograph, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 July 1997, p.2)

Figure 31 ‘Mrs Carnell ... nervous’
On 15 July, *The Sydney Morning Herald* also pictured Kate Carnell in a tightly cropped close-up that appears, from those items of her wardrobe that are visible, to have been taken at the same time as *The Canberra Times*’ photograph of the previous day. The Chief Minister is shown with lips pursed, and eyes averted from the viewer. There is no reciprocal gaze in this instance. Figure 31 is not a photograph of a head of government importuning her public, as Figure 30 was. While the close-up may typically invite engagement, to crop a photograph so tightly as this usually indicates a lack of sympathy with the subject. The photographer (or perhaps the editor) here applies a scrutinising and ruthless gaze to Mrs Carnell that so comprehensively removes her from any context that not even her full face is shown. Such a removal from context suggests that other detail is extraneous to the viewer’s consideration of the subject of the photograph. The Chief Minister is the only focus – the cropping zeroes in on her, making her the sole occupant of the ‘frame’. The close-up, ‘that most individualising of techniques’ (Turner, 2004:10), emphasises that the executive power of this government rests with one person alone.

The accompanying article is headed, ‘Crisis may spell the end of a meteoric career’, and the photograph itself is captioned, ‘Mrs Carnell … nervous’. The article provides, for Sydney readers, a blunt thumbnail character sketch of the ACT Chief Minister that would have been unnecessary in Canberra:

> The ACT’s Liberal Chief Minister, Mrs Carnell, was on top of the Rydges Hotel at 1.30pm on Sunday to watch what had been billed as a spectacular farewell to the Royal Canberra Hospital. She was her usual self – the highly visible chief executive of Canberra Inc, who could be relied upon for a great stunt, whether launching an open day for Canberra’s brothels or parachuting from a plane while giving a running commentary over her mobile phone. Last Friday, she had advised people to watch the event from the viewing area where the dead girl was standing. (Brough, 1997a:2)
In the final, published, photographic coverage of the implosion aftermath, the images of Katie’s funeral return her death from the realm of the violent and the terrifying to the realm of the familiar. Although she was mourned by a wide community, newspaper photographs such as Figure 32 focus primarily on Katie’s school friends, whose appearances mirror hers, and thus, return her, in some senses, to the obscurity of the greater social body of ‘youth’ from which she came. The school girls comforting each other in the photo hold daffodils and wear white ribbons in their hair, as Katie did in the photograph shown in Figure 28 – imagery of innocence and the fragility of life, but also of eternal renewal and the therapeutic value of ‘shared suffering’.

25 Variants of the photograph shown in Figure 32 were published in three different newspapers.
Political cartoons

Political cartoons employ the rhetorical devices of condensation, combination, opposition and domestication (Morris, 1993:199-202). Use of these devices simplifies issues and reduces complexities to single, readily apprehended frames. Condensation results in disconnected elements being compressed into one frame; combination brings together diverse elements, which may have conflicting meanings; opposition reduces complexity to binary opposition; and domestication relates distant events in familiar terms. Greenberg adds the function of ‘transference’ to Morris’s model, claiming that the displacement of blame and responsibility onto other, non-pictured agents, is also key to the rhetorical workings of the political cartoon (2002:187).

The political cartoons reproduced in this chapter are persuasive because they are set against a background of shared assumptions about the social world and make use of various rhetorical devices such as metaphors ‘to capture the essence of an issue or event graphically’ (Greenberg, 2002:183,195). They seek to persuade readers of certain normative positions. Such cartoons only work, and can only be understood, within certain socio-political and temporal contexts. They do not, typically, stand alone, and as such, need to be understood as contributory elements within a broader discourse. Greenberg is alluding to Burke’s classic work on rhetoric (1945) when he argues that ‘for political cartoons to be cognitively persuasive, they must address a timely topic that exploits transitory, common-sense ideas’ (2002:188). The ways in which two cartoonists employed by The Canberra Times, Geoff Pryor and Ian Sharpe, did this, are explored below.

Figure 33  Smoke from the implosion (photographer not credited, The Canberra Times, 14 July 1997, p.4)
On 15 July, punning on the shape of the cloud of smoke rising above the imploded hospital in a photograph featured in *The Canberra Times* the previous day (Figure 33), cartoonist Ian Sharpe created the image of a question mark foregrounded by a chain, one of whose links is patently weaker than the others, being both thinner and broken (Figure 34). The cartoon was used to illustrate Crispin Hull’s review of the decisions that led to the implosion, in an article titled ‘A chain of decisions leading to tragedy’. The metaphor alludes to the logical power of sequencing that leads people to assume that each event in a sequence is causally linked to the next. Behind the chain, the smoke whose shape was the inspiration for the image hangs in the air, just as a sense of unanswered questioning was already ‘hanging over’ Canberra. (What such an image excludes from the cognitive frame it thus proposes is the possibility that this issue is more complex than a linear model can accommodate, and that perhaps there was more than one ‘weak link’ that contributed to this accident.)

*The Canberra Times* then appropriated this fortuitous image of a question mark-shaped cloud of smoke and applied it as a ‘news icon’ (Bennett and Lawrence, 1995), using it to visually frame its particular obligations and capacities as the local newspaper in the implosion aftermath. The
newspaper used the image emblematically to badge their coverage of the story and in doing so, to signal their professional role and expertise in investigation (Figure 35):

![Image of 'Hospital disaster' (The Canberra Times, 15 July 1997, p.1)](image)

**Figure 35**  ‘Hospital disaster’ (The Canberra Times, 15 July 1997, p.1)

Bennett and Lawrence note that images such as this one seem ‘not only to dramatically encapsulate a disturbing event but to evoke thematic associations with troubling aspects of the larger story in which it was embedded, evoking thematic associations (1995:24). The image of the question mark encapsulates the failure of the hospital to fully implode – an issue which raises technical questions of its own – but also alludes to the larger political environment in which that failure occurred, and suggests that there are questions to be asked about that context as well. On a third level, it is also a metaphoric image for the prevailing public state of mind. The newspaper thus frames itself as at once reflecting the community’s concerns and being able to answer them (or to advocate on their behalf in getting answers for them). ‘News icons’ condense issues that either celebrate or challenge aspects of contemporary culture, and the question mark does both. It poses a challenge (that is, it raises the question) primarily to the government of the day, and it posits itself as the agency best positioned (author-ised) to provide the answers. As Greenberg suggests:

> Political cartoons are a form of visual news discourse … that … seize upon and reinforce common sense and thus enable the public to actively classify, organise and interpret in meaningful ways what they see or experience about the world at a given moment. (2002:181)

As editorial cartoonist for The Canberra Times and a senior member of the newspaper’s editorial team, Geoff Pryor is well positioned to direct its readership as to what issues should be engrossing them. Cartoons such as his suggest particular readings of events to their audience, ‘framing’ issues in order to make them ‘visible’.
The first of Pryor’s cartoons (Figure 36), published the day after the implosion, captures the tragedy of the abandoned family picnic, in an image in which what is depicted stands syntagmatically for the damaged family (and thence, society) itself. In the centre of the picnic rug, a large chunk of masonry has landed. The remains of the picnic meal are strewn about and the people whose picnic this was have disappeared from the scene. The viewer’s eyes are drawn to focus on the piece of hospital debris, its bulk underscored by the heavy shading of its base. Beyond the rug, the background is white space, suggestive of a terrible and unnatural stillness and silence. There is no suggestion here of even a grim humour – just the pathos of the significance of what could have been a literal illustration. With this first image, Pryor locates the key aspect of the implosion’s failure – first and foremost, this is a domestic and personal issue rather than a public and political one. The cartoon suggests that this is the fundamental level on which every reader should understand, and empathise with, what has happened. There will be time soon enough to turn to the public and political aspects of the tragedy.

26 ‘By 3.30pm, the once happy scene had been reduced to a few eerie reminders: three red deck chairs by the shore, the remains of a picnic and some damaged cars’ (Brough and Peatling, 1997:2).
Sure enough, the next day (15 July) Pryor captures the ‘feast of blame-casting’ that has begun in earnest in the nation’s capital (Figure 37). Centre-stage, speaking to ‘camera’ (and hence, to the viewer), is a dead-pan journalist, surrounded by a maelstrom of pointing fingers. Beneath the cartoon, the Letters to the Editor column carries the first Letters asking just this question. It is the first of what will be a series of days on which no other topic is broached on this page.
On the same day, Pryor’s illustration for a story of a lawyer for a Melbourne family planning to sue for emotional shock resorts to the comforting cliché of depicting the lawyer as a vulture (Figure 38). This image reassures readers that those outside their community are not only geographically but morally ‘other’. In doing so, the cartoon (employing the device of opposition) reduces the many complexities of legal questions about compensation following the implosion to an overly simplified version of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ – and makes it plain that this action is ‘wrong’.

The vulture is depicted as alighting even while debris is still falling – in other words, ‘before the dust has settled’ and before the community is even fully aware of the crisis that has befallen it. Such eagerness to profit from others’ misfortune, especially when under the guise of ‘assistance’, is a clichéd attribute of ‘ambulance-chasing’ lawyers. This image, and the stereotype to which it alludes, also makes use of a strategy referred to in psychoanalysis as ‘splitting’, whereby that which is wrong or bad is projected onto an external other, thus preserving the self or the group from the effects of its own feelings of destructiveness (Haaken, 2002:456).

This was the only occasion on which a Pryor cartoon was used to illustrate a news story about the implosion, and is therefore quite significant. Its function is normative, just as was that day’s editorial (‘Time to calmly seek the cause’ – analysed more fully in Chapter Three). On this day, The Canberra Times began concertedly to proscribe certain behaviours (blaming; seeking to gain from others’ losses) and to emphasise the unifying and healing power of community cohesion as a preferred response to the accident. The fact that the litigants were from Melbourne, rather than Canberra, made it easier to depict their lawyer as opportunistic. Similarly opportunistic behaviour by some of the Chief Minister’s political opponents was commented on disapprovingly in Letters to the Editor, but as members of the local community and hence part of the newspaper’s own constituency, they were not so easy to criticise.

As time passed, Pryor and his colleague, Ian Sharpe, observed the key features of the implosion’s political aftermath with an increasingly wry tone. On 27 July, a fortnight after the implosion, both produced cartoons featuring the personal and political dilemmas that threatened to destabilise the Chief Minister.

27 ‘After reading your front page on Monday, I was sickened … [by] comments from a George Wason which will prove to be undoubtedly the most despicable, disgusting and disgraceful comments ever published’ (Dixon, 1997:8).
Pryor shows Kate Carnell as a ‘victim’ of sorts herself, battered (but still ‘on top of’) the rain of debris generated by her attempted employment of Noel Tanzer (a former federal public servant, at that time on the ACT Government’s pay roll in various capacities, including as provider of ‘mentoring’ advice to senior bureaucrats) to conduct the implosion inquiry (Figure 39). The Chief Minister is shown as a diminutive figure, struggling alone, dwarfed by the scale of what has befallen her. It is thus not an entirely unsympathetic portrayal.
Sharpe, on the other hand, produced a stringent cartoon, whose literary allusions are hardly necessary for its comprehension (Figure 40). Here, Kate Carnell is depicted as a customer who is dismayed to find that the dry-cleaner has been unable to remove the very visible stains on the front of her jacket. The dry-cleaner appears to purse his lips disapprovingly as he considers the situation; the Chief Minister, meanwhile, her chin jutting forward combatively, is nonetheless helpless (indicated by her wide eyes and physical position of powerlessness relative to the dry-cleaner). The wit of this image is based in the facts of Totalcare’s history as a one-time provider of laundry services to the Canberra Hospital, and of Kate Carnell’s status at that time as one of its two shareholders.  

Before too long, however, the public began to express exasperation with the drawn-out debate over the implosion. It began to seem to some in the community like a tug-of-war between

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28 ‘TotalCare Industries Ltd – the body charged with overseeing the demolition – is a wholly owned ACT Government asset. TotalCare may now be a $200-million-a-year, corporatised entity run by a former bank manager but it is nonetheless the property of the ACT Government. It has two shareholders – the Minister for Urban Services, Trevor Kaine, and the Chief Minister, Kate Carnell’ (Taylor, 1997:9).
politicians and the media, from which every possible ‘drop’ had been squeezed. Pryor neatly illustrates this mixed metaphor (Figure 41):

![The Implosion...The Story So Far...](image)

Figure 41  ‘The story so far’ (cartoon by Geoff Pryor, The Canberra Times, 19 July 1997, p.17)

From this time onward, the frequency with which textual or visual representations of the implosion will find a voice in The Canberra Times lessens rapidly. Perhaps the newspaper, too, is signaling to its readership (and the day’s cartoon, like the day’s editorial, always shares the same page as the Letters to the Editor, and is therefore clearly to be understood as providing the newspaper’s ‘position’ on a certain issue – its contribution to that discourse) that it, too, feels that there is little more to be achieved now by pursuing this ‘story’.

CONCLUSIONS

With an expectation of how it would look in mind, many spectators prepared to capture the image, both as a record of a spectacle, and as a memento of a significant occasion. To a large extent, the very unusualness of the demolition method had rendered the occasion more significant that it might otherwise have been appreciated as being. The choice of implosion served to heighten, to draw additional attention to, and to make more remark-able, the event. The choice of place, of viewing point, from which to watch the spectacle, was the most important of the pre-event considerations for most people.

For the event’s sponsors, the implosion was intended to serve the important purpose of being a catalyst for positive community interaction – to act as an ‘instrument of unification’ (Debord, 1967).
The spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible. It says nothing more than ‘that which appears is good, that which is good appears’. The attitude which it demands in principle is passive acceptance which in fact it already obtained by its manner of appearing without reply, by its monopoly of appearance.

(Debord, 1967)

The appeal of the event was heightened by the relative rarity of the implosion method – this would be no mere utilitarian demolition, but a spectacular demonstration of skill that would be entertaining as well as functional. People’s anticipation had been heightened by the expectation that they would be viewing an implosion like those which other communities around the world had also experienced. This was an audience that thought it knew what to expect, not only in terms of entertainment, but of physics. As such, they formed ideal witnesses, as Lasch describes them: ‘[c]eremony requires witnesses: enthusiastic spectators conversant with the rules of the performance and its underlying meaning’ (1979:105).

In this chapter I have shown that the notion of ‘audience’ as a presence of witnesses is central to any conceptualising of the implosion event. In the first place, an audience was called for – it was both invited and invoked. Its presence was assumed by those who determined the exclusion zone and by those who advertised the spectacle’s vantage points. The purpose behind most people’s attendance at the event was their desire to be entertained, to be part of an audience that would share in the experience of an awe-inspiring spectacle. Many admitted afterwards that it would not have been possible to keep them away – it was a spectacle they were determined to see.

Visual representations of the event and of its key players were thus central to the shared practices of witnessing that were facilitated by The Canberra Times’ (and other newspapers’) publication of diagrams and photographs. Not only did images prepare the audience for the event by priming the imagination, they served as incontrovertible evidence afterwards of what had gone wrong. In these images are crystallised the disjuncture between what was anticipated and what was realised.

The anticipation of spectacle had been linked unproblematically with an expectation of pleasure in the audience that prepared to witness the collapse of the hospital. Considerations of the technical dimensions of the demolition had not figured largely in the media coverage of the preparations for the event. Therefore, when people were presented, instead, with a spectacular accident, it was difficult to reconcile the imagined with the actual, the latter differing so comprehensively from that which had been promised. As consumers of a consumable product, and especially in those touristic dimensions that this exotic event encouraged in them as
citizens, the implosion audience had entered a social contract. The disconcerting legacy of that contract, though, was the ontological uncertainty that the failed implosion precipitated.
Chapter 3
Practices of engagement: textual responses to the implosion

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I consider in some detail the textually mediated discursive responses produced by various configurations of the media and the public to the hospital implosion. I pay particular attention to the Letters to the Editor page of The Canberra Times because it is there that the institutionalised discursive interaction that is characteristic of the public sphere (Fraser, 1990:57) takes its clearest textual (and hence, empirical) form. I also analyse an editorial and several opinion pieces written by local and interstate journalists and one member of the public. In this chapter, the ‘concrete audience’ (Warner, 2002:50) of the previous chapters is transformed into a mediated audience, brought into being within the discursive space of the post-implosion dialogue. It may be ‘as much notional as empirical’ (Warner, 2002:51), being both imagined and actual, but it is helpful to conceptualise this audience as engaged in cultural labour. Through the performance of attendance, this audience has engaged in ‘the labor of becoming an audience’ and then through the performance of response, in ‘the labor of completing the story (filling the gaps with local knowledge and beliefs)’ (Shimpach, 2005:358,353).

Although the concrete audience requires a ‘co-presence’ (Warner, 2002:53), the mediated audience patently does not. On the Letters pages of the newspaper can be seen the empirical evidence of the traces or products of an audience that has no existence as a co-present entity. It is a public that is only discernible in the texts it has produced – or even, to be more precise, in those of its texts that the newspaper editor has selected for publication. The Letters as empirical data can thus only ever be regarded as shards in the archaeological dig for public opinion on the implosion. Although I do not claim to describe the whole from the evidence of these pieces alone, my analysis of a selection of these texts demonstrates that the Letters page facilitates a narrativisation of personal opinion, enabling individual stories to accrue within that discursive space, forming something like ‘public opinion’.
It is in the intersection of media-audience practices that the polity referred to in this thesis as the Canberra ‘community’ can be observed. In this chapter I explore that discursive space in which the meaning-making activities of the public, the media and the audience coalesce. This is a theoretical space that has been vehemently (and prolifically) contested, resulting in a multitude of possible avenues of inquiry. As I have done throughout this thesis, I have chosen here to explore a range of diverse perspectives, demonstrating that the light these perspectives shed on each other enhances the likelihood of the empirical data yielding unexpected insights when opened to interpretive inquiry.

The visible discursive space that is *The Canberra Times* Letters page is a key location in which (and by means of which) a discursive ‘community’ formed as public and media articulated their responses to the implosion. On the Letters page an audience can be seen ‘look[ing] back at [and] talk[ing] back to [the] structures of power that are deeply embedded in the contexts and forms of [their] daily life’ (Couldry, 2006:1). Again, in using the term ‘community’, it is not my intention to suggest that people’s interpretive behaviours were uniform or even convergent. In fact, if news discourse is generally understood to be a ‘claims-making arena’ (Greenberg 2002), then it is to be expected that the discourse will be characterised by differences of opinion and the energetic exercise of rhetorical strategies in pursuit of influence.

The richness and complexity of people’s responses to the implosion were characteristically human in their diversity. Nonetheless, and with no intention to minimise the differences of opinion that comprise this heterogeneity, I have found that ‘strong strands of common understanding’ were also evident (Corner, 2000:388). It is apparent that despite the community of respondents accessing various conventional rhetorical and narrative strategies – to make arguments and to tell stories – in order to collaboratively arrive at some understanding of the event’s meaning, certain of these strategies were applied more frequently than others. On occasion I have shown where key explanatory strategies favoured by these respondents were also employed in responses to other disasters.

The authors of the texts that are analysed in this chapter were journalists and members of the public. They engaged in ‘conversations’ that were local and specific to Canberra and the implosion, but which were also part of broader, ongoing, historically situated debates (Gee, 1999:34). The debates which were conducted as to whether or not politicians can be trusted, whether or not governments ought to out-source services, and whether or not certain governing rationalities put economic and political expediency ahead of community safety, are all ones that have a life beyond the particular conversations about the implosion. These discussions made
use of pre-established arguments and made reference to broadly held values that would be familiar to (because they are the product of) generations of conversants.

Although I am primarily interested here in the responses local people made to Canberra’s 1997 hospital implosion, I have found it instructive to occasionally situate those responses in wider contexts. Therefore, in this and the following chapter, in addition to undertaking a detailed critical discourse analysis of a sample of implosion responses, I look more broadly but briefly at the same community’s responses to another crisis, some six years later, and at the responses of some other communities to other disasters. I do this by examining a selection of responses to Canberra’s 2003 bushfires, the 2002 Bali bombings and the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, and considering whether those responses, despite the qualitative differences in the crises that prompted them, resonate with the Canberra Hospital implosion experience. As a result of this comparative analysis, I will show that disaster response is articulated rhetorically according to certain recurring patterns.

**The Public Performance of Textual Response**

Disasters engage experts and lay people alike in practices of interpretation. Many academic studies of community responses to disaster focus on the physical actions taken by those communities such as their provision of aid to the victims. Often these studies are concerned with being able to predict which behaviours are likely to occur under such circumstances, in the interests of informing disaster planning for the future (for example: Barton, 1969; Hodgkinson and Stewart, 1991; Major, 1998; Perrow, 1984; Raphael, 1986). Of these behaviours, this thesis is most interested in meaning-making in the aftermath of disaster, particularly as it is engaged in socially. As ‘language is a tool for making sense of experience’ (Rosh White, 1998:174) it is to be expected that such meaning-making will be largely undertaken discursively. This study uses the example of the implosion to consider ways in which both media professionals and lay audiences employ narrative and other rhetorical strategies in attempts to make sense of the incomprehensible.

In the aftermath of a crisis, people try to make sense of their own actions in response to the event, as well as attempting to make sense of the event itself. Because their initial responses to the crisis have become entwined in the crisis itself, when people look back over the event in order to make sense of what occurred, their own activity is an integral part of that which they seek to understand (Weick, 1988). This review may or may not be accompanied by an evaluation of the usefulness or significance of such activities:
I feel guilty for having been there, for having been part of the machinery that encouraged people like the Benders to go along for the spectacle. (Journalist, Norman Abjorensen, reflecting on the implosion) (1997c:C3)

I grabbed my photo albums, but felt a little silly as I was putting them in the car. A lot of houses would have to burn before it reached ours, surely. (Benita Sommerville, recalling the 2003 Canberra bushfires) (Matthews, 2003:115)

There wasn't time to be scared. I knew that in an instant we might all be dead. I remember saying the same prayer over and over: 'Oh God, let us escape. Oh God, let me get back to my two boys. I've got to raise those boys.' I looked back and I saw that the upper part of the building was on fire. I thought, 'How could a bomb reach so high and not damage the lower part of the building?' I couldn't understand it. (Alison Summers, writing about September 11, 2001) (2002)

As some of the Letters to the Editor explored in this chapter will show, in recalling their experience of a disaster, survivors may also seek to restore to themselves the agency the event robbed them of, just as John Tulloch, a victim of the 7 July 2005 bombings in London, did: 'We who experienced the explosions had made active choices to be doing what we were doing at the time of the terrorist attacks' (2006:11).

Among non-experts, even if nothing else of the psychophysiology of disaster victims is understood, there is a popular appreciation of the therapeutic value of testimony – of talking about what happened, of telling one's story, of 'the restorative power of truth-telling' (Herman, 1992:181). Just as it had done in 1997 after the hospital implosion (see Figure 21), The Canberra Times again invited its readers to contribute their stories of the event following the bushfires in 2003,29 thereby answering two needs – that of the survivors to verbalise what had happened, and that of the rest of the community to hear about it, to learn from it, to share, vicariously, in the experience, and thus to empathise with the victims.

The value of inscribed responses for research purposes is that they may be interrogated across time and space, the texts and images in which and by which they are expressed rendering them historically fixed. In the time that has elapsed since the hospital implosion in 1997, the Canberra

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29 On 18 January 2003 bushfires that had been burning for some weeks in National Parks to the west and south of the city swept through the south-western suburbs of Canberra, causing the loss of four lives and the complete destruction of some 500 homes within a few hours.
community, like countless others, has become one whose interactions are increasingly electronically-mediated. Although the local newspapers and radio stations again played an important role in broadcasting people’s responses, in 2003 the role played by their websites was significant. Websites, unlike Letters pages, have a capacity, limited only by editorial decision, to host as many responses as the community wishes to make, and, what’s more, for those responses to be as lengthy as their authors wish. Contemporary electronic media facilitate the synchronous, asynchronous and repeated sharing of people’s narratives to a far greater extent than traditional print-based media could.

Hearing and reading the stories told by others is a way for many people to judge their own actual or projected behaviour, just as Wilson argues is the case when they imaginatively engage with the behaviours presented to them on television:

[F]inding both similarities and differences in their circumstances compared with those of people in [television] programs, [audiences] project implications for their everyday lives.

[T]hey playfully identify with characters … Subsequently, they return to life changed, acting in new ways. (2002:123)

There is also, as McKee points out, pleasure to be had in ‘trying to make sense of things’ (2002:314). Although he is considering two very different intellectual projects (theorising and gossip) in making this claim, McKee shows that both are processes of ‘exchanging information – evidence – and trying to fit it all into a wider schema’ and that, importantly, the end product of both practices is ‘community; communication; a practice that works on a relationship’ (2002:314). In this thesis I show that such relationship building is fundamental to the exchange of information that occurs in post-disaster discourse.

30 Many stories about the Canberra bushfires posted on the local Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) website in 2003 were illustrated with photographs that bore visual testimony to the veracity of the writers’ claims to having experienced something at once horrific and spectacular. One witness accompanied his story with a 10 minute video clip (Makin, 2003).

31 After the bushfires the ABC offered to interview those who didn’t want to write about their experiences so that their stories could nonetheless be shared by being posted in Real Audio on the ABC website. However, traditional print media continue to hold an appeal for those who seek to preserve the communal experience, as was evidenced in the work of a local publisher, who almost immediately began collecting stories for a book of people’s experiences of the bushfires (Matthews, 2003).
The public sphere

Traditional liberal theory holds that the ‘public sphere’ is the space between governments and society in which private individuals exercise formal and informal control over the state: formal control through the election of governments and informal control through the pressure of public opinion. The media have long been seen as central to this process – distributing necessary information and facilitating the formation of public opinion by providing an independent forum of debate. Many newspaper editors certainly see themselves and their papers as performing these functions (Wahl-Jorgensen 2001; 2002a).

Taking a different, ‘radical democratic’ perspective on the media’s role, Curran re-positions the media as being politically active, operating as a ‘countervailing agency’ to redress power imbalances and enable broader access to the public domain (1991:30). He argues that entertainment should also ‘provide…an adequate way for society to commune with itself’ (1991:33). This project interrogates the various roles that the media played in relation to the implosion, and assesses whether The Canberra Times contributed to the public discourse that the implosion generated by operating merely as a disinterested facilitator of debate, or as an active agent of radical democracy.

The contemporary public domain cannot be equated with the classical forum, and, Hartley claims, is more akin to the confessional (1992:3). This function is enabled by the modern media, which are media of disclosure (both witting and unwitting). Most contemporary secular societies continue to require the function of confession to be performed, even if that necessitates the efforts of an investigative journalist to force the confession from the guilty party. In a less aggressive form, the media actively invites the public to engage in confessions of its own, via such institutions as the Letters to the Editor. Thus, ‘the media are simultaneously creative and participatory’, having life breathed into them by the people who willingly turn themselves into its audiences. In response to public confessions in the media, the audience interrogates itself, realigns itself, and creates itself as ‘social other’, that is, as ‘public’. Thus the media can be

32 Traditionally, confession was private unless associated with punishment, and the most public confession of all was that which preceded capital punishment. The nexus so created between public confession (apologia) and death is one that lingers in our psyche, and may explain the reluctance of many politicians to make public apologies.
thought of as at once comprising and creating the public domain – they are ‘the place where and
the means by which the public is created and has its being’ (Hartley, 1992:1).

Communities and publics resist definition and are difficult to locate, but are constituted and
characterised by their discursive activity. Hartley observes that publics are only to be found in a
‘mediated form’ – that they are created by institutions and discourses (1992:2), while Ang goes
further, claiming that the media audience as a discursive category cannot be regarded as a
simple object of study, ‘but has to be defined first and foremost as a discursive trope signifying
the constantly shifting and radically heterogeneous ways in which meaning is constructed and
contested in multiple everyday contexts of media use and consumption’ (1996:4).

While ‘the public’ has traditionally been thought of as the legitimating (and essentially
conglomerated) centrepiece of democracy (Mayhew, 1997), it is no longer seen as a uniform
aggregation, nor public opinion as simply the accretion of many individuals’ single opinions. The
approach of contemporary cultural studies and media theory is to avoid essentialising the public
by reducing its complexity to a unidimensionality that fails to acknowledge the differences
contained within this social category (Gergen, 1999). Rather than thinking of a single ‘public’, it
is preferable to think of multiple ‘publics’ (Fraser, 1990:77) which may comprise ‘activist-publics’
(Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001) and ‘counterpublics’ (Warner, 2002:49).

Recent theories of ‘audience’ have been challenged, just as the essentialism of early feminist
work that focused on ‘woman’ as a category was challenged, by theories of ‘difference’ (Press,
2000). As an outgrowth of poststructuralism, ‘difference’ poses as an impossibility the notion
that a category can be studied as if it were comprised of identical entities. Yet avoiding
essentialism deprives theory of useful categories such as ‘woman’, ‘audience’ and ‘community’.
In this study I have tried to avoid reductionist or essentialising perspectives while still making use
of such terms as ‘audience’, ‘community’ and ‘public’.

 Audience

The implosion audience was at once a product of its social context and a response to particular
media provision (McQuail, 1997:2). It was convened as ‘audience’ from the time the implosion
was first considered as an event for public consumption – whether that was during the
Government strategy meeting of December 1995 (when the term ‘bomb’ was notoriously used)
or whether it was later, once the plans had firmed, and the occasion had begun to be advertised
by its various promoters as a family outing for a good cause. In the months leading up to the
event, the implosion was invariably reported in *The Canberra Times* as being a subject of public
interest, just as had the hospital’s closure and the demonstrations of opposition to that closure. These latter segued into the coverage of the implosion itself, and indeed, into the post-implosion analysis.

The members of the public who attended the implosion have already been described in Chapter One of this thesis in their material, bodily form as a presence and as an entity. Their attendance en masse at a publicly convened event marks them as ‘audience’ – as a group with a shared purpose and focus, located together in time and space in the chronotope of the implosion event. This inscribed or assumed unity of purpose lends itself to an essentialising tendency. Once that audience entity splintered into a multitude of diverging responses in the event’s aftermath, however, its diversity became more apparent. The entity then presented another manifestation of the ‘civic body’ – as co-responding interpreters of public events they may be inscribed as another sort of ‘audience’.

This study borrows the approach of ‘new effects’ media research in regarding audience interpretation as a central plank in exploring the mediation of public issues, and in taking the audience’s own accounts of their experiences as empirical evidence. New effects research concerns itself not only with ‘knowledge, and the diverse and sometimes contradictory resourcing of knowledge’ but also (and of more interest to this study) with ‘the narrative organisation of knowledge’ (Corner, 2000:391). In this chapter I analyse the narrative strategies employed by writers of Letters to the Editor and other texts in order to explore ‘the way in which story structures project relations of value, entailment and causality’ (Corner, 2000:392).

In the shifting theoretical paradigm characterised as the ‘linguistic turn’ in media studies, Hall noted that ‘the event must become a “story” before it can become a communicative event’ (1980:129; italics in original). Letter writers and journalists alike engage in the construction and the telling of the implosion story. In the weeks immediately following the implosion, people struggled to make sense of the event, to search for whom to blame, and to explain to themselves their part in an event that, as it turned out, was as much about a child’s death as it was about the demolition of a hospital. While a majority of people would have performed this sense-making activity privately, others chose to do so in the public domain, and in doing so, to use certain rhetorical strategies designed to persuade others to their position. Wahl-Jorgensen’s extensive survey found that her sample of United States’ newspaper editors preferred to publish letters giving people’s personal opinions, and that the more strongly these opinions were expressed, the more likely those letters were to be published (2001). Crises are likely to produce greater numbers of letters than usual that meet such editorial criteria.
RHETORICAL STRATEGIES IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

Given that ‘effective persuasion relies on appeals to social norms, on ties of solidarity, and on the cultural strength of eloquence’, rhetoric is ‘the inescapable medium of public discussion’ (Mayhew, 1997:17). In public discourse, rhetoric’s function is more important than the mere establishment of ‘facts’ – it acts as praxis, as a guide to human action by integrating knowing and doing (Zhao, 1991:255). An important social function that is served by recounting stories of disaster experience is sharing what has been learned with others.  

While forensic investigations attempt to explain the technical dimensions of a disaster (and some members of the community have a strong need to have this sort of meaning-making occur), it has been argued that the normative or moral aspect of sensemaking is most likely to be found in the public domain of rhetoric (Rowland, 1986). In the activity of sharing their perspectives on ‘the irruption of the unpredictable’ (Castel, 1991:289), community members tentatively and mutually negotiate a range of intersubjective discursive positions. They negotiate, through narrative, a communal understanding of right and wrong in the context of a particular occurrence (Fukuyama, 1995:35). Such understanding can only be developed through engagement with the rhetoric in whose terms both right and wrong are discussed. In other words, an important achievement of a community’s response to an accidental or disastrous event is the determination, in its aftermath, of its moral dimensions.

Each contribution that an individual contributes to community dialogue is assessed by that community and the maker of the statement held accountable or ‘answerable’ for it (Clark, 1990:9). This process of engaging in argument and negotiation over the meanings that can be attached to events is clearly apparent in Letters to the Editor, in which some writers specifically take issue with the stated positions of others. For many rhetoricians, participation in such community dialogue is seen as a civic responsibility, a pre-condition of a healthy democracy (Clark, 1990; Herzberg, 1993; Mayhew, 1997; Zulick, 1997). For many participants in social dialogue, however, their personal needs to express their thoughts take priority over any sense that by doing so they are contributing to a civic exercise. Many individuals make clear, reflexive

33 The Canberra bushfires provided a rare opportunity, in disaster terms, for the communal exercise of such deliberative rhetoric, because a week after the destruction in the south-west of the city the threat of bushfire to the northern suburbs provided the opportunity for many of the lessons that had been learned to be shared with others who might immediately implement them.
statements that the purpose of their statements is to assist in their private need to make meaning – it is a personal, not a political activity. Others indicate that it is by immersing themselves in the dialogue that they hope to be enlightened, even if this is a somewhat painful experience, as this woman, reflecting on the hospital implosion, suggests: ‘I inflicted so many news stories on my brain in order to deal with the events of Sunday and to try to provide answers as to why it happened at all’ (Strika, 1997:8).

The instinct to put one’s own experience into words is a very strong one. Two Australians living in New York, the writer, Peter Carey and his then wife, theatre director, Alison Summers, published written responses to September 11. Carey noted in his own response the driven way in which Summers had worked at her piece in order to get it all down:

Alison needs to stay home. She nests, tidies, spends several hours on small domestic tasks. Then, finally, she begins to write a powerful piece about her escape. She works all day, all night, she cannot stop. (2001:4)

It is not only victims who experience the need to tell their story. As social beings, people use narrative to ‘construct’ themselves, and much human socialising involves sharing stories. Not only do ‘we live in a storied world’ but ‘the self is a story as well as a storyteller’ (Osatuke et al., 2004:194-195). Cordelia Hull’s extensive piece (discussed in more detail later in this chapter) in which she imaginatively likens her own 12-year-old daughter’s behaviour and interests to those of Katie Bender, is a narrative that serves both empathic and instructive purposes (1997:C3).

Most importantly, for this study, the urge to give voice to witnessing prompted many in the Canberra community to become authors. Through writing recollections and in formulating judgements, their experiences of the event were mediated in the same way that Tumarkin describes trauma survivors applying narrative strategies:

It is through telling that many survivors for the first time discover the shape and depth of the trauma they are carrying. The acts of witnessing and narrating often serve as the bridge between one’s survival and a life after a catastrophe. (2005:140)

Raphael observes that these strategies are a means by which survivors seek to restore a sense of control: ‘[t]alking through what has happened, putting it concretely into words and thus outside the self, to be examined and viewed by others, is another method by which mastery is sought’ (1986:94). Newspaper columnist, Robert Macklin, reported a ‘surprising number of calls from people who just wanted to talk about Sunday’s hospital tragedy’ (1997b:3):
‘Every time I close my eyes I see shrapnel flying at me across the lake,’ Joan Hallett, of Deakin, said. ‘I haven’t been able to sleep for two nights now.’ … Mrs Hallett said she had thought about seeking counselling or sleeping pills. ‘I suppose all I really need is a bit of a chat,’ she said. (1997d:3)

Viewing response through the lens of rhetorical theory

It is not currently fashionable to seek to explicate popular discourses by reference to theories of rhetoric. However, the traditional genres of rhetoric (the deliberative, the epideictic and the forensic) provide persistent explanation of the purposive functions of much popular discourse. The traditional bi-partite function of rhetoric – to deal in facts (episteme) or beliefs (doxa) – continues to provide a useful, if simplistic, characterisation of the twin planks onto which popular discourse is scaffolded. Rhetoric in such instances serves more than a merely epistemic purpose. It attempts to do more than obtain the ‘truth’. As Zhao proposes, when certain norms are advocated via discourse, the rhetoric thus employed becomes ‘a form of social praxis’, in which doing and knowing are integrated (1991:256). Where this rhetorical discourse gives rise to public consensus, the resulting normative knowledge can then guide future action. Such future-focused rhetoric, informed by expediency, belongs to the traditional genre of deliberative rhetoric.

In the aftermath of an event such as the Canberra Hospital implosion, it is not surprising to see the community engaged in a rhetorical discourse that is also very much a form of social praxis. In such contexts, rhetoric functions architectonically, to ‘re-make’ the world. Aristotle first observed that rhetoric comes into play in the absence of systematic rules. Where there is uncertainty, there is a place for contesting and deliberating, and thus a role for rhetoric. Indeed, as Poulakos points out, it is perhaps only in such times of stress that people feel compelled to use ‘the power of the word, to attempt to end a crisis, redistribute justice or restore order’ (1983:39). Rhetoric is also employed in the telling of trauma stories, a process by which those stories become testimony. As a ‘ritual of healing…testimony has both a private dimension, which is confessional and spiritual, and a public aspect, which is political and judicial’ (Herman, 1992:181). In the Letters to the Editor pages, both of these aspects of testimony are evident.

Rhetoric in contexts of risk and disaster

Following a disaster, in that time in which ‘systematic rules’ may appear to have broken down, rhetoric is exercised normatively by both the accuser and the accused. ‘While an act of wrongdoing is not rhetorical, determination of the significance of the act is a decidedly rhetorical activity’ (Hearit, 1995:2). In the case of the implosion, many in the local community engaged in
dialogue whose purpose was to propose an ethos of responsibility in which such a determination could be made.

Meanwhile, those who might be considered to have been at fault in this event also made calculated use of rhetoric. While many analyses of such rhetoric have been performed (for example, see Hearit, 1995; Ice, 1991; Johnson and Sellnow, 1995; Ware and Linkugel, 1973), the focus is usually on the organisational or institutional communication produced by the at-fault agency (for example, NASA – the Challenger shuttle disaster, Union Carbide – Bhopal, Exxon – the Valdez oil spill). The last of these is also commonly referred to in the field of public relations as a salutary case study of poor organisational crisis communication (for example, see Tyler, 1992; Williams and Treadaway, 1992). The urgency attached to the production of efficacious crisis communication, in which an apology may be the cornerstone, arises from the crisis in ‘social legitimacy’ that faces the organisation responsible for the disaster (Hearit, 1995:1).

Despite Sproule’s assertion that during the twentieth century the source of rhetoric shifted from the individual to the institution (1988), individuals who are the subject of public accusation commonly feel compelled to respond in self-defence. Ware and Linkugel, in their seminal exploration of apologia, propose that the apology is a sufficiently distinct form of public address that it deserves to be categorised as an independent genre (1973). Further, they categorise four sub-genres of the apologetic form: ‘absolution, vindication, explanation or justification’ (1973:282). Each of these sub-genres is employed, not only in various statements issued by officials following the failed hospital implosion, but also in Letters to the Editor. To the extent that that was the case, the Letters writers themselves can be seen as having performed a significant degree of the work of apologia, or defence of character, in the event’s aftermath.

Finally, although it was largely the subject matter of Chapter Two of this thesis, it is worth briefly noting here the rhetorical function of spectacle. The appropriation of the demolition for the purpose of spectacular entertainment, and further, the choice, attributed to the Chief Minister, of implosion as the method most likely to garner popular attention in the lead-up to the 1998 election (Guthrie, 1997:A14), were evidence of her Government’s belief in the rhetorical power of the implosion spectacle. More than solely an enactment of the social order, a violent event such as the implosion serves to underscore the power of the person or institution (in this case, the ACT Government), at whose behest it is conducted by effectively colonising the public space in which it occurs.
THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

In 1997, *The Canberra Times* was independently owned, and had a Monday-Friday circulation of approximately 41,600 (Kirkpatrick, 1998). Although it must therefore be regarded as a ‘small’ publication, *The Canberra Times* is nonetheless an influential media player in the nation’s capital as it is the city’s only local daily newspaper. In their study of media agenda-setting, Kim et al. suggest that the media’s ability to ‘prime’ or shape public opinion is greatest ‘in small communities with a limited number of media outlets for citizens to choose from’ (2002:21). They argue that such outlets have an enhanced capacity to not only tell audiences ‘what’ to think about issues, but ‘how’ to think about them. Perhaps in such contexts having only a single local newspaper more readily enables people to subscribe to ‘the myth of the mediated centre’: the belief, or assumption, that there is a centre to the social world, and that, in some sense, the media speaks ‘for’ that centre (Couldry, 2003:2).

Local media certainly provided the vector for the community’s textually-mediated response to the Canberra Hospital implosion. Journalists initiated, facilitated and contributed to that discourse. Indeed, the activity of journalists as ‘central agents in the reproduction of order’ (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1987:3) was fundamental to that communal sense-making. For the media, the implosion’s failure and tragic aftermath provided a rich vein of disorder, from which many stories were generated. As Hartley suggests:

> [J]ournalists are visionaries of truth, seers of distant order, communicated to their communities by a process of photographic negativisation, where the image of order is actually recorded as its own negative, in stories of disorder. (1992:140)

A majority of those journalists were members of the local community, who, above their own bylines, expressed the same diversity of sentiments as those expressed by the public in the Letters to the Editor. In this instance, for a time at least, the media and the public could be constituted as being one ‘community’. The fact that several local journalists had been eye witnesses to the implosion gave their reports an immediacy and a veracity with which *The*  

34 In July 1997, *The Canberra Times* was owned by Kerry Stokes, who sold it in 1998 to its current publisher, Rural Press Limited.

35 The paper’s masthead ambitiously states its dual mission: ‘To serve the national city and through it the nation’.
Canberra Times’ readers could identify. A journalist’s physical participation in a reported event is one of the rare conditions under which readers will forgive the intrusion of personal opinion into news reporting (Mander, 1987:56).

Having said that, it is also the case that the media’s role in disaster coverage has often been politically controversial (Hodgkinson and Stewart, 1991:98) and morally ambivalent (Scraton, 1999). Media involvement in meaning-making is as likely to earn disapproval as approbation on such occasions, and the implosion disaster was no different, as this Letter to the Editor demonstrates:

If the tragedy of the events around the Canberra Hospital implosion was not enough, the media frenzy that is already well under way before 24 hours have elapsed from the event is wholly odious and obnoxious. The usual well-known minor bit players and media junkies are all already getting in for their all-too-predictable chop. Doubtless they will be getting a good feed from this event for years to come. (Hambley, 1997:8)

People are understandably fascinated by disaster as a ‘symbol of death’ (Hodgkinson and Stewart, 1991:99), and their attempts to understand it may be understood as attempts to come to terms with death itself. The capacity of the media to provide wide-ranging visual coverage and to access expert opinion makes them attractive to those seeking explanation. In addition, the media may claim ‘to perform a therapeutic role by enabling victims to talk about their experiences’; although it must be remembered that ‘the agendas of the media and the victim are divergent: therapy is for the injured party, reporting for the news consumer’ (Hodgkinson and Stewart, 1991:100).

Corner suggests that the concept of media ‘influence’ should be considered more critically. He claims that while the concept has been central to most studies of mass communication, it has often been over-simplified and also regarded as negative (2000). Studies which depicted audiences as ‘resistant’ to and critical of, media influence positioned such audiences as being beyond the reach of the negative power of such influence. He claims that ‘there has been a tendency to ignore or at least to underestimate the way in which the media are symbolic processes, working through the production of meaning’ (2000:380; italics in original). He suggests that explorations that take ‘agenda setting’ (how media help define the terms of public debate); ‘priming’ (how media coverage gives prominence to certain themes); and ‘framing’ (how the media draw upon and reproduce certain assumptions and not others) into account, make for more subtlety in interpretation (2000:384). Corner also claims that knowing audiences adopt a ‘discounting effect’ in response to advertising’s ‘directed influence’, but that they are not so likely to respond in such a fashion to news and current affairs. ‘In relation to specific news stories …
different social and biographical factors will produce different terms of viewer engagement … perhaps initiating diverse emotional states’ (2000:389). This may explain why some Letter writers appear to ‘discount’ the Government’s (and particularly, the Chief Minister’s) statements in regard to the implosion.

By making the implosion more imaginatively available in retrospect than it was in actuality, the media served to increase the size and engagement of the actual audience of the spectacle. As Thompson argues, modern media facilitate ‘the extension of availability in time and space; and the public circulation of symbolic forms’ (1990:219). Media operated as the vehicle for rhetorical as well as symbolic forms; indeed, particularly for both as they were brought together in some of the most powerful metaphorical tropes in which the event was depicted (for example, as an execution).

Media studies have traditionally focused on text, production and audience. As mediated relationships changed with the advent of new communication technologies (and were seen differently through altered theoretical perspectives), so key terms such as ‘expert’ and ‘recipient’ were rendered problematic, just as was the previously dominant ‘transmission’ model of communication. Indeed, ‘knowledge’ itself began to be seen as relative rather than absolute as the imperialist character of the transmission model was critiqued. When an audience is framed as an ‘interpretative community’ and the media as a ‘resource’, then ‘knowledge’ may also be understood as ‘not the pedagogy or propaganda of the transmission model, but the habitus, the shared representations, the lived understandings of the community’ (Livingstone, 1999:96; italics in original). Couldry also reminds us that our study and analysis of the media necessarily takes place ‘within the media environment’, making it impossible to discount the consequences of that environment (2006:6; italics in original). However, while such increasing sophistication characterises cultural and media theory, the previously prevailing paradigms continue to hold sway in the popular imagination, as evidenced by the calls for ‘expert’ opinion in the Letters to the Editor.

**Letters to the Editor**

The interdependence of text and reader (Livingstone, 1993:7) is nowhere more explicit than on the Letters to the Editor page of a daily newspaper, a page that is a ‘mediated site of public discourse’ (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001:303). This is not to say that the Letters page can be assumed to be representative of ‘public opinion’ in an entirely unproblematic fashion. Each Letter that is published is the result of an editorial process just as it is the product of an authorial process. Wahl-Jorgensen notes that the Letters page functions as the vehicle by means of
which the newspaper makes itself accountable to its readership and thus enhances its credibility (1999:57). She notes, however, that it is always the newspaper’s editors who determine which Letters are published and therefore which citizens have ‘access to the conversation’. She reminds us that ‘the newspaper industry sees its product as a commodity rather than primarily as the site of a public conversation’. This ‘allows newspaper management to act as the custodians of the public sphere’ (1999:58).

Elsewhere, Wahl-Jorgensen proposes that newspaper editors systematically privilege certain forms of expression by selecting Letters to the Editor on the basis of compliance with four criteria: relevance, brevity, entertainment and authority (2002b:69).

Beyond offering information, newspapers must also solicit new ideas from citizens. Therefore, letters to the editor selected for publication should not merely address normative concerns as reflected in ongoing stories placed on the agenda by the news organisation itself. They should also allow for members of the public to introduce topics, and open them up to the critical scrutiny of public debate. (2002b:72)

Wahl-Jorgensen refers to Letters having to ‘earn’ a place and to the common editorial practice of publishing Letters only when they reflect the paper’s own front page and editorial (2002b:73). Despite these constraints on the construction of a completely unfettered discourse, the Letters nonetheless realise a substantial body of articulated opinion that by virtue of its weight alone has the capacity to exert influence – influence, not only on current opinion, but on what becomes the accepted ‘story’ or ‘history’ of the event.

As this study demonstrates, significant numbers of people shared their perspectives on the implosion by writing Letters to the Editor. Each of those perspectives may have added a piece to the ‘puzzle’ of 13 July for their readers. However, the primary purpose of any of those Letters, Gee would argue, is not the sharing of information. Rather, it is a social and political activity – the enacting of ‘human affiliation’ and the affirmation of certain ‘social identities’ (1999:1). The Letter writers’ shared project is to ‘create new affiliations and transform old ones’ (1999:4). Their activity is thus a social, not merely a personal, politics. Mayhew argues that rhetorical communication derives its power from its ‘affiliative basis’ – that is, its capacity to invoke ‘community’ or ‘solidarity’ (1997:27-29). However, his suggestion that such communication involves a ‘two-sided exchange’ is too simplistic, mechanistic and inadequate to describe the complex inter-play and interweaving of positions that occurs as most public discourse is conducted, and which is evident in the post-implosion discourse.
Dewey observes that shared experience is the basis of any community’s shared knowledge (1954 (1927)). This is particularly evident following a disaster, when people commonly re-negotiate their beliefs via interaction with others. To some extent, people’s knowledge of the event thus also becomes a product, or local achievement, of that interaction. The textually mediated discourse facilitated on the Letters pages of *The Canberra Times* illustrates how such a ‘local achievement’ may be negotiated over time. My exploration of the empirical data in this thesis reveals some of the ways in which community members ‘co-construct and negotiate their roles [and] definitions of the situation’ (Alasuutari, 1999:13-15) through the outlet of a public print medium.

As empirical evidence, Letters to the Editor sometimes provide only a one-sided indication of what the writer necessarily assumes to be, and the reader is required to understand as being, a dialogue with others in the writer’s community. Such Letters therefore pose certain challenges to the intending discourse analyst who must infer the unspoken or unwritten half of a dialogue from the evidence contained in the available texts. In fact, however, these Letters have a clearly identified inferred reader – the editor to whom they are addressed. The editor’s decision to publish thus marks such Letters as correspondence that meet certain editorial criteria, while at the same time preserving the necessary illusion that what is being conducted is a conversation between equals. In fact, the editor is also a synecdochic device, standing as he or she does for the wider, newspaper-reading public, whom most Letter writers seek to imaginatively address.

Wahl-Jorgensen notes that the newspaper editors in her study typically spoke in Habermasian terms (that ‘what is true, what matters and what is moral’ are publicly agreed on via mediated critical debate) about the democratic role of the Letters page as ‘public forum’:

> The letters section, when viewed through this lens, is not just the site of re-action, but inter-action. It is not merely a soapbox for monologue, but a roundtable for dialogue. In this model of democratic dialogue, truth is not empirically observable and reportable, but is the consequence of conversation. (1999:54)

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36 In a not dissimilar fashion, Phillips undertakes a discourse analysis of letters written by his grandmother to his grandfather. Having only her letters, he nonetheless infers from them his grandfather’s part in their dialogue (1999). Some Letters to the Editor need to be analysed in much the same way, while others belong to a clearly identifiable dialogue between contributors to the page that is sometimes conducted over extended periods of time.
As she points out, this vision is somewhat contradicted by the reality of actual editorial practices that result in the Letters page being structured as a ‘marketplace of ideas’ – each competing with the others for attention (1999:55-56). She proposes that the Letters page be thought of as a public relations device for the newspaper – ‘by providing a forum for citizens, the newspaper gains in popularity, circulation and advertising revenues’. Importantly, she notes that the Letters page provides some readers with ‘a grievance route, or an opportunity for individual catharsis’, going so far as to claim that ‘the conversation between citizens, the process of listening, responding and collective grieving, are subsumed to the provision of a wailing place’ (1999:57).

Indeed, Letters to the Editor are situated at the intersection of the two dimensions of media consumption that Morley identified: the ‘vertical dimension of power’ exercised by the editor (transmission of programs/contents/ideologies) and the ‘horizontal dimension of ritual and participation’ exercised by the writers and readers (the ways in which what is transmitted is inscribed ‘in the everyday practices through which media content is incorporated into daily life’) (1999:197). Letters to the Editor serve a reflexive purpose in that they facilitate a community’s interrogation of itself, its self-examination. The time following a crisis, such as the Canberra Hospital implosion, is typically a time of deep introspection and far-ranging enquiry as people attempt to understand and explain the event, and to restore sense to their perspective on the world (Goldzwig and Dionisopoulos, 1986; Hodgkinson and Stewart, 1991; Raphael, 1986). The motivation to seek knowledge is different in times of tragedy than it is at other times, and where that tragedy has resulted in a crisis in civic confidence, it will prompt greater urgency in the calls for explanation and the desire for restoration of order.

Such crisis situations also require responsible civic action to be undertaken and what Boyte calls the ‘active dimension of judgement’ (1995:423) to be exercised. While these activities are a practical means of achieving wisdom (*phronesis*), in contexts of crisis, opinion-making and problem-solving are both inextricably linked with the exercise of power. At such times the community may exercise a greater than usual involvement in politics, as participants rather than merely as critics or audience. In times of crisis the public reclaims the public arena, and exercises its responsibility to be engaged in the process of searching, if not for the truth, then for a ‘resolution of concerns’ – for jointly determining ‘ethical standards for public life’ (Boyte, 1995:431-432). The institution of Letters to the Editor is an accessible forum in which such communal responsibility may be exercised.

Letters to the Editor need to be thought of, however, not as the expression of many voices working towards a singular consensus, but as the expression of many voices in what is likely to remain a ‘constellation’ of opinions. Part of their meaning derives from their relationship to the
whole, and part of their meaning is as they relate to each other. Deleuze and Guattari’s trope of the rhizome can be productively applied to the functioning of the Letters page. Just as rhizomes connect ‘any point to any other point’ (1987:19) so Letters to the Editor enable linkages to be made that might not otherwise be made, exemplifying the fulfilment of one of the ideological purposes of the media in a democratic society.

In contemporary society, where there is not sufficient time or opportunity for full discussion of every issue, the principles of information economics suggest that people will make do with abbreviated information – accepting what Mayhew calls ‘rhetorical tokens’ (1997:14). What is important, however, is that forums exist within that society where those tokens can be redeemed, in order that trust be maintained as the necessary pre-condition for their use. Mayhew describes these forums as public meetings in which civic leaders may be quizzed by their community, but I suggest that the Letters to the Editor page is an equally effective forum – perhaps more so because of its wide audience.

Mayhew believes that contemporary processes of communication create a modern form of solidarity that replaces the lost social bonds of *gemeinschaft* (1997:16). However, he also claims that the mass media no longer ‘provide for effective public discourse’ (1997:19). I would argue that the use people make of the Letters to the Editor forum within their local newspaper gives the lie to that claim. Although it is a discourse mediated by the newspaper’s editorial policies and practices, and results in the public exchange of only editorially-selected arguments and observations, the Letters page remains a very popular medium (Wahl-Jorgensen, 1999). It is a forum that has withstood the transition from newsprint to e-media, and has proliferated there in web logs and discussion boards where, as has already been noted, users are often freed of the restraints formerly imposed by the limited physical space allocated to the Letters within the printed newspaper. As a locus of both language and social action, the Letters page is a pre-eminently political site. Gee reminds us that if we are at all interested in politics, then we must be concerned with, and engage with, the empirical details of language and interaction for ‘it is there that social goods are created, sustained, distributed and redistributed. It is there that people are harmed and helped’ (1999:2).

How audiences relate to a specific genre, what they consider to be of value and how they position themselves in relation to it all frame what they may gain from it, in terms of ‘what knowledge’ is at stake (Livingstone, 1999:92-93). In their study of talk-show audiences, Livingstone et al. found that these programs offered ‘a sense of community’ and that viewers who valued the contributions of ordinary people most were most likely to feel that they gained something from watching and that their own perspective was represented among the opinions
expressed (Livingstone, Wober, and Lunt, 1994:358-359). The Letters page offers readers and writers a similar forum, and it appears that its audience responds to it in a similar fashion. Writing and reading Letters to the Editor are ‘practices by which people sustain their general sense of cultural membership and attendant values’ (Corner, 2000:384).

Mayhew conceives of rational discourse as being possible only in public forums where ‘participants…engage in sincere, two-sided exchanges’, clearly implying that the position of each party is publicly (and hence, accountably) articulated (1997:21). In my view, this is a very limited understanding of the actual practices of public rhetoric. As the Letters to the Editor reveal, an argument or a discourse may proceed quite discernibly, if implicitly rather than explicitly, from its initial position(s) without any party to that discourse specifically addressing the stated claims of any previous ‘speaker’, although this may occasionally happen. The Letters page is a site of conversation, and that conversation can be seen to be evolving, to be shifting in its themes and preoccupations over time, just as face-to-face conversations do.

The virtual community of a newspaper’s readership comes closest to taking a shape that has both personal and particular characteristics on the daily Letters to the Editor page. The writers and readers of these Letters are engaged in a communal activity, enabled by the technologies of journalistic production to partake of the classical components of politics: drama, didactics and democracy. The reading and writing in which (and with which) they engage can thus be seen to be a political activity.

**Mediated Textual Responses to the Implosion**

Although the implosion drew responses from further afield than its immediate geographical and temporal vicinity, it is the responses that were produced by Canberra Letter writers and journalists both prior to and after the event that are the focus of this analysis. In analysing the texts which I have assembled here, I have chosen to use critical tools that can be applied to these texts in ways that are sympathetic to the theoretical perspectives that inform my broader project.

In order to conduct a critical discourse analysis of public, community-generated documents related to the Canberra Hospital implosion, I could have made an arbitrary entry point of any of the numerous Letters to the Editor and other pieces that *The Canberra Times* published in response to that event. Of these, my choices for more detailed analysis are not random ones, the texts being selected on the basis of an initial content analysis, out of which certain key themes began to emerge. Although undoubtedly other texts would have borne such detailed
analysis equally well, those that I chose were selected for the ways in which they were illustrative of particular themes that emerged in the post-implosion discourse.

As Canberra’s only major daily newspaper, *The Canberra Times* invited readers to contribute their thoughts and experiences about the implosion to the newspaper, and over the two weeks that followed Sunday 13 July, 76 Letters to the Editor were published that related to the implosion. There were also substantial pieces of writing, including some lengthy personal pieces, contributed by *The Canberra Times*’ own journalists. For the purposes of this study, therefore, this two week period is treated as the ‘funeral period’ (Kitch, 2003) during which the media performed a ritualised funerary role that involved the use of cultural symbolism, the sharing of personal narratives, the use of the language of grief and the publication of obituaries, visual eulogies and messages of condolence.

The first 12 of the Letters were published on 15 July, followed by 13 on 16 July and 11 on 17 July – thus almost half of this fortnight’s Letters on the subject were published within four days of its occurrence. On each of these three days, Letters about the implosion also made up the sum total of all Letters published. The major theme that was later to come to characterise the whole post-implosion discourse was already apparent: blame (of politics, of the media, of dimly apprehended ‘others’, of ourselves). Also apparent was the prevalent tone of irony.

The predominant emotion in the Letters of 15 July is anger. Although some writers call for those in authority to accept responsibility, there are others who express disgust at the ready blaming which some in the community have already voiced. This blaming and its opposition are both inextricably bound to the politics of each position. The media, too, come in for their share of opprobrium, with their coverage being characterised by one writer as a ‘frenzy.’ The first call for a memorial is made on this day, in a Letter from a well-known Canberra resident, Malcolm Mackerras, who also introduces the idea of Katie having been sacrificed: ‘the 12-year-old girl who gave her life for the museum’ (1997:8). Such memorialising may have sprung more readily

37 I do not intend to explore the significance of authorial gender in these letters. However, it is of some interest to note that of the 76 letters in question, 39 were written by men, 16 by women, 3 by couples or families, 1 by a child, and 17 cannot be determined. Thus at least 51% of the letters were written by men (and only at least 21% by women), confirming in this case what has been noted to be a long tradition with Letters to the Editor, that of men clearly outnumbering women as contributors (Sparks and Perez, 1991).
to mind given that the site had been designated (and was thus being cleared) for the construction of a national institution whose primary function was to be commemorative.

While ‘media intrusion’ is also criticised the following day (16 July), other Letters begin to assume a more measured posture – one that suggests that judgement needs to be made in a cooler, more rational atmosphere: while ‘the good citizens of Canberra … need to know’ and ‘deserve to be told’, this is ‘not the time for uninformed accusations’. One writer even invokes the myth of the Australian fair go, saying that it is ‘neither Australian nor fair to blame the company’.

Not surprisingly in this uncertain environment, a degree of anger is deflected onto more remote causes or agents – fireworks, a rescue helicopter that had been long talked about but never purchased for the city, compensation lawyers. One writer suggests that this tragedy has already taken a disproportionate amount of attention: ‘do try to keep things in perspective’ (Bourne 1997:10). There is also a certain tone of irony apparent in many responses, giving voice to a predictable cynicism in the community about the activities and ethics of this, and all, governments.

The search for meaning continues on 17 July, with more blame being cast and more questions being asked: “What went wrong?” is the wrong question’ and ‘three questions for the inquiry.’ Other writers appeal to ‘universal’ principles of probability that they claim were ignored by the event organisers: ‘Murphy’s Law’ (‘anything that can go wrong, will go wrong’) and the ‘golden rule’ of explosive engineering (‘minimum amount of exposure to minimum amount of people’).

Just as the nature of the event shifted from spectacle to disaster, so the prevailing values shifted from the public to the private sphere. Letter writers to newspapers insist that their private values are validly applied to matters of public concern. In this they are not dissimilar to fans, who, as a social category, have received considerably more critical theoretical attention. Fans may be constructed as a particularly ‘active’ and ‘skilled’ audience, relating to their favoured program or personality in ways that are at once critical and creative. Forming, as they do, ‘an alternative social community’ (Tulloch and Jenkins, 1995:147), fans work collectively and reflexively to produce their own texts. Such behaviours are similar to those of Letter writers, who, prompted (or driven) by their interest in a particular issue, create the material production that is their Letter or Letters. Fiske has also noted that fans are productive; indeed, that their very fandom ‘spurs them into producing their own texts’ (1989:147). The passion which spurs Letter writers to express themselves in the public domain is similarly motivated. Fans and Letter writers are
similarly engaged in an egalitarian co-production in which individually and collaboratively constructed discursive positions are shared, debated, appropriated and re-worked.

The various writers create texts, some of which align with, and others which oppose, other Letter writers’ positions and the positions taken by the newspaper’s journalists. Often, as is the convention in this genre, this is done quite self-consciously, with the writer nominating the other whose position they are supporting or opposing. For example, his public statements about Kate Carnell’s responsibility for the implosion having prompted several Letters to the Editor, George Wason, Secretary of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, responded to his accusers: ‘I write in response to M. Dixon, J.P.D. Hodgman and Phil Maier’ (1997:8). While such Letters can be cast as merely instances of the polemical style expected of participants in the Letters to the Editor discourse, they may also be seen as resistant readings/writings, or as nodes of meaning, each connected rhizomatically to each other. They also demonstrate the ‘relentlessly political’ nature of the Letters page as a site of debate (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2006:224).

Critical discourse analysis of texts

In analysing these texts, I have found it helpful to keep in mind Gee’s distinction between what he calls “little d” discourse and “big D” Discourse’ (1999). He uses the former term for ‘language-in-use’, and the latter for culturally and historically situated life performances that involve more than language alone – actions, attributes and beliefs, for example – which enact and sustain particular identities and communities. The writers whose work is discussed here can be seen to be contributing to both d/Discourses. Hartley and Montgomery’s distinction between ‘representational’ and ‘relational’ modes of signification operates in similar ways to Gee’s, to facilitate exploration of the cultural along with the textual (1985). I have found it can usefully be applied when performing close analysis of the vocabulary employed by Letter writers. I have also borrowed techniques from Fairclough’s (1995) and Halliday’s (1985) approaches to discourse analysis. I have chosen, however, not to perform the sort of detailed micro-analysis that their approaches favoured, preferring to analyse the discourse at a level that comes closer to minimising the distinction between ‘discourse’ and ‘Discourse’.

Next, mindful that these are non-journalistic texts, I have critically interrogated the thematic and schematic structure of news discourse, as proposed by van Dijk (1985), for its application to the structure of Letters to the Editor. It could be assumed, however, that the extensiveness of news coverage of this story might have been influential on writers’ structuring of their own accounts of, and responses to, the event.
A further disciplinary prism through which I have examined these texts is that of traditional rhetoric, within which there are three major genres: the forensic, the epideictic and the deliberative. The first concerns itself with giving evidence about that which has happened in the past; the second with identifying what’s to be valued in the present; and the last with making decisions about courses of action to be pursued in the future. All three genres are evident in post-implosion texts as people review the event, make normative decisions about how to respond, and consider how future actions ought to be determined in light of what they’ve learned. Within the forensic genre, three rhetorical functions predominate. They are: justification (*apologia*), praise (*eulogy*) and blame (*jeremiad*), all of which are exercised in the aftermath of the implosion.

The empirical data which is discussed in this chapter is arranged chronologically, in order of publication date, as that sequence has most bearing on the development of authorial positions. The texts are produced by a variety of authors – three Letters to the Editor from members of the public, one editorial, and opinion pieces from one local journalist, one interstate journalist and one member of the public are considered in detail. These are supported at various times by briefer quotes from other writers whose texts are not analysed in detail.

‘Carnell responsible: she must resign’

On the first day on which the community’s response to the implosion comprised the full content of the Letters to the Editor page, Tuesday 15 July, under a banner reading, ‘Reflecting on the hospital disaster’, this Letter from Geoff Cohen was given the position of principal prominence (Figure 42). In Anderson’s graphic phrase, it is a ‘flame thrower’, guaranteed to ignite debate and to prompt response from others (1990:3). A strident jeremiad, reminiscent of Zola’s 1898 ‘*J’accuse*’, it levels a clear and personal accusation of moral culpability at the ACT’s Chief Minister. Addressing her directly as ‘Kate Carnell’, rather than as ‘Chief Minister’ or even as ‘Mrs Carnell’, the writer explicitly addresses his charge at the Chief Minister-as-person, rather than at the Chief Minister-as-office-holder.
Cohen’s opening sentence, ‘Kate Carnell, you are morally responsible for Sunday’s tragedy at RCH, and you must resign’ (1997:8), may be compared with those of two other Letters published on the same day: ‘I think Mrs Carnell’s Government (and previous governments) have a lot to answer for’ (Brown, 1997:8), and ‘So, the Chief Minister wasn’t made aware that explosions are dangerous’ (Walker, 1997:8). Although both other writers imply that some fault rests with the Chief Minister, Brown’s attribution is diluted by its extension of agency beyond the Chief Minister to her Government, and then further, to unnumbered ‘previous governments’, while Walker’s choice of irony (a common device in this discourse) risks being appreciated only by those who share his opinion of the Chief Minister’s typical political *modus operandi*. By contrast, Cohen’s accusation is direct and unambiguous; his use of Kate Carnell’s name compounded by his emphatic and repeated use of the second person (‘you’).

This Letter is one of the earliest contributions to what became a discourse of blame, and the force of its accusation is sufficiently powerful that it may be regarded as serving as a model for those jeremiads that continued to follow it for the next month. Although several Letters attempted to counteract this blaming with calls for caution, it was a rare voice that would seek to justify the Chief Minister’s position (or even more, to eulogise it, as one writer did on 18 July).38

‘Damn all you local politicians!’

On the same day, 15 July, Christopher Davis’s passionate condemnation of Canberra’s local government is a powerful mix of anger and grief, its potency enhanced by its structural coherence (Figure 43). This Letter is an expressive instance of what Wahl-Jorgensen describes as ‘the language of the impassioned amateur writer, rather than the polished professional journalist’ – a so-called ‘gut-reaction letter’ (2006:223-225).

38 ‘I do not consider Mrs Kate Carnell, the Chief Minister, to be “morally responsible” for Sunday’s tragedy; neither do I think she should resign,’ wrote G. Hunt. ‘Heaven forbid. She has shown great courage and strength in the last few days’ (1997:10; italics in original).
Damn all you local politicians!

IT IS hard to find a temperate word to describe the tragedy of Sunday’s bungled hospital demolition.

Our hearts go out to the family of the dead child — a child and family who attended what was simply the macabre conversion of a political decision into a glorified public spectacle.

Is this a portent for the continued misguided heading of Canberra, under local government? Damn all you local politicians! Damn all the politicians who have manipulated and contributed towards the machinations that have resulted in this deplorable event.

I doubt that our leaders of government are prepared to be imploded as a public spectacle, so at least have the courage to resign in a demonstration of a sense of shame and regret at the consequences of a quite predictable danger.

This accident, not to detract from its terrible consequences, is endemic of the expediency of modern government; the short sight that abounds; the sense of theatre that is somehow expected to replace reason. I put it to everyone, whether media, onlooker or casual reader: this event needs to make everyone take stock. We all ought to be ashamed of the licence we have been given our government; the nonchalance with which we allow veritable “cowboys” to make decisions affecting our lives, our welfare and the safety of our children.

If this was economic rationalism, I hope it is moribund, like our pathetic local government.

CHRISTOPHER DAVIS

Farrer

Figure 43  ‘Damn all you local politicians!’ (Christopher Davis, The Canberra Times, 15 July 1997, p.8)

Applying the terms in which Halliday describes an act of speaking, a Letter to the Editor may be said to be an ‘interact’— ‘an exchange, in which giving implies receiving and demanding implies giving in response’ (1985:68). As readers we are invited to interact with Davis’s argument, being drawn in to the ‘conversation’ of the Letter via the rhetorical modes of persuading, asserting, shaming, blaming and accusing which he alternately adopts. A response is required of us. What’s more, our agreement with the writer’s position is assumed by means of his use of what Fairclough terms the ‘inclusive’ we which makes an implicit authority claim for the stated authorial position (1995). Not only is the reader’s reply assumed, rather than awaited, but this Letter invites the reader to identify with the writer. It ‘beckons readers to inhabit the subject position’ (Parameswaran, 2006:47).
The dominant tenor of this Letter is one of personal, rather than communal, expression. While other writers wrote on behalf of their families, Davis gives no indication in his Letter (for example, in the signature block) that that is his intention. His use elsewhere of the first person plural ‘we’ leads me to assume that, being consistent, in this case ‘our’ is to be assumed to mean that he is speaking (with implied authority) on behalf of his audience. Here we see a sandwiching of an assumed commonality of position with the reader (‘we’) between clearly idiosyncratic positions in the first and final paragraphs – the first as writer, the last as citizen.

Davis taps into discourses of accusation/indictment and impotence/frustration. The main body of the text, the meat in this discursive sandwich, is the powerfully voiced and strongly cohesive discourse of accusation or indictment: ‘macabre … spectacle … portent … damn … resign … expediency … short sight … theatre … everyone take stock … be ashamed … nonchalance … welfare … safety.’ This accusation is framed by or embedded within two paragraphs that speak out of a discourse of impotence and frustration, the Letter beginning, ‘It is hard to find’ and ending, ‘I hope it is moribund, like our pathetic local government’.

Twice, in those two paragraphs, the age-old dilemma of high emotion rendering words inadequate for appropriate expression of feelings is expressed: ‘It is hard to find a temperate word to describe the tragedy.’ The final paragraph is more of a whimper than a bang. It tails off after the vibrancy and uncontainedness of the previous paragraph, in which simple sentences were not enough to express the depth and complexity of the writer’s response – requiring two long and complex sentences, each with multiple clauses (‘This accident’ and ‘We all ought to be ashamed’).

The helplessness of the original paragraph is reprised in the final one, in which the bogey of ‘economic rationalism’ is made synonymous with ‘local government’ (now curiously stripped of its power to ‘manipulate’ and ‘machinate’, and reduced to being ‘pathetic’). As resolution, it is strangely powerless, the slow death by moribundity a contrast to the child’s swift execution. It is an impotent wish for vengeance.

Halliday reminds us that we must ‘think of text dynamically, as an ongoing process of meaning; and of textual cohesion as an aspect of this process’; indeed, that ‘a text is the product of ongoing semantic relationships’ (1985:290-291). Coherent texts (and hence, discourses) are
formed by the use of structuring devices which relate the component elements to each other. Cohesion in English is typically created by means of reference, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical organisation, each of which has been employed by Davis.  

Having analysed this Letter to make apparent its thematic and structural dimensions, I next move on to explore whether what I have observed in this instance resonates with the expressed positions of other Letter writers and with those of the newspaper’s own journalists, chief among whom is, of course, the Editor.

‘Time to calmly seek the cause’

Unlike Letters to the Editor, editorials are the product of a very different political instinct. They speak with an institutional, rather than a personal, voice, and may engage in the rhetorical subordination of those voices that they deem are antithetical to their interests. Crispin Hull’s editorial of 15 July (Figure 44) stands firmly in the journalistic tradition of prescription to its audience, rather like a secular version of the sermon (1997b:8). It is a piece of popular instruction that has its rhetorical origins in the political and religious tracts that once guided the behaviour of the newly literate masses.

Although the editor acknowledges that a wish for vengeance is being expressed by some in the Canberra community, it is very far from his mind:

39 ‘Reference’ is the device by means of which an element becomes a ‘reference point’ for other elements introduced later in the text. The reader has to look elsewhere (for example, further back) in the text for its meaning. For example, ‘a temperate word’ is followed by many which we may or may not judge as ‘temperate’: ‘damn’, ‘machinations’ and ‘deplorable’. With ellipsis, what is omitted is presupposed. As it is ‘our leaders of government’ who are the subject of the sentence, the reader may assume that is they who are being addressed in the clause which follows, despite their not being named: ‘… at least [leaders of government] have the courage to resign …’ Conjunctions elaborate, extend or enhance the meaning of a clause, as in ‘… a child and family who attended …’, ‘… all the politicians who have manipulated …’ and ‘… the machinations that have resulted …’ Lexical organisation takes the form of simple repetition, the commonest device for achieving coherence: ‘Damn’, ‘Damn’, ‘family … child’, ‘child … family’, and five uses of the word ‘government’; synonyms: ‘spectacle’/‘event’; terms which are commonly used together: ‘courage’ and ‘resign’, ‘shame’ and ‘ashamed’; and ‘keywords’ – those which are of particular significance in certain texts: ‘Damn’.
Time to calmly seek the cause

ON SUNDAY afternoon Canberra was sent into shock, and like any earthquake it lasted out. In retrospect there might be many people — politicians, union officials and just ordinary citizens — who would wish in haste that they will never feel the pain of seeing fingers at every corner possess the full facts.

Then, after the finger-pointing came the blame back, the deleting of instructions and the taking of names, the shifting of responsibility and liability.

One day the truth will be known why the demolition of Royal Canberra Hospital went so terribly wrong. But that day was not Sunday. That day was not Wednesday, nor will probably not be tomorrow or next week. These are days for sorrow, sympathy and mutual support, most especially for the family of the young girl who died and for those who were injured and those who witnessed the trauma. They should not be days for recrimination and name-calling.

It is in this nature at a time like this. And there is nothing wrong with people speculating and making inquests, but there are questions can be posed or proved about why a routine operation went wrong.

So it is natural that people will speculate about what occurred on Acton Peninsula, just as they will inevitably feel that if the trajectory of a piece of flying debris had been slightly different it might have been their own family at the centre of the tragedy.

Many of the families who went to the lake on Sunday must now be wondering why they did so and why they did not occur to them that something could go wrong. Nor many, a vague sense of guilt may be mixed with the shock.

Speculating about a cause for the tragedy is part of the process of inquiry and discovery, but it is only the very first stage, many steps behind blame and recrimination.

The fact is, no one yet knows how or why the implication failed, so many have been left bewildered and some-one-blameless.

The process of inquiry will be a complex one and must not be rushed. Why was implication selected as the method of demolition, over conventional methods? Was the demolition planned and carried out correctly? If so, was it appropriate that such an event be turned into a public spectacle, or that many people be actively encouraged to witness it?

If that encouragement was not appropriate, who is most to blame — the politicians who knew that a big community event would be paid for the city’s soul? The mass-media for talking up the event and even suggesting prime vantage points? Or Canberrans themselves, who resided in such curiously vast numbers to watch a building collapse?

And how far back should the chain of causation be traced back to the day when Royal Canberra closed? Or only back to the day the Kingston-Acton land swap was made?

If that sounds ludicrous, how much less ludicrous is it really to seek to absolve immediate blame closer in time, as so many people have sought to do since Sunday lunchtime?

There may come a day when it is right and proper to lay blame for Sunday’s disaster in one quarter or another. But there are far too many vested and political interests and too many raw emotions in the air just now to make any of the criticism sensible.

How many of those who are now saying that “of course” this implication is a more dangerous method of demolition publicly debated the issue earlier, or tried to dissuade people from attending? The only doubt seems to be whether it was ever even considered the possibility of asbestos in the building, and how many of those who were still surprised by the decision to close the hospital and angered by the ACT Government’s decision to swap the Acton Peninsula for land at Kingston have simply looked this shock on top of their earlier anger and hit out at the closest target — the Government.

And what if there was more laborious, less spectacular method of demolition had been chosen and one or more demolition workers had died in an industrial accident during that demolition? Would the city now be in such a state of shock?

Sunday’s tragedy was so far outside the consciousness of anyone associated with the demolition that it is impossible to make any rational sense of it. Making sense of it must be just as difficult for those public figures who were put on the spot soon after the tragedy as it is for the rest of us. Yet, unlike us, public figures are expected to be coherent, to have answers they cannot possibly have, to articulate on behalf of the community a response to something senseless.

Estimates of the number of Canberrans who gathered at various vantage points around Lake Burley Griffin on Sunday to witness the demolition of Royal Canberra Hospital range up to 100,000. In other words, up to one in three Canberrans made a conscious choice to journey from their homes to watch a hospital razed.

If only we could tell why it is that so many ordinary people should go up a sunny Sunday afternoon to witness Royal Canberra Hospital’s passing, we might better understand the shock which reverberated through the city when something, unaccountably, went wrong.

Figure 44  ‘Time to calmly seek the cause’ (Crispin Hull, The Canberra Times, 15 July 1997, p.8)
Immediately noticeable is Hull’s tone of judicious pacification. Readers are reminded not to cast the first stone – in their haste to judge others they may have overlooked that they, too, share the guilt (‘What parent’ and ‘why it was that so many ordinary people’). This is the tone of the wise man, the tribal elder – it is a calm and considered piece, in strong contrast to Davis’s passionate Letter. Hull’s objective is not to ‘tell it like it is’, but to tell it as it ought to be. His rhetorical purpose is normative, that is, it is to outline appropriate responses. The first of these is given in the headline: ‘Time to calmly seek the cause.’ The search for explanation should be dispassionate. It is inappropriate to ‘lash out’, to respond ‘in haste’, ‘to point fingers’, ‘to bite back’ and ‘to trade insults’. These are all behaviours that are only too human. Above them rises the prospect of the ultimately knowable ‘truth’ that will ‘one day … be known’. Who will ‘know’ this truth? Whose ‘truth’ will it be? Ultimately, any truth or knowledge that the community might arrive at will not – cannot – be absolute. At best, some shared understanding might be intersubjectively negotiated, but it can only ever be partial and indeterminate.

Employing the rhetorical skills of the professional writer, Hull proceeds to ask a series of questions of his readers, inviting them to see that they, too, are implicated in their own (and their families’ – but specifically, their children’s) exposure to risk. It follows that therefore they must share in the guilt that attaches to this tragedy, which, it begins to seem, was a failure of information as much as a failure of demolition technique. He suggests that the search for answers is bound to be difficult and time-consuming. It is not easy to establish whom to blame: is it ‘the politicians’, ‘the mass media’ or even ‘Canberrans themselves, who responded in such curiously vast numbers to watch a building collapse?’ In this comment, Hull marks the public’s responses as ‘curious’, in contrast to the responses of the politicians and the media. The media are cast as merely ‘talking up’ an event that the politicians in their patronising wisdom knew ‘would be good for the city’s soul’.

Further, it is unclear how far back the investigation should stretch. By making an avowedly exaggerated claim for taking causation back to the closure of the hospital, Hull claims that any attempts by the public to ‘apportion immediate blame’ are likewise and analogously ‘ludicrous’ and thus, inappropriate. What is not questioned, however, is his belief that ‘one day the truth will

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40 It is interesting to note that this editorial (and hence, the editor’s position) was specifically endorsed by the Catholic Bishop of Canberra in a Letter to the Editor the following day: ‘I welcome Tuesday’s editorial … and fully support its call for calmness’ (Carroll, 1997:10).
be known’ – the belief that the diligent application of scientific method will result in the revelation of ‘truth’. Hull’s argument thus also privileges the technical over the public sphere, allowing the primacy of ‘fact’ over values and policy (Rowland, 1986: 139).

Hull is disturbed by the presence of ‘raw emotions’, dismissing them as rendering criticism irrational. Taking another tack, he suggests that those who were opposed to the hospital’s closure ‘have simply loaded this shock on top of their earlier anger’ and blamed the Government unfairly. Next he tries to suggest that a similar death might have occurred had the buildings been demolished by conventional means, and that had that been the case, the people of Canberra would not have reacted the way they did. (This in spite of the qualitative, and ethical, differences between this accident and one that may befall an employee at work.) Then Hull consigns the event to the realms of the ‘impossible’, beyond ‘rational sense’, suggesting that it could not have been foreseen by anyone involved.

Finally, he returns to the people of Canberra, who are his readership and the audience for this secular sermon. As many as 100,000 may have attended the event, choosing ‘consciously’ i.e. deliberately, to do so. Suggesting that it is still a puzzle why that should have been the case, Hull claims that people’s shock at the accident can only be understood in the context of their attendance at the event. What is this connection meant to imply? That they are guilty by association? That wanting to see a building collapse is as ghoulish and hence reprehensible as choosing to attend an execution? That the interest in the former was somehow, cosmically, repaid with the occurrence of the latter?

In this editorial, Hull attempts to persuade his audience to exercise their common sense rather than their emotions and to comply with dominant behavioural norms and social values regarding appropriate responses to crisis. In prescribing preferred interpretive boundaries for his readership, he seeks to steady the social and political universe of Canberra, which, he suggests, is reacting wildly in response to the implosion tragedy. He implies that it is destabilising for some members of a society to give full and immediate expression to mourning violent deaths for which other members of that society are responsible.41 What is apparent here, however, is

41 Interestingly, psychoanalysts have learned through working with Holocaust survivors that a period of denial or repression allows the worst of a traumatic experience to be blunted by time before it begins to be dealt with by the community as a whole, after which mourning might lead to reconciliation (Robben, 2005:122).
Hull’s fear of the ‘horrific threat of chaos’ (Horton, 1970:163) that he can see lurking behind this challenge to the validity of his established beliefs.

Hull’s rhetoric is persuasive rather than coercive, operating in classic hegemonic fashion to seek to obtain his readers’ consent to his preferred reality such that they will regard it as ‘common sense’. Allan observes that ‘subordinate groups are directed to negotiate reality within what are ostensibly the limits of “common sense” when, in actuality, this “common sense” is consistent with dominant norms, values and beliefs’ (1998:109). This legitimating activity, at once conceptual and social, is a central practice in what Berger and Luckmann refer to as ‘universe-maintenance’ (1966:122).

Therefore, as well as urging constraint on his audience, Hull identifies those types of responses that he considers are inappropriate. It is within his power to do so. In this editorial he attempts to position his readers through this particular mode of address, and readers may choose to take up his ‘textual invitation’ or not (Livingstone, 1993:7). Journalistic control also determines which (and how) external voices are allowed to enter the narrative of the news, and this confers legitimacy on those voices so admitted. Media genres manage ‘the construction of particular kinds of knowledge … by managing the various discursive positions available to the participants … thus establishing what it is legitimate for each to say and in what manner utterances should be regarded’ (Livingstone, 1999:92).

The ‘rhetorical subordination of other voices’, by contrast, marks them as less believable (Robinson, 1995). While The Canberra Times may not actively suppress those voices from this point forward, its readership has now been alerted as to the degree of credibility which they ought to attach to them, and as a result, those voices have been delegitimated in this debate. From this point onwards, Hull’s exhortations are regularly echoed in the Letters to the Editor pages. If the conflict between normative and contentious positions is ‘at the epistemological heart of framing’ (Durham, 1998:103), it is at this early point that the normative frame begins to win out in the contest between competing social narratives. It is important to observe how quickly this happened in this case – within two days of the implosion.

‘Not the time to make political capital’

While Hull was urging restraint, other Letters writers were more strident in their criticisms of those in the community (in particular, a local union official and the ACT’s Leader of the Opposition) who had immediately sought to attribute blame to the Chief Minister. These writers were given a substantial voice in the 15 July Letters, comprising three of the twelve Letters
published. One of these expresses revulsion and, somewhat naively, shock that this has so rapidly become a political issue: ‘Trying to score political points is despicable’ (Dixon, 1997:8). Another writer characterises those who are doing this blaming as ‘jackals of the political fringe … snapping for blood and scavenging for political points’ (Maier, 1997:8), while the third describes them as ‘heartless and cynical’ (Hodgman, 1997:8). Thus those in the community who are blaming the leader of the Government which authorised, financed and promoted the implosion, are framed by these writers as destructive, immoral and calculating. Not only is their behaviour described as inhumane, they themselves are portrayed as inhuman (‘jackals’).

On 17 July, Brian Richards’ Letter echoes Hull’s editorial of two days before, as he reminds his fellow citizens that ‘our community voted with its feet’ to attend the event. This is ‘not the time for a witch-hunt’, he advises (Richards, 1997:8). The object of a witch-hunt, of course, is a female charged with possessing unnatural powers, and Kate Carnell was arguably the ACT’s most powerful woman at the time. Witch-hunts are also renowned for being driven by the (affective/subjective) passions and prejudices of the crowd, rather than by the (intellectual/objective) due processes of the law. The fear that emotions rather than reason will determine who was at fault has become a key concern in this discourse.

In the aftermath of an event to which perhaps insufficient consideration was given beforehand, it is interesting to note that the prevailing tenor of post-event analysis is caution. The following day, 18 July, J. Ward suggests that Canberrans are engaging in a ‘horrible feast of blame-casting,’ prompted perhaps by their ‘realisation that “There, but for the grace of God, go I”’ (1997:10). Despite the overtones of savagery in the phrase ‘horrible feast’, Ward at least nominates a psychological explanation for the behaviour, thus implying that this is a (changeable) behaviour, not a (fixed) character defect. Taking a cue from Hull and others, Ward suggests, ‘Let’s wait for the inquiry results’.

‘Fatal fallout’

On the Saturday following the implosion (19 July), Murray Hogarth of The Sydney Morning Herald used the trope of ‘explosion’ (with its resultant, equally damaging, fallout) as the defining image with which to frame his analysis of the impact of the event’s fatal consequences on Canberra and its community (1997:38). As might be expected of an external perspective on the crisis, it differs in certain respects from many of the local responses to the event. Beginning his article by graphically describing Katie Bender as having been ‘cut down by flying steel shrapnel’, he then goes on:
Katie’s death in a rare implosion blunder shocked the building demolition world. And it has left the capital’s chill winter air filled with political shrapnel, in which the enemies of the can-do Chief Minister, Kate Carnell, see potential for her electoral demise, with the poll that counts in the ACT just six months away.

That silent but deadly flight of steel across the lake at lunchtime last Sunday also appears to have perforated the “trust us, we know what we are doing” rhetoric of those ACT politicians who espouse corporatisation, self-regulation and a belief in the infallibility of free market forces.

In this tragedy the publicity demands of local politics have been combined with private enterprise self-confidence to create a dangerously explosive mix. (1997:38)

Although he makes no reference to what has been said in the Letters to the Editor published in The Canberra Times during the week, Hogarth captures here the very mix of retaliation, opportunistic blame and disillusionment that has characterised them. He is also alert to the prevailing sense of irony, noting the paradoxical names of two of the organisations most closely implicated in the conduct of the implosion:

Controlled Blasting Services, whose blasts proved to be anything but controlled … and …

Totalcare Industries, the corporatised arm of the ACT Government that stands accused of displaying anything but total care. (1997:38)

By 19 July, after five days of comprehensive analysis by experts and lay commentators alike, the prevailing mythological theme among The Canberra Times’ journalists had become that of the ‘scapegoat’. Three of the paper’s most senior reporters took up most of the column space in the paper that day. In the first of his two pieces, Norman Abjorensen’s review of the events of the previous Sunday relayed a litany of the errors of others, while in his second piece, he reflected on his own, personal and professional, participation in the event (1997a:C1; 1997c:C3).

Brendan Nicholson’s political analysis was headed ‘A question of responsibility’ (Nicholson, 1997d:C2), while Robert Macklin philosophised in his piece, ‘Trying to find what life means’ (1997e:C2). All three placed the question of blame at the centre of their analysis. Judy Prisk (1997:12), whose regular Saturday column at that time, ironically, was titled ‘Live and Learn’, wrote specifically about the social function of scapegoating, and the column was illustrated by a Tiedemann cartoon, ‘At the scapegoat household …’ (Figure 45). Scapegoating is a strategy that not only personalises evil and misfortune (Crick, 1993:231), enabling them to be explained and evaluated, but one that facilitates moral distancing from the self.
The only Letter to the Editor published on 19 July was one from Senator Cheryl Kernot, then national leader of the Australian Democrats, titled ‘Some things are worth paying for’, in which she implied that it was the policy of outsourcing government services that was to blame for the accident (Kernot, 1997:17). On the same day, Cordelia Hull’s contribution, ‘Irony, paradox and guilt’, (explored more fully below) concluded with the message, ‘let us not be too ready to blame. We can discover what went wrong, but we are all at fault’ (1997:C3). While these two non-journalists also made use of the powerful myth of the scapegoat in framing their analyses, only Hull insisted on the more difficult resolution that her readers should not avail themselves of this means of seeking to avoid moral responsibility.

‘The dust clears, but the grief lingers on’

Norman Abjorensen was one of the paper’s journalists who had been stationed on site at the hospital, on the roof of the old maternity wing, to cover the implosion. (His piece for the newspaper on 14 July had been titled ‘The view from maternity’, seeming, in full awareness of the tragedy, to pun on the phrase, ‘From here to eternity,’ the title of a film in which unforeseen disaster awaits the unwitting and preoccupied central characters.) Abjorensen had thus had privileged access to an insider’s perspective on the conduct of the implosion. That enhanced role of participant, however, would back-fire with the event’s tragic outcome leaving him questioning his own role in the promotion and conduct of the event:

I feel guilty for having been there, for having been part of the machinery that encouraged people like the Benders to go along for the spectacle. Again and again, like an endless newsreel, I see the building collapsing before my eyes, the deathly shards flying off across the water. Why am I helpless in trying to stop them? Trying to turn back time? Trying to
undo what has been done? I don’t remember the word ‘danger’ being used at any time, only the bureaucratically neutral term, ‘risk assessment’. Was I negligent as a communicator in not taking a more critical interest in what we were being told? Was I too complacent in not checking the facts? Did it even cross our minds that we might have been at risk? (1997c:C3)

Abjorensen makes no attempt to shirk the consequences of his position, using the 1st person singular unflinchingly where others might have resorted to the relative comfort and anonymity of the third person (or at least the first person plural). Although he includes references to the key players (who are elsewhere variously held responsible for the tragedy) – Kate Carnell, Totalcare, Town and Country and Controlled Blasting Services – Abjorensen refrains from attributing blame to them and thus absolving himself. Instead, he claims, there is not really anyone to blame: ‘of course, we were not to know, none of us’. What cannot be avoided is that ‘[w]e were all, unwittingly, a part of it’ (1997c:C3).

‘Irony, paradox and guilt’

On the same day (19 July) Cordelia Hull, whose brother Crispin was one of The Canberra Times’ senior journalists at the time, contributed a lengthy reflection labeled by the paper as ‘a mother’s view’ of the event. The newspaper thus identifies her perspective as one that is particularly ‘feminine’. By foregrounding and validating ‘the domestic and the everyday’ (Gray, 1999:28) in her view of the implosion, Hull certainly takes a feminist approach to her documentation of the event. In her article, Hull shared with readers the sequence of decisions and actions that led her family to return to Canberra from interstate for the purpose, prophetically expressed by her daughter, of seeing ‘the hospital explode.’ It is a highly self-aware piece, using her self and her own experience as a means of pursuing understanding – a performative process of ‘passionate knowing’ (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986:141).

Hull’s daughter was the same age as Katie Bender, and like her, the youngest child. She had been born at the hospital, and had been most keen to see the implosion – a desire her mother was prepared to indulge: ‘it was her birthplace, after all’. She remembers the time the two of them had spent in the hospital at the time of her daughter’s birth:

It was just me and her then. Four beds in the ward and three of them empty. We were left alone for four days as nurses have more pressing concerns than mums with healthy offspring. I bonded so well with that child in the near-empty hospital that she still gets anything she wants – spoilt, some would say, par for the course for Canberrans. Now she wants to watch the hospital go down. Funny, that. (1997:C3)
The visceral sense of closeness between a mother and her newborn child that Hull evokes with this description, their unity heightened by their relative isolation, is a clear counterpoint to the violent and final separation suffered by Katie Bender’s mother from her ‘baby’. What such a loss means can barely be put into words. As Zora Bender, Katie’s mother, said, in her only statement to the media at this time: ‘What can I say? I lost my daughter. What can I say? I lost my child’ (Kazar and Mapstone, 1997:1). Amid all the words written and spoken at this time, it is Katie’s mother who reminds us that hers is a loss that evades description.

‘You said we wouldn’t make it’, an adolescent voice whined in my ear, ‘now we’ve got to wait half an hour. Wish I’d brought my book’. I wonder if that other 12-year-old read as much as this one does. She was in Year 7 too. We were on the city side of the lake. Not a good spot, but we’d found a tree to sit in … I looked across the lake. There were so many more people on the other side, near Lennox Gardens. ‘We’ve got time to walk round there if you want to. The view will be much better’. ‘Can’t be bothered. Should’ve brought my book’. Kids can be such a trial, can’t they? You worry they’ll never grow up. ‘Why can’t we go out on a boat?’ this one continued. We were near the boat-hire depot, and it looked fun. We were tempted. But we didn’t go out, nor did we get to the other side of the lake. And my 12-year-old is still with me. (1997:C3)

The poignancy of this mother’s decisions point, of course, to how easily they might well have been otherwise. How simple, to place your beloved child in the path of mortal danger merely out of indulgence. How blessed not to have moved into the path of such danger merely out of lassitude. How the child’s whimsy – to do this, but not that – can have such fateful/fatal consequences. It is, of course, a morality tale, for Hull’s family’s experience is emblematic of that of all the other families likewise gathered at the lake, and the family to whom the similarities are most pointed is the Bender family.

In expressing her exasperation with her daughter’s childish behaviour, Hull uses the idiomatic, ‘You worry they’ll never grow up’, in which ‘to grow up’ means ‘to mature into adult behaviour’. It is an expression which she uses in full awareness of its cruel double meaning. For the child who will now ‘never grow up’ is not Hull’s daughter, but the one who was killed by the implosion, Katie Bender.

Unlike some other writers, Hull claims no authority to speak other than her participation in the event. Although she refrains from taking a didactic stance, she effectively demonstrates (what readers may assume the newspaper considers) a ‘model’ response to the implosion. In sharing her experience she describes not only her actions, but also her decisions – and takes responsibility for both. Hull’s story accomplishes an imaginative feminisation of the body politic.
that returns the implosion experience from the domain of the political to that of the personal. In its focus on the personal and the particular, it is an evocative piece that allows the reader to imagine the real child who was killed – a child like all others who might get easily bored, complain to her mother, and prefer to read rather than watch the event she has insisted on being brought to watch. In other media representations meanwhile, approaching the hagiographic in their depictions, Katie was already being removed into the realms of unreality – depicted not as a lively child, but as ‘a beautiful angel we never knew’ (Kazar, 1997d:2).

**Silent and unheard voices**

In this chapter the primary empirical evidence has been the Letters to the Editor that have voiced a range of positions in response to the implosion. What has not been considered are the unheard or silent voices that were not expressed in those pages, whether that be by editorial omission or by their potential authors’ habitual exclusion from the newspaper-reading and Letter-writing community. Ringham says that the Letters section ‘gives voice to people who don’t usually have one, or who don’t usually choose to use it’ (1990:11). Occasions such as the implosion, do, it is true, often prompt contributions to the Letters page from people who do not usually express their opinions in this arena. However, it must also be remembered that those with the requisite cultural capital (or, more specifically, the ‘cultural competencies’ described by Bourdieu) to have mastered the various technical requirements to produce a publishable Letter to the Editor are more likely to be ‘heard’ in this debate than those who have not (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2002b). It must be remembered, too, that ‘[l]etters are not necessarily reliable indicators of local public opinion, because the keenest contributors are also the people who have the strongest, most polarized and unchangeable opinions’ (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2006:229). Any conclusions as to the representativeness of the community response as expressed in the Letters to the Editor can therefore only be tentative at best, and must be made with the larger, silent, polity in mind.

At the heart of the implosion story, however, there remains the unvoiced Conrad-ian ‘horror’ of not just the death, but the manner of death, of the child who is herself forever silenced. Although she is the catalyst, the cause and the object of this communal discourse, Katie Bender is not a subject within it – she herself has no voice.

Braudel, referring to erasures in historical records, asks whom we should listen to in interpreting events: the voices on the surface, or the voices that are nowhere apparent – the ‘silent ones’ (1972:56)? The ‘silent ones’ produce no texts that can be made the subject of a discourse analysis, but it is binding on the researcher to include them, imaginatively, in the depiction of a
community-wide response. This is not easy, but to avoid the attempt is to shirk a social responsibility of the sort that I believe is comprehended in Appadurai’s depiction of imagination as a ‘social practice’ (1990:5). Cordelia Hull exercised just this sort of imagination in her implosion memoir discussed above.

Katie’s parents, Mate and Zora Bender, who were naturally rendered inarticulate by the death of their beloved child, were journalistically depicted as inarticulate due to their non-native English speaking status. It was to be expected that they would be feeling ‘an inchoate sense of horror and despair’ (Rosh White, 1998:173). Even long afterwards, other Canberra parents, like Paul Osborne, an Independent Member of the ACT’s Legislative Assembly, acknowledged that the Bender family’s suffering was beyond their imagination:

I cannot imagine what the family of that little girl has gone through. Being a father myself, I could not imagine coping with the events of that day. I recall on the day, Mr Speaker, considering going there myself. It was only because my wife did not want to that we chose not to. It could have been any one of us sitting in that position. (1999)

In the introduction to his coronial report, the coroner, Shane Madden, paid tribute to the Benders’ stoic attendance at the inquest, an experience that must have been terribly difficult to bear:

Mr and Mrs Bender and the family attended the Inquest almost on a daily basis, particularly Anna who provided substantial assistance to their legal Counsel. The dignified attendance on a daily basis has been noted. Their regular attendance underscores the importance of learning from this tragic incident. (1999)

Pondering dimensions of illness that technology cannot capture, Stafford talks about ‘confronting the reality of the nontextualisable’ (1996:85). While others ‘textualised’ their responses to the accident that killed Katie, her family was left having to confront ‘what are, ultimately, unspeakable truths’ (Rosh White, 1998:173) – the inexpressible reality of her death. Theirs is ‘the untranslatability of the story of trauma’ (Hirsch and Smith, 2002:13). Their voices are almost unheard in this publicly mediated discourse.

42 For example, in this somewhat insensitive and unnecessarily literal, rendition of Zora Bender’s comments to two reporters from The Sydney Morning Herald: “If I knew what [was going to] happen I not go there with my family,” said her mother Zora, in her broken English. “We go for little look … I can’t understand,” she said, her voice trailing off (Papadopoulos and Peatling, 1997:1.2).
Not everyone sought verbal expression of their grief and sympathy, however. There were also mute expressions of condolence and respect, two of which were featured in *The Canberra Times*. Such expressions are particularly powerful when given by those whose prestige increases their power to influence, and who, as a consequence, are held up as models for others to emulate (Murphy, 2003:621).

![Figure 46](image)

**Figure 46**  Father John Armstrong lays flowers at the site where Katie Bender was killed

On the day following the implosion, Father John Armstrong, the Bender family’s parish priest, was photographed laying flowers in Lennox Gardens (Figure 46), and it was reported that ‘the Canberra Raiders wore black armbands and observed a minute’s silence before kicking off in memory of Katie Bender’ (Dillon, 1997). The newspaper indicates its approval of the local rugby league football team’s actions by featuring a large photograph of team captain, Ricky Stuart, on page 3 (Figure 47). Here is another of the community’s leaders demonstrating an appropriate response to the tragedy that is endorsed by the newspaper. By printing this photograph in the news section rather than the sports section of the paper, the team’s actions are presented as belonging in the civic, rather than in the sporting, domain and are praised for what they (mutely) ‘say’, not only about the importance and the place of acknowledging and honouring the dead, but also of all members of the civic body joining to ‘know the unity of shared suffering’ (Carroll, 1997:10).
The Raiders’ tribute was covered on television as well, prompting a Letter to the Editor that illustrates its effectiveness as moral and cultural guidance:

I inflicted so many news stories on my brain in order to deal with the events of Sunday and to try and provide answers as to why it happened at all. Out of all the media reports I consumed, the one that touched me the most was witnessing, on the TV, the way in which
the Canberra Raiders started their game with a minute’s silence in memory of Katie. (Strika, 1997:8)

The most salient unspoken tribute, however, was the memorial cross that was erected, anonymously, overnight (Figure 48). Undoubtedly part of its power was its succinct epitaph that expressed popular sentiment so eloquently, and, for the media’s purposes, so graphically:

![Image of memorial cross with inscription: 'In memory of a beautiful angel we never knew']

Figure 48  ‘In memory of a beautiful angel we never knew’  
(photograph by Andrew Meares, The Sydney Morning Herald, 16 July 1997, p.5)  

43 A similar photograph by Andrew Campbell was also published on the same day in The Canberra Times (p.2).
CONCLUSIONS

The Letters page of the newspaper is not a site that requires privileged access. The dialogue that is engaged in there is not an interchange between experts. It is a ‘common-knowledge’ discourse where ‘meanings are produced in a community’ (Alasuutari, 1999:13-14). The discourse that is produced on the Letters page is intersubjectively produced, its readers and writers collectively achieving certain convictions (but not consensus) – that it is ‘not the time for a witch-hunt’, that ‘what went wrong is the wrong question’, that ‘the people should have been listened to’ and that ‘governments have a lot to answer for’. Wahl-Jorgensen notes the preference that editors express for ‘letters that are written by private individuals about very personal experiences’ (2006:227) – the Letters page is not primarily for those who have a voice elsewhere, but for ‘ordinary people’.

This chapter has demonstrated that the Letters page functions not only as a ‘soapbox’, but as both stage and theatre insofar as its contributors ‘perform’ (rather than merely ‘state’) their positions, and are at the same time themselves the ‘audience’ for other contributors. For Letter writers, the newspaper is at once their source of material and the means by which reflections on that material are expressed. To the extent that some (like Vesna Strika) self-consciously refer to this process, it is a highly reflexive activity. While it is common for writers to take issue with the positions expressed by other writers, it also happens that some will take issue with the editorial stance taken by the newspaper itself. On the Letters pages, people ‘position’ themselves in relation to the event, just as on 13 July they positioned themselves in relation to the view. Thus the taking up of certain positions is bound up with identity (and of course, in this instance, with fate).

In this chapter I have shown that the once ‘concrete’ audience, now mediated, manifested traditional characteristics of ‘the public’ in its exercise of civic responsibilities and its use of rhetoric to do so. The public that voiced its opinions on the Letters page was heterogeneous, and their opinions were likewise. Their active pursuit of explanation was accompanied by some questioning of the status quo that made it clear that it was not regarded as sacred and the challenge to authority implicit in such questioning provoked some anxiety in the elites (personified in this discourse by the editor and the bishop).

In the immediate aftermath of the accident, a clear dialectic emerged between those texts that expressed subversion and those that sought containment, with calls for the Chief Minister to accept the blame and resign juxtaposed against calls for calm and a commitment to the due processes of an inquest. Ultimately, however, I do not believe that the post-implosion discourse
provides any evidence that the early differences of opinion were ever assimilated. No Letters were published that issued retractions or acknowledged conversions. While the passionate expression of some of the earliest Letters is modified with time, the same differences of opinion as to questions of responsibility, for example, remain unresolved throughout the period of this discourse. As the implosion fades into the mediated past, these Letters likewise fade from public view. After dominating this page for a fortnight, the newspaper stopped publishing Letters on this topic, and the voices of the Chief Minister’s apologists and opponents alike were silenced.

Attwood has described the Australian nation as being created through a process of ‘narrative accrual’ – a process whereby separate narratives coalesce to form a shared story that can be known and understood by people. Importantly, he says, it was in comprehending that story that Australians came to be ‘conscious of themselves as Australians’ (1996:101). Just such a ‘narrative accrual’ can be seen to have been created in the pages of the newspaper as journalists and Letter writers not only expressed their cognitive and affective responses to the implosion but performed the transformative work of fashioning for themselves a revised sense of their own identity as a ‘citzenry’ in the aftermath of the implosion. The narrative themes that run through this discourse – blaming, memorialising, mourning – form, if not a conversation, a sequence that must be read as a narrative collaboration or accrual.

In this chapter I have shown that Letter writers and journalists alike performed a co-construction that was partly phenomenological (their experiences of attending the event, for example) and partly social constructionist (their attribution of certain meanings to the event and to their own, and others’ parts in it). However, as many Letter writers recognised, in the final analysis no amount of ‘meaning work’ could explain away the physical consequences of this event. Ultimately, perhaps all that can be arrived at by the sharing of personal narratives about this (or any) disaster is not only the pursuit of knowledge and resolution through testimony. It is, as Tulloch realises, the possibility of achieving ‘a new emotional engagement with what happened’ (2006:12).
Chapter 4

‘The dust clears, but the grief lingers on’: feeling, thinking, judging and acting in response to disaster

INTRODUCTION

The responses to the implosion considered in this study are only available insofar as they were textualised and hence rendered available for later scrutiny. However, where the previous chapter focused on those responses that took a primarily rhetorical posture, this chapter analyses response in other forms, such as emotional, cognitive, moral and active, noting that these, too, were documented. By this I do not mean to suggest that the responses can be categorised simply as either discursive or performative, or that they took only one, not several or all of those forms, merely that particular instances of these forms of response will be discussed individually. The performative aspects of these responses are readily recognisable in the activities of attendance, celebration, commemoration, witness, protest, eulogising, and mourning.

Long before Herman suggested that ‘the traumatic event challenges an ordinary person to become a theologian, a philosopher, and a jurist’ (1992:178), anthropologists had been following Evans-Pritchard’s lead in exploring the strategies pursued by tribal societies in their attempts to explain misfortune. As Horton observed, ‘there are certain circumstances that can only be coped with in terms of a wider causal vision than common sense provides. And in these circumstances there is a jump to theoretical thinking’ (1970:142).

The implosion’s tragic outcome was one of those contingencies in which the everyday application of common sense proved inadequate to the task of explanation. It was a situation that required the application of ‘theoretical’ perspectives, whether spiritual or scientific. Such attempts at explaining misfortune seek to address how an incident occurred and why it happened as it did. Evans-Pritchard showed that a mythical explanation for the latter is not necessarily incompatible with a scientific explanation for the former (Crick, 1993:235).

Whatever their frame of reference, some people locate responsibility outside the self, and some locate it within the self. People articulate their responses in dialogue with others, within and
People’s divergent affective responses to the implosion cannot be separated from the affective climate in which it was prepared for. They are also implicitly involved in the equally debated ethical dimensions of the event. The ‘mood’ of the city was the subject of comment before the implosion and a topic that was considered relevant by several commentators afterwards. That ‘mood’ or affective environment, was instrumental in people’s decision making about attendance at the event, and equally, about their assessment of it and their part in it afterwards.

Strong emotions are apparent in the writings of many of the earliest respondents to the implosion tragedy – emotions which, before too long, there is an evident hegemonic instinct to quell, or at least to dampen. However, as LaCapra observes, there are some events which must be written about or talked about in emotional or affective terms. To fail to do so, to ‘overly objectify, smooth over or obliterate the nature and impact of the events they treat’ is to do such events a grave injustice (2001:104). The challenge in this for The Canberra Times was achieving an appropriate balance between two conflicting proprieties: the expression of emotion and the exercise of social (and self) control.

At the same time, one of the functions of the print media in the aftermath of a tragedy is to accomplish what Kitch describes as the ‘reification of emotions’ (2003:215), by which she means the permanent recording (in print) of the verbal and visual mourning narrative. This chapter concludes by examining the performance of mourning, an activity that incorporates dimensions of each of the types of response dealt with in this chapter. It considers the particular ways in which The Canberra Times performed this function for its readership and the particular role that journalists, as professional writers, performed in textualising the mourning response.

Finally, as was the case in the previous chapter, I contextualise this chapter’s examination of response by looking briefly at similar responses to other local, national and international disasters: the 2003 Canberra bushfires, the 2002 Bali bombings and the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre. In doing so, I note that some themes recur throughout the responses that comprise the thus-constructed public disaster discourse.

THE EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

The implosion was proposed as an entertaining experience and became instead a traumatising experience. It did so both cognitively and affectively. In her study of ‘traumascapes’, Tumarkin
is careful to define trauma as meaning ‘overwhelming’ – as describing ‘not a medical condition or a pathological state but an individual and collective response to loss and suffering’ (2005:13). Trauma, therefore, may be understood as deriving, not from an event itself, but from how it is experienced (2005:12).

‘Feelings’ are both emotions and physical sensations, and the strong emotions that were voiced in the post-implosion discourse were directly related to powerfully apprehended (even if only imagined) sensations of being physically attacked: ‘On Sunday, at Commonwealth Avenue Bridge, my family was narrowly missed by a 4kg piece of the Royal Canberra Hospital’ (Arundell 1997). Affects are experienced in the body and transmitted to the bodies of others, a phenomenon described by Tomkins as ‘affect contagion’ (1962-1992). This fundamental social characteristic of humans may be observed when a smile prompts a smile in another, or when a fearful expression prompts anxiety in another. It is a phenomenon that is central to the operations of a social issue such as the communal response to the hospital implosion. Affect is also co-opted, amplified and orchestrated by the media (Gibbs, 2002:338) which encourage people to express and to share what might otherwise have been private affective responses.

Rorty argues that contemporary societies can only find a sense of solidarity through embracing as ‘we’ an ever-widening number of ‘they’, and that this is accomplished by embodying a truly felt empathy (1989:189-198). Wahl-Jorgensen claims that it is to create this semblance of felt community among their readers that newspaper editors prefer to publish Letters that express basic emotions such as love and fear (2001:316). Similarly, Linenthal argues that it is only through the shared emotion of nationwide mourning that Americans can now transcend the many ways in which they are divided and ‘imagine themselves as one’ (2001:111). In the wake of the Thredbo disaster,44 in a broadcast discussion about the extent to which private tragedy is also public property, Wark observed that ‘the tragedy is the thing that makes us feel we are a community’ (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1997). Profoundly affective experiences such as communal trauma operate catalytically within a society, resulting in a deeper sense of community than can ever result from mere shared entertainment. The expression of that trauma narrativises key cultural meanings and articulates the moral order.

44 On the evening of 30 July 1997 a landslide in the village of Thredbo in Australia’s Snowy Mountains caused the deaths of 18 people. Three days later the sole survivor, Stuart Diver, was brought to the surface in a nationally-televised rescue that involved hundreds of volunteers as well as trained emergency services personnel.
The experience and expression of the felt response is therefore an integral part of the larger exercise of imagining community, and a function that the Letters page (and the newspaper as a whole) may facilitate. Such expression, however, may give rise to confronting consequences. ‘The valorisation of personal experience that strikes a responsive chord challenges the venerated distinction between the public and the private’ (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001:317). This is particularly marked when journalists themselves have personal experiences of an incident to share, and avail themselves of the pages of their newspaper to do so. The extent to which they may do so, unfettered by editorial policy, will depend on whether or not such expression is seen as being in the newspaper’s interests.

**Affective responses**

The desire to feel that they have the power to protect themselves and their property from unforeseen destruction takes its most affective form in people’s sense of responsibility for their children’s safety. Further, responsibility for the young is felt socially, as well as personally. When the young are the victims of disaster, as in the hospital implosion and the Bali bombing, not only the parents but also others in the community may experience a terribly poignant form of survivor guilt, as did this Canberra journalist:

> I feel guilty for having been there, for having been part of the machinery that encouraged people like the Benders to go along for the spectacle. Others I have talked to during the week, including those in the immediate vicinity, feel guilty for having been out enjoying themselves while a young life was so senselessly snuffed out. (Abjorensen, 1997c:C3)

The death of a child leaves parents feeling ‘that they should somehow have been able to protect the child’ (Raphael, 1986:110). Interestingly, in his classic study, *Communities in Disaster*, Barton found that the variable that appeared to be most significant in calculating the likely immediate and long-term effects on families exposed to disaster (whether in close proximity or not) was the presence of dependents. Stress reactions to disaster were found to be markedly greater for mothers than for fathers or for men and women without dependents. This was equally the case for women upon whose families the disaster had no immediate impact as it was for those immediately affected by the disaster’s impact (1969:83-86).

In the implosion and Bali bombing disasters, it was the youth of so many of the victims that most engaged the community's emotional response, in turn drawing forth a sense of responsibility – innocents(ce) betrayed by their elders’ lack of vigilance. In cases such as these, victims' relatives and others are likely to look to those in authority, who by virtue of their positions share in the duty of care for the young, and identify a dereliction of that duty:
The US was reportedly well aware and it apparently alerted your Government. But your Government did not make my son aware. Why did our children die …? (Brian Deegan, father of Bali bombing victim) (Canberra Times, 2002a:1)

It would appear that the golden rule of explosive engineering – the minimum amount of exposure to the minimum amount of people – was contemptuously flouted by all concerned in the recent demolition of the Royal Canberra Hospital. (Hammond, 1997:8)

Following the hospital implosion, there was no expression of post-disaster euphoria such as that which followed the 2003 Canberra bushfires, where the survivors’ sense of community was actively celebrated. There was nothing to celebrate which might have leavened the widespread blame-casting that followed the implosion. While much of it focused on individuals who were thought to have been recreant, this blaming had consequences for the cohesion of the wider community:

Kate Carnell, you are morally responsible for Sunday’s tragedy at RCH, and you must resign. (Cohen, 1997:8)

We are outraged and must demand a scapegoat. We will refuse to believe this was a blameless ‘accident.’ The only question is whether a technician will be sufficient or if our sense of order demands the sacrifice of Kate Carnell. (Macklin, 1997e:C2)

In the aftermath, blame and vitriol have been heaped on whoever is handy and the death of a little girl has brought the city to its knees. (Prisk, 1997:12)

The fact that crises and disasters often present in spectacular fashion calls forth complex responses from witnesses. The tragic outcome of the hospital implosion made one witness, Cherril Kousal, revise her participation in the event, horrified that her presence had somehow made her complicit in the accident:

My first reaction was horror. I felt like a voyeur, entertained by an accident … part of a terrible thing that killed. I was angry at being coaxed into a great big party. I didn’t sleep that night. (Ryan, 1997:C2)

Many of the witnesses to the bushfires, even while voicing their horror at the tragic outcomes of the event, seemed reluctantly compelled to acknowledge the spectacular dimensions of what they had seen, just as did many witnesses to the destruction of the World Trade Centre. For these witnesses, the sight was typically outside their visual and experiential lexicon, and they resorted to whatever specific or generic analogies they thought most appropriate – the bushfires being likened to war, and both the bushfires and September 11 to a disaster movie:
Saturday in Canberra reminded me of Vietnam 1969. The enemy was ‘nature’. ('Aussie Bill', 2003)

As I rounded the Canberra/Cooma turn off I looked into the sky and the thought that came to my mind was that I was driving into hell … if I had to compare it to a Hollywood movie, I'd say it was very much like Dante’s Peak, when the volcano erupts and ashes rain down on a small town. (Hassen, 2003)

A wave of dust came straight up the street like something out of Independence Day.

(James Dorney, an Australian who escaped the World Trade Centre) (Dennis, Peatling, and Maddox, 2001) 45

Rando argues that comparison continues to be a most powerful device in our attempts to achieve comprehension, pointing out that ‘the events of September Eleventh were first brought into sense through frames of comparison, or metaphor’ (2002:1). In Chapter Five I deal in more detail with the use of frames as interpretive strategies in response to events that defy ready explanation.

Tomkins describes nine innate affects: two positive (interest-excitement; enjoyment-joy); one re-setting (surprise-startle); and six negative (distress-anguish; shame-humiliation; contempt-disgust; anger-rage; fear-terror; and dissmell) (1962-1992). These affects can be seen not only being individually manifested in individuals’ own narratives, but being expressed in sequence on the Letters pages. Capturing the range of affective responses that had already been expressed in interviews and on talkback radio, Brendan Nicholson’s 15 July article was entitled, ‘From rage to blame to sorrow’ (1997b:3). Crispin Hull’s editorial on the same day, considered in Chapter Three, also illustrates this phenomenon. As editor, Hull had stepped quickly into the public implosion discourse to stipulate a normative prescription for the public expression of affective responses, implicitly acknowledging their power to influence others. Anger was not appropriate, nor blame (‘contempt’ in Tomkins’ typology) he said. It was understandable and appropriate to feel surprised and distressed at the event’s outcome and to be retroactively afraid of what the consequences could have meant. But Canberrans should, he suggested, deflect their anger onto an examination of their own decisions to attend, and thereby to legitimise, the event.

45 The second and third of these are examples of what Liebes and Katz (1993) describe as ‘referential’ television talk, in which viewers interpret events in their own lives by reference to occurrences in television programs (or in this case, movies).
Rather than seeking to shame others (such as the Chief Minister), they should accept some of that shame themselves for their part in the accident.

The influence of affective state on decision making

Encouraged to examine their own reasons for attending the implosion, Canberrans also began to ask themselves why they had been so heedless of the risk that they understood, *ex post facto*, to have characterised the event. In the field of risk assessment, many studies have been conducted into possible determinants on decision making (Alhakami and Slovic, 1994; Ghosh and Day, 1997; Slovic, 1999; Thompson and Dean, 1996; Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). For the majority of the implosion audience, the fact that it was an event which carried a high degree of risk became apparent only in retrospect. Many writers reflectively examined not only the cognitive processes they had followed in order to make the decision to attend, but also their affective state at the time.

In studies seeking to determine the influence of mood or ‘affect’ on people’s decision making ability, mood has been found to have a global effect, with the result that people ‘tend to make judgements that are compatible with [their] current mood, even when the subject matter is unrelated to the cause of that mood’ (Johnson and Tversky, 1983:30). The ACT Government’s invitation to the community to attend the hospital implosion had fostered a celebratory approach to the occasion that would have encouraged people to be disinclined towards considering the risky dimensions of the activity. Once committed to conceptualising the event solely as an entertainment, it would have been increasingly difficult for people to begin to think about it as a risk. As Horton observed, the more emotional and aesthetic investment there is in a prevailing theoretical scheme, the more difficult it is to abandon that scheme when it appears cognitively that that is the right thing to do (1970:161).

It has also been established that if the chances of loss are low, people are more inclined to be risk-prone (Arkes, Herren, and Isen, 1988), with the corollary being that if a high risk is perceived, people are more inclined to be risk-averse. If made aware of a genuinely possible loss, people will behave conservatively because they are strongly inclined towards maintaining a positive affective state (Isen and Geva, 1987). When people feel good they are more likely to interpret unfamiliar or ambiguous material positively (Isen and Shalker, 1982). However, if given misleading information, people may be led to make erroneous assessments, regardless of their mood (Isen and Means, 1983).
Positive affect may also lead to increased risk taking, especially when the outcomes are not personal. As positive affect increases there is an accompanying decrease in estimating the likelihood of negative events occurring and less information checking. Simplified decision making occurs. It has also been observed that managers experiencing positive affect may perceive events as less risky if they believe that in the event of failure they will be able to avoid personal blame (Isen, Daubman, and Nowicki, 1987). The pertinence of such a finding to the actions of the ACT Government and those whom it employed to conduct the implosion reminds us that these theories of decision making apply not only to the implosion audience, but also to the event’s organisers and promoters.

Canberra was not prepared for the hospital implosion to become a disaster because the event had been so comprehensively framed as entertainment. The shocking shift from what had been expected to what actually eventuated necessitated a significant re-framing of the event in people’s minds, and many Letter writers can be seen struggling with that ontological re-alignment in their Letters to the Editor. Some of those frames are considered in detail in Chapter Five. What happened necessitated a cognitive shift, but also prompted profound affective changes, with all the attendant stress that such shifts bring.

**Collective stress**

The hospital implosion was necessarily re-framed as a crisis in its aftermath, its fatal consequences traumatic and disastrous both for the Bender family and for the Canberra community. The impact of such events on social systems has been observed in several seminal studies such as Barton’s, in which he identifies four key dimensions of collective stress situations: scope of the impact; speed of onset; duration of the impact itself; and social preparedness (1969:41). Barton finds that a community’s degree of ‘social preparedness’ is a key factor in the extent of stress it will experience in a time of trauma.46 Some populations, such as mining communities, he observes, accustom themselves to the expectation of disaster, and are thus typically better prepared for disaster than are suburban communities (1969:40). The

46 Despite the scale of the September 11 disaster, the high degree of social preparedness in New York City saw its emergency services workers (most notably, its fire-fighters) swing into immediate action. In Bali, by contrast, a low degree of social preparedness for disaster meant that disaster response following the bombing of October 2002 was performed to a large extent by the community. Tourists and ex-patriots worked with locals to get the injured to hospital, staffed the hospital wards and even took on such responsibilities as beginning the identification of bodies.
Canberra community was not at all prepared for a tragic outcome to their day of entertainment, so rarely had it been contemplated that anything could go wrong.

In the state of heightened arousal during a disaster’s first impact, some of those affected may misinterpret what is actually happening, drawing on past experiences (such as war) or currently-held fears (such as terrorist attack) (Raphael, 1986:56), as Summers reports having done in the immediate aftermath of the first of the September 11 attacks:

I had almost reached the Uptown 1 and 9 station when there was an enormous explosion. The building shook. I heard people say, ‘Oh, no.’ Some, not many, were screaming. We all knew at that moment that we were under attack. Most of us assumed it was a bomb. (2002)

People’s attitudes and beliefs also affect how they adapt to a disaster. Emotional processing works to integrate the experience with a person’s existing cognitive models, although this can take some time. Tulloch describes feeling doubly disempowered as a victim who had no knowledge, for a time, of the event that had made him so: ‘not only was I physically very vulnerable, I also didn’t have a cognitive picture of what had happened to me’ (2006:48). Without this knowledge, a sense of continuity from the previous to the future self can be lost. Hodgkinson and Stewart argue that unless the rupture caused by the experience of being victimised is ‘integrated’, then its impact will continue to be felt in the victim’s ‘personal, family and community identity’ (1991:21).

Victims may also believe that they are being singled out for attack – a syndrome Raphael labels the ‘illusion of centrality’. At this time, certain sensory perceptions imprint themselves, as may certain images, especially of incongruous sights that epitomise the unreality of the disaster (Raphael, 1986:56-57):48

While we were mopping up, I heard the thump thump thump of the helicopter rotor blade. Through the swirling black clouds, the South Care helicopter appeared … I looked up to

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47 Some victims of the Canberra bushfires suffered this syndrome. Afterwards, they recalled their feelings of disbelief that the fire brigade was not coming to their rescue. Totally preoccupied with fighting to save their own homes, they could be forgiven for not imagining that over 500 other homes were likewise affected – far more than the city’s twelve fire crews could possibly have dealt with.

48 One such image that featured in television coverage of the Canberra bushfires was a family’s washing – complete with plastic pegs – still on the washing line beside their burned-out home.
see a couple of faces peering down at me from above. I guess I should have waved at them … it was such a surreal image that it is burned forever into my memory. (Kim Fitzgerald, probationary firefighter in the 2003 Canberra bushfires) (Matthews, 2003:23)

The fear that is a normal response to threat is not often admitted afterwards. During the preparation to meet a disaster, ‘most take actions or control their fears in ways that seem to assist their own survival and that of others’ (Raphael, 1986:58) and it is likely to be those activities that are recalled rather than the emotion that accompanied them. When a disaster befalls people without warning, some apply those actions and controls to their response instead. On September 11, 2001, Alison Summers attempted to continue with her planned purchase of school stationery for one of her children, despite having just escaped the World Trade Centre (2002).

It is also common to feel helpless and abandoned, as Rowena Odgers, a spectator at the implosion, described: ‘I felt really helpless when I saw two really big pieces land near the shore. It was very much like a war zone’ (Armitage, 1997:2). Among the many aspects of the implosion queried by Letter writers and journalists alike (‘Shafts may have had gun effect’; ‘Sightseeing at demolitions unwise, wreckers say’; ‘Question of detonation velocity’) were also such plaintive questions as ‘What happened to the rescue helicopter?’ which is more symptomatic of a sense of abandonment than of a logical assessment of the implosion’s cause.49

In the aftermath of disaster, those who have survived will experience euphoria, but also begin to realise the extent of the damage. Survivors may band together in ‘intense involvement’ (Raphael, 1986:73), as Peter Carey describes happening in New York following the September 11 attacks:

We stand among the extraordinary shrine at Union Square where nuke-crazed groups stand next to pacifists, all united by their grief. The searing, murderous heat of that explosion has brought us all together. (2001)

49 Much of the post-bushfire euphoria in Canberra focused on the very fact that people did not abandon each other, with dozens of stories of strangers rescuing the elderly, and of friends and neighbours rallying to protect the property of their (sometimes absent) friends. Likewise, in the World Trade Centre, workmates and strangers alike helped each other out of the buildings, some performing heroic acts of assistance, such as the men who carried a paraplegic woman to safety down several dozen flights of stairs.
'The retroactive fear of death that follows a narrow escape … results from the awareness of forces that deal death and destruction at random’ (Barton, 1969: 116), as Paul Osborne, an Independent Member of the ACT Legislative Assembly, reflected: ‘It could have been any one of us sitting in that position’ (1999).

Survivors will also experience relief and will exhibit this in various ways, including psychosomatically. The release of feelings is also facilitated by sanctioned occasions such as funerals and memorial services and by communal rituals such as barbecues, neighbourhood get-togethers and fund-raisers for victims (Raphael, 1986:94-95).

However, ‘disaster bereavements are very public’ (Raphael, 1986:105). Although media coverage of their plight generates public support, the public scrutiny to which the bereaved are subjected may compound the difficulty of their experience, and be experienced as a profound invasion of their personal privacy. ‘In general, individual and family disasters take place at home or in hospitals behind walls and screens; collective disaster strips away the walls and parades its victims’ (Barton, 1969:233). In this respect, collective disaster may be said to resemble spectacle. Public disasters also rob the victims’ families of their privacy, compounding their grief with the tensions that accompany being made the objects of public scrutiny. The president of the ACT branch of the Australian Croatian World Congress wrote to The Canberra Times to protest on behalf of the Bender family:

On Monday the Bender family were not even able to go down to the local shopping centre without being filmed and photographed by the media … but the most disturbing conduct was that of the media entering, unannounced and unwelcome, into the Benders’ family home with other relatives and friends who had come to pay their respects to the family. This conduct has turned the private grief of the Bender family into a public spectacle. (Skrnjug, 1997:10)

On the other hand, ‘for the victims, the response of local, national and/or international authorities signifies not only assistance but also recognition of what has been suffered’ (Raphael,

50 The editor of The Canberra Times added this footnote to Mr Skrnjug’s letter:

‘I agree with Mr Skrnjug. For the record, The Canberra Times has not approached, followed or initiated any form of contact with the Bender family, and refrained from doing so because of our respect for their grief and trauma. Mr Skrnjug excepts this newspaper from his criticism.’
A message of sympathy to the Bender family and to ‘the people of Canberra’ from the Prime Minister was published on page 2 of *The Canberra Times* on 15 July. A similar, bipartisan, statement of condolences was also made by the ACT’s federal politicians and publicised at the same time (Peake, 1997). Such acknowledgement is an important signal to the community, and also operates as a ‘model’ in this respect. Other prominent figures from outside the local community who added their perspectives to the analysis of the event included politician, Cheryl Kernot, and sociologist, Eva Cox. *The Canberra Times* also published comments from local, national and international experts in the fields of demolition and psychology. In other disaster situations, self-help groups are typically formed at this time, and these also satisfy the need to take actions that help restore a sense of mastery over the environment (Raphael, 1986:92-93). Camaraderie between victims is strong and may exclude those who did not share the disaster experience.

Counselling is also commonly organised to assist people to ‘come to terms with’ disaster, and this was the case in the aftermath of the implosion. Counsellors arrived on the scene of the accident within minutes of it occurring ‘to help the [emergency] workers and bystanders with their emotional trauma’ (Clack, 1997e:C2). In the 48 hours that followed the accident, more than 250 people called the police, and of these, about 170 calls were diverted to a counselling hotline set up for the purpose (Kazar, 1997a:2). Katie Bender’s school ‘brought in extra counsellors from the Catholic organisation Centacare…to support students and staff and help them accept the loss of their friend’ (Kazar and Mapstone, 1997:1). Sue George was reported as receiving counselling, being ‘deeply affected by the incident and that what was supposed to go down as part of Canberra’s history had gone horribly wrong’ (Kerin, 1997:6).

The affective impact of grief and trauma may be felt in what Bennett describes as ‘sense memory’, which she distinguishes from ‘ordinary memory’. The former remains interiorised and unintelligible, while the latter is integrated and may be interpreted and communicated to others.

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51 Following the Canberra bushfires, several news stories made the point that this experience of adversity might endear the nation’s capital to other Australians because it demonstrated the city’s human vulnerability, thus making it apparently more similar to the rest of the country. This view was welcomed by some residents but seen as gratuitously insulting by others. Similar comments were made following the implosion.

52 By the time a further week had passed, those numbers had risen to 320 calls to the counselling hotline and 200 calls to the police, of which ‘more than 100 calls related to video footage and photographs’ (Kazar, 1997e:5).
The traumatic memories that the Bender family undoubtedly continue to suffer must be assumed to be far more horrific than those of other people, such as Joan Hallett, who professed themselves traumatised by the event when interviewed by The Canberra Times: ‘Every time I close my eyes I see shrapnel flying at me across the lake,’ (Macklin, 1997b:3).

Traumatic memories differ from other memories insofar as they are not recalled from the past, but are experienced afresh in the present, being ‘simply retriggered and felt as a “realtime” experience’ (Bennett, 2002:339; italics in original). Sense memory resists narrativisation and remains fresh – not just in the mind, but viscerally, in the body as a physical sensation. A month after the bombing of his London train, Tulloch continued to fear that exposure to bright flashing lights would instantly recall the sickly yellow light of the explosion, triggering a powerful nauseous response (2006:142-143).

Importantly, though, just as not all victims find it helpful to talk about their experience, neither is all disaster experience negative. For some people, it is an opportunity to re-assess assumptions they had about themselves (and others) in more positive ways (‘A touching tribute by the Raiders’; ‘Carnell has shown great courage’; ‘Now a chance to do something good’). In the face of grief and uncertainty, it is commonly observed that communities respond to disaster with emotional solidarity and altruistic behaviour. Wolfenstein refers to the phenomenon of ‘post-disaster Utopia’ (1957:181-188), Fritz to the ‘community of sufferers’ (1961:684-689) and Barton to the ‘community of fate’ (1969:245), in which previous social stratification is abandoned in favour of communal identification:

[L]et us support the bereaved and know the unity of shared suffering. (following Canberra hospital implosion) (Carroll, 1997:10)

The nation unites in grief. (following Bali bombing) (Australian Associated Press, 2002:1)

Friendships blossom among the ashes. (following Canberra bushfires) (Lucas, 2003:3)

We moved as one body. No one pushed and no one shoved. We all had the same intention: to get out of the building. (following September 11 attack on the World Trade Centre) (Summers, 2002)

Ironically, given that this was the climate in which the implosion was conducted, the other social context in which a comparable breakdown of societal mores occurs is the carnival, which is discussed further in Chapter Five.
Grief and mourning

Synchronised with the progressive stages of disaster response are the heavily ritualised phases of the mourning process that have been described by many bereavement theorists: the initial reaction of shock; the second phase of disorganisation and reorganisation; and the final phase of reorientation, resolution and recovery (Goldzwig and Dionisopoulos, 1986:182-183). Kitch describes these 'transition rituals' as involving 'separation, transformation (or liminality) and aggregation':

In this theory, the first stage is the initial tear in the fabric of society that the death creates, and the resulting shock and disbelief. The second stage is a transitional time when the wound is still raw, when anger and uncertainty upset the social order, when social values are challenged and debated, and yet when answers and healing are sought. The third stage is a reforming of society with renewal of faith in social values and a commitment to get on with life as a group. (2003:215)

In the first phase, epideictic rhetoric praising the victims may accompany the expressions of shock, especially in cases like the 1986 Challenger Space Shuttle disaster, where the victims were charged with highly symbolic significance for their nation. The almost immediate depiction of Katie Bender as an 'angel' (Kazar, 1997d:2) exemplifies responses typical of this stage.

In the second phase, authorities provide ritual assurances that the causes of the disaster will be discovered, and that lessons will be learned from the investigation. There can be conflicting judgements at this stage, and, as a result, internal organisational disharmony may be revealed that would not otherwise have been made public knowledge. In order that this potentially destabilising information not prevent the community’s moving on to the final phase of recovery, some in the community, particularly its moral leaders, will urge that people desist from

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53 Hodgkinson and Stewart argue that rather than thinking of grief as having 'stages', it is more useful to think of interlinked 'components' which do not necessarily occur in chronological order, and which may recur. Even so, they suggest that the components present in something like the following order: shock (disbelief, numbness, depersonalisation, derealisation); disorganisation (may also present as superefficiency); denial (denying facts or meaning of loss); depression (especially pining and despair); guilt (sins of omission as well as of commission); anxiety (fears about being overwhelmed by the disaster, not able to cope in future); aggression (from irritability to resentment to anger); resolution and acceptance; reintegration (1991:26-27). Evidence of all of these stages is apparent in the public responses to the implosion disaster.
recrimination and focus on what’s good in the community instead. Crispin Hull’s 15 July editorial falls clearly into this category.

A ‘public commitment to address the problems’ revealed in the second phase is one of the markers of progression to the third phase. Symbolically, commentators will refer to ‘a way forward’ and the like. The term ‘closure’ has been popularly appropriated to describe the ideal of resolution as the completion of this final stage in the grieving process. Exactly what form that way ahead ought to take is also liable to be debated, disaster forcing, as it does, ‘a confrontation of shared values and dreams as indexed by communal commitments’ (Goldzwig and Dionisopoulos, 1986:188-189). Such a public debate was conducted in the discursive space of the Letters pages, where some writers urged immediate action while others preferred to wait for the inquest’s recommendations.

Katie Bender’s brief life exemplified values that many Canberra people may have liked to think they shared – but, like the hospital in this respect, she was also the embodiment of values that many people nostalgically remembered rather than actively held. These values were typified in media representations of Katie’s family’s adherence to tradition and convention – attending church together on Sunday morning, participating in traditional cultural activities, and socialising within a close-knit ethnic community. In some senses, Canberrans can be seen to be mourning the loss of an idealised past along with the actual child who seemed to embody those values.

An idealised past was also felt to have been lost in the Bali bombing of October 2002. In its aftermath, many Australians were shocked into realising that their simple, and previously innocent, pleasures in holidaying abroad, had made them vulnerable to the forces of terrorism that they had up until then seen as belonging only to the wider world.54 For many of those who survived the bombing, the experience would have meant a horrific ‘loss of innocence regarding death’ (Raphael, 1986:77) as they searched for friends, assisted the injured, volunteered in the hospital and identified bodies. That experience was traumatic even for trained professionals with years of exposure to death and dying. Compounding the trauma in such cases is survivor

54 Bali had always been attractive to Australian tourists for the ways in which the country itself appeared to have brought otherwise conflicting cultural myths into peaceful resolution. It was exotic and undeniably ‘other’, and yet highly accessible and in many ways ‘tamed’. Bali had been as close to a local resort as an overseas destination could be, and was so common a holiday for Australians that some years ago a folk group, Redgum, had a hit record with a song that expressed the ubiquity of that holiday – “I’ve been to Bali, too”.

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guilt, which is strongest where there has been competition for survival and an inability to save others (Raphael, 1986:96).

The public grief expressed over Katie’s death, combined as it was with a feeling of survivor guilt, also operated as the vehicle for the expression of all sorts of other communally-experienced losses, such as job losses. As Raphael observes, ‘[s]ometimes relatively minor losses may cause great grief, because of all they symbolise or because somehow all other losses are condensed into them. Seemingly disproportionate mourning over the death of a favourite pet is a good example’ (1986:110). Crispin Hull made a similar point in his 15 July editorial:

How many of those still saddened by the decision to close the hospital and angered by the ACT Government’s decision to swap the Acton Peninsula for land at Kingston have simply loaded this shock on top of their earlier anger and hit out at the closest target – the Government? (1997b:8)

Haaken has observed that this phenomenon is narrativised in particularly dramatic and emotional ways:

[D]ramatic events become the focal point for more ambiguous anxieties. Unlike the chronic suffering of daily life, such as overwork, alienating work, low wages, or poor health, acute episodes break through the numbing threshold of unresponsiveness to suffering … At the same time, they may reinforce hysterical modes of storytelling – a reliance on dramatic, emotional accounts to communicate distress. (2002:456)

Unexpected, untimely and violent deaths are those which are most difficult for the bereaved to resolve, and disasters typically occasion deaths in which all three of these elements combine. ‘Many aspects of disaster losses make for high-risk bereavements and greatly increase the likelihood that bereavement syndromes will occur as a consequence, rather than reaction and healing’ (Raphael, 1986:110). Drawing on the work of Das and that of Seremetakis, Bennett notes that while ‘all untimely and violent deaths are “bad”’, deaths are particularly so when they

55 The nation-wide phenomenon of mourning for Princess Diana was similarly attributed: ‘Diana’s death provided the opportunity to vent the anger and grief that many felt with the state of the nation’ (Mirzoeff, 1999:247).

56 During the Canberra bushfires, people risked their own lives to rescue pets and especially horses, and were grief-stricken over their failure to do so wherever that was the case. Hundreds attended a memorial service for the forty or so pets lost in the destruction of an animal hospital and boarding facility, and a counselling service was established specifically for those grieving for pets.
are ‘improperly mourned or “unwitnessed”’ (Bennett, 2002:334). Mourning and witnessing therefore assume greater significance as restorative strategies following such deaths.

People in mourning are in a state of transition, a marginal state. Until the transition is complete ‘they are held to be dangerous to themselves and to others’ (Douglas, 1975:107). Eventually, the contesting narratives of grief (‘Why was baby Katie called to eternity?’; ‘What’s next on your hit list?’; ‘Destruction of hospital senseless, unnecessary’) are integrated into a broader, less threatening social performance of mourning. Mourning then becomes a positive, healing experience as it ‘affirms basic human bonds through shared affective response’ (Davies, 2001:87). During the mourning period, it is the mediated responses to Katie Bender’s death that are the public voices of mourning, spoken in that liminal space between the event, the accident, the trauma, and a return to more banal, everyday concerns. The task of rendering the unthinkable thinkable, while addressed by some Letter writers, fell predominantly to those for whom this is a professional responsibility: the journalists.

**Journalists and the affective response**

The operative norm for journalists is their professionally-avowed pursuit of objectivity, an ideology which may be translated into practice as meaning that:

[J]ournalists should report the news through the valueless procedures of objectivity, rather than making the news by either becoming actors in an occurrence or obvious re-interpreters from another ideological vantage point. (Berkowitz, 2000:128; emphasis in original)

When an extraordinary event occurs, journalists adapt their everyday newswrking strategies to accommodate the heightened demand for reporting and analysis that has been prompted by the event. Berkowitz (1992; 2000) and Zelizer (1993) have both shown how the management of ‘what-a-story’ events serves to reinforce journalistic norms by demonstrating their very adaptability in times of stress. One strategy that journalists employ is to make use of other sources to express what they themselves (or their agency) believes. As Edy observes:

57 Perhaps at the other extreme is the phenomenon of the universalisation of victimhood, in which even people remote from a disaster will insist that they, too, are its ‘victims’, placing themselves at the centre of mourning practices, like the journalist who claimed, ‘We are all victims of the Bali bombing’ (Price, 2002:27).
Journalists are notoriously cautious about introducing nonobjective material into their news stories. Opinions and analyses are almost always introduced into news by sources other than the journalists, frequently by elites. (1999:77)

However, the stressful impact on journalists themselves of witnessing and reporting on disasters should also be acknowledged. American photographer Jeff Christensen was distressed when he realised that in several of the shots he had taken of the World Trade Centre he had unwittingly captured images of people who undoubtedly did not survive the towers’ collapse on 11 September 2001: ‘I’ve had to go back and relive it … It’s part of the job, I guess, but it’s difficult’ (Basheda, 2001:27). In contexts of disaster, journalists are required to bear the same responsibilities as emergency workers – to remain in control of themselves and the situation in order to serve their community. But it is not only journalists who may find the requirement to suppress their affective response impossible:

It is the day of the funeral for 12-year-old Katie Bender. One police sergeant goes to the church and sees the flower-draped coffin. But before the service is over he cannot hold back the tears, and so he leaves. A police officer in uniform should not be seen crying in public. (Clack, 1997e:C2)

Following the hospital implosion *The Canberra Times* published the personal perspectives of some of its journalists in a strategy that departed from the professional norm of preserving distance between the reporter and that which is reported on. In this instance the strategy served to highlight the (usually implied) claim that the cultural values of its readers were shared by the paper’s journalists. In their coverage of the story, *The Canberra Times*’ journalists conceptualised and presented themselves as one with the social body, their ‘community’ – an imagined community that they help to construct through their use of the first person plural (‘we’). They and their ‘public’ were thus constructed as co-contributors to the production of the implosion story, the newspaper thereby framing itself as community, its journalists at one with the local ‘community of sufferers’. This commonality was further highlighted by the newspaper’s use of the sister of one of its editors as a guest contributor. By making explicit these ‘cultural commonalities’ (Berkowitz, 2000:131), *The Canberra Times* implicitly claimed ‘community empathy’ to be of greater value in this instance than ‘journalistic objectivity’.

These journalists demonstrated their empathy by addressing the public directly and often incorporating their subjective assessment of the significance of that which was being reported into their stories. McGregor claims that such journalistic practice is influenced by television’s ‘piece to camera’, which has led to what she terms the ‘celebrification’ of the journalist (2002:5). This accomplishment may have been achieved at some personal cost, however. Suiter (2001)
has shown that journalists experience greater stress when they are emotionally linked to traumatic stories, and that neither their professional training nor the culture of their workplaces equips them to deal with such stress. Thus the journalists in question were rendered vulnerable by their experience, just as members of the wider society were – a shared vulnerability that, it is claimed, comforts communities in times of crisis (Fisher, 2001:18).

Green and Maras agree that traditional journalistic values ('truth, accuracy, honesty, independence and fairness of reporting') do not include affective aspects of communication (2002:22). They argue that journalistic ethics ought to be re-oriented away from an ethics of objectivity and more firmly towards an ethics of affectivity. In doing so, they are mindful of the inherent challenges to journalistic practice in this suggestion, noting that although the public looks to the media for demonstrations of 'ways of feeling', such expressions may be treated skeptically by media audiences, who can be inclined to dismiss affective reporting 'as belonging to the realm of the tabloid' (Green and Maras, 2002:22-23). Media outlets are also sensitive to the periodically reiterated charge of inflating the sentimental response (Kitch, 2000), such as followed media coverage of the flurry of celebrity deaths in 1997.⁵⁸

Of course, it is impossible for journalists not to be affectively involved in what they report. Their story telling work means they are unavoidably involved in 'the generation of public feeling' and they themselves are 'always, already, affectively involved' (Green and Maras, 2002:25). Indeed, the contemporary media in which and for which they work seek to communicate not only information and analysis, but 'raw human experience' (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987:46). Two such participants in the implosion event were Crispin Hull and his sister, Cordelia Hull.

As members of the audience, each with a particular role to play (one as professional, the other as parent), both Hull siblings shared with the wider community, through articles in The Canberra Times, some of what that experience meant to them. Even before the implosion failed, both were focused on the attendant meanings of the event, Crispin as a senior journalist and editor for the newspaper, and Cordelia in her capacity as a researcher in the health field. Both were perhaps more cognitively engaged with the event than the majority of spectators, actively engaging in analysis and interpretation from the start. Each had strong emotional ties to the

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⁵⁸ Gianni Versace (15 July); Princess Diana (31 August); Mother Theresa (5 September); John Denver (12 October); and Michael Hutchence (22 November).
hospital, too, and articulated these in their writing. Both of them exemplified the practice that one-time BBC correspondent Martin Bell has called for: a ‘journalism of attachment’, that does not disengage while it observes and that ‘cares as well as knows’ (Green and Maras, 2002:24).

Drawn to the event in anticipation of pleasure – and Ang reminds us that ‘the consumption of mass culture always has to do with pleasure’ (1996:11) – Crispin and Cordelia Hull both experienced a wrench that was both affective and cognitive at the discovery that a child had been killed by the implosion. This was not merely an intellectually experienced dissonance, but rather a profoundly felt disjuncture. Such an outcome should not have happened when ‘pleasure’ and ‘social healing’ were the stated purposes of the activity.

THE COGNITIVE RESPONSE

For the implosion audience, their understanding of the implosion process was thrown off-centre as soon as it became apparent that the event was not ‘going to plan’:

One o’clock came and went, and at three minutes past the count-down began, only to stop at five before resuming. At 1.05, the pyrotechnics went off, rockets spearing up into the sky and exploding in brilliant flashes with small pieces of roof and debris being hurled skywards – but no blast. (Abjorensen, 1997d:4)

The audience was thus thrown off balance, their expectations foiled and the limitations of their understanding of the implosion process thrown into sharp relief. As described in Chapter Two, the public had contented themselves with the merest details of how an implosion actually functions beforehand, and afterwards, not even experts could answer their questions as to ‘why’ it had not gone to plan. That this lack of knowledge extended to experts in the field may have been consoling to some, but also confirmed the extent of the cognitive de-railment that had occurred.

A similar failure to be cognitively prepared for a certain outcome again prevailed in Canberra on the day of the bushfires, 18 January 2003. It is ironic that despite their city being known as ‘the bush capital’, residents such as Gail Reekie had not considered themselves vulnerable to the quintessentially Australian threat of bushfire:

Above all, I was shocked by the realisation that cities burn. I knew Australia had bushfires – in the bush, or at least in the rural fringes of cities where people like to live surrounded by trees. But not that whole suburbs would be destroyed. (Matthews, 2003:140)
What this very different event has in common with the implosion is that neither of their disastrous outcomes was ‘meant to happen’. Each was arguably a disaster only in local terms, both events lacking the scale and impact of such unarguable catastrophes as the 2002 Bali bombing and 11 September 2001; catastrophe being defined as ‘an accident that kills more than 100 people with one blow’ (Perrow, 1984:357). However, both events certainly resulted, not only in personal tragedy, but in widely apprehended social and political crisis within the Canberra community that is best described as a breach of ontological security – a rupture in people’s confidence in their own capacity to understand their world. Such a breach is a prompt to restorative meaning-making activity, as Haaken observes:

By definition, traumatic events overwhelm existing meaning systems. But this very disruption of normalcy invites storytelling as people attempt to make sense of what has happened. (2002:455)

While the immediate aftermath of a disaster is characterised by the prevalence of the affective response, the search for more cognitively complex interpretive frames begins in earnest once the immediate danger is past. Several frames may be available to those with prior experience of similar disasters, but these are not necessarily available to those experiencing the event. It is more common for those involved to struggle to find the words that will help give meaning to certain experiences (Pickering, 1997:131). Often, forensic responses to disaster, prepared by those (such as the coroner) with relevant professional expertise, will supply those frames, but usually not until some time has passed. Journalistic analysis of the same sort begins almost immediately (see Figure 25, ‘How it went wrong’). More extensive media synthesis and analysis of the evidence can only be published once that evidence has become available. This may take much longer, as was the case with Mike Taylor’s article, ‘Tracking the TotalCare connection’, published a fortnight after the implosion (1997:9).

The post-traumatic process of meaning-making often involves selective forgetting and selective remembering, as Robben observes:

On the one hand, recurrent re-experience helps trauma sufferers in their search for meaning, precisely because they were unable to encode and thus remember every detail of an overwhelming event. On the other hand, deliberately shutting out the most inexplicable memories makes the traumatic event more manageable. Both responses help to create universes of meaning that give people a sense of mastery, orients them to the future instead of the past, and allows them to function better in society by giving their experiences a place in life. (2005:125)
Knowledge

On the Letters pages, two opposing paths to comprehension of why the implosion had failed competed for public attention. One might be considered a ‘religious’ approach, by which the ‘truth’ is thought to be revealed by god (or someone exercising god-like agency, such as an omnipotent ‘government’). The other might be considered a ‘scientific’ approach by means of which the ‘truth’ is thought to be ascertained by the logical and prescribed application of scientific investigation – that is, that it yields itself to careful empirical observation. The assumption that ‘knowledge’ is there for the discovery underpins both approaches.

In his discussion of the competing rationalities in the rhetoric of risk, Beck suggests that experts are not in possession of knowledge at all, but that they dangerously and unethically refuse to acknowledge the extent of their limitations and act as if, and publicly claim to have, ‘knowledge’ which they do not have (1992:69). He claims that ‘the whole bureaucracy of knowledge’ (1992:54), to whose judgements the public defers, is a sham. Beck argues that consequences are made, and that the public should ‘no longer tolerate the fairy tale of the unforeseeability of consequences’ (1992:170).

Similarly, a ‘sociological’ approach ‘emphasises the social character of knowledge’ (Dant, 1991:3). To the sociological way of thinking, knowledge, rather than being ‘discoverable’, is created by communities, and is not a question of ‘truth’ or ‘untruth’. Further, ‘social knowledge, as it is shared by people, exists as discourse’ (Dant, 1991:8); discourse being a process of both creation and exchange, of meaning-making and meaning-sharing through language.

It was Mannheim who identified that information in a post-religious context could be made sense of if its place in a historical context could be perceived, and if its causal antecedents could be identified. He saw knowledge, not as residing in a knowing subject, but as being always contingent upon its place in a broader history (Dant 1991:17). Following Mannheim and others, Dant observes that knowledge, like language, ‘is social in two ways; it is present in the society into which the individual is socialised … and it is also a resource shared by members of the society’ (Dant, 1991:17). Such knowledge cannot be comprehensive, but is always a matter of a particular perspective or world view. It is not the product of an individual mind, nor even of a ‘group mind’. Rather, it might be found in ‘the social practices of groups’ (Dant, 1991:38). To a certain extent, knowledge (in this case, of the implosion event) is a product, or ‘local achievement’, of those members of the public who contributed to the post-implosion ‘textually mediated discourse’ (Smith, 1999).
In a context such as the implosion, where what can be said to be ‘known’ (at least, in the immediate aftermath) was arrived at or ‘achieved’ via the construction of stories, Somers makes an important observation regarding the role of narrative in knowledge cultures. Firstly, she defines narrative structure as one in which ‘meaning, structure, causality and explanation are constituted through temporal and spatial relationality (1999:128; italics in original). She then goes on to claim that in knowledge cultures, narratives are awarded epistemological status due to the convincing power of their form as ‘story’: ‘the success or failure of truth claims embedded in narratives depends less on empirical verification and more on the logic and rhetorical persuasiveness of the narrative’ (Somers, 1999:129). It was in this fashion that certain stories of the implosion came to be regarded, with time, not as individual, interested perspectives, but as authoritative, official explanations.

The ontological breach

The texts that form the empirical data analysed in this study are evidence of the discourse that was prompted by what was widely felt by the Canberra community to be a ‘crisis of social legitimacy’ (Hearit, 1995) or a breach of ontological security (Giddens, 1990), occasioned by the implosion’s failure. Robben refers to the disorientation of the traumatised as being a time when ‘cognitive understanding fails’ (2005:146). While some might argue that the death of a child during an implosion may better be described as an ‘accident’, rather than a ‘disaster’, it is only a matter of degree that separates the singular accident from the broad scale disaster, for in all other respects than scope they do not differ. A disaster causes stress on a social system, regardless of the scale of either the disaster or the social system (Barton, 1969:40). The collective nature of the exposure to stress occasioned by disaster is fundamental to a society’s response. When ‘many members of a social system fail to receive expected conditions of life from the system’ (Barton, 1969:38), a broadly-felt undermining of people’s ontological security results: ‘I still feel as if the rug has been pulled out from under my feet,’ said Gail Reekie, long after the Canberra bushfires, and despite not having suffered any physical losses herself (Matthews, 2003:141).

‘Natural forces that overwhelm society’s system of technological defenses … can be disquieting because they remind us that our immunity from natural disaster is incomplete’ (Freudenburg, 1993:915). Indeed, they expose the ill-foundedness of the belief in the possibility of such immunity. Two survivors of the Canberra bushfires expressed just such disquiet:

Suddenly the wind was blowing like a hurricane and the fire was upon us. The grass on the plain between us and the pine forest was alight. This wasn’t supposed to happen. The trees
were miles away and grass doesn’t burn and spit embers. The equestrian centre was between us and the pine forests, we shouldn’t be threatened by bush fire. (Robertson-Dunn, 2003)

Having lost everything to a freak of nature is a humbling and disorientating experience. Although there are certainly things we miss, it is not just the stuff we have lost that makes us different people now. We are different because we have been rendered low by something so unexpected and so powerful that we will never feel omnipotent or immortal again. And we will never believe that any life we make for ourselves cannot be taken away again. (Karan Gabriel) (Matthews, 2003:155)

Assumptions about ourselves and our world are ‘violated by trauma’ – assumptions about vulnerability and invulnerability; about safety and danger; about predictability and unpredictability; about control and lack of control; and about good and bad:

Implosion is something that goes in … if I had known it was going to explode I wouldn’t have gone. (Cherril Kousal, a spectator at the hospital implosion) (Ryan, 1997:C2)

Our world has been turned upside down, shattering our present and leaving us wondering about our future. (Rev. Brenton Daulby, at an Adelaide memorial service for Bali bombing victims) (Australian Associated Press, 2002:1)

It was a holocaust of an extent that we simply did not and could not possibly have had the capacity to deal with. (ACT Chief Minister, Jon Stanhope, defending local firefighters’ actions) (Grubel, 2003:9)

God did not plan things like this but as a rabbi had said, “bad things happen to good people”. (Father John Armstrong, the Bender family’s parish priest) (Downie, 1997:1)

The implosion was, in Garfinkel’s terms, a ‘breaching’ event, and the public discourse that followed was one means by which people attempted to resolve the cognitive dissonance they felt. Experts found themselves as perplexed as their lay peers. Wayne Willimott, the ACT emergency services coordinator, had been on site at the implosion:

‘This can’t be true,’ Mr Willimott had said to himself when he reached the place where people had been struck by flying debris … ‘This can’t be right; it was advertised as the place to be’. (Clack, 1997b:2)

The media asked several demolition experts for their assessment, but none could suggest why this implosion had failed:

Metropolitan Demolitions general manager Bert Musch said he had watched news footage of the implosion frame-by-frame, but was unable to see why it did not work according to plan. ‘Everything looked to go as it is supposed to,’ Mr Musch said. (Hickman 1997:6)
In the aftermath of disasters, many survivors feel a sense of not only physical, but cognitive, disempowerment as they struggle to piece together their own understanding of what has happened (Tulloch, 2006:48). By contrast, others when recalling the event will ‘suggest that they knew or suspected or saw omens or signs of the disaster’ in order to restore a sense of having been in control (Raphael, 1986:53).

In disasters, more than the loss of loved ones or property, people suffer a loss of faith – faith that life is predictable (Hodgkinson and Stewart, 1991:1-2). Twenty-two years after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, a psychological study of survivors found that they continued to suffer a loss of faith in the structure of existence (Lifton, 1967). Key among the questions to be answered in the aftermath of disaster is how this faith may be restored. Much of the labour of that restoration is work performed by the survivors themselves. For example, Tulloch charts his gradual progression from a solely visceral and emotional engagement with his status as victim to the point at which, as he physically recuperates, he becomes keen to express not only his personal, but his political and professional responses to the London bombing (2006:98-101). More than his physical healing, that cognitive re-engagement marks his return to the world.

The ontological rupture that trauma causes in a life is a rupture in that person’s identity, not only, as in Tulloch’s case, an instance of physical and psychological damage. As he begins to look forward to a return to the normality of everyday personal and professional obligations, Tulloch describes this transitional period as a time in which not only his body but also his identity is being restored – he is ‘back to being academic’ (2006:113). Note the absence of an article in this phrase – Tulloch is not referring to the restoration of a performative role as an academic, but to the restoration of cognitive capacity, of an existential state of ‘being’ academic. The achievement in this is Tulloch’s ontological restoration in the wake of an event that made the contingency of the world universally apparent. For some, that event was ‘7/7’, for some it was ‘9/11’, for others perhaps, the 18 January 2003 Canberra bushfires. For many Canberrans, it was the 13 July 1997 hospital implosion.

The ubiquity of tragedy in the human experience means that each of us has a private 9/11. However, when a breach of ontological security is experienced by people on both an individual and a social level, a significant degree of public response may be expected. After an accident or disaster the trustworthiness, reliability or competence of those who hold certain civic responsibilities in the affected community may be questioned, especially if any of the victims have reason to believe that these office-bearers were at all negligent or recreant. Thus a common response to an accidental event is the call for the exercise of responsibility and the attribution of accountability.
Blame

Certainly, the overriding theme apparent in the post-implosion Letters to the Editor was that of blame – blame for the politicians and the broader political context in which the event was conducted; blame for all sorts of other causes, sometimes specified, sometimes only vaguely apprehended; blame for the media; and blame leveled at the community itself (self-blame). Political blame was directed specifically at the Government’s Chief Minister, Kate Carnell; at her party, the Liberal Party; at her Government; at the (likewise Liberal-led) Commonwealth Government; and at all politicians in general. This blame came not only from Letter writers, but also from commentators outside Canberra:

Eva Cox, social policy analyst, believes there were additional, more political, factors. She says the death of Katie frightened Australians because it occurred at such a public event. ‘It was a government-organised occasion, which raises a whole lot of issues around whether it was bread and circuses. Did a child die because the Government was keen to be flashy; was it a dreadful accident or did the Government exploit a situation that put a child at risk?’ (Price, 1997:C3)

Expressions of political blame also began to blur with blame directed at other causes when they were directed at an economic philosophy espoused by that Government (economic rationalism) and at its translation into policy (outsourcing), both of which were seen as having contributed to the disaster. Senator Cheryl Kernot leveled her criticism squarely at the consequences of economic rationalism, leaving the reader to assume that, by implication, her criticism extended to any political party that espoused such a philosophy. Further, she internationalised her observations by including a reference to the 14 July collapse of the bridge at the Maccabiah Games in Israel, as a result of which two Australians had been killed:

[E]conomic rationalism leads to … lowest-tender acceptance in building demolitions and bridge building … At least with a strong public sector there was corporate memory, experience and decent safeguards. Some things, like public health and safety, are worth paying for. (1997:17)

Kernot was not alone in her somewhat wistful expression of regret for what she saw as the loss of standards of corporate governance. Just as blame became the almost ubiquitous tenor of the implosion discourse, so an undifferentiated grief found expression. Some Letter writers, perhaps opportunistically, blamed the ACT Government for not having purchased a rescue helicopter and for not having banned fireworks – blame that, while it may appear illogical, was nonetheless symptomatic of the same instinct for resolution expressed in Letters which made more clearly articulated claims for ministerial and personal responsibility.
Joking

In contrast to the performance of blame, in the aftermath of trauma joking may fulfill a diversionary or denial function, whereby distressing thoughts are ‘supplant[ed]…with defensive humour’ (Raphael, 1986:70). Douglas’s work on the symbolic function of joking reprises the inversion of the carnival. She depicts joking as a rite, the nature of which is subversive, involving ‘the overthrowing of a control by that which is controlled, such that the balance of power is successfully shifted’ (1975:93). In facilitating the catharsis of laughter, the joker plays the role of ‘ritual purifier’ (1975:107).

Imaginative engagement with spectacular accidental death commonly finds its popular expression in jokes. The archetypes on which the originators of such jokes draw are so intuitively appreciated (and readily adapted) that such jokes may emerge and circulate in a surprisingly short time. Sofoulis notes that the public’s repressed desire to see Princess Diana’s ‘damaged body’ was given voice in the Diana jokes which circulated in the days following her death. These jokes, she observes, ‘made explicit [the] contiguity between the car body and Diana’s body’ (1997:15), as is commonly the case with jokes in this genre (Douglas, 1975; Ellis, 1991; Smyth, 1986).

In the instance of the implosion, however, despite the predictability of such a response in psychological terms, and, indeed, one newspaper reference to the emergence of such jokes (Macklin, 1997a:3), humorous responses to the event itself and to the child’s death were markedly absent from public discourse. Smyth explains such absence by noting that ‘the taboo nature of these jokes makes them censored as material for media broadcasts and tends to relegate them (particularly just after the tragedy occurs and people’s sensitivities are highest) to rather private tellings’ (1986:247). Jokes must be ‘permitted’ by their audience, and this may explain their absence from the post-implosion discourse – stronger community sanctions would

59 Smyth notes that the speed with which such jokes are circulated is undoubtedly aided by communication technologies, and that within four days of the Challenger disaster, jokes about it had been heard from ‘all over the country’ (1986:247).

60 Certainly, none appear to have made their way into recorded discourse, unlike the many which abound to this day about the 1986 Challenger shuttle disaster, and 1997’s premier celebrity death, that of Princess Diana.
have applied to this local tragedy than to ones which are more distant. In addition, as Douglas argues, some values are ‘too precious and too precarious to be exposed to challenge’ (1975:98).

THE MORAL RESPONSE

Guilt and shame

In being transformed from entertainment to horror, an event loses none of its spectacular appeal. Indeed, its appeal is often actually enhanced or increased, and the audience thus continues to be drawn to its observance. Consciousness of the often fatal consequences of this transformation for some people (who are themselves also transformed at once into victims and spectacular objects, participants in and contributors to the spectacle – for example, the people who leaped to their deaths from the World Trade Centre towers on 11 September 2001) renders its ongoing observation a guilty pleasure. People’s fascination with death and destruction is mostly suppressed but is almost irrepressible when an opportunity like this presents itself and may be indulged. Guilt and grief alike owe something to a sense of moral failure.

How much of what was written afterwards, therefore, functioned at least partly as a defence of someone’s choice to be part of that audience, now that it was implicated in tragedy? Such defences ranged from the brief ‘You couldn’t have stopped me’ to Cordelia Hull’s extended apologia explaining her and her daughter’s presence – which yet, by extension, also explained the Benders’ presence. Hull’s was a considered, a planned, even a defended, attendance, whereas the Benders are described as having made a detour on the way home from church – their attendance was an afterthought. However, Hull imaginatively constructs both daughters as wanting (if impatiently) to witness the spectacle, perhaps suggesting that some power of decision (and thus, disturbingly, responsibility) rested with them. (Does she imaginatively absolve the Benders of responsibility – as, by extension, she absolves herself – by picturing them as parents indulging the demanding whims of their child/ren?) What was established in the press at this time was that no right-thinking parent would knowingly have placed their child in the path of such danger. A social and moral norm was being reinforced, and this, too, performs restitutive work.

Although pleasure is always implicated in the consumption of mass culture (Ang, 1985; 1996), the invitation to the community to attend a violent spectacle of destruction, and in doing so, to make it a socially acceptable festivity, was always problematic, and was identified as such by journalists such as Robert Macklin prior to the event (1997c:3). Other commentators wondered as to the moral consequences of seeking, and finding, pleasure in an actual, rather than a
fictional, event, whose purpose and outcome were both unequivocally violent (Hull, 1997c:8; Warden, 1997a:28). For many in the community, their pleasure was always going to be tinged with the discomfort of finding enjoyment in destruction – an activity that they might usually have seen as an ideologically unacceptable source of pleasure.

The media must tread a fine line between the depiction of violence in news and documentary contexts and its representation in drama. The social acceptability of violence is finely balanced upon preserving the distinction between fantasy (drama) and reality (news), with a further distinction between the two dramatic functions of disgust and pleasure. In the case of disgust (occasioned by observing negative social behaviour) ‘a social knowledge-effect is involved, since we are being invited to become involved in a degree of moral deliberation’ (Corner, 2000:390). In the case of pleasure, the satisfaction audiences derive arises from ‘fantasies of agency’ – fantasies about the experience of being violent themselves. Such fantasies only remain acceptable as long as the line between them and the real behaviour which parallels them is not crossed. Thus the appeal for Sue George of being the one to press the plunger to detonate the implosion was perverted from a prize into a terrible punishment when the line between fantasy and reality was crossed (Kerin, 1997:6). Violence had seemed very attractive when it was to bring about the spectacle of the implosion (fantasy), but was afterwards realised to have been the abhorrent agency of death (reality).

Grief and guilt also combine in the phrase, ‘an angel we never knew’. There’s a lot that the community ‘never knew’ until it was too late, and this phrase expresses not only regret and loss but also a desire for expiation for that omission (as in, ‘it’s not my fault – I never knew’). There is also the sense, as with all loss, that this is a loss of future benefits, now unrealisable (as in, ‘now we will never know’).

Responsibility and trust

Although some 100,000 people gathered en masse to witness the implosion spectacle, there was no suggestion in the media, either at the time or afterwards, that in doing so they were behaving as a mindless crowd. While Blumer (1946:174) defined a crowd as a ‘non-moral group’, the mediated audience of the Letters pages was clearly characterised by the strength of its moral concerns. The discourse that was inscribed there dwelt at some length on the two sides of the social contract: responsibility and trust.

While the ‘mass mind’ has long been characterised as irrational (Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001), when individuals reflected on their decision to participate and hence to expose
themselves to risk, it was their own individual thinking processes they were critical (or defensive) of, not those of the group. In reflecting critically on that day, many individuals (especially journalists) accepted a share of the blame for the event’s awful outcome. ‘I was sickened. So were the others. I felt guilty about the death and about engaging in the carnival that caused it,’ said Crispin Hull (1997a:5), while Norman Abjorensen told his readers, ‘I feel guilty for having been there, for having been part of the machinery that encouraged people like the Benders to go along for the spectacle’ (1997c:C3).

That some did not forego their own agency and absolve themselves of individual guilt may be contrasted with the insistent calls by others for certain individuals to accept a share (or all) of that guilt. Those who called publicly for Kate Carnell to accept blame for the tragedy were exercising that other supposed property of human collectives, power – the power of normative rhetoric to convince others of the rightness of their arguments. Two years later, when the coronial report was made public, then leader of the Opposition in the Assembly, Jon Stanhope, employed just such rhetoric in moving a no-confidence motion against the Chief Minister:

What more damning indictment of a government can there be than for it simply to walk away from its fundamental obligation to ensure the safety of its citizens? What more reckless abdication of responsibility could there be than to encourage citizens to attend an inherently dangerous event, compounded by the failure to undertake anything remotely resembling a risk assessment? I can think of none. Having acted to encourage people to come to a spectacle that ended in tragedy, what remedy should apply? I can think of only one – that the official principally responsible concede the responsibility she bears and accept that she can no longer command the confidence of the community she purports to represent. (1999) 61

His comments were echoed on the same occasion by the Bender family’s lawyer, Bernard Collaery:62

61 This motion, on 24 November 1999, was defeated. Kate Carnell eventually resigned on 17 October 2000, the day before another no-confidence motion was due to be debated regarding her part in unlawful financial dealings in regard to the Bruce Stadium (Bennett, 2000).

62 Bernard Collaery had previously been Deputy Chief Minister and Attorney General of the ACT, and was also at this time the lawyer for the families of the Thredbo landslide victims.
If there is such a thing as ministerial responsibility in a Westminster system, this must surely be it. One shouldn't have to draw teeth. Decency, common humanity would have suggested that this Chief Minister who, as the coroner has found, approved the radio promotion that attracted the Bender family to the event, should have resigned. She should have resigned, she still should resign. It would be the honourable and appropriate thing to do. (Reynolds, 1999)

When some begin to be blamed, those whose actions have been most public and volitional will find those actions most difficult to disown (Weick, 1988:310). Where individuals may be seen to have been recreant, the community is at higher risk of becoming a ‘corrosive community’ in contrast to those ‘therapeutic communities’ in which ‘official actions … tend to reflect community expectations, helping to restore a sense that the system can be trusted’ (Freudenburg, 1993:926). It is not surprising that the latter is more likely to be the case following natural disasters, while the former is more likely following technological or anthropogenic disasters, despite the impossibility of entirely separating these two types of disaster (Murphy, 2001:342).

Societies such as Australia’s which are organisationally premised on a division of labor are highly vulnerable to suffering widely distributed effects of recreancy (Freudenburg, 1993). The fact that those in power have not been able to protect their community from the damaging effects of disaster undermines not only their own authority, but the community’s faith in the efficacy of those mechanisms which they have adopted in order to shield themselves from such trauma.

Christians explores the notion of collective responsibility. As he says, ‘disasters typically do not result from one person’s failure, or a single corporation’s fixation on profit, or only one profession’s moral insensitivity’ (1988:51). He proposes three forms of responsibility which must operate symbiotically: task-related duties, corporate duties and collective obligation (1988:52). While the first two of these are understood as comprising ‘expertise, division of labor, legitimate authority, well-meant promises and mutually-understood expectation’, collective responsibility is the public’s ‘broad moral duty … to supervise’ those social functions that impact on us all as human beings and cultural agents (1988:52). Such collective responsibility was exercised through the public discourse that followed the implosion, although the public had also been reminded that it had probably been somewhat recreant in the exercise of that collective responsibility in recent times. Some of the self-recrimination expressed in the implosion’s aftermath appears to have arisen out of such a sense of failed collective responsibility: ‘Many share in the responsibility’ claimed Letter writer, Anthony Hanson (1997:10).

However, the ontological breach also cannot be separated from the breach of trust. Trust is a form of faith that needs, indeed assumes, no cognitive foundations. It is fundamental to human
relationships, including those between people and their governments, and is a key element in
the ‘social contract’. Trust in their government means people being able to have faith that the
unstated but understood reciprocal moral obligations between them will be honoured. It has
been shown that when a population has a high degree of trust in an agency it will perceive itself
as being at a lower degree of risk from that agency than might have otherwise been the case
(Bord and O’Connor, 1992). Trust in such contexts is comprised of commitment, competence,
caring and predictability (Kasperson, Golding, and Tuler, 1992). When one party to a
relationship is judged to have been recreant in any of these domains, the trust that existed
between them is damaged.

THE ACTIVE RESPONSE

Disasters are commonly attributed to ‘bad engineering, bad management and bad ethics’
(Harris, 1995:23). Individuals tend to focus on one of these (perhaps whichever one in which
they have most expertise) although of course the three explanations are not mutually exclusive,
and, Harris observes, ‘most disasters have multiple explanations’ (1995:22). Just as an
exploration of technical errors may enable the same faults not to be repeated in future, so, Harris
argues, an examination of ethical failures can clarify what people ought to avoid doing in the
future. He terms this ‘preventive ethics’ (1995:23). Following the implosion, observers identified
all three types of error as having contributed to that disaster – bad engineering (‘Demolishers
wary of implosion method’; ‘an implosion failure’; ‘Data on steel structure available before final
bids’); bad management (‘Murphy’s Law overlooked’; ‘Golden rule flouted’; ‘Some things are still
worth paying for’); and bad ethics (‘ACT chief seeks ban until end of inquiry’; ‘Carnell
responsible: she must resign’; ‘The people should have been listened to’).

‘Group affiliation’ and ‘attempts at mastery’, whether physical or intellectual, have both been
shown to increase the chances of survival for those subjected to disaster (Raphael, 1986:69).
One way in which disaster survivors take action is to seek explanations in order to establish a
cause or causes, which can then be managed. Survival requires that the experience be
transformed, be integrated with ‘enduring models of the world and one’s relation to it’
(Hodgkinson and Stewart, 1991:21).

In 2003, in the days following the first onslaught by bushfires on the city, those Canberrans who
had gone through the experience passed on what they had learned to those faced with the
threat later the same week, thus exercising their mastery in order to assist others – a doubly
positive cognitive and social exercise. In the days following the implosion, any lessons to be
learned were not to be put to such immediate use. These ‘attempts’ at cognitive mastery were
perhaps more useful in restoring personal ontological security than in serving any broader, social purpose. However, in voicing them publicly, in contributing to a public discourse on the subject, people were also exercising that ‘group affiliation’ that was also a necessary component of their post-disaster recovery.

Traumatic public events prompt people to behave in atypical ways such as collecting or fabricating documentary evidence of the event or visiting the site of a tragedy (Zelizer, 2002:697). Even people at a distance from the event can experience a disruption of their routine behaviour patterns such as having trouble sleeping or being unable to settle to everyday tasks (‘Every time I close my eyes I see shrapnel flying at me’). While these behaviours fall outside the individuals’ usual behavioural repertoires, they are symptomatic actions of populations under stress and therefore predictable.

Perhaps the only political action possible after an accident such as the hospital implosion is the institution of more stringent regulations governing the conduct of such activities. It is one of the few consolations open to survivors of accidents that there may be something they can do to prevent similar disasters being repeated. As White observed, disaster survivors are ‘strongly motivated to restore their faith in the adequacy of themselves and their community by taking effective action against the disaster’ (1962:17-18).

The most common way to do this was to seek to discover or to proffer an explanation for the implosion’s failure. Many individuals who wrote Letters to the Editor asserted that they had a ‘right to know’ certain information about the implosion. They made these assertions believing that they were entitled to expression, to information, to revelation, and to explanation. While some writers were content to make their arguments and to contribute to a community discourse, others were making claims on a government that they framed as answerable (‘We must know who is responsible’; ‘Three questions for the inquiry’). Others took the position that it was preferable to wait for the explanation that would be legally enforced in due course, that is, by means of the inquest (‘Let’s wait for the inquiry results’). Armed with such information, citizens might insure themselves against similar disasters in future.

Other observers suggested that what was needed were corrections to certain prevailing political, economic or social mores (‘What went wrong? is the wrong question’). Perhaps the most radical of all these strategies, one which might initially appear naïve, was one suggesting that positive action could take the form of bypassing political involvement in local decision making: ‘We now know what happens when politicians get involved, so let us, the citizens of Canberra, take
responsibility for decisions that affect us and take politics out of the equation’ (Hume and Hume, 1997).

However, giving voice to the desire to see certain political action taken is not the same as being in a position to undertake such action oneself. Just as Canberra’s citizens (its public) were spectators, not active participants, at the implosion itself, so was their role after the event limited to one of ‘speculation’ – to voicing personal and emotional responses, with no apparent avenue of practical action open to them. Hence many writers expressed anger and frustration at their inability to do more than just call for others to take action (‘Damn all you local politicians’).

MEMORY AND MEMORIALISING

Memory work is affective, cognitive, moral and active in its performance. As a key site in Canberra’s cultural memory before the implosion took place, the hospital had a prior claim on whatever new memories would be laid down about that event. Some of the cognitive work required to mend the ontological breach caused by the implosion’s tragic consequences took the form of memory work that was undertaken in the public domain as well as in private:

Unlike personal memory, which refers to an individual’s ability to conserve information, the collective memory comprises recollections of the past that are determined and shaped by the group. By definition, collective memory thereby presumes activities of sharing, discussion, negotiation, and, often, contestation. (Zelizer, 1995:124)

Collective memory is accomplished socially and processually, continually evolving and being transformed. The texts which this thesis has examined are voices engaged in what the Popular Memory Group calls ‘the social production of meaning’ – a collective production of personal accounts that together form a ‘composite autobiography’ (1998:76,82). Because this is a popular, rather than a scholarly process, neither the contents nor the methods of such work are prescribed by academic parameters, and may therefore, in bricolage fashion, include a variety of component parts that have highly personal meanings unique to their contributors. Zelizer observes that ‘memory work brings together unusual bits of the past in unpredictable ways’ (1995:221), and this was certainly the case for Letter writer, Alison Hastie:

I had to stop producing babies because I was obviously responsible for closing Australia’s hospitals. First came the Queen Vic in downtown Melbourne … My next closure was at Crown Street, Sydney, and now the Royal Canberra has reluctantly imploded into a pile of rubble with both bang and whimper as though it has an intrinsic protest of its own. Rest in peace – my childbearing days are over! At least my firstborn saw the light of day in
Uppsala, Sweden, where they don’t seem as keen on demolishing historic landmarks. So perhaps I am not at fault after all! (1997:8)

The undoing of old memories – whether by erasure or by forgetting – enables the creation of (or makes the space for) new ones. Sometimes, however, the creation of space for new memories is created more violently, in a traumatic and unwelcome fashion, as the implosion did for these two Canberra people:

Sunday, July 13, 1997 – the sweeping aside of old memories, but simultaneously the creating of a new one. ’It was made to last’, wrote Simon Grose of the noble hospital building, but maybe this will also describe the new memory, a thought disconcerting to some. (Haberecht, 1997:8)

On Monday I drove over Commonwealth Avenue Bridge, as I do regularly to get to the gym in Deakin. People ask ‘Why do you go all that way to a gym? Isn’t there one on the north-side?’ Yes, but I get such a high driving over Commonwealth Avenue Bridge, over the lake with the Brindabellas in the background; the National Library on the left. I think how lucky I am to live here. The only blot on the horizon until now was the hospital building. Ugly, I used to think. Pity it doesn’t come down. Well, it has, and my drive to Deakin will never be as joyful again. (Hull, 1997:C3)

Memory work was also central to the evolving nature of the implosion event. Public regret at the hospital’s demolition was focused on the place and function it had once occupied within a local social network. ’Space has always helped define the boundaries of memory’, argues Zelizer (1995:223); indeed, recollections may be said to be ‘anchored’ in space (Wachtel, 1986:212), which may explain why some people felt ‘cut adrift’ at the prospect of the hospital’s demolition. The strong visceral connection that people felt with the institution arose not merely from its having been at one time the city’s sole health facility. As explored in Chapter One, it was a place that had nurtured people’s memories and identities as well as their bodies. Furthermore, those personal memories were collective memories, ‘interconnected with the histories of … families, neighbours, fellow workers’ (Hayden, 1995:9).

An individual’s recall of his or her own experiences at the hospital inevitably triggered memories of others with whom he or she had been involved at the time, as exemplified in the recollections of Crispin and Cordelia Hull. Collective memory is unpredictable, incomplete and always partial – an event cannot be reproduced in its entirety by piecing together the mosaic of many recollections. Nonetheless, when brought together recollections ‘assume a collective authority’ (Zelizer, 1995:224-226). Commemoration helps such memories stabilise, because it too is a collective activity (as opposed to the individual work of recollection).
Importantly, these are ‘place-specific’ memories (Hayden, 1995:13) that are linked only to this site, and for some people the alteration of the site threatens them with the prospect of the concomitant loss of treasured (and indeed, existential) memories. In preparation for the loss of this iconic building, therefore, may Canberrans began implementing a range of ritual memory practices designed to preserve the hospital in their hearts and minds – re-telling the building’s history, conserving and collecting souvenir items, photographing it before it was demolished, and above all, being in attendance at the hospital’s last moments to ‘say farewell’. After the implosion, the impetus for memorialising moved from the hospital to the accidentally killed child.

Nora has proposed that ‘memory attaches itself to sites’, resulting in what he calls ‘les lieux de mémoire’ (‘sites of memory’) (1989:22). Zelizer describes the same sort of places (‘burial places, cathedrals, palaces, battlefields’) as embodying ‘concrete traces of the past’ and as serving a mnemonic function (1995:223). Purpose-built memorials may be designed to facilitate the ‘collective memory [that] often resides in the artefacts that mark its existence’ (Zelizer, 1995:232). It was therefore not surprising to see the expression of a desire for a memorial emerge almost immediately in the implosion’s aftermath, when people felt most strongly that this was an event that they were morally obliged not to forget:

> When the museum is in place, I would like to see a small part of it commemorate Sunday, July 13, 1997, as the true date of its beginning. The exhibition of that (which must be a permanent feature) should include something on the 12-year-old girl who gave her life for the museum. (Mackerras, 1997:8)  

Journalistic memory work

Media organisations compete to be regarded among certain demographics as the authoritative source of public story telling and the construction of collective memory. ‘Mediated remembering’, the communication of the memories of individuals to others, is what makes collective memory possible, argues Edy (1999:72-73), who them adds:

> The stories told by reporters may affect whether we think critically about our past or just accept it as ‘the way it was’, and whether and how we see the past as relevant to the present and the future. (1999:73)

63 No such memorial was incorporated into the structure of the museum.
Edy notes that although some events that are commemorated with the publication of ‘anniversary journalism’ may be non-controversial and socially sanctioned, there are other instances in which the subject of commemoration is problematic. In these latter instances, the objective of anniversary stories can be the creation of ‘social consensus’. It may also be the case that what is contentious about the subject is simply too great to ignore (1999:75). On the fifth anniversary of Katie Bender’s death, Crispin Hull recalled the event, but the focus of his article was the ACT Government’s continuing failure to compensate the Bender family:

As nearly 100,000 people were going ‘Wow! Amazing! Fantastic!’ one piece of metal, weighing nearly a kilogram shot across the lake and hit 12-year-old Katie Bender in the head, killing her instantly. Now, five years later, the wretchedly hopeless, incompetent, unfeeling legal and administrative system and those who run it cannot face the Bender family squarely and deal with them fairly and responsibly – mother, Zora; father, Mato; sisters, Anna and Maria; and brother, David; who saw Katie hit by the shrapnel and die. (2002:C1)

The following day, The Canberra Times endorsed Hull’s position with a front page photograph of the family laying flowers at Katie’s lakeside memorial, headlining it, ‘Still waiting for justice’ (Figure 49):

![Still waiting for justice](image)

**Figure 49** ‘Still waiting for justice’ (photograph by Kate Callas, *Canberra Sunday Times*, 14 July 2002, p.1)

Edy says that ‘commemorations provide discursive space for direct negotiations between varying meanings of the past’ (1999:83). Here, Hull (and his colleague, Peter Clack, the following day) contests the presentation of Katie’s death as a ‘finished’ or completed past event
– despite its solid stone memorial, this is ‘still’ a present experience for the family: they are ‘still waiting for justice’, ‘still grieving’, and the case is ‘still in the courts’ (Clack, 2002:2).

In re-narrating the story about what happened, journalists ‘make the past live again for the audience’, creating ‘an emotional connection between the past and the present’ (Edy, 1999:75). Importantly, such narratives can serve the same memorial function as the structures described above. The media is an aid to recollection and a means of storage of information about the past. As recorders of images as well as stories, media agencies can also draw on their archives to republish images of people and events that ‘stabilise the transient nature of memory’ (Zelizer, 1995:233), but that also revive emotions on anniversary occasions.

CONCLUSIONS

Just as the major studies of disaster and risk focus on large-scale or far-reaching incidents such as Challenger and Bhopal, so the major studies of trauma and memory focus on events whose impacts are felt across entire populations and even generations (for example, the Holocaust and September 11). In this chapter I have shown that it is in the details rather than in the broad brush of these studies that the resonances with a more modest case such as the Canberra Hospital implosion make themselves apparent.

When the lead protagonist in a fatal event is the city’s Chief Minister, the debate as to who ought to take any blame for the accident becomes unavoidably, even if misleadingly, politicised. More important even than the question of political culpability under a Westminster system of government, is the question of human fallibility. Unfortunately, but understandably, the post-implosion debate was derailed by the first of these questions, when it is the second that is far more challenging to address. Although it is less easy to accept in cases where a tragic outcome is traceable to human decisions, human fallibility is easier to accept in cases of natural disaster, where there can be no argument that human powers could have made a difference to the event’s outcome. Like the tribal societies studied by Evans-Pritchard, who sought mythical explanations for misfortune, contemporary citizens struggle to find explanations for disaster. Sometimes, they admit defeat, bowing to a fate that is synonymous with an acceptance of human powerlessness, as expressed by one survivor of the Canberra bushfire: ‘There is no sense in it, just a humbling reminder of human frailty and our ultimate lack of control over the environment’ (Mikhailovich, 2003).

It is the sense of undifferentiated danger that cannot be attributed to a particular entity (and thus cannot be remedied by any particular power) that creates the pervasive feeling of ontological
insecurity of which Giddens (1990) speaks. Faced with a traumatic situation that defies easy explanation or for which responsibility cannot easily be attributed, some people will attribute agency to ‘fate’ in order to relieve themselves of ‘the burden of engagement with an existential situation which might otherwise be chronically disturbing’ (1990:133). The impulse to restore a lost sense of ontological security is a powerful driver that will prompt many people to accept the first explanation that appears to provide resolution. In the aftermath of the implosion, Canberra people experienced a widespread insecurity that stemmed from ‘a diminished sense of individual control’ (Furedi, 1997:68). For this community, the implosion had unleashed a state of ontological insecurity that could well have led to one of moral panic. It was a situation not unlike that which Furedi describes as prevailing in a ‘culture of fear’:

> The coincidence of the process of individuation with a mood of social pessimism helps to produce a sense of cynicism regarding the merit of social engagement. This lack of belief in the problem-solving ability of human beings helps to heighten the sense of vulnerability. It is this convergence of insecurity with the sense that we have run out of answers that makes society feel that it is entitled to panic. (1997:70)

What arrested this potential slide into fear was the public performance of individual and communal acts of cognitive repair. Whether people wrote Letters to the Editor for personal or political reasons, the net result was a discourse that achieved more than a merely intellectual exercise of post-disaster problem-solving. It resulted in a discursive performance of community, expressed in rhetorical argument, in passionate feeling, in forensic judgement, and above all, in action. For despite the frustrations of those writers who felt themselves deprived of the possibility of action, the Letters demonstrate that the discursive is the performative.

Significant work had been done prior to the implosion to create the imagined community that would join together to attend the spectacular event. Such creative work has to be undertaken repeatedly for there is no such entity as ‘the community’ that can be sustained having once convened in actuality. Several communities were construed in the particular chronotope of this study. The ‘community of sufferers’, first invoked by the Catholic Bishop of Canberra, remained a powerful trope throughout the mourning period, despite an early call from one Letter writer to ‘keep things in perspective’ (Bourne, 1997:10). In this respect, as in others, the responses to the implosion were consistent with those of other communities to other disasters, as I have shown in this chapter.

The other sustained and powerful community was that created by local journalists. Undoubtedly it built on pre-existing relationships, but in the two weeks that followed Katie Bender’s death, staff of *The Canberra Times* aligned themselves unambiguously with their readers, signaling
their shared affective and intellectual responses to the tragedy and practising a 'journalism of attachment'. Journalists and public alike turned to archetypal frames of reference in an effort to find ready means of explanation for the implosion accident. In the following chapter I explore the dominant frames adopted in the post-implosion discourse, and consider the reasons for their appeal.
INTRODUCTION

Layered with nostalgia, resentment, excitement, irony and coincidence, the implosion as ‘event’ was freighted with multiple interpretive possibilities long before Sunday 13 July 1997 saw it turn from spectacle into disaster. As explored in earlier chapters, the preparations for the event involved significant promotional activity that framed the occasion as a positive experience – not only as spectacle, entertainment and carnival, but as a restorative and unifying opportunity for the whole community. Initially, the implosion’s failure to comply with those expectations seemed to have been but a disappointment, resulting in the occasion being reframed for a time by its audience as a ‘banal event’ or even a ‘non-event’. It was not long, however, before Canberrans realised that a death had occurred, and the event was then swiftly reframed yet again as a negative experience – as risk, tragedy and disaster – an event that would fracture, rather than heal, the social fabric.

In this chapter, I consider some of the ways in which beforehand, during and afterwards, the event was variously framed by all of those who sought to discursively represent it: the Government, the media and the public. The argument of this chapter is that using multiple frames enables various interpretations of an event to be made. In addition, it is that this cognitive strategy is employed by all of those who seek to interpret the event – Letter writers, journalists and the author of this study. Whether thought of as frames, screens or lenses, these ways of seeing the event determined that certain elements would receive more attention than others and that some would not form part of the ‘picture’ at all. Certain recurrent themes appear to have held more interpretive and narrative appeal than others, and these are identified as characterising the prevailing frames. The process by which these dominant frames came to be the chief means by which the event was explained was one that legitimised and naturalised the perspectives and the values of specific social interests (Tucker, 1998).

In this chapter, I use frame analysis as the principal interpretive strategy. I depart from that theory’s conventional thesis, however, which proposes that a single frame provides the entire explanatory scaffold for a given issue, suggesting that a richer interpretation is enabled if various
frames are considered as alternating lenses through which the implosion phenomenon may be viewed. Thus I use frame analysis, not to limit or define the ways in which the event was conceptualised, but to more richly document the diversity of angles from which it was viewed, and thus understood, by its many audiences.

The frames that are identified in this chapter are not intended to be read as providing a definitive nor imperial overview of the implosion as ‘event’, but rather, as a range of possible cognitive, explanatory and discursive strategies that were accessed by the implosion audience. Nor is their description intended to suggest that there were no other interpretive lenses through which the implosion was, or could be, viewed. For every frame there is a counter-frame that contests its ideological position, which suggests that every frame should be thought of dialectically (Gamson, 1988).

It has been proposed that media frames have four functions: ‘defining problems, diagnosing causes, evaluating actions and prescribing solutions’ (Tucker, 1998:145). Taken together, these four functions describe a normative role for each frame. Each of the dominant frames described in this chapter exhibits these functions. In considering the evidence that people sought to explain the event using such frames, this project tests the thesis that certain archetypal narrative themes, such as those of myth, provide enduring explanatory frameworks by which and through which people understand their world, and further, that the popular appeal of certain types of event (such as disasters) lies in their high degree of conformance with those archetypes.

Using frame analysis, I consider the various ways in which the event was ‘framed’, by its promoters, by the media, and by the community itself: first as spectacle, as carnival, as commodity and as ritual, and finally as sacrifice, as risk and as disaster. Occupying the liminal space between the frames of spectacle and tragedy is the nature of the event as risk. The dangerous dimensions of the spectacular event were literally ‘overlooked’ at the time – that this was clearly perceived only in the event’s aftermath is part of its tragedy. In this chapter, therefore, I also explore some of the many dimensions of risk, the least considered of the frames through which the implosion was viewed. I contend that it is the requirement to engage cognitively with frames of risk that explains why they made their appearance only after the implosion failure, when people were strongly committed to the performance of enquiry, explanation and attribution. Prior to the event, there was no such popular commitment, the prevailing interest being in the prospect of entertainment.
FRAMING

The instinct to search for a ready means of interpretation is particularly strong when extraordinary events disrupt the usual flow of our lives. The greater the disruption to the social order, the stronger the desire for resolution. The activities of writing Letters to the Editor, of phoning talk-back radio, and of submitting evidence to an inquest, are all discursive means by which a community may perform reconstructive work on a fractured body politic. Framing can be thought of as providing ‘interpretive shortcuts’ for those who make use of it as a strategy (Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan, 2002:8). Journalists find such ‘shortcuts’ as appealing as do lay people, for newswork can only be conducted with any authority as long as it is able to explain as well as to report.

The danger in too readily adopting a certain interpretive frame, however, is that information which does not apparently conform to the frame may be overlooked, ignored, or dismissed. In addition, if ‘resolution’ of an important social issue is achieved prematurely through adoption of an appealing frame, it is less likely that those involved will take the opportunity to engage in the self-reflection that is necessary for social and political change (Ott and Aoki, 2002:494).

The frames identified in this chapter as being the predominant ones through which the implosion was presented tap into and reiterate certain popular beliefs about events that ‘turn bad’. These frames crystallise key social values and concerns, and in doing so ‘produce and reproduce social power through the construction of common sense’ (Tucker, 1998:143). Further, these frames themselves may be understood as existing within a larger conceptual framework that I will describe as a ‘meta-frame’. That meta-frame is the powerfully explanatory and generative one of drama. The meta-frame of drama encapsulates perspectives on carnival, spectacle, risk, disaster, and tragedy within comic and tragic discourses.

The stories that are told within these frames may not be the only perspectives on the implosion, but they become its ‘prevailing narratives’ (Glassner, 2004:824), as Entman argues:

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (1993:52)

Journalists are as susceptible to the cognitive attractions of frames as are their lay peers (Scheufele, 1999) – after all, the news ‘is a story about reality, not reality itself’ (Bird and Dardenne, 1988:82), and framing is a way of seeing, and of telling, those stories. To frame is to
edit, just as to edit is to frame. In the process of narrativisation by means of which journalists ‘typify’ news stories according to certain recurrent themes, ‘cognitive shortcuts’ are used to simplify the process of deciding what is news and how it should be told (Berkowitz, 1992:83). That process, of course, does not ‘develop in a political or cultural vacuum’ (Ryan, Carragee, and Meinhofer, 2001:176).

At a more fundamental level, Durham contends that the media engages in framing as ‘a modernist and social process that contributes to a dominant sense of continuity’. He claims that stories of disaster such as that of TWA Flight 800 64 ‘represent gaps in the presumptive continuity of modernity’ and hence are resistant, or lost, to framing (Durham, 1998:102), and that there are ‘events that defy framing’ (Durham, 1998:101). In this chapter I therefore also consider whether aspects of the implosion disaster were resistant to framing.

The influence of framing on decision making

The spread and lethal nature of the debris that the implosion created meant that an event that had been billed as a family outing became instead a high risk occasion. In some senses, Canberrans had been made unwitting spectators at an ‘execution’ (an expression used by several Letter writers). At the same time, they had exposed their own children to the risk of the same fate that befell Katie Bender. It would be argued afterwards that their voluntary presence at the event also rendered them complicit in the fateful outcome.

Given that framing influences how issues are thought about, it also affects decision making. Prior to 13 July 1997, the implosion had been framed as a spectacular community entertainment, and only afterwards was it re-framed as an ill-considered public risk. Perhaps the community’s failure to anticipate the risk inherent in attending this event stemmed from its never having been framed as ‘risk’ by its promoters.

The phenomenon of framing originally began to be considered as an explanatory factor in decision making research because it demonstrated that the positive or negative value of an outcome would always be relative to the position of the original reference point. Tversky and Kahneman likened framing to a ‘perspective effect’, such as that experienced by a person

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viewing mountains, where relative heights cannot easily be judged due to the distorting effect of changing vantage points (1981). So much more difficult, then, is it to attempt to make decisions in domains such as risk where there are no objective standards to refer to.

Kahneman and Tversky’s 1979 ‘prospect theory’ redefined value as a relative concept, and paved the way for cognitive research, particularly into cognition under conditions of impoverished information, to be recognised for what it could contribute to an understanding of people’s perceptions of risk. ‘Frames’, ‘scripts’ and ‘schema’ were the metaphors of choice adopted by the psychologists and linguists who wrote in the 1970s about how people organise experience, or engage in ‘sense-making,’ and of these, ‘frames’ became the dominant cognitive metaphor in risk research in the 1980s and 1990s (Elliott and Archibald, 1989; Fagley and Miller, 1990; Kahnemann and Tversky, 1979; Levin, Johnson, and Davis, 1987; Slovic, 1997).

Levin and his colleagues tested the persistence of an initial frame in decision making. Their findings confirmed those of earlier studies that proposed that positive frames induce risk behaviour whereas negative frames discourage it, and showed that the initial assessment persists even when information is framed differently on subsequent occasions. They observed that ‘inducing a positive frame appears to lead to decisions aimed at seeking gains, while inducing a negative frame leads to decisions aimed at avoiding losses’ (1987:53). This would suggest that in a situation that had been framed positively from the start (like the hospital implosion) there would be an increased likelihood of participants being risk-seeking rather than risk-averse. Interestingly, while Elliott and Archibald proposed that a distinction ought to be made between imposed and subjective frames, their study showed little difference in influence between the two framing sources (1989).

Risk-taking propensity is also influenced by the ‘domain’ or ‘reflection’ effect. The domain effect considers the environment in which the risk decision is made, that is, the ‘domain of gains’ versus ‘the domain of losses’. It presumes that the outcome of any choice is clearly identifiable as a gain or as a loss. Framing, on the other hand, is concerned with the effects of shifting perspectives, that is, it is about viewpoint (Fagley and Miller, 1990). Framing is thus ‘rife with subjectivity’ argues Slovic (1997:23). He points out that ‘there are often no “right frames” or “wrong frames” – just “different frames” [and that] whoever controls the definition of risk controls the rational solution to the problem at hand …Defining risk is thus an exercise in power’ (1997:54). Because the selection of frame determines the perspective that is likely to be taken on any question of risk (Stallings, 1990), such framing is likely to be contentious in the event that a risk is realised.
Early work on the effects of framing also acknowledged that its impacts have ethical dimensions, Tversky and Kahneman noting that ‘when framing influences the experience of consequences, the adoption of a decision frame is an ethically significant act,’ and, because people may deliberately manipulate frames in order to exercise self-control, ‘the framing of acts and outcomes can also reflect the acceptance or rejection of responsibility for particular consequences’ (1981:458).

Media frames and the attribution of responsibility

In the aftermath of the implosion failure, as illustrated by the texts analysed in Chapter Three, two essentially opposing positions became apparent amongst media and community commentators. These positions can be summarised as deriving from what Goffman classified as natural and social frameworks. ‘Natural frameworks identify occurrences seen as undirected, unoriented, unanimated, unguided, “purely physical”’ (Goffman, 1974:22), – that is, events framed thus are understood as being naturally determined. ‘Social frameworks, on the other hand, provide background understanding for events that incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effort of an intelligence, a live agency, the chief one being the human being’ (Goffman, 1974:22). Events framed thus are understood as having been instigated, and guided by, human decisions.

Although the media is inclined to ‘keynote’ certain aspects of risk in their search for a cause of certain events, and then to define the themes of any subsequent discourse accordingly (Stallings, 1990), the mediated post-implosion dialogue sustained these two positions for some time. Those who sought to attribute blame (to the Chief Minister, to the blasting contractor, to government policies of outsourcing, and even to themselves or the community) framed the implosion as being social in nature; while those who urged avoidance of blame were also more likely to urge a fatalistic acceptance of the accidental nature of the event as one beyond human control – indeed, one in the dominion, or frame, of nature.

I would argue that a further distinction can be made within the social category. There were those who sought to attribute personal, specific, blame (for example, ‘Carnell responsible: she must resign’ and ‘Damn all you local politicians’). Others sought to attribute, or to have established by some authority (such as the coroner), organisational or institutional blame, which is undifferentiated (for example, ‘We must know who is responsible’ and ‘Let’s wait for the inquiry results’). The number of responses in these two categories vastly outweighed the number of those who subscribed to the natural framing of the implosion failure.
In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, some people expressed sheer disbelief that such a thing could happen (‘Emergency officer: “This can’t be true”’ and ‘Fatal hospital demolition a ‘freak’’). These observers felt unable to account for the event by referring to any of the frames with which they were familiar. For them, the event fell into the category of the astonishing, the inexplicable, or what Goffman refers to as the ‘astounding complex’ (1974:28). While the community struggled for some time to find satisfactory explanations for how the accident could have occurred, the frame of the ‘astounding’ was short-lived and not resorted to after 15 July. Such a response, which speaks very directly from a person’s upset sense of ontological security, appeared to be soon displaced by varied attempts at explanation.

Applying Goffman’s concept of the ‘frame’ to the construction of news stories, Tuchman noted that news events do not become newsworthy unless certain organisational principles can be discerned in them. Further, Tuchman argues, ‘[u]sing the conventions of a news story as frame, reporters do more than make an event public; they define what an event is and which amorphous happenings are part of the event’ (1976:94). Indeed, the ‘news media perform public rituals … [through which] … news is transformed into myth and memory’ (Kitch, 2000:172). The media are not alone in that performance – it is necessarily a co-performance with the ‘public’, for whom the same transformation is essential work to achieve some accommodation of the event in their world picture.

Iyengar develops Goffman’s distinction between social and natural frames, proposing that television presents news events either thematically or episodically (Iyengar, 1991). Thematically framed events are presented as having a general context, while episodic ones are presented as singular, unrelated instances. Each option influences the public to determine responsibility for the event differently (Iyengar and Simon, 1994:171). Applying this idea to the implosion, those who argued that this accident was characteristic of a government that was negligent of its civic responsibilities were arguing that the thematic nature of the implosion be recognised, while those who felt that this was a unique, unforeseeable accident, were arguing that the implosion be seen as episodic. The latter was always going to be the more persuasive (or ‘winning’) argument in the long run. It is not only the simpler of the two positions to grasp, but also the argument that lends itself best to governmental ‘disownership’ of responsibility. In the media, Stallings likewise argues, accounts in which patterns and causes can be identified, thus implying regularity, will always be regarded as ‘winners’. ‘Winning accounts’ are mostly monocausal, which ‘concentrates responsibility, thus simplifying the process of disownership’ (Stallings, 1990:90).
The media also chooses between comic and tragic frames when framing public traumas. The comic frame encourages an audience to identify with the trauma’s ‘perpetrators’, thus facilitating humility and learning from errors. The tragic frame, on the other hand, encourages an audience to blame and to scapegoat, and by doing so, to avoid having to learn any lessons itself by attributing all culpability to the perpetrators (Ott and Aoki, 2002:497). As has been noted already, the choice of the tragic frame has ethical consequences for the attribution of responsibility (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981).

The implosion was understood by journalists and their readers as having occurred within a particular social framework. The involvement through attendance of so many in the community encouraged this perspective. Cautioned by social elites to be wary of attributing personal blame for an accident in which they were complicit, people were encouraged to transfer blame to undifferentiated and impersonal agents. Eventually, by representing the implosion as a singular, freakish incident, rather than as an element of a larger, predictable, whole, the media absolved both the government of the day, and by extension, the body politic, of responsibility for the accident.

The event as carnival

The earliest frame in which the implosion was presented was that of the carnival – a festive farewell. It was clearly represented as belonging in Goffman’s ‘social’ framework as it was a socially and politically engineered activity, managed by technical experts, promoted by the local government and attended by a significant number of the city’s residents. The preparations for the event and the event itself were subject to close scrutiny.

Unlike an audience attending a spectacle, the crowd at a carnival participates in the event. Like all good carnivals, the implosion was an occasion of festivity, of family fun, of communal eating, with music and announcements broadcast by way of commentary on the event’s progress. Over the loudspeakers, the crowd was exhorted to make purchases of memorial bricks, both as souvenirs of the old hospital and because the proceeds were being directed to the neonatal intensive care unit in the city’s remaining public hospital. Lingering opposition to the demolition was effectively disarmed by this strategy of turning the event into a fund-raiser for a worthy cause.

A cultural analysis of ‘carnival’ needs to take into account two senses in which carnival may be understood. The first is the commonsense meaning of a festival, a celebration, referring to the secular vestiges of the traditional, Christian, pre-Lent carnevale (literally, a ‘farewell to meat’) – a
time of feasting during which people prepared themselves for the abstinence of Lent. The second is an anthropological meaning, also derived from the social practices of those traditional carnivals, as described and analysed by Bakhtin (1965), referring to the celebration of social inversion permitted by the carnival. During carnival, the social world is turned on its head, making masters into servants and servants into masters. It is a time of ‘misrule’. The inherent instability in such inversion means it is also, therefore, a time of potential danger.65

The implosion’s failure renders the event truly carnival-like, for a key principle of the carnival, as articulated by Bakhtin, is that it confounds expectation by inverting norms and behaving in unexpected ways. There were certainly elements of the carnivalesque about the implosion and its promotion. In delegating responsibility for pressing the plunger to a member of the public, the Chief Minister in effect absolved herself of responsibility for the ensuing ‘misrule’. Like many of those who are extracted from the anonymity of the crowd to join those in the limelight on stage, Sue George, the woman who had won the right to press the plunger that would detonate the implosion, expressed some ambivalence about the privilege she had sought. As a mother, she was alert to the ambiguities of her legacy:

Sue George, the Canberra mother of three who drew the winning brick in the competition to press the plunger, admitted to a case of the jitters, reflecting on how her children were born at the hospital and future generations would talk about their great-grandmother as the woman who blew it up. (Abjorensen, 1997d:4)

As has also been explored in more detail in Chapter Three, in the aftermath of the implosion, two discourses among many emerged in opposition to each other – that of the voice of authority, calling for calm and that of the popular call for someone to be brought to account. These two discourses were given expression in the pages of The Canberra Times, where, to some extent, they exemplify the Rabelaisian duality of voices identified by Bakhtin (1965) and described by Fiske as ‘the high, validated language of classical learning enshrined in political and religious power, and the low, vernacular language of the folk’ (1989:82). As Fiske also observes, ‘the collision’ of these two languages (or discourses) gives rise to the carnivalesque inversion of the

65 In a link with the traditions of sacrifice, it may be noted that the Romans traditionally scapegoated the person appointed as Lord of Misrule, sacrificing him at the end of his 30 days in office (Frazer, 1922:583-587).
prevailing social order, wherein the vernacular achieves the (temporary) status of authority (1989:82).

The presentation of the event as ‘carnival’ was a deliberate strategy on the part of its promoters. Framing the event as wholly positive precluded recognition of any lingering opposition, whether strident or tentative, and whether or not that opposition was politically motivated. ‘Carnival’ sits ostensibly within a comic frame. The subversive undercurrent whose presence was foregrounded in Bakhtin’s study really only comes to the fore in the event’s aftermath, when a critical perspective is applied to the entire process. However, as the discourse analysis in Chapter Three has demonstrated, the authoritative status temporarily accorded to the public voice (encouraged to share their stories and opinions) began to be withdrawn as soon as it became apparent that some of those opinions were openly critical of the prevailing social order.

THE EVENT AS RITUAL

Rituals are occasions which are ‘felt to be peculiarly significant’ (Chaney, 1983:120) by their participants. Ritual events are imbued with significance by means of formal dress, setting and speech, which together mark such occasions as drama, removed from everyday reality. They are highly self-conscious, dramatic events, whose purpose is to naturalise the exercise of control. Indeed, the formalised structure of ritual events is a dramatic celebration of a society’s ‘ability to impose order’ (Chaney, 1983:120).

In addition, ‘part of the meaning of a ritual is that collectivity is shown to be possible...that a collectivity is postulated or affirmed which might otherwise only have an ambiguous social existence’ (Chaney, 1983:120). Such an affirmation was the key objective in the imposition of ritualistic elements onto the design of the implosion. A demonstration (and celebration) of collectivity was the legible sub-text of the Government’s invitations to the implosion, an event that was all along designed to be a media event.

66 Some six weeks after the implosion another instance of such inversion occurred that drew much academic and popular attention. In the United Kingdom, in the aftermath of Princess Diana’s death, the authority of the popular voice was stridently asserted, particularly via the vehicle of the Murdoch press, instructing the royal family on the behaviour ‘the people’ wanted demonstrated: ‘Show us you care’ (Cousins, 1998; Wilson, 1998).
Media events are occasions of ‘high ritual’ (Dayan and Katz, 1992). Whether or not the implosion audience thought of themselves as engaging in a ritual, the event and their participation in it can be understood in those terms. Despite noting that in popular usage the term ‘ritual’ has come to signify ‘empty conformity’, Douglas defends anthropologists’ continued use of the term on the grounds that it makes no reference ‘to the commitment or non-commitment of the actors’ (1970:1;2). Douglas sees ritual as signifying ‘heightened appreciation of symbolic action’ (1970:8) – that is, as entailing an increased sensitivity towards cultural symbols and an increased willingness to believe in their effectiveness. In addition, she notes that '[t]he perception of symbols … as well as their interpretation, is socially determined’ (1970:9). This certainly seems to have been the case with the implosion, where the audience of spectators had been primed by the media as to the symbolic significance of the hospital and its demolition. As Chaney observes:

The concept of a dramatic spectacle is of a highly formalised parade of social types in an elaborate setting organised by a narrative in which moral certitudes are affirmed in ways which often combine inducing awe in the audience with sentimental involvement. As such civic rituals are spectacular displays for which the framework of audience interest can be presumed. (1983:122)

Certainly, while the staging of the implosion involved no literal ‘parade’, because its participants were not on display to the audience, it was well understood thanks to prior media coverage, who these ‘performers’ were67 and what their roles on the day entailed: ‘Someone asked project manager Cameron Dwyer what would happen if it didn’t work. He smiled nervously, and said, ‘We would have to go and sneak out of here very quietly’ (Abjorensen, 1997d:4). The participation of the mass media is essential to the effective operation of this kind of celebration. If a ritual event goes awry, however, such media involvement also ensures that a powerful message is sent to the community about its incapacity to ‘impose order’ on its world.

The intention to ‘impose order’ certainly underpinned the political, as well as the logistical, organisation of this event. It could be argued that powerful elites – in this instance, the ACT Government – used their access to staging rituals as a way of ‘legitimating their authority’ (Chaney, 1983:120). This exercise of power, however, was also clearly identified as a restorative opportunity for a community that had become increasingly unhappy and fractured in

67 The work roles of some of these performers were considered in Chapter One of this thesis.
the wake of massive down-sizing by the city’s major employers, the Commonwealth and ACT Governments. Surely such a valid and socially worthwhile purpose would render any lingering expressions of opposition to the hospital’s demolition churlish and anti-social? Surely it would result in a community that was more united for its shared experience, than not?

As an event designed to celebrate the transition from a past to a future era of public health care, the implosion of the hospital was always going to be a rite of passage, quite appropriately marked with ritual by its community. It was an occasion characterised by the conventional practices of ritual such as communal gathering, the sharing of food, and a common emotional focus:

If you have fond memories of Royal Canberra Hospital, July 13 will be the last opportunity to bid farewell to the hospital buildings. All Canberrans are encouraged to come and say good-bye. (Section Publications, 1997)

So get your family together, pack your picnic rug and head to Lennox Gardens for a truly spectacular event. (radio station Mix 106.3) (Macklin, 1997c:3)

Everyday newwork may also be framed as ‘cultural ritual’, journalists performing the ‘professional ritual’ of publicly scrutinising their own profession’s behaviours (Berkowitz, 2000:125), as Hull and Abjorensen both did in reflecting on their journalistic participation in the implosion, as discussed in Chapter Three. In the event’s aftermath, the media also performed the ritual function of civil religion, a function it performs by affirming social collectivity (Kitch, 2003:214). Of all the ritual elements that were made manifest in the implosion, none was more significant than that of ‘sacrifice’.

The event as sacrifice

The most sustained media frame through which the implosion was presented, applying the device of anthropomorphism to the hospital, was that of ‘sacrifice’. The extensive use made by the media of the vocabulary of sacrifice in their coverage of the impending hospital demolition (as discussed in Chapter One) prepared the media audience at least to frame the event in this way. When it became public knowledge that a child had been accidentally killed in the event, that audience was predisposed to thinking of her death, too, as a ‘sacrifice’. One of the first Letters to the Editor on the subject of the implosion referred to ‘the 12-year-old girl who gave her life for the museum’ (Mackerras, 1997:8).

A sacrifice serves purposes both sacred and profane, symbolic and pragmatic, for the society in which and by which it is performed. As Mizruchi claims:
One could say that nothing in sacrifice is what it appears to be. Surrendering becomes an occasion for communal celebration; powerlessness becomes a form of control; fear becomes hope; the profane becomes sacred; innocents are killed and the guilty are allowed to live. (1998:28-29)

In this instance, the hospital, earmarked for destruction in one way or another, was primed to serve the higher purpose of sacrifice by becoming the vehicle for an act of social cohesion. With the hospital thus effectively transubstantiated in the public mind, the practical function of demolition could also be sanctified by being transformed into a community-building function. The demolition was thus framed as serving higher ends than merely those of economic or political expedience. As with all sacrifice, the ‘transcendent goals’ of the activity had to be reaffirmed prior to the conduct of the event, and before that which was to be sacrificed could be put to other, more mundane purposes such as consumption (Miller, 1998:73).

However, a sacrifice cannot simply be framed as such – it must also look like a sacrifice by taking on the appearance of a sacred act. In this instance, that was achieved by requiring that the demolition be performed as an implosion, and that it be conducted on a Sunday, that day of the week most charged with religious significance in a primarily Christian, if also mainly secular, society. In such a community in late modern times, even non-church goers experience Sunday as being charged with something like religious significance – it is the day for family get-togethers and special outings, a reprieve for many from everyday domestic and workplace obligations.

Thus it was that the community was called to come together to jointly witness (as a congregation does) the hospital’s demolition, to become virtual collaborators in its destruction, but to experience that collaboration as spiritually uplifting, the demolition being for the greater good. It was, after all, the whole community (or so they had been promised) who would benefit from this sacrifice. In a secular community, the higher purpose of the sacrifice can be the association, or communion, with itself that is held out as the social objective of the activity, rather than communion with a god or gods. It is not essential that a relationship with the divine be affirmed for the sacrifice to be true to form. Indeed, outside the Christian tradition it is more common for

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68 Immediately before the implosion, at 12.30pm, an ecumenical service was held at the hospital. The service was advertised in a Chief Ministerial media release as being ‘to mark the passing’ of the hospital (Brough and Peatling, 1997:2).
sacrifice to serve a purpose focused on the ‘renewal of social and individual order’ (Miller, 1998:80), just as it was proposed the implosion would.

The value of the hospital as sacrificial object can also be said to have been enhanced by the arguments of those opposed to its demolition, for such arguments made claim to the hospital’s viability and continued worth. Had the community held no such views, the hospital would have been, and been seen to be, a less worthy object of sacrifice.

The ritualistic aspects of the implosion event have already been covered, but it is important to note here that sacrifice is a ‘collective ritual’ (Mizruchi, 1998:29). The first part of the ritual is the preparation of the object for sacrifice, and this may take some time, as was the case with the hospital, whose gradual preparation for implosion was covered by The Canberra Times on more than one occasion in the weeks preceding 13 July 1997. If the shot firer, Rod McCracken, is seen as playing the role of high priest in this sacrifice, there is added significance in the fact that his son, Troy (pictured in The Canberra Times on 11 July – see Figure 5), was one of those responsible for laying the charges, exemplifying the priestly tradition in which the knowledge and skills of the initiated are handed down the patrilineal line.

An integral part of the devotional rites of the sacrificial occasion is the communal meal in which the participants partake; a rite which, within the Church, has been reduced to the almost entirely symbolic function of the communion (surviving as a ‘trace of meaning’), but which lives on in secular contexts in various forms of communal feasting. Many Canberrans treated the occasion of the implosion as an opportunity for a picnic by the lake, so indeed, the occasion was clearly linked with the communal consumption of food. The community had been explicitly encouraged to make the implosion this type of feasting event, and the timing of the implosion, scheduled for 1.00pm, served to reinforce that encouragement.

The thousands of people surrounding the lake who were picnicking together as they waited for the implosion were partaking of a ritual meal, a communion. The event organisers had intended that the crowd’s experience of ‘community’ was to be enhanced by this activity of shared, synchronous eating. Instead, Pryor’s cartoon of the destroyed and deserted picnic (Figure 36) metaphorically depicts the devastated family and damaged society that was the implosion’s legacy. Far from engineering an enhanced sense of solidarity in the ACT community, the event organisers precipitated a bitterly divisive and openly hostile debate centred on the attribution of blame, in which old wounds were re-opened rather than salved. Rather than enhancing such values, the event destroyed the familial (and hence, sacred) values of civility, reciprocity,
generosity, innocence and happiness. Pryor’s cartoon also alludes to the ‘horrible feast of blame-casting’ in which eating is a destructive, rather than creative, activity.

It is also in the feasting dimension of the sacrifice that the occasion most closely approximates the character of the carnival as delineated by Bakhtin – where eating, sacrifice, destruction and entertainment are all brought into close association. In traditional animal sacrifices, the feasting that occurs follows the distribution of those parts of the animal no longer required for sacrificial purposes. In the case of the hospital, ‘parts’ which had already been dismembered (individual souvenir bricks) were distributed to the crowd as a means of fund raising. Following the implosion detonation, other ‘parts’ were randomly ‘distributed’ as pieces of hospital debris rained down on the lake and its foreshores.

The implosion’s intended visually impressive nature was also firmly in the tradition of ‘sacrifice as grand spectacle’ (Miller, 1998:77), just as the smoke that rose heavenwards following the explosion was a conventional component of the traditional ritual of sacrifice. (That this smoke appeared in one of the press photographs to have settled into the form of a question mark above the hospital is discussed in Chapter Two.)

If the implosion failed as sacrifice in any aspect, it was in the hospital’s failure to be fully destroyed. As has long been observed by theorists of sacrifice, it is the destruction itself that adds potency to a sacrifice (Miller, 1998:76). Indeed, having been incompletely carried out, the implosion would, according to technical prescription, be understood to have been thereby annulled as sacrifice (Miller, 1998:77).

However, it was not only the hospital buildings that were to become sacrificial victims on 13 July 1997. One among the spectators was to be singled out for that role, and indeed, to exemplify the requirements of the perfect sacrifice in ways that the buildings could never have attained. As a living sacrifice, Katie Bender personified the ideal, unblemished, sacrificial type. Her parents’ youngest child – a beautiful, obedient and virginal girl – Katie had, what’s more, come straight from church prior to the implosion, and could thus be considered to have been consecrated prior to her death.69 Media reports stressed the fact that the Bender family had stopped to view the

69 In traditional sacrifice, the practice of consecrating a victim to ensure his or her purity as an offering to the gods arose from a perceived need to endow the victim with the characteristic perfection of the one for whom the victim was the substitute – the king or his firstborn (Mizruchi, 1998:52-65).
implosion on their way home from church. A dual purpose is served by this emphasis: it underscores the family’s allegiance to traditional values and prescribed behaviours, at the same time ironically emphasising that such obedience is no protection from cruel and random fate.

The mode of Katie’s death is also significant. Prior to the event, the hospital’s demolition had been hailed as promising a ‘clean, fast, kill’. While this was far from what eventuated in the hospital’s case, it is exactly what, according to testimony at the inquest, would have been delivered to the child victim. The coroner’s report described Katie Bender’s death as having been clinical in its precision and speed, the speed and force of the projectile that killed her being dwelt on at some length (Madden, 1999).

The return to normality that follows the act of sacrifice is itself a stage as significant as the stage of preparation that precedes it. This is a stage of desacralisation, during which the community’s focus is on ‘the social consequences of sacrifice’ (Miller, 1998:105). Anthropological studies of sacrifice have noted that the distribution of food during this stage accomplishes an affirmation of social status as its primary purpose, and that thus ‘one of the main consequences of sacrifice is the sanctification of social order’ (Miller, 1998:106). For the Canberra community, the return to normality could only be achieved once ontological security had been restored via a cathartic, communal, but dialectical, process of seeking to understand what had gone wrong, and of proposing restoration. For some, that process involved questioning the social order, while for others, it necessitated its reaffirmation.

Bound up in that process of meaning-seeking that characterised the period of desacralisation following the implosion, was the guilt of the survivors. During this time, a third sacrificial victim was mooted, although the identity of this victim was vigorously debated: the scapegoat. As Chief Minister, Kate Carnell was the person most often nominated for this role, although the blasting contractors were also identified as bearing responsibility. Complicating the search for a surrogate for their collective guilt was people’s awareness of their own attendance at, and hence, complicity in, the event. That attendance could be explained as innocent only if people could reassure themselves that they had had no expectation of danger from the implosion. It was now apparent that in the lead-up to the implosion the celebratory framing of the event had

70 In addition to the many calls in the press for her to accept responsibility for the accident, Mrs Carnell’s office received death threats during the week that followed the implosion (Dawson and Ludlow, 1997:9).
masked the fact that the event was also a risk, and it was to that aspect that many people now
turned.

**THE EVENT AS RISK**

By 1997 risk has begun to be experienced as so pervasive an element of late 20th century life that it is being described as the defining condition of the period – profoundly characteristic of contemporary society itself and the key ingredient in turn-of-the-century zeitgeist (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990). No longer limited to specific situations, risk is now characterised, Beck claims, by the consequences of modernisation being seen as globalised, ‘irrevocable threats’ to life itself (1992:13). The risk to which an estimated third of Canberra’s population was about to expose itself, however, was one that was rarely considered in the lead up to 13 July 1997. If there was a risk at all, it was suggested, it was that the over-engineered building would fail to succumb to the explosives with which its internal walls were being packed. Photographs and diagrams assured the readers of *The Canberra Times* that this risk to their proposed entertainment was being adequately addressed (‘Hospital history to become rubble in 30 seconds’; ‘Old hospital gets set to go out with a bang’). Other risks, like the demolition contractors not being in possession of the building plans, were not discussed in the media in the preparation stages. (A month after the implosion, however, these plans were found: ‘Revealed: “missing” plans of hospital’; ‘Hospital plans were available to demolishers: Totalcare’.)

However, the need to exclude the public from too close a proximity to the implosion site was considered – and the recommended exclusion zone extended from 50 to 200 metres:

> Expert advice held that even a mere 10 metres away would be safe; engineers nominated a 50-metre exclusion zone; and on the day police extended this to 200 metres as a supposedly ultra-conservative safety measure. (Hogarth, 1997:38)

Even this least sophisticated and most technicist of approaches to risk assessment and risk management proved inadequate. Katie Bender was killed at a distance of some 430 metres from the site, and police located potentially lethal pieces of debris at distances over one kilometre from the hospital. Experts whose opinions had not been broadcast prior to the implosion were afterwards reluctant to nominate a ‘safe’ viewing distance for such events, most of them claiming that the implosion should never have been made a public event at all (‘Sightseeing at demolitions unwise, wreckers say’; ‘Alarm at how blast became a public event’). Ultimately, it was not a simple question of distance.
Risk assessment

While a technical risk assessment had been carried out in preparation for the implosion, it was only afterwards that the public engaged in its own *ex post facto* risk assessment. Although approaches to risk assessment that regard risk as manageable so long as it has been quantified have been supplanted by more complex, socio-political and cultural analyses in order to frame ‘thicker’ risk analyses, simplistic, positivist approaches have retained their appeal (Covello and Johnson, 1987; Dake, 1992; Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Jasanoff, 1987). Despite the growing sophistication of risk analysis, risk nonetheless continues to this day to be appraised inadequately, and accidents, disasters and tragedies continue to occur as a result.

Those with a vested interest in the application of risky technologies have long disputed the public’s judgements, especially what they see as the public’s ‘irrational’ fear of high-consequence, low-probability events when statistically they are more likely to experience low-consequence, high-probability events (Cole and Withey, 1981). Research into the perception of risk continues to be prompted by the desire of policy makers to understand and predict the public’s response to risky technologies, combined with recognition of the potentially damaging political power of public opposition to such technology. Much of this research is devoted to determining what factors contribute to the public’s sense of dread, and to explaining why it is that some fates are considered so much more terrible than others.

In a review of research that continues to be widely cited, Covello observed that the most significant way in which experts and lay people differed in their risk assessments was in the significance they did or did not attach to exceptional deaths (1983). Certainly, Katie Bender’s death was ‘exceptional’ in that she alone among thousands of spectators was killed, and that singularity contributed to a heightened sense of poignancy in the media commentary (‘Change of plan placed Katie in path of disaster’; ‘The girl in the crowd picked out for tragedy’). ACT Greens Member of the Legislative Assembly, Kerrie Tucker, articulated this poignant status in a statement to the Assembly on the occasion of Jon Stanhope’s no-confidence motion in the Chief Minister: ‘That Katie Bender was hit was a tragedy. That no-one else was hit was a miracle’ (1999).

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71 While the Canberra Hospital implosion claimed just one victim, the Thredbo landslide 17 days later produced just one survivor. Katie Bender and Stuart Diver share a unique, if inverse, status, that marks them as beings apart from those around them who did not share their fate.
The belief that expert and lay assessments of risk are wildly at variance with each other has attained mythical status that even evidence to the contrary (for example, Freudenburg, 1988) seems unable to dislodge. Even otherwise sophisticated research continues to oppose ‘subjective assessments’ to ‘objective, statistical risk’, and to claim that information (in the form of risk communication) can remedy deficient public risk perceptions (McDaniels, Kamlet, and Fischer, 1992). Ultimately, risk perception is the outcome of risk judgement. It is often characterised by the presence and influence of dread and knowledge. ‘Dread involves indicators such as threat to future generations, catastrophic potential, and voluntariness. Knowledge centres on indicators of how well a risk is understood by the individual, how well experts are thought to understand the risk, or the observability of the risk’ (Trumbo, 1999).

It is widely thought to be more terrible to be killed while engaged in an innocent pursuit, such as being on holiday, than while at work, particularly if that work carries a predictable degree of risk. However, there are distinctions to be made, even between holiday accident victims. Those who are the innocent victims of the miscalculations of others (for example, the victims of the bridge collapse at the opening of the Maccabiah games in Israel on 14 July 1997) are commonly regarded with greater sympathy than are those who knowingly expose themselves to risk (for example, such as that involved in participating in ‘extreme’ sports, like base jumping).

Likewise, because they choose what they do, those who are killed in the course of their employment (for example, in an industrial accident) are less likely to be accorded the same levels of sympathy as those who are merely on their way to work (as in the 1977 Granville Bridge collapse), asleep after a day at work (as in the 1997 Thredbo landsbide) or who are at their place of employment, engaged in work that they could reasonably expect would not pose a risk to their safety (as in the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre). A corollary of this aspect of risk perception is that death is seen as less terrible in instances where victims wrest some agency from their circumstances in order to die in a manner or time of their own choosing. The passengers on Flight 93 on September 11, knowing that their flight had been hijacked and assuming that it was to be used in similar fashion to the planes that had been flown into the World Trade Centre, chose to defy their hijackers and, while not able to save their own lives, are believed to have thus saved countless others. Tumarkin claims that for this reason – the defiant

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72 Letter writer, Geoff Clarke, failed to make this distinction, as is discussed on the following page (1997:10).
exercise of agency – the site of their deaths is marked by a serenity that is absent from the World Trade Centre site (2005:39).

Assessing the value of a life

Ten days after the implosion, two Letter writers expressed puzzlement at what each saw as logical inconsistency in the community’s response to Katie Bender’s death:

While sharing the sadness over the hospital tragedy, it is interesting to contemplate the community’s reaction with other possible scenarios. For example, had explosives not been permitted and a worker killed while demolishing the building by traditional methods. Or had a family decided to cycle to avoid parking problems during the implosion of the hospital, and a child hit and killed by a bus failing to give way. Although a life is lost under both scenarios, I have no doubt the community and media responses would have been quite different. (Clarke, 1997:10)

It is curious to me that when a death occurred on a football field not long ago it received only two lines on the back page of a newspaper. No inquiry, no threats of suing anyone for liability, almost no media coverage at all. Why is this so? After all, a life is a life. Deaths do occur on a football field yet there are no calls to ban the game. Maybe someone can explain the difference to me. (Hodges, 1997:10)

These writers are not only asking, rhetorically, that the implosion case should be assessed comparatively (that is, normatively) against others. They are both asking the ethical question that implicitly informs all risk assessment, ‘How much is a human life worth?’

Where a society is strongly complicit in the activity of an accident’s victims, those victims will be regarded more sympathetically than if this were not the case. As the single fatality at an event attended by a third of the city’s population, Katie Bender was regarded by many commentators as the unfortunate victim of a random fate which ‘but for the grace of God’ they could have shared. The Canberra community understood only too well that, like other disasters, this one happened to ordinary people who merely ‘happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time’ (Hodgkinson and Stewart, 1991:1). Such identification serves more than an empathic purpose. Lifton (1983) suggests that the establishment of a shared ‘victim-identity’ enables both anger and action, providing a renewed sense of control for disaster survivors, while Barton argues that:

Two characteristics of the impact directly promote sympathetic identification with the victims: randomness and proximity. Three forms of communication promote it: direct contact with victims, interpersonal discussion of the victims, and mass media coverage of them. Sympathy naturally is related to the severity of deprivation suffered by the victims.
On the other hand three factors limit or reduce identification and sympathy: the perceived number of victims, if it reaches too great an overload; explanations of the deprivation that involve blaming the victims themselves; and the subjective deprivation of the individual. (1969:239)

Barton goes on to note that ‘one factor that reduces sympathetic identification with the victims, and that tends to silence the victims themselves, is the development of explanations in which the victims themselves are held to blame for their own situation’ (1969:253). This is more likely to occur in contexts where moralistic and individualistic ideologies prevail, where there is little or no contact with victims and where the media and others blame the victims. Sudden and random impacts (such as the implosion) lessen the likelihood that the victims will be blamed.

Those who have a vested interest in doing so, and who are in a position to influence media communications, may seek to minimise news coverage of their part in the disaster (Barton, 1969:257). They may imply, or even claim directly, that others, even the victims, are to blame. This has arguably and notoriously been the case in such instances as the Challenger space shuttle, Three Mile Island and Bhopal disasters (Dombrowski, 1991, 1995; Ice, 1991; Perrow, 1984; Vaughan, 1997; Winsor, 1990). For the same reasons, those in power are also more likely to favour an episodic rather than a thematic framing of the event.

Making risk decisions

How then, did the community make its decisions about potential risk from the implosion beforehand? If risk perception is the result of making one or more risk judgements, then people’s perceptions can only be properly evaluated once their decision making processes are better understood. Research into risk decision making seeks to quantify the degree to which non-experts or lay people will agree to expose themselves to physical, financial, emotional, or psychological risk. It considers people’s ‘willingness-to-pay’ (either to prevent a loss or for compensation) and how to determine ‘acceptable risk’ (the level of exposure to which people will consent) (McDaniels, Kamlet, and Fischer, 1992). Although economists ‘monetise’ risk, attempting to establish a standardised unit of assessment that they claim would enable ‘rational’ (because uniformly comparable) risk assessment, it is widely felt by others that risks cannot be assessed in financial terms alone (Adams, 1995).

In 1979, Kahneman and Tversky published their seminal critique of expected utility theory, in which they developed an alternative model, ‘prospect theory’, which has continued to be influential in the field of decision science when risk contexts are under consideration. The ‘certainty effect’ they describe as central to their model proposes that when a choice is posed
between a certain gain and a possible loss, the decision-maker is risk-averse, whereas when a choice is posed between a certain loss and a possible gain, the decision-maker is risk-seeking (Kahnemann and Tversky, 1979). This was an influential paper because it recognised that the perception of risk skews decision-making in particular ways that mere cost-benefit analysis (which is what expected utility theory is) cannot account for. It was the pre-cursor of many explorations of the nature of rationality in the face of risk assessment (for example, Perrow, 1984; Freudenburg, 1988; and Sauer, 1992).

Confronted with so much data on which to base risk assessments, most non-experts make the pragmatic, not misguided, decision to use a heuristic approach to decision making (Clarke, 1988). Further, they limit the heuristics they access to ‘representativeness’, ‘availability’, and ‘anchoring and adjustment’ (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). For example, when people draw on the instances that they can recall most easily, and then infer that those instances typify the frequency with which that class of events occurs, they are accessing the availability heuristic. If people can recall only instances in which implosions have been conducted spectacularly and safely (because such has been the case with all the televised instances which they can recall viewing), then they may well assume that all implosions are safe.

Of course, people may choose between using heuristic strategies (such as reliance on expert opinion), and using systematic processes (which entail considered and careful assessments of information, after which they are more likely to make more independent judgments). Trumbo proposes that the choice of decision making strategy hinges on the decision maker’s perception of their own ability to acquire and use information (self-efficacy); their judgement as to whether or not the effort to acquire more information is justified (information sufficiency); and the importance of the situation requiring the information (motivation). His most interesting finding is that in a group of people uncertain as to whether or not they were faced with risk, those who pursued heuristic strategies ended by perceiving less risk, while those who followed a systematic process ultimately perceived greater risk (Trumbo, 1999). Could this explain people’s decisions to attend or not attend the implosion? Among Letters to the Editor, there is very little evidence that those who chose to stay away did so after independent assessment of the risks.

As became apparent in the post-implosion analysis, experts’ judgements may be as prone to error and bias as those of non-experts. Reflecting on a decade of input from social science to risk theory, Slovic points out that ‘risk is inherently subjective’, and that scientists, just like non-scientists, base their estimates on ‘theoretical models whose structure is subjective and assumption-laden, and whose inputs are dependent on judgement’ (1997:23). He argues that
Risk assessment is therefore a subjective exercise, requiring value judgements, for expert and non-expert alike, and that key among the values involved is trust. Slovic shows that there is a strong correlation between high levels of distrust of those who manage risk and a societal perception that levels of risk are unacceptably high, a perception that some argue has become characteristic of Western society (Beck, 1992; Furedi, 1997; Giddens, 1990).

Risk assessment is also performed through a process of social and cultural collaboration, especially in public contexts such as the implosion. Here the media has a role to play. As discussed in Chapter Three, journalist Norman Abjorensen berated himself for not having brought the risk dimensions of the implosion to the public's attention (1997c:C3). Had people been better informed of the risks inherent in the event, they might have made different judgements about attending. Perrow applauds the public's commonsense heuristics, and suggests that that they are informed by a 'social rationality' rather than a 'bounded rationality'. In other words, he says, the public's judgement is not limited (that is, irrational) because of the unknowableness of a risk and its outcomes, but is appropriate to its social context, and appropriately conservative, given the extent to which much about any risk remains unknown and unknowable (Perrow, 1984).

Tyler and Cook's 'impersonal impact hypothesis' posits that information sourced from the mass media is deemed sufficient when risks are not seen as personally relevant, but that when they are, information is more actively pursued from a variety of sources. They suggest that people think of risks as being 'societal' in the former case, and 'personal' in the latter case (Tyler and Cook, 1984). Later studies have also found that people are more likely to engage in risk reduction activity or to pay for such reduction when the risks they face are personal ones rather than environmental ones (Fischer, Morgan, Fischhoff, Nair, and Lave, 1991). It is apparent that Canberrans did not perceive the implosion as a possible personal risk.

Critiques of risk assessment

Shrader-Frechette proposes that both of the traditionally polarised, but dominant, perspectives on risk are misguided and reductionist. She claims that in basing their respective philosophies on equally flawed and deficient epistemologies, both naïve positivists and cultural relativists have it wrong. She suggests that 'all judgments about hazards or risks are value-laden', but that that does not render such judgements entirely relative, as the cultural relativists would have it, nor entirely non-objective, as the naïve positivists claim (1991:220). She argues that where cultural relativists reduce all causes of risk behaviour to social causes, they deprive those assessing risk of a personally constructed ethical dimension to their judgements. On the other
hand, she says, naïve positivists deny the validity of normative scholarship, applied ethics and methodological criticism in risk assessment by claiming that only ‘natural science’ can author objective, value-free, empirically-confirmable hazard assessment. Both groups, she argues, fail to allow for the application of the democratic process in risk identification and risk estimation (1991:218-248). That process can be enacted in the public domain in the discursive spaces provided by the media.

Shrader-Frechette proposes a democratic approach that can withstand criticism from both lay and expert opinion; one in which an appropriate assessment of reliability is made by recourse to similar hierarchies of value judgement as apply in moral philosophy; and one which acknowledges that objectivity does not always require empirical confirmability – that is, that there are commonly understood meanings of objectivity (even-handedness, care to avoid bias). Her position is that ‘some risk judgments are more warranted than others are’ and she proposes that hazard assessments be subject to review by affected lay people as well as the scientific community (1991:220).

A prevalent assumption in the domain of risk research is that exposure to evidence results in knowledge. Winsor concludes her evaluation of the Challenger investigation by noting that, sadly in that instance, ‘shared evidence does not necessarily create shared knowledge’ (1990:13). However, to suggest that the data were ambiguous also allows decision makers to duck personal responsibility, an important ethical dimension to this argument (Dombrowski, 1992). Locating risk assessment problems in the domain of the data risks overlooking its socially constructed nature. Further, the scientific authority in which mathematical risk assessments are cloaked may also disguise what is essentially a subjective and socially-constructed process composed of vague and unspecified definitions, data, measurements and reasoning, in which ‘the Cartesian rationality of the mathematics masks the subjectivity of the assessment’ (Sauer, 1992:246). Indeed, all decision theory may be seen to be premised on the assumption that information available is information applied. It assumes that information is gathered prior to decision making; that it is used in that decision making; that the information provided is examined before more information is sought; that information needs are determined before information is sought; and that irrelevant information is not gathered (Feldman and March, 1981).

Also implicit in much research into risk decision making is that construct of logical positivism, the ‘rational man’ of tort law. This legal and academic construct is a hypothetical standard against which real people’s decisions and actions are assessed. Not only does the terminology reveal the gendered basis of the assumptions about rationality implicit here, it is also indicative of a
deeper epistemological bias against subjective judgement. In critiquing the authority of this model, Sauer (1992) takes a feminist perspective, referring to the work of Belenky et al. (1986) on ‘women’s ways of knowing’ as one example of an approach that goes beyond notions of the social construction of knowledge to explorations of the consequences of that construction’s being gendered. Sauer points out that feminist theorists have made a fundamental contribution to public policy formulation through their efforts to legitimise the role of subjectivity in risk assessment. She also notes that feminist theory has exposed the irrationality of people’s assumptions that science is objective, and that they may not raise a dissenting voice against the prevailing norms of behaviour, be they male or female.

The most powerful of the assumptions on which risk communication is predicated are that people’s perceptions of risk can be modified by education, and that people with higher levels of education will assess risk in ways that more closely approximate to those of experts. In fact, it has been shown that as risk judgements move from the abstract to the personal domain, education levels correlate less and less strongly with risk judgement. Also flawed is the notion that opposition to risk can be successfully addressed by directing education at the problem. Only trust can ameliorate levels of concern, and that is related, not to supply of information, but to the credibility, integrity, and good governance of governments and industries (Bord and O’Connor, 1992). Despite this evidence, a persistent belief in the so-called ‘powerful effects’ of the mass media continues to underpin both the claims and the efforts of much risk communication and public relations. The notion that public information campaigns will result in ‘well-informed and rational publics’ is predicated on this belief (Coleman, 1993:611).

Organisational risk assessment

The role of organisations in making risk choices must also be interrogated in contexts such as the implosion of the Canberra Hospital where an organisation, the ACT Government, was deeply implicated in the design and conduct of the whole occasion. Most psychological studies have been conducted at the individual level, an approach which ‘implies that individual members of the public are the final arbiters of acceptable risk’ (Clarke, 1988:23). Instead, organisational decisions are better explained by two approaches: bureaucratic theory (which asks, ‘What are the standard operating procedures?’) and interorganisational analysis (which asks, ‘What other organisations are involved, and what is the nature of their involvement?’).

However, there are hazards in each of these approaches, as demonstrated by considering the possible application of each in the case of the Canberra Hospital implosion. There is a danger in bureaucratic theory that some risks will be defined as acceptable because that suits the
organisation’s interests. The ACT Government was accused of selecting the implosion method because it suited other purposes than simple cost-efficiency. In multiorganisational contexts where the risks may be ambiguous, interorganisational analysis falls prey to the ease with which less powerful groups may be excluded (and hence their perspectives discounted). Those who had expressed opposition to the implosion, such as the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, felt that their perspectives had been ignored by the ACT Government. Secretary of the union, George Wason, claimed that the tragedy ‘could have been avoided had the ACT Government taken advice from my union that there were safer and more appropriate ways to demolish the old hospital’ (1997:8).

An organisation’s (or individual’s) statements about risk may be read symbolically as indicating that they are to be trusted, or that they are in control (Plough and Krimsky, 1987). Clarke points out that ‘[r]isk assessments represent claims by organisations that their decision making processes are rational and complete. As signals to a society that expects rationality from organisations, they are technologies for constructing order out of ambiguity (1988:30). Formal assessments provide, he argues, not a tool for decision making, but a ‘tool of legitimation’ for the organisation that commissions them. This is most urgent in situations in which a tragic choice has been made, because such choices ‘have to be legitimated to those who will bear the costs of those choices’ (1988:30). Similarly, Plough and Krimsky argue that ‘[w]hen risk communication becomes embedded in the political arena, it is less about risks per se than about responsibility or accountability for certain events’ (1987:6). At the conclusion of the inquest into the hospital implosion the ACT coroner, Shane Madden, made it clear that in his opinion civil servants and others had failed in their duty of care to the community by promoting attendance at an event, the safety of which they had no expertise to judge:

Persons in government and a commercial radio station were advocating the attendance of the public at an industrial project which had significant dangers not knowing fully the hazards or consequences that might follow. On any global view of all the evidence it was a total abrogation of responsibility to the safety and well being of the general Canberra community to have adopted such a position. (1999)

Risk management

In a world in which risk abounds and the perception of risk has social and political force, it is not surprising to see the attempt to control risk (and the perception of it) emerge. This attempt takes many forms, but can broadly be considered as ‘risk management’. Risk management is concerned with reducing risk, not balancing costs and benefits (Adams, 1995). In contemporary society, risk management tends to be regarded as an essential element of public relations, equal
to good governance, whereas once it was the proper work of government authorities and regulatory bodies, who identified risk and were then bound to protect the public from its effects by means of legislation, regulation and action.

Calculating the total (social, economic and environmental) cost of certain risks is far more complex than mere cost-benefit analysis allows. In cases where a risk, if realised, can cause ‘higher order impacts’ (that is, have a very costly impact on society) or where the risk event acts as a signal, creating system-wide ripples (that is, has effects that follow on, and may even be suggestive of more to follow), cost-benefit analysis is insufficient as a predictor of ultimate cost (Slovic, 1987:280-285). Had the members of the ACT Government in 1997 anticipated the higher order impacts and powerful signifying effects of the Canberra Hospital’s failed implosion, they may have taken more seriously the advice of those who urged them to consider less spectacular and less risky means of demolition. Sadly, their perception of the risk attached to the venture was distorted by ‘the prism of institutional interests’ (Sapolsky, 1990:90). Not only did members of the Government fail to correctly assess the risks to the public, they also failed to assess the risks to themselves.

For Sue George (and, less publicly, thousands of others) what had been promoted, and participated in, as a celebration was corrupted by its fatal outcome into a nightmare that they bitterly regretted. A contributing factor in the guilt experienced by many Canberra residents who had attended the implosion was the realisation that they had exposed their own children to the risk of the fate that befell Katie Bender. Christine Healy, ACT Disaster Recovery Coordinator, summarised the nature of the calls the counselling hotline had been receiving:

‘Most people said they didn’t sleep very well last night and they can’t stop thinking and talking about the events yesterday. We’re also getting a lot of calls from people there who are feeling insecure, shaky and fearful because it’s dawned on them today that it could have been their family’. (Dickins and Kazar, 1997:3)

Even those who had not been in the audience that day were not immune from the powerful emotional impact caused by imagining such a fate for one’s child. Michael Moore, Independent Member of the Legislative Assembly, spoke in support of the condolence motion proposed by the Government on 27 August 1997:

I was not in Canberra at the time of Katie Bender’s death. In fact, I was in Brisbane on Assembly business, but I had my family with me. My immediate reaction was to look at my young daughter, who is of a similar age to Katie Bender, and try to imagine what the parents and friends of Katie would have felt. Nobody can imagine that kind of tragic circumstance. (Moore, 1997:2482)
Risk realised as disaster

The hospital implosion was certainly framed as a crisis in its aftermath, commentators referring to it most often as a ‘tragedy’ or as a ‘disaster’. While not a crisis on the scale of the Western world’s pre-eminent contemporary disaster, the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre, the implosion’s fatal consequences were nonetheless traumatic and disastrous, both for the Bender family and for the Canberra community. Although the impact of a disaster may well vary with its size and that of the affected community, this study has shown that even a minor disaster can have a traumatic impact on the society in which it occurs.

Furthermore, framing the event as an accidental disaster worked to remove any connection between the outcomes of the event and its human agents, and to create a preferred reading of the implosion that cast it in fatalistic terms such that the outcome could be presented as unforeseen, uncontrollable and unpreventable. As du Gay points out, ‘if social phenomena cease to be recognisable as the products of human action then it is understandable to perceive them as material things, and thus to accept them as inevitable’ (1996:11).

Although du Gay is referring here to the reification of work-induced social alienation, his observation may be applied to the post-implosion process by which the majority of human actors sought to progressively distance themselves from their various roles as engineers of the implosion event. From the Chief Minister to the shot firer, not one voluntarily accepted that his or her actions had contributed to the disaster. One consequence of this distancing was the achievement of the implosion becoming in the public mind a ‘natural’ risk, neither humanly-engineered nor preventable, hence inducing a fatalistic acceptance of its occurrence. Ultimately, only one agent was charged with having been negligent in his actions. In 2001 the shot firer, Rod McCracken, was charged with a breach of occupational health and safety laws and fined $15,000 (Campbell, 2001:1). No other charges were laid.

THE EVENT AS FANTASY

The implosion was also framed in terms borrowed from the literary conventions of ‘fantasy’. As distinct from myth and fairy tale, fantasy is an essentially modern genre, that may be understood as originating in the Romantic pre-disposition towards the non-rational, particularly as manifest in folk traditions (Nikolajeva, 2003:139). While fantasy owes a debt to the characterisation and plot structure of the fairy tale, the two genres can be distinguished by the structure of their spatiotemporal relations. Bakhtin claimed that all literary genres were characterised by unique constructions of time and space, and he coined the term ‘chronotope’ to describe such a
construction (Bakhtin, 1981). In myth and fairytale, the chronotope is utterly removed from the world of the reader, belonging more properly to the time and space of eternity; in fantasy, this is only temporarily the case, and characters and readers alike will necessarily be returned eventually to the space and time of the ‘real’ world (Nikolajeva, 2003:141).

The chronotope of the implosion may be described as fantastic in that the period of 30 minutes or so between the event’s appointed occurrence and its final, aborted, conclusion stands alone in an unreal apposition to the times both preceding and following the event, in which the return to reality is too cruelly felt by the victim’s family and her community. It is a period that was commonly experienced as one of being in suspension, coloured somewhat by the remnants of anticipation and the beginnings of disappointment, with the overall sense being one of confusion. The breach of ontological security had already begun to be experienced as a community-wide cognitive dissonance, as the crowd wondered why the event had not proceeded to plan, so strong was their expectation that it would do so (‘Station staff shaken at abuse over promotion’). In the absence of clearly articulated scientific reasons for the implosion’s failure, fantastic explanations of the magical and the supernatural came rapidly (if temporarily) to the fore in the community’s apprehension of the event: ‘This can’t be true’, ‘Fatal hospital demolition “a freak”’, ‘The girl in the crowd picked out for tragedy’, ‘Why was “baby” Katie called to eternity?’.

In the aftermath of this event, only one member of the community did not return, safely, to the world as it was beforehand: the victim, Katie Bender. Inversely, a fortnight later, following the ‘fantastic’ and freakish landslide at Thredbo, only one victim was returned to the ‘real world’: Stuart Diver. His experience echoing elements of classic fantasy, Diver had voyaged to the underworld and returning unharmed, alone of his companions, to safety.  The event of the landslide, like the event of the implosion, had the inviolate and unquestionable integrity of magic. It also operated in some senses ‘out of time’. If not altogether unseen and unheard, it at least happened in the middle of the night, when the majority of the population was unaware of its occurrence. By contrast, the hospital implosion was keenly scrutinised by all of the 100,000-strong crowd who gathered to watch.

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73 Adding to the mythical qualities of Stuart Diver’s story was the fact that, like Orpheus, he was forced to leave his wife behind in the underworld.
Both events operated to defamiliarise that which had previously been known and understood by their local community. The ‘temporary state of enchantment’ (Nikolajeva, 2003: 153) in which the implosion audience had willingly placed itself was broken by the event’s failure to behave according to the ‘rules’ (‘Blast plan’s failure baffles officials’), and yet, the breaking of rules is central to the performance of fantasy. When the fantastical is revealed, the participants must decide if they accept it or not. In a postmodern fantasy world, characterised by ambiguity and uncertainty, the boundaries between the real and the unreal are blurred and there may be no escape: ‘Implosion team has no answers’, ‘Bosses, experts remain silent’, ‘What went wrong?’ is the wrong question’ (Nikolajeva, 2003: 154).

Bormann proposed that certain recollections of the past, or dreams of the future, may be regarded as ‘fantasy themes’ in ways that reflections on the present may not. When shared with others, fantasy themes that resonate emotionally are adopted enthusiastically and thus gain the commitment of others. In his view, the result is a dramatisation, or ‘rhetorical vision’ that will not only spread more widely, but will also ‘sustain the members’ sense of community … and impel them strongly to action’ (1972:398). The rhetorical activities of Letter writers and journalists may be read as co-constructions of a ‘fantasy’ that explains the events of the implosion. While Bormann was concerned primarily with the rhetorical activities of small groups, engaged in face to face discussion, it seems to me that his theory may equally well be applied to the activities of virtual communities such as the discursive community of the Letters pages of a newspaper.

Bormann describes ‘chaotic and indiscriminate’ situations in which rumours prevail as being ones in which ‘fantasy themes become the main explanatory systems for the events’ (1972:405). The post-implosion writers, whether amateur or professional, would undoubtedly not have agreed that they were dealing in ‘rumour’. Nonetheless, the severe jolt to the community’s ontological security occasioned by this event meant that people’s efforts to make sense of it in retrospect often relied on recourse to archetypal or elemental explanations. It is apparent that a simple recounting of the ‘facts’ of the implosion was felt to be patently insufficient by those who ignored the calls to wait for the due process of an inquest.

Bormann later went on to explore the recurrence of certain fantasy themes: evidence, he claimed, that those themes were shared within communities (1982:294). He cites, as example, the Salem witch hunts, which provided a fantasy type that observers critical of McCarthy’s investigation into communist presence in the United States Government could draw upon. The senator’s activities, in turn, provided a new fantasy type, that of ‘McCarthyism’ which continues to resonate today. As Bormann explains, ‘rhetors interpret the new event as a member of a fantasy type for which a particularly salient fantasy is the exemplar’ (1982:296). The fantasy
type of the witch hunt is one whose enduring power was again in evidence in textual responses to the implosion, as observed by Brian Richards in his Letter to the Editor of 17 July 1997. In the same Letter, he also referred to a second, related, fantasy type in operation – that of the scapegoat. He urged the community to cease their ‘rush to look for scapegoats’, claiming that it was neither fair nor sensitive ‘to create a witch-hunt about the method chosen to demolish the hospital’ (1997:8). As we have seen in Chapter Four, the scapegoat was a popularly applied trope throughout the post-implosion discourse.

THE EVENT AS MYTH

Nikolajeva’s delineations of the complexity of postmodern fantasy were derived from observations of literature, not journalism. It is instructive, therefore, to look at Lule’s analysis of contemporary journalistic narrative in mythological terms. The mythical was to become one of the most influential frames in which the implosion was presented.

Lule, following Barthes, notes the power of the mythical in news stories, observing that the popular appeal of certain stories can only be explained in such terms, and claiming that this appeal is so profound and persistent that certain mythic types can be found recurring again and again in Western news narratives (2001:3-7):

Myth draws upon archetypal figures and forms to offer exemplary models that represent shared values, confirm core beliefs, deny other beliefs, and help people engage with, appreciate, and understand the complex joys and sorrows of human life. (2001:15)

Certain news stories, Lule claims, ‘offer sacred, societal narratives with shared values and beliefs, with lessons and themes, and with exemplary models that instruct and inform’ (2001:18). Further, these stories are ritually repeated, they relate ‘real’ stories, they are shared in the public domain, and they serve to instruct and inform their community. Likewise, Bird and Dardenne argue that ‘[m]yth has meaning only in the telling; cultural themes and values exist only if they are communicated’ (1988:72).

Lule proposes seven ‘master myths’: the victim, the scapegoat, the hero, the good mother, the trickster, the other world and the flood (2001: 21-25). Elements of several of these mythological types can be readily recognised in the news coverage of the Canberra Hospital implosion. He also scans the many purposes that media theory has proposed for the news (to watch over government, to set the public agenda, etc) and adds ‘to enact social dramas’ to the list (2001:35). Borrowing Burke’s concept of ‘social order’ in preference to that of ‘society’, Lule
defines a primary role of news as being 'to enact social dramas that sustain the social order' (2001:36).

The myth of the victim confronts death, turns that death into sacrifice and attempts to 'reconcile people to the seeming randomness of human existence' (Lule, 2001:53). The myth of the victim is commonly conflated with that of the hero, as the celebration of the victim's life makes apparent the extent of society's loss. Lule recalls Jung's observation that stories of victims find their power to resonate in the fact that the victim 'is a symbol of the self' (2001:54). It is only fate, after all, that often separates the victim from any others of his or her community ('Change of plan places Katie in path of disaster'). He also refers to the Freudian conflict between the forces of life and death. The affirmations of the value of the victim's life (the victim as hero, indeed) that are provided in the eulogising that follows the victim's death serve to contradict the apparent meaninglessness of that life as it may have been rendered by the disaster that caused it. 'We tell myths to give meaning to the meaningless and to explain that which cannot be explained', Lule says (2001:59).

For the media, the power of myth-making is its conflation in the public mind with truth-telling. That is its source of authority. In determining the mythological types into which to cast their stories, journalists are able to 'invest their stories with the authority of mythological truth' (Bird and Dardenne, 1988:80). News accounts therefore need to be understood as 'culturally constructed narratives' and certain story-telling devices recognised as integral to that construction (Bird and Dardenne, 1988:67-68). Tuchman refers to the process by which unanticipated occurrences are rendered comprehensible as events in a larger sequence as 'routinising the unexpected' (1973:110). Seen in this light, the 'news' as such is an 'enduring symbolic system' (Bird and Dardenne, 1988:69) that makes use of myth to explain phenomena, to delineate moral and behavioural boundaries, and to entertain and to reassure its audience.

**The Event as Drama**

Like any drama, such rhetorical visions are best sustained when their plot and characters are recognised and validated by their audience. 'A drama to be compelling requires plausibility, action, suspense, and sympathetic characters' (Bormann, 1973:152). In creating the rhetorical vision of the implosion, commentators accessed powerful *dramatis personae* in the Chief Minister as 'architect of this disaster' (George Wason, quoted in Nicholson, 1997a:1) and the child victim as 'angel we never knew' (Kazar, 1997d:2). The 'plot' of the story ran along familiar lines drawn from archetypal stories of disaster, complete with chance, innocence and miraculous escapes. The story features the sort of clear binary oppositions that are so appealing in the
popular search for meaning: life and death; innocence and experience; age and youth; old and new; known and unknown; familiar and foreign; and so on. To borrow Bormann’s term, these binary oppositions could be said to become the ‘explanatory system’ of this particular rhetorical vision (1982: 296).

The dramatic genre to whose characteristics the implosion most closely conforms is the tragedy. Suiter points out that tragedy and disaster are key ingredients of drama, and that drama, in turn, provides the entertainment that is often required ‘to win audiences’ (2001:81). Audiences expect stories of tragedy to be peopled with familiar character types and cultural symbols and to comply with the dramatic requirements of the tragic narrative framework (Kitch, 2003). The implosion story did just that, containing as it did the operations of chance, the inversion of the world as it was expected to be, and the far-reaching and fatal impacts of individual decisions and actions.

If well handled, the artistic representation of tragedy has a powerful emotional appeal. Hume was not the first to observe this phenomenon, drawing on the observations of classical scholars to produce his explication. He noted that the depiction of a tragedy could be appealing in ways that the experience of the actual event could not and that the horror of a tragedy itself may be ameliorated and even rendered somewhat pleasurable by its artful depiction. Hume claimed that ‘the heart likes naturally to be moved and affected. Melancholy objects suit it, and even disastrous and sorrowful, provided they are softened by some circumstance’ (1757).

In art, that circumstance is the viewers’ awareness that they are being presented with a work of artifice: ‘we comfort ourselves, by reflecting, that it is nothing but a fiction’ (Hume 1757). It is discomforting to reflect that in cases of reported disaster, the ‘softening’ circumstance is our personal distance from the Other who suffers the affliction.

Two additional dimensions are described by Hume as further enhancing the appreciation of tragedy: eloquent portrayal and the presentation of the new and unusual. Where the latter has laid the groundwork for the presentation of tragedy, a heightened emotional response is also likely (1757). The promotion of the implosion event as spectacle focused on the novelty of the anticipated sight, and spectators commonly remarked afterwards that that anticipation had primed them to respond to the event, regardless of its outcomes.

**THE EVENT AS BANAL, ‘NON-EVENT’**

Immediately following the event, while most people were still unaware of the child’s death, the crowd’s initial response to the failed implosion was one of disappointment. Some jeered at the
local radio station staff who had been conducting the outside broadcast of the event, ‘Nice promotion, fellas’ (Wallace, 1997:2). Far from an entertainment, this event had been a ‘flop’, just another failure, a community occasion whose purpose had back-fired, resulting in disillusionment rather than the intended increased social cohesion. As people were made aware that the implosion had resulted in a child’s death, however, that disappointment was displaced by a more profound sense of anger at what had happened.

One of the unintended consequences of the implosion was the significance that attached to its failure due to its tragic outcome. This created an unlooked-for and unwelcome degree of attention on the ACT Government, particularly on its Chief Minister, Kate Carnell. Despite its extensive promotion of the event beforehand, the Government would not have wanted or expected the event’s impact to be so far-reaching. It more likely that it would have preferred the event to have no consequences at all, after the fashion of the archetypal postmodern event:

> Events are kept strictly separate and their autonomy is closely guarded; they should not, they do not affect the events of tomorrow and the deeds committed next door. They are what they are: episodes, occurrences with no history and no follow-up, one-off happenings. (Bauman, 1992:30)

Hage, however, takes issue with anthropology’s unreflexive association of the ‘event’ with ‘contingency’, and in doing so, questions the pervasive epistemological assumption that events are *not* part of a larger structure (2005). Thus he challenges us to re-conceptualise the event, not as contingent, but as a banal occurrence, and hence, not as exceptional, but as routine. This of course, is a more profound challenge to people’s sense of ontological security as the traumatic event cannot be dismissed as extra-ordinary, but must be accommodated within their sense of the possible and even of the everyday.

As an entertainment that produced no ‘history’, the implosion would have been a soon-forgotten ‘success’. Instead, the Government soon found itself faced with a community of Letter writers and talkback radio callers who strongly resisted any construction that stripped the implosion of all meaning and significance other than momentary entertainment. For a majority of them, the event’s ‘consequences’ mattered deeply, as did its precedent conditions – and their search for why the implosion failed, who was to blame, and what should happen next was interpretive work that insisted on restoring a social and moral context to this singular event. Such a search intuitively recognises that this is not a contingent event, but an occurrence that can be understood if only its place in a larger social context can be perceived.
CONCLUSIONS

The failure of the hospital to be demolished according to plan was emblematic of more wide-ranging, popularly-perceived failures of science and engineering, which can themselves be read as evidence, and signifiers, of human fallibility. When such a failure results, not merely in embarrassment, but in tragedy, the error is compounded and many more people will feel drawn into the emotional sphere of the event’s aftermath. Ultimately, an event like the implosion brings members of its audience face to face with their own human vulnerability, reminding them that in questions of life and death, they are, in the final analysis, helpless. When such a challenge to their ontological security is experienced simultaneously by large numbers of people, many will engage collaboratively in whatever communal attempts are made to restore meaning to their world. Chapters Three and Four illustrated the various forms such meaning-making activity took for the implosion audience (discursive, emotional, cognitive, moral and active). This chapter has shown the enduring power of archetypal frames of reference to provide the interpretive scaffolding on which such meaning-making activity is conducted.

Journalists are key performers of the work of restoring ontological security, and in doing so, they make use of the same frames that lay people do. As Tucker has suggested, each frame functions to define the problems inherent in the event, to diagnose the causes of those problems, to evaluate the actions taken in response to them, and finally, to prescribe solutions (1998:145). Thus frames serve a heuristic purpose in that they provide a structure within which a sequence of cognitive work focused on problem-solving can be meaningfully carried out. In this chapter I have argued that no single frame is sufficiently comprehensive to prevail over all other possible ways of seeing the event. Some frames overlap, such as the frames of ritual and sacrifice, while others are contradictory, such as the frames of carnival and tragedy. All, however, may be considered as operating within a broader structure, or meta-frame, of drama.

Risk did not sit comfortably among the dramatistic frames that provided a repertoire of ‘interpretive shortcuts’ to the implosion audience. This chapter has argued that a failure to engage beforehand in the necessary risk assessment at both the personal and the political level left a legacy of guilt in the community, and that that failure is partly explained by the widespread subscription to the framing of the event as entertainment. However, the fact that even before Katie Bender’s tragic death the event had been framed as sacrifice and as ritual lent it more readily to being framed as ‘disaster’ in its aftermath.

Part of the deep shock experienced by the implosion audience at the news that a child had been killed during the event lay in its unexpectedness, in the sense that such a thing ‘was not meant
to happen’. More than one fantasy was destroyed along with the hospital – fantasies of control over the environment, of technological supremacy, of human capability. As Radstone argues, ‘fantasy scenarios underpin the “dominant cultural idioms” through which nations transform events into meaningful experience’ and it is when these fantasies are ‘punctured’ that cultural groups experience the most profound shock (2002:458). The Canberra community readily subscribed to the ‘fantasy’ of disaster in interpreting the implosion, because ‘disaster’ was the most salient type against which the event could be mapped. It did not matter that it was limited in scale when its features complied in every other respect to those of the archetypal disaster.

Rather than debating the competing claims of alternative frames to interpretive purchase on the event, I have depicted in this chapter a range of approaches that people took to its explanation. What is noteworthy is the speed with which people moved to seek explanation, and that their meaning-making efforts were performed collaboratively in public discourse. Ultimately, however, despite being encouraged to share in the responsibility for the tragedy, people would show a preference for episodic and contingent explanations rather than thematic and routine ones, indicating a reluctance to accept any such personal responsibility.
Conclusion

The event of the hospital implosion was planned as a spectacular performance. Instead, it caused a tragic death. The shift from what had been anticipated to what eventuated precipitated a significant degree of ontological turmoil and discursive response from the people in whose name the event had been conducted – the people of Canberra.

This thesis began with an exploration of materiality. It began, as the event began, with a public building being prepared for demolition. However, as a site of profound identity-shaping experiences this building was felt to be part, not only of the urban landscape, but of the very social fabric of the city. The hospital was not merely situated, but was an agent within a complex web of social and cultural relationships that bound people to the building as a place with particular claims on their sense of self, of community and of place. In the tragic drama that was played out in this event and its aftermath, the hospital was an entity that was framed as having played a performative role. The frequent use of organic metaphors to describe the hospital emphasise that it was seen as having a living role in Canberra’s story. Its closure and proposed demolition were therefore contentious and the ACT Government sought a way that might minimise the socially destabilising effects of continued popular antagonism towards the project.

Canberra people had appropriated and domesticated the hospital in their imaginations, incorporating it in their private worlds of experience, making it integral to their identities and their histories. Where a key dimension of the domestic in architecture is the control its inhabitants exercise over its spaces and the freedoms they have within its walls (Dant 1999:70), such control is not extended to the users of public facilities. When the local government asserted its proprietorial rights over the hospital, people were rudely awakened to the fact of having no personal ‘control’ over it. Despite its holding the most significant memories for them, the hospital was not immune from demolition. The anguish many people felt over the loss of the hospital was thus intrinsically linked to feelings of identity loss.

The event of the implosion was presented to its ‘community’ as a catalytic event – it was promised as a salve to a wounded polity that had felt itself damaged by social and political change. Instead, the audience that expected entertainment witnessed an accident in which they were made to feel complicit. In this thesis I have shown that this reversal of expectation precipitated not only shock, grief and guilt, but also a widespread state of ontological instability that many people sought to address by engaging in a public search for what sense could be
made of an occurrence that resisted meaning. At the same time, this was a process of restoring assumptions that had been violated by the traumatic accident – assumptions on which people's sense of themselves and their world had rested. I have also shown that in this instance local journalists operated not only as the professional community that is their everyday working identity, but as a local, shared-experience community, collaborating or co-producing with their readers the work that was required to produce this event's meaning. Together, they performed the textualisation of the implosion that is embodied in the public and private documents, email invitations and newspaper announcements, anecdotes, reminiscences and evidence presented at inquest, protest posters and petitions, speeches in the ACT Legislative Assembly and articles and Letters published in *The Canberra Times* that form the empirical sources for this study.

This thesis has considered the event and its aftermath not only as cultural artefacts in their own right, but as catalysts for social and cultural action. It has charted a community's attempts to discursively reconstruct a fractured body politic. It has also traced the vector of the implosion accident and reproduced and analysed some of the textual products its movement generated. Creating analytical vectors of my own, I have viewed the event and its participants from a range of perspectives and have created the body of work that forms this thesis by applying strategies of theoretical speculation to those perspectives. As a discursive public comprises all those who anywhere, anytime engage with a text or texts that assume their readership, the public of this study can be understood to comprise, by extension, the writer and readers of this thesis, for we, too, engage with the texts produced in the prelude to and the aftermath of the event. By sharing insights into this event and people's responses to it, this thesis makes a contribution, not only to analytical discourse, but also to the performance of commemoration. In doing so, it enacts a commitment to socially-engaged research.

Certain tropes that are characteristic of the implosion event are reflected in my choice of methodological strategies. For example, the trope of the spectacle permeates both the event and its textualisation, and a key mode of analysis of this spectacular event is surely speculation. The implosion as anticipated in popular imagination failed to materialise, producing instead a failure of realisation. Visual imagery characterises the analysis just as surely as it did the event itself: points of view, viewing points, perspectives, frames, angles, vision, illustration, images, imaginings, what was looked for and what was overlooked. In the public sphere, prior to 13 July 1997, the officially-sanctioned power of the event's place in the Canberra community's imagination lay in its spectacularity. The spectacular enacts and is therefore dramatic. It was this aspect of the event that was promoted and which all but silenced any other voices. Some of those voices quietly made themselves heard, however, insisting on the personal significance of what had become a political event. The private gathering at the Yacht Club on 13 July held by
nurses to commemorate their former workplace (Mapstone, 1997:4) mirrored the undoubtedly more lavish and certainly higher-profile function being hosted by the Chief Minister in a hotel on the other side of the lake.

In gathering around the lake to watch the implosion, Canberrans configured themselves as ‘audience’. Attracted to the event by extensive promotion, it was inevitable that large numbers of people would respond to the Government’s invitation, and expecting to be entertained, form an audience for the implosion. (Afterwards, that participation would be felt by many as an inescapable complicity in the event, and particularly, in its tragic outcome.) The object of their attention (on centre stage, as it were) was the hospital, ideally situated for this purpose on the end of a peninsula jutting out into the lake, visible from many vantage points elsewhere on the lake foreshores. For this audience, response was integral to the performance of their role(s).

However, their practices as audience cannot be considered in isolation from those media practices that were necessarily integrated with theirs (Couldry, 2004). Their awareness of themselves as ‘audience’ and their understanding of what response was expected of them, was a mediated awareness, achieved by the journalistic practices of engagement that create dialogic relationships between media outlets and their audiences. ‘Response’ was firstly practiced as attendance, signifying public endorsement of the significance of the event; and secondly as reaction to the event’s fatal outcome. This thesis has shown that the responses which this audience made to this event were informed by the same social, cultural and historical contingencies that shaped the event itself. People’s post-accident sense-making was necessarily framed by the ontological and epistemological contexts in which they and the event were situated.

Even before the implosion took place, the community’s imaginative responses to it had been divided between pleasurable anticipation and uncomfortable disapproval, expressing an ambiguity that was heightened, rather than lessened, by the aborted demolition. From that time on, the fatally wounded child, Katie Bender, assumed equal symbolic significance to the damaged hospital building in the public’s imagination. Indeed, a powerful, if tentatively articulated, metonymy emerged in the post-implosion discourse, in which the bodies of the two victims, hospital and child, may be read as standing one for the other. The metonymic relationship between the hospital body, the child’s body and the civic body is one of the central observations of this thesis, a metonymy highlighted by the repeated public anthropomorphism of the hospital. After her death, the reciprocal fates suffered by hospital and child ensured that Katie Bender moved in to that ritual place occupied prior to the implosion by the hospital. The hospital’s destruction mattered much less to its public once it was apparent that the act of
‘sacrifice’ had resulted in the death of a child, and the community’s formerly expressed desire to commemorate the hospital was transformed into arguments about the necessity of memorialising the child.

There was a pivotal point at the moment of the implosion – a moment Schudson (1992) refers to as a ‘flashpoint’ – which was also the moment of Katie’s death. It was the point at which the chronotope was altered, the frame re-framed, the event transformed from spectacle to disaster and at which the community’s response turned from celebration to mourning, from pleasure to guilt and sorrow. It was an irrevocable and fatal moment at which a situational shift occurred that transformed the meaning of the implosion event. Some in the audience felt themselves likewise transformed from bystanders to witnesses, some describing it as feeling that they had been made unwitting spectators at an execution. That meaning was necessarily situated in ‘specific social and cultural practices’ (Gee, 1999:63) that thenceforward entailed practices of mourning rather than practices of celebration.

The voices that are re-voiced within the pages of this thesis are, for the most part, local ones. They tend to avoid making universalising claims, preferring the specificities of what is known via their own experience, thus producing a phenomenology of responses, a series of petit récits, not because their authors are incredulous towards any grand or metanarratives that would explain events for them, but precisely because those reassuring metanarratives seem to have been obliterated along with the hospital. If the main rhetorical function of story-telling prior to the event had been to validate the hospital’s part in Canberra’s (and Canberrans’) histories, afterwards it became the means by which people commemorated and rationalised their part in its destruction.

Through the performance of memory, the past can be ever-present. Prior to its demolition, significant restorative memory work was done on the hospital’s past to retrieve an identity that seemed to have been lost since the time of its closure. The contested nature of those memories was reinvigorated rather than ameliorated by the tragic event of the implosion, however, as debates about the buildings’ social usefulness gave way to debates about the implications of the implosion as a socially-constructed occurrence. The event’s past was negotiated in the aftermath of the implosion by means of commemorative discourse whose purpose was to establish a unique chronotope in which that time and place could continue to exist in the present – a chronotope of ‘present pasts’ (Huyssen, 2000:21).

This thesis has shown not only that a catalytic event precipitates a rich field for cultural analysis, but that broad cultural significance is to be found not only in the far-reaching events that are the
subject of grand narratives. The lineaments of a culture are reported (or given expression) in even the least of its artefacts, just as the unique characteristics of individuals are encoded in their DNA (which is expressed by reporter genes). In this thesis I have shown that small-scale phenomena and petit récits re-pay careful investigation because they convey the same truths and prove equally valid as subjects of social research as those events that are writ large on our cultural horizons. Although it may be tempting to read the implosion as a simple event that, through a tragic complication in its plot, became a complex drama, this study has shown that even a ‘simple’ event is never uncomplicated.

In this thesis I have demonstrated that the death of a single child and the demolition of a couple of unremarkable buildings in a city populated by fewer than 300,000 people may be as significant for that community, and as valid an object of study, as were the deaths of 3,000 people occasioned when two of the world’s most highly visible and iconic buildings, in a city of 19 million people, were destroyed. The narratives that were created in the aftermath of each event do not differ in kind, only in number and scope. The whole implosion story may be but a petit récit when set alongside the grand narratives that continue to be produced about the events of 11 September 2001. However, this thesis contends that it matters just as much – not only to those involved, but to anyone interested in the myriad ways in which cultural significance makes itself apparent in small-scale as well as large-scale events.

This thesis is informed and enlivened by a powerful kinesis. The event which is its subject was transformed into a tragedy in a single, fatal stroke. That movement precipitated waves of further motion, like the ripples that spread out from a rock thrown into a pond. The implosion sent out cultural shock waves, it reverberated and its audience vibrated synchronously with it, as if the human and non-human players in this event had all been tuned to the same pitch. Indeed, it is apparent in this study that the body of empirical data reverberates with the echoes and vibrations of the traumatic event that engendered it. When examined retrospectively, even materials produced beforehand appear saturated with the significance of the fact of the accident. The pivotal moment of the implosion marks the time at which the world described in this study was irrevocably altered. The methodological trope that sustains this study is that of the vector, a trajectory that destroys, but at the same time, opens up for inspection the social fabric through which it has sliced. That same movement then invited communal attempts at restoration and restitution of the damaged body politic.

The post-implosion discourse articulates many of post-modernity’s characteristic concerns with identity, community, history, memory and power. The hospital was a modernist structure that was more sturdy than had been appreciated, and like modernism itself, this edifice of the past
proved surprisingly resistant to attack from the present, resisting its planned demolition and resulting in only partial destruction. Despite being subjected to an over-engineered demolition, its de-construction was a spectacular failure.

As an orchestrated collision between past and future, the implosion was intended to enable an instantaneous obliteration of the past in order to create a site of future opportunities. However, it was a site whose heteroglossic possibilities had been compromised or foreclosed by the imposition of a pre-ordained future. The ‘imagined geography’ (to borrow Said’s concept) of the Acton Peninsula had been re-imagined by those in power as a site free for re-colonisation, fit for new purposes, a blank. The imaginings that comprised the acts of memory of those who held the hospital dear were discounted and ignored in these calculations. ‘Always mediated, cultural memory is the product of fragmentary personal and collective experiences’ (Hirsch and Smith, 2002:5). The verbal and visual responses that form the empirical data considered in this thesis are thus the beginnings of what would become Canberra’s cultural memory or ‘received history’ of the implosion – ‘both what happened and how it is passed down to us’ (Young, 1997:41).

The cultural artefact of the newspaper provides a forum for journalists and others to present evidence of the trauma to the public. The readers of their stories are invited to share imaginatively in the worlds they present. In doing so, they ‘perform an act of memory that is potentially healing, as it calls for political and cultural solidarity in recognising the traumatised party’s predicament’ (Bal, Crewe, and Spitzer, 1999:x). Such recognition of the ‘predicament’ of the other, the sufferers of trauma, is also an act of affect, an act of empathy such as Rorty called for in exhorting people to extend their imaginative group identification beyond those who are comfortably close to those who are uncomfortably distant (1989:189-198).

In the aftermath of the implosion, Canberra people were challenged to empathise with, and enfold into their sense of self, those whose personal experience of trauma located them at the far reaches of human emotional experience, which in Douglas’s terms, renders them a ‘danger’ to the rest of their community (1966). The challenge to others was to imagine themselves into that liminal state in which they are proximate to death. The realisation that Katie’s death could have been their own or their child’s was the cognitive and emotional vector along which they were accelerated into that liminal space. In July 1997, that realisation cut through people’s sense of ontological security, temporarily rupturing it; but also providing an avenue for empathic identification with the Bender family in recognition of shared human vulnerability.

In this thesis I have shown that Letters to the Editor are capable of sustaining the production of meaningful cultural narratives as their writers and readers collaborate in an ongoing co-
constructed dialogue-in-print. While acknowledging that the Letters to the Editor published in any newspaper can only ever be partially representative of all those submitted (and that the principles on which that selection is made are at the editor’s discretion) and that they can thus never be truly representative of the full range of possible public opinions on any issue, the Letters page is nonetheless an accessible site, a visible discursive space, for both writers and researchers. At the same time, this study has shown that journalists access the same repertoire of cultural resources that the Letters writers do. Mindful therefore of avoiding generalisations about ‘the writer’, this study has sought to explore the performance of response as a product of the cultural labour of both lay and professional contributors to this discourse.

This thesis has dealt with fragmentation and rupture, both material and cultural. It has explored failure insofar as the promoted event, the subject of the imagined spectacle, failed in all respects to follow the script that had been prepared for it. This event was ‘out of control’, it was transgressive, it did not respect the boundaries that had been set for it. The traditional reaction to an occurrence that fails to fit into established categories is the ‘taboo’ reaction (Douglas, 1966; Horton, 1970). An event that behaves in an aberrant fashion, disobeying the laws of physics and of narrative, is thus itself a taboo event. Memorialising can be seen in this context as an activity of epistemological re-creation intended to restore the world to its pre-event status, thereby renewing society. Tragedy also creates a ‘world of “liminal” space, a space between order and disorder, a realm of disturbing, but also potentially fruitful disintegration of familiar boundaries and identities’ (Cole, 1985:10). It is thus ‘a pivotal point for assessing competing cultural myths’ (Goldzwig and Dionisopoulos, 1986:189). Several powerful frames containing mythical elements were drawn upon by those attempting to interpret the meaning of the hospital implosion. In the aftermath of the event, the full extent of its mythic force made itself felt. Katie Bender’s accidental death forced Canberra people to acknowledge signifying dimensions of the event that had always been there as potential mythic energy. The detonation of the explosives, and their fatal outcome, released that energy, catalysing it into its full, kinetic expression. The mythic force thus unleashed was so powerful that very little of the post-implosion discourse is untouched by it.

Throughout the implosion story, the objects of loss – the hospital, the ways of life of its workers, Canberra’s past – were all idealised. Even the child victim was idealised through the reified grief and guilt that comprised her public eulogising. Only Cordelia Hull in her imaginative exploration of the similarities between Katie Bender and her own daughter gently nudged her readers toward a fuller, more rounded, and thus more human, view of the child at the centre of the communal mourning (1997:C3). None of the reminiscences of the hospital featured stories of medical mismanagement or mishap, none of the workers remembered times of unhappiness in
their employment; indeed, the picture of Canberra’s past as it centred on the hospital was characterised in these memoirs as unproblematically utopian. There were no stories that contested any of these representations, but we must assume that among the implosion audience, there would have been people who had those stories to tell, but who kept silent. The public, ‘official’ vision of the hospital as benign public institution went uncontested. However, the implosion unleashed a latent disquiet that must have been simmering in the population, for the post-implosion discourse expresses broader and more deep-seated social and political dissatisfaction than the tragedy or the loss of the hospital alone might have precipitated.

Regardless of their scale, disasters, accidents and misfortunes cause ontological breaches that require narrative work for their repair. Even though this narrative work may be extensive and collaborative, it does not guarantee resolution – a painful and incomplete incorporation into a community’s history and identity may be the most that can be achieved. Technical explanation may be a necessary part of this work, but it is not sufficient. The implosion certainly left a legacy in the public domain of a heightened awareness of the need for stringent risk assessment and procurement processes. At the same time, I have not come across anyone who was in Canberra on 13 July 1997, who, when learning the subject of this thesis, did not spontaneously recall vivid details of the day regardless of whether or not they had participated in the event, indicating that in the private domain the implosion’s legacy remains a powerfully affective one. The wound may have healed, but a scarred body politic remains.

Ultimately, however, the implosion was a social drama that sustained the social order rather than threatened it. Considerable work was required to achieve that outcome. In some senses, the event had been ‘prescribed’ for the community.74 As the leaked minutes of the ACT Liberal Party strategy weekend showed (see Figure 2) and the inquest confirmed, the Government had determined that the event would have curative properties that would benefit those who took part. A prescription confirms the hegemonic relationship between the agent who prescribes and the subject in receipt of the prescription. Although some challenged this prescription (and thus, were understood to be challenging the government of the day), the majority of citizens accepted what they were told and almost one third of their number complied with the direction to attend the event. After the event, rather than prescribing responses, certain reactions were proscribed in the public domain.

74 Prior to her election to the ACT Legislative Assembly, Kate Carnell was a pharmacist.
In this thesis I have shown that in the aftermath of the implosion, the event was swiftly reframed in negative terms as sacrifice, disaster, tragedy and risk, and that this was enabled by the community’s ready appropriation of pre-existing, archetypal, mythic narratives. Further, it has been my observation that despite its modest scale, this accident nonetheless conforms culturally and sociologically with the paradigms of disaster behaviour as delineated by theorists who have developed their models through the observation of large-scale disasters and crises. I propose that it was the Canberra community itself, rather than any external agent, who determined that this event ought to be framed as a disaster. Framing the implosion as ‘tragedy’ provided explanation at the expense of accountability for it placed the event in the realm of the supernatural, over which no human agents have control. By promoting an ideologically-contrived construction of ‘community’ the Government and the media insisted that responsibility for the event was shared but that no-one was to blame. Eventually, even the courts found this to be the case.

The chronotope of the implosion is the unique time-space in which/where it occurred and was transformed. Its trajectory moved not only through space, but also through time, and along that vector transformations became apparent. The catalytic nature of the event caused a shift in time and space that was necessarily reflected in a semiotic shift. As the event was transformed from carnival to spectacle to accident to tragedy, so the implosion audience was transformed from crowd to spectators to witnesses to authors. In exploring practices of authoring, this thesis has also considered the related practices of authorising by which certain voices and certain stories achieved authority. A struggle for authority emerged in the post-implosion dialogue as the ‘authorised’ version of events was contested on the pages of The Canberra Times. The implosion caused certain spatio-temporal and ontological relationships between ‘place’ and ‘public’ to be altered, and those changes were felt as profoundly unsettling.

Like comedy, the chronotope of tragedy is a time-space of suspension and inversion, but unlike comedy, its outcomes are irreversible. When the world behaves oppositionally and no longer ‘makes sense’ meaning has to be sought or made anew. In the chronotope of the implosion, time did not behave as it ought, predictions were not borne out, things did not ‘go to plan’. Material that was meant to go down stayed up, and material that was meant to stay in went out. This disobedient movement created its own unresolved dialectic, inherent with tension. There was no resolution and no ‘closure’. There was no ‘restoration’ of the ontological and social
There was only the resumed normal passage of time, communal efforts at sense-making and the clearing of evidence from the site. On the Letters page of the newspaper, reflecting as it must only current concerns, other issues became more pressing. The paper and its readers moved on, leaving no evidence that the meaning-work that people had undertaken in that public space had made any difference, either personally or politically. The discursive space that hosted the inscriptions that formed the empirical data for this research was only temporarily occupied.

It is to be wished that discursive response can make a difference or bring about a change. However, the ideal of a utopian community nurturing its members through trauma to restored good health may eventually prove to be no more than a fantasy, revealed as an ultimately impossible ‘kind of social totality’ (Warner, 2002:49). Although it is an appealing illusion, just as ‘community’ is, it is the idea, or the possibility, of resolution that appeals. It is apparent that it is in the performance of post-trauma intersubjectivity that individuals may find resolution or private meaning rather than in the idealised but unstable entity of ‘community’. Discursive activity may serve other purposes than restoration and a community that is discursively constructed may need to exist for only as long as such a construction is felt to be necessary by its members. What was discursively constructed in the aftermath of the implosion was not a comfortable, or even restored, ‘utopian community’, but a publicly expressed and practiced intersubjectivity.

As the product of extensive cultural labour on the parts of those who produced it, the implosion discourse, of which this thesis is now a part, stands as a significant corpus of commemorative work. As such it is evidence of an engaged polity – one that transcended the passive role prescribed for it of an audience as consumers of entertainment to become, through its own labour, agents, creators and performers of meaning. It is in this cultural performance that the true practice of ‘community’ can be discerned.

75 Almost five and a half years after the implosion, on 29 November 2002, Zora Bender was interviewed on ABC TV’s Stateline program. Her words were reported in The Canberra Times the following day: ‘No matter what is paid, how much you give, it does not, it not pay what we lose. We lose everything already’ (Canberra Times, 2002b:1).


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