

Deer departed: a study of the news coverage of the death of the Exmoor Emperor

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Abstract. This paper explores the socio-political symbolism which underpinned the UK's mainstream national press coverage of the death of a red deer stag known as the Exmoor Emperor during the autumn of 2010. It employs both qualitative and quantitative methods of content analysis, and draws upon interviews with journalists and public figures involved in the telling of this story in order to suggest reasons behind the significant public and media interest in a narrative which had no ostensible material impact upon a general readership. In doing so, it proposes that journalists, journalism students and journalism educators might significantly benefit from viewing the meaning of apparently trivial news stories through the frames of broader contexts and subtexts, and that such an approach might prove more enduringly useful than a pedagogical focus upon more ephemeral technicalities.

The actor-comedian Steve Coogan in his online sitcom *Mid Morning Matters* (2011) and in the guise of his celebrated alter ego, North Norfolk Digital radio presenter Alan Partridge, imagined a scenario in which Britain's "last osprey egg is stolen and scrambled for a Russian oligarch's breakfast – who eats it without one iota of remorse." Coogan appears to be satirising the furore which had engulfed the UK news media just a few months earlier when another representative of Britain's native fauna had been reported slaughtered, apparently at the hands of a wealthy foreign national.

On 27 October 2010 the second issue of *The Independent's* sister paper *i* chose the shooting of a deer as its cover story. The story of the killing of the stag reputed to have been Britain's largest wild animal and known as the Exmoor Emperor recurred in the pages of the UK's national press for nearly a fortnight. One

might reasonably inquire why, in the words of Sarah Stride, the General Manager of the British Deer Society, “it appealed as a story on so many levels.” Did the fate of the Emperor stag symbolise the demise of Britain’s greatness at a time of national austerity – coming exactly a week after the publication of the British Government’s Comprehensive Spending Review? Might the later reports of the creature’s resurrection suggest wistful dreams of better times ahead? Was this just another animal tale so beloved by the readership of Middle England? Or might this story’s popularity lie in its negotiation of contemporary concerns within a narrative archetype?

Methodology

This paper will seek to examine the reasons for the success of the story of the Exmoor Emperor across the mainstream national press in the UK. This paper first presents the narrative structure of the story as it appeared in the British press; it will then look at the journalistic commentaries which appeared in the press in relation to this story; and it will go on to explore the recurrent themes in the reportage of this story. This study will finally examine the views of politicians and journalists involved in the story as to why this narrative proved so popular, and will ask how journalism students and educators might learn from this kind of case study.

This study is based upon a survey of the 59 stories related to the death of the Exmoor Emperor which appeared in the British news media (specifically in the *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Independent*, *Guardian*, *Sun* and *Times* – and their Sunday stable mates – as well as *BBC News Interactive*) between 25 October and 16 November 2010. These newspapers and the *BBC News* website were selected as core institutions of the UK’s mainstream national print/online news media outlets. The statistics resulting from a preliminary quantitative analysis of these stories were collated according to the following criteria: number of stories featuring in each publication; number of occurrences in each publication of key recurrent metaphors and narrative structures used to frame the accounts (these comprised references to celebrity, literary, cinematic and mythical/legendary antecedence, to the specific narrative genres of mystery and whodunit, and to the economic or monetary value of the stag or the cost of hunting); and the number of occurrences in each publication of the main terms used to describe the unknown killer of the stag in question (wealthy, mysterious, stranger, outsider, or foreigner).

The quantitative analysis showed that the story had featured most extensively in the *Telegraph* (10 articles) and *The Times* and *Mail* (9 each), following by *The Guardian* (8), the *Express* (7), *The Independent* (6), *BBC News Interactive* (4) and *The Sun* and *Mirror* (3 each). It demonstrated that the most prolific framing metaphors were related to whodunit and mystery genres (17 and 11 occurrences respectively), mythology (17 occurrences) and celebrity (10 occurrences). Every publication included references to economic and monetary value, with by far the highest number featuring in *The Telegraph*. The most popular descriptor for the stag’s killer were ‘foreign’ and ‘wealthy’ (16 occurrences each), followed by ‘outsider’ and ‘mysterious’ (4 each): *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian* included the most references to foreignness (5 each), but the latter paper deployed the term ironically or meta-journalistically; *The Guardian* also contained the most allusions to the perpetrator’s wealth (6), while *The Telegraph* contained none. These themes were selected because of their clear recurrence throughout these stories. The qualitative analysis, which closely investigated these narratives at the level of symbolic discourse, was framed by the results of the quantitative analysis; that is to say, areas of thematic significance demonstrated by the quantitative analysis were focussed upon in the qualitative analysis.

This study also draws upon a series of interviews conducted in November 2010 with five politicians and eight journalists involved in this story. One of the journalists interviewed represented a redtop tabloid newspaper, one represented the BBC’s broadcast news, five represented ‘quality’ newspapers and one represented the specialist interest periodical *Shooting Times*. Five of the eight journalists interviewed requested anonymity: they will be referred to hereafter as RTJ (redtop journalist) and QJ1, QJ2, QJ3 and QJ4 (quality newspaper journalists 1, 2, 3 and 4).

Theoretical underpinnings

Fiske (1989, pp.293-6) reminds us that the “textual devices that control the sense of news are all embedded in a narrative form” and that “stories are prewritten [...] their meanings are already in circulation.” The journalist’s art as such is to recognise and repackage traditional or established narratives. There are no new stories; it is all old news. Thus McQueen (1998, p.101) notes that news stories “develop the narrative qualities of soap opera or epic sagas.” There is nothing particularly new in this idea: Propp (1968) demonstrated how traditional folk tales follow similar structural models and employ recurring formal elements, and Propp’s work has been applied widely to fiction and reportage. Indeed, the recurrent narratives of news produc-

tion can be seen from psychoanalytic as well as purely narratological perspectives: Anslow (2008) has, for example, witnessed how Jungian archetypes can be seen resurfacing time and again in the news coverage offered by the redtop press. Charles (2004; 2011) has examined how news stories concerning native British fauna reflect both traditional narratives (from Little Red Riding Hood to Beatrix Potter and Bram Stoker) and urgent contemporary concerns (from hysteria about immigration and paedophilia, to tensions between urban and rural perspectives, fears of terrorism and anxieties over the War on Terror).

News accounts are, as Bird and Dardenne (1988, p.73) suppose, constructed according to ‘news values’ which come down to no more than the symbolic systems of “culturally specific story-telling codes”. When, therefore, trainee journalists adopt or learn these ‘news values’ one might suggest that they might also usefully be aware of the narratological or mythological structures which underpin them. The assumption and deployment of such values may for the most part represent an unconscious process, but it is not one without responsibilities. As Bird and Dardenne (1988, p.70) suggest, “news can act like myth” and it is through myth that “members of a culture learn values.”

Anderson (1991, pp.35-36) witnesses within the processes of the production and consumption of what he describes as the “newspaper-as-fiction” (and therefore the blurring of mythical and material realities) the broader development of a mythical discourse of nationhood. Through the homogenising effects of its mass media manifestations, discourse is, for Anderson (1988, p.46), reified into the mythic fact of nationhood: “the convergence of capitalism and print technology [...] created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which [...] set the stage for the modern nation.”

Wodak et al. (2009, p.22) argue that nationhood “is “constructed and conveyed in discourse, predominantly in narratives of national culture.” The impact of such symbolic-discursive systems is societally seminal. As Wodak (1996, p.12) asserts, “institutional reality is produced and reproduced through discourse.” It therefore seems a matter of some importance that journalists become conscious of the processes and responsibilities involved in this balancing of fictional or mythical structures and their avowed (albeit perhaps naïve) ideals of objectivity, so that they might at least come to terms with what is for Bird and Dardenne (1988, p.78) a defining dilemma or anxiety of the profession: “journalists find themselves poised between [...] the demands of ‘reality’ [...] and the demands of narrativity.”

Harcup (2004, p.91) makes a similar point when he observes that it is inevitable that “part of the journalist’s job is to entertain as well as to inform.” Here however he cautions that “the trick – for both the journalist and audience – is to recognise the difference between the two.” Toolan (1988, p.236) also emphasizes the need for readers to remain alert to this situation: “we can and sometimes should ‘unpick’ such phrases [...] so as to see what a particular narrative version of events is tacitly committed to.”

It is precisely such an unpicking which this paper attempts. Indeed it suggests, along with Harcup and Toolan, that this unpicking represents a crucial strategy for news audiences and practitioners alike – and that we might benefit in our engagements with such discourses by attempting, as Wodak (1989, xiv) puts it, “to uncover and de-mystify certain social processes [...] to make mechanisms of manipulation, discrimination, demagoguery and propaganda explicit and transparent [...] to [...] understand how and why reality is structured in a certain way.” If, as Wodak et al. (2009, p.8) argue, discursive practices “serve to establish or conceal relations of power between [...] social groups and classes”, it would seem essential that we develop strategic approaches whereby we might reveal those power relations at once established by discourse and which that discourse conceals.

These strategies represent a critical area of engagement for journalism audiences, journalism practitioners, journalism scholars and journalism educators. Bird and Dardenne (1988, p.68) point out that “like news, history and anthropology narrate real events, and their practitioners are finding that to understand their narratives, they must examine how they are constructed, including the story-telling devices that are an integral part of that construction.” Bird and Dardenne’s implication is clear: journalism would clearly profit from a similar level of reflective rigour.

The narrative

On 14 February 2004 *The Times* had reported that “one of the finest stags on Exmoor” had been shot – although this had not at the time caused a major furore. On 4 October 2009 *The Times* had reported a similar case – that of two stags shot dead on the Exmoor. *The Times* had followed this up on 8 October 2009 with the news that another stag was thought “to be the largest wild animal in the British Isles.” On 29 October 2009 *BBC News Interactive* had also reported that this stag “could be Britain’s biggest wild land animal.” A year later, on 5 October 2010, the *Daily Mail* had reported that “the UK’s alpha male” was “back for his yearly stag do” – the autumn mating season on Exmoor.

Thus the Exmoor Emperor had become something of a celebrity by the time the story of his death hit Britain's national press on 25 October 2010. Early reports stressed the public shock at the animal's death (and hence the story's newsworthiness): people were "horrified" (*The Sun*, 25 October), "infuriated" (*The Guardian*, 25 October), "enraged" (*Daily Telegraph*, 25 October; *Daily Mail*, 26 October) and "outraged" (*Daily Mirror*, 26 October) – indeed, the story had "sparked fury" (*Daily Express*, 26 October).

The deer's killer was unknown and this prompted immediate media speculation. One journalist interviewed for this study (QJ1) commented that "from the outset it was clear no one would be found out – so this story would run and run with no definitive end to it." There is a clear attraction for the press in this kind of open-ended story: it had *Lost* and Lord Lucan written all over it. The *Telegraph* had, on 25 October, suggested that the shooting was the work of "a licensed deer hunter", but by the following day narrowed its suspects down to a "hunter from abroad who had paid a substantial amount for the shooting rights." The same day, *The Sun*, *Mirror* and *Mail* also blamed wealthy hunters, while *The Times* focused upon "wealthy European and American hunters." By 27 October the *Mail* was blaming "trophy hunters, maybe from abroad" – adding that "hunters are known to have come to Exmoor from various parts of Europe." The *Express* also hazarded a guess at the killer's likely provenance when, on 26 October, it noted that "hunters travel from [...] as far away as northern Europe to shoot the Exmoor red deer." While the culprit's financial status was a dominant trope in the left-leaning *Guardian* and *Mirror*, the *Mail* and the *Telegraph* seemed rather more interested in the perpetrator's foreignness.

It appeared that in the absence of a perpetrator the press were willing to fill the gap with their own stock villains. This hysteria did not go unnoticed by the papers' own commentators. Charles Moore in the *Telegraph* (on 29 October) challenged the received wisdom that the gunman came "from abroad, probably Europe." On the same day Alexander Chancellor in *The Guardian* asked whether the Exmoor Emperor was "really murdered by foreigners" and two days later John Vidal in *The Observer* questioned the talk of "dodgy bankers [...] who plague north Devon with their helicopter gunships." These commentators were notable for their implicit concern over the xenophobic and increasingly hysterical tone the narrative had adopted.

The story started to become somewhat repetitive. On 27 October the *Telegraph* had run with 'Who killed the Emperor?' and *The Independent* with 'Who shot the Emperor?' – a headline reprised in *The Times* three days later. On 27 October *The Independent* had suggested – in a reference to the myth of Actaeon (Ovid, 1955, pp.77-80) – that the "hunter becomes the hunted" and *The Times* had noted that "the hunter became the hunted." On 26 October the *Daily Mail* had suggested that the stag's "head and antlers are destined for the wall of a hotel or country home" and the following day the same paper proposed that its "glassy eyes will be staring out soon from a hotel lobby or a stately home hallway." The next day *The Times* announced that "his magnificent antlers [...] would soon be hanging on the wall of a schloss or château." This was clearly one of those stories which the media thought had captured the mood of the nation but about which (like the lingering death of a minor royal) there is not much to say. They therefore leaped on every development with hungry relish.

Public figures were welcomed to join the fray. Local MP Iain Liddell-Grainger was reported by *The Independent* (27 October) and the *Mail* (28 October) as being "bloody furious" about the shooting while the *Express* (28 October) noted that he had "vowed to expose the killer." A group of 16 other MPs (reported by the BBC on 27 October, by the *Express* on 28 October and by the *Telegraph* on 29 October) had on 26 October signed an Early Day Motion calling upon the Commons to condemn the shooting of the Emperor. These MPs' outrage was echoed by rock guitarist Brian May as reported in both the *Telegraph* and the *Mail* on 28 October and in the *Mirror* the next day.¹

On 28 October the *Telegraph*, *Times*, *Guardian*, *Mirror*, *Express* and the BBC reported claims that the Exmoor Emperor might still be alive. The *Express*, the *Mail*, the *Mirror* and the *Telegraph* suggested that the stag's death had been faked in order to protect it from "rogue hunters". The *Mail* reported that various locals had seen it in their gardens (28 and 29 October) and that a photograph appeared to depict the Emperor alive (30 October). On 30 October *The Sun* announced the discovery of a possible hoof print.

¹ Brian May has proven a popular focus for animal welfare stories, offering a celebrity hook much valued by contemporary journalism: on 17 December 2010 he published a polemic against fox-hunting in *The Guardian* and on 23 May 2011 his opposition to the culling of badgers afforded *BBC News Interactive* an opportunity to feature a related story in their 'Arts & Entertainment' section – although it remains unclear whether the Corporation views badger-culling as artistic or merely entertaining. One might also note, in the context of this self-consciously patriotic narrative, that Brian May, a rock musician who achieved fame with a band called *Queen*, had played the national anthem on the roof of Buckingham Palace in celebration of Elizabeth II's Golden Jubilee in June 2002. May, like the Exmoor Emperor, has become something of a focus for royalist nostalgia himself.

The tale then turned to the death of another large stag (known as Bruno) on Exmoor twelve years earlier. On 29 October the *Telegraph* reported that “Richard Austin, the photographer who first reported the stag’s death [...] following an anonymous tip-off, said the same person had contacted him 12 years ago to inform him that Bruno had been killed [...] on exactly the same day.” Also that day *The Times* announced that “Johnny Kingdom, the Exmoor film-maker who made a documentary about a giant stag called Bruno [...] believes the Emperor was Bruno’s offspring.” The following day the *Mail* reported that “it was 12 years to the day when the same informant rang to tell [Austin] the Emperor had been killed in almost exactly the same spot. Mr Austin believes the Emperor was the son of Bruno and finds the whole business ‘unnerving.’”

Seasoned journalists were also becoming unnerved as the coincidences continued to accrue. On 29 October Paul Harris in the *Mail* and Charles Moore in the *Telegraph* challenged these increasingly absurd accounts. Harris wrote that “in a twist in which Agatha Christie herself might have delighted [...] Austin revealed [...] the stag is ‘almost certainly’ the son of the last famous red deer to have been shot on Exmoor.” Moore added that “the Emperor is ‘certain’, according to Mr Kingdom, to be the son of Bruno” – before condemning the entire narrative as “an inverted pyramid of piffle.” Moore also denounced claims that the Emperor had been Britain’s largest wild animal. Two days later *The Observer*’s John Vidal noted that the stag had not been Britain’s largest – a fact pointed out five days earlier by *The Guardian*. The story was clearly starting to unravel.

On 31 October *The Sunday Times* revealed the identity of the eyewitness to the deaths of both Bruno and the Emperor as none other than nature pundit Johnny Kingdom. The same day the *Sunday Telegraph* recounted Kingdom’s claims that he had confronted a poacher over the Emperor’s death, while the *Mail on Sunday* published pictures supplied by Kingdom which purported to show the stag’s final moments. The *Independent on Sunday* also reported on the *Mail*’s scoop, and the next day the *Express* ran the story.

By this time, however, the tide of press opinion had turned against Johnny Kingdom. As early as 28 October *The Times* had noted that Kingdom “has a new series coming out in two weeks’ time. He is also the last person to have filmed the Emperor and has been selling clips of the stag for £300 a time.” On 1 November the *Mail* branded Kingdom “the man who cashes in on every twist of the Emperor saga.” It was at this point that Kingdom withdrew from the limelight. His agent informed this researcher that he had “taken the decision not to speak about the past few weeks to anyone again. He is so thoroughly disgusted with what has happened to him and his family. He has now gone away on holiday to simply get away from it all.”

The story was by this time dying down, but the press still found a few further angles. The first of these – as seen in *The Times* and the *Daily Express* on 1 November – was to compare the fate of the Exmoor Emperor to that of stags in the Scottish Highlands. The second was to make a story out of the fact that this had never been a story at all: the “Exmoor Emperor was just another stag” (*Telegraph*, 6 November). The third was to seek the Emperor’s successor. As early as 25 October *The Guardian* had suggested the possibility of “the empire of the son”; on 27 October the *Mail* had speculated that another large stag might be the son of the Emperor; on 31 October the *Sunday Telegraph* had reported the appearance of a stag “hailed as the Emperor’s son and named ‘The Prince’.” The *Mail* ran a story on 6 November about a bigger stag spotted in the New Forest; this was followed, ten days later, by a report in the *Express* and *The Independent* that another stag (dubbed the Viceroy of Rackenford) could be the Emperor’s son and might (in the words of the *Express*) “soon attain his illustrious forebear’s mighty presence.” As one journalist interviewed for this study (RTJ) commented, “the resurrection of the great beast we thought was killed – that would be the happiest ending possible.”

The themes: economics

When the Exmoor Emperor appeared on the front page of *The Independent*’s budget spin-off, the paper billed its 20-pence price as offering “Exmoor for your money” and thus signalled a relationship between the fate of the stag and the nation’s economic situation. Charles Moore in the *Telegraph* (29 October) suggested that the interest in this story might simply be “down to money”. Rachel Johnson wrote in *The Times* that the story had revealed profound changes in the economy of Exmoor, pointing out that “in the old days it was all Land Rovers with a sheepdog hanging out of the passenger window. And now it’s Learjets.” On 30 October *The Guardian* included a sub-section to its coverage which charted the “cost of hunting around the world” and on 26 October *BBC News Interactive* published an interview with a professional deer stalker which stressed the costs of the pursuit. There seemed to be a close relationship between issues of wealth and issues of foreignness or outsider status in these stories: the *Daily Mail*, for example, referred four times to “wealthy outsiders” and the *Telegraph* observed on 27 October that “the Exmoor economy [...] now largely relies on [...] shoots in which visiting guns may barely know which country they are in.” Just as economic hardship tends to provoke media antagonism towards immigration, so it seems that domestic austerity meas-

ures may have forged a link in these stories between wealth and foreignness. Perhaps unsurprisingly the other economic scapegoats of the age also emerge in these accounts: the bankers. The *Daily Telegraph* noted on 27 October that “hotels on Exmoor have been turned into residences for bankers”, while *The Observer* (31 October) referred to the rumours that “an evil trophy-hunting banker” might be behind the death of the Emperor.

If this story was about money, then it was eventually about the disparity of wealth: the wealthy outsiders contrasting with the poor locals. On 27 October *The Independent* quoted a ‘local source’ as pointing out that “people are facing hard times and struggling to make ends meet. When they can get thousands of pounds from this, they do.” This story appears to chime with public consciousness insofar as it specifically addressed what, at a time of national austerity, was perceived by some as an increasing inequality between the luxurious lifestyles of the wealthy ruling classes and the economic pain experienced by the broader population. It was perhaps no coincidence that just as the story of the Exmoor Emperor subsided from the press, reports about the Prime Minister’s personal photographer began to appear (see for example ‘Cameron forced to axe “vanity photographer” from public pay roll in embarrassing U-turn’, *Daily Mail*, 17 October 2011).

The themes: nationality

The newspapers which most heavily featured the story were the *Times*, the *Telegraph* and the *Mail* – three publications which generally promote a traditional (and relatively rural) perspective upon Britishness. This may be specifically related to the newspapers’ readerships, or to their perceptions of their readerships. As one journalist interviewed for this study (QJ1) suggested, “from the point of view of our readers there’s an interest in country pursuits – deerstalking, that kind of thing – it’s our natural territory.”

The stag represents something traditionally British; as *The Sun*’s leader suggested on 26 October, it is a figure associated specifically with the monarchy. Michael McCarthy in *The Independent* (30 October) referred to the aptly named Emperor stag as “His Majesty” while Charles Moore in the *Daily Telegraph* (29 October) called the stag “His Imperial Majesty”. Ruaridh Nicoll in *The Guardian* (27 October) alluded to the stag’s “majesty” and indeed the term ‘majestic’ appeared 13 times in the 59 stories surveyed for this study. Furthermore, the Emperor’s possible son was dubbed the Prince or the Viceroy.

At a time in which national self-esteem had been undermined by economic crisis, the stag might be seen as representing something great about the British spirit, a humble native and a *Monarch of the Glen* – a memorial to British greatness as evocative as John Constable’s *Cenotaph*. This magnificent creature (and the word ‘magnificent’ appeared a total of 49 times in the 59 stories surveyed) offered to represent the imperial in all of us, a last moment of British glory before the cuts started to bite. How much the worse then that this hart of England might have been cut down by a wealthy foreigner. Hence the need for the tales of the stag’s resurrection, and then of the Emperor’s succession, and the possibility of the restoration of national pride.

On the very day – 16 November – that *The Independent* and the *Daily Express* announced the sighting of the Exmoor Emperor’s heir – his son or grandson – the Queen of England’s eventual heir announced his engagement to Kate Middleton. Again, the nation was offered a majestic consolation or distraction from its woes. The two stories served similar feel-good functions: the imperial stag was to be followed by a royal wedding.

The commentaries: narratology

The press was clearly drawn to the story because it had a celebrity narrative built around it (the stag was already gaining celebrity status at the time it was shot, although its death enhanced that fame). The cinematic and literary nature of the narrative also clearly added to the story’s appeal. Both Rory Bruce Knight in the *Telegraph* (27 October) and Paul Harris in the *Daily Mail* (29 October) specifically cited R.D. Blackmore’s *Lorna Doone*. But what is most interesting about the comparison with *Lorna Doone* is that, while Blackmore’s novel was set in the seventeenth century, it was published in 1869: it is itself a hearkening back to a romantic Britain which only ever existed in the minds of nostalgic fictionalists.

The most interesting commentary pieces were perhaps those by Charles Moore in the *Daily Telegraph*, Alexander Chancellor in *The Guardian*, John Vidal in *The Observer* and Paul Harris in the *Daily Mail*. All four commentators considered the story in terms of broader popular narratives. Moore (29 October) described the television presenter Johnny Kingdom as the “Crocodile Dundee of Exmoor” and compared the stag itself to “King Arthur, not dead, but somehow occulted, waiting to return.” Chancellor (29 October) saw the success of the narrative as owing something to the mystery tradition of Agatha Christie and argued that this “celebrity” stag followed a model laid down by Walt Disney “who portrayed Bambi’s father, the ‘Great Prince of the Forest’, as a heroic creature of matchless courage and dignity.” Vidal (31 October) also

saw the story falling within the whodunit genre, and suggested that the Emperor of Exmoor had become one of those “British archetypal legendary beasts, like the Hound of the Baskervilles, the Beast of Bodmin, the black dogs of the Quantocks, the Loch Ness monster, the Surrey Puma.” Harris (29 October) viewed the story again as a whodunit and again as having assumed “the flavour of other great animal stories of our time, notably those of the Tamworth Two piggies, and, for anyone with a longer memory, Blackie the Donkey.”

The themes of the murder mystery appeared in other journalistic commentaries. The *Daily Mirror* (on 28 October) included a *CSI* report as part of its coverage (thus emphasising the story’s adoption of the idioms of a TV crime series). In their column in the *Daily Express* on 30 October Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan suggested that “Agatha Christie would have loved *The Mystery of the Mighty Emperor*.” Reportage of the story in *The Times* (28 October) also emphasized that the narrative was “worthy of a television murder mystery”; while the *Daily Express* (30 October) featured a light-hearted piece which presented this “bizarre whodunit” in the style of a “Hollywood pitch”.

The commentaries: hypocrisy

Giles Coren in *The Times* (30 October) bemoaned the “childish sentimentality” by which the animal had been given a name and turned into a celebrity: “Emperor was killed because he had a name. He fell victim to the ludicrous anthropomorphic tendencies of over-civilised modern Man. But he was an animal. He should never have had a name. For then we should never have loved him, and then nobody would have killed him, and we wouldn’t have been bothered if they had.” Glynn Evans in *The Guardian* (30 October) similarly argued that “people seem less likely to understand essential wildlife and habitat preservation techniques when animals are Disneyfied and given monikers such as ‘Emperor’.” Ruaridh Nicoll – also in *The Guardian* (27 October) – penned an opinion piece celebrating the joys and values of hunting. Indeed, the *The Guardian*’s uncharacteristic openness to such pro-hunting voices led Joe Dimbleby, the news editor of the *Shooting Times*, to argue that “*The Guardian*’s coverage of this issue was much more level-headed than any of the other nationals and shamed the other broadsheets by its maturity. This is ironic given that *The Guardian* is not normally thought to be the newspaper of the countryside.”

While the pro-hunting lobby found an incongruous haven in *The Guardian*, Rose Prince (like Coren, a food writer) complained in the *Daily Telegraph* (30 October) of the hypocrisy of meat-eaters who get upset about the shooting of a deer. The same day Michael McCarthy in *The Independent* offered perhaps the most original analysis of the popularity of the story. Like various commentators, McCarthy noted that this story was virtually without evidence – he quoted a colleague who had said that the story had “dodgy written all over it.” McCarthy suggested that the success of this story came primarily as a result of the personalisation of its tragic lead, arguing that the stag had become that “key figure of our age, a celebrity.” This position was not dissimilar from that of other commentators; but McCarthy went on: “the essence of the fuss about the Emperor [...] is beauty. For the Emperor is – or was – quite extraordinary beautiful.” McCarthy’s emphasis upon the aesthetics of the situation reveals the overwhelming significance – as in all such celebrity iconography – of the image itself.

The politicians

In order to assess the reasons behind the popular interest in this story, it is perhaps useful to seek the opinions of a number of public figures involved in the narrative. Ian Liddell-Grainger, the local Conservative MP who had been reported as being “bloody furious” at the shooting of the stag, explained the success of the story in rather less emotive terms:

The story ‘took off’ because it appeared to involve a huge brave beast that nobody had ever heard of before, being cut down by a wicked marksman just for fun. Good tale. Not totally true, of course. There are scores of stags on Exmoor. Some every bit as big as the so-called Emperor. But a photographer got a decent close-up shot of this one and gave it a name. The Emperor tale touched a chord only in those places (usually urban places) that have never seen a stag in the raw.

Echoing *The Times*’s Giles Coren and *The Independent*’s Michael McCarthy, Liddell-Grainger observed that it was the story’s use of pictures and personalisation which prompted its popularity. This is clearly a phenomenon which influences much contemporary news-making (see, for example, McQueen 1998, pp.96-97, pp.101-102).²

² The prioritisation of personality and picture (in both senses, of image) is clearly a process which has affected the practices both of news media and, by extension, of contemporary western politics (see, for example, McLuhan, 2001, p.337; Greenstein, 1967; Swanson and Mancini, 1996, p.272; van Ham, 2001; and Savigny and Temple, 2010, p.1051).

The Members of Parliament who put their names to the Early Day Motion condemning the killing of the Exmoor Emperor included Conservative Peter Bottomley, Liberal Democrats Bob Russell and Adrian Sanders and Labour's Michael Connarty. Interviewed for this study, these four MPs all saw the media-friendly nature of the story as central to its popularity. Peter Bottomley noted that it had been "a continuation of an earlier story" and that it also offered a series of elements which secured its coverage in the mainstream press: "a photograph, good quotes, a suspect and an echo of an incident in the film *The Queen*." Like Liddell-Grainger and Michael McCarthy, Bottomley was aware of the significance of the photographic image (as was Russell below); and, like the press commentators cited above, he was also aware of the story's narratological genealogy (indeed, his specific point about *The Queen* was also made by *The Sun* on 26 October).

Bob Russell argued that it was clear that this story keyed into a British sympathy for stories about animals:

I think it was one of those stories which people wanted to relate to – like they did a few years ago with 'the Tamworth Two', two pigs who escaped from an abattoir. With the Exmoor Stag it was even more of a 'people's story' because people, in the main, are animal lovers – and this stag was impressive, as the photographs of this wonderful beast in the national media portrayed.

Like Paul Harris in the *Daily Mail* (29 October), Russell cited the case of the 'Tamworth Two': a pair of pigs which fled from an abattoir van and went on the run for a week in January 1998 – much to the delight of the media. One might note in passing that the *Mail* sponsored a life of comfort for the two pigs, once recaptured, at an animal sanctuary in Kent; one might also note that on 8 October 2010 (just three days after reporting on the return of the Exmoor Emperor to his annual rut) the *Daily Mail* had reported on the death of one of those pigs and had suggested that the pair had "shared a spirit of survival which struck a chord, particularly with the British." The Exmoor Emperor certainly seemed well qualified to take the place of the Tamworth pigs in the nation's heart as a stereotypical symbol of Britishness.

In citing the Tamworth Two, Russell recognised that this story adhered to a popular news formula: not just an animal story, but also an account of tragic celebrity. Like Princess Diana – or for that matter Marilyn Monroe – the stag became an icon of tragic iconicity. Adrian Sanders also observed that, in addition to the animal welfare aspects of the story, "the iconic stature of the stag garnered a great deal of interest."

A similar point was made by Michael Connarty. Connarty noted that his own response stemmed from the iconic nature of the stag in question:

There are iconic images of nature which deserve to be protected. The eagle in flight and some other bird species compare to a multipointed stag on a hillside in reminding us of what we must preserve in the wild if we are to pass on ideals and values to our children. That such a symbol, such a reminder of our duty to nature could be sold for a hunter's money disgusted me.

Connarty's perspective recalled that of the commentator Michael McCarthy in *The Independent*. The story was not about the animal but the image. It was not about the individual stag, but about what the stag represented: the stag might, for example, be seen as bridging the urban/rural socio-political divide, bringing the wonder of nature to the metropolis, and thereby restoring an imaginary integrated national community. In this sense, we might see the fate of the stag as a result not simply of its anthropomorphism but of its celebrity. This was (not entirely unlike the death of Princess Diana) about the loss of an ideal: and it was the ideal – rather than the individual – which the public mourned.

This seemed to be a key idea for all of the politicians interviewed: Liddell-Grainger and Bottomley commented on the pictorial personalisation and anthropomorphism of the stag; Bottomley and Russell saw the story in terms of recurring media narratives; and Sanders and Connarty referred to the image's symbolic iconicity. All appeared conscious that the stag represented something beyond itself as a symbolic figure within a broader national discourse.

The journalists

The BBC's James Naughtie – whose report on the stag's death for the *Today* programme had been criticised by Charles Moore in the *Telegraph* (29 October) for "throwing all BBC impartiality to the wind" – also suggested that the appeal of this story lay primarily in an aesthetic personalisation which bolstered a narrative emphasis upon mystery, myth and majesty:

The story would have been a non-starter, save for the extraordinary picture of the beast which, not surprisingly, was picked up by every picture desk on Fleet Street. The image was powerful, and it played to an instinct which is familiar to many people – namely, an admiration for the wild, and a longing to be part of its mystery. When the alleged trophy-hunter came in to get the Emperor, the story reached its natural climax. An elusive beast stalks the moor and mesmerises all the hunters, not only the deer around him. He is hunted and killed. You don't have to have read *Moby Dick* to know how deep that story lurks within us. It was the

playing out of a tragedy that was inevitable. And the truth is that many people, having seen that picture, will have felt that it must end with slaughter. They wouldn't admit it, but that's what they were waiting for. Majesty in the wild is endlessly alluring; so is the hunt to the death. We may not like it, but that's what we're like.

It was, for Naughtie, the inherently tragic nature of this narrative which attracted its audience. Naughtie's emphasis upon the stag's majesty is also revealing. It is notable that the redtop tabloid journalist (RTJ) interviewed for this study also emphasized the "the idea of this majestic creature roaming wild in modern Britain." This language further exposes the significance of this narrative within a discourse of national identity.

RTJ also addressed the socio-economic aspect of the story: "the idea that it had been killed by a rich git who didn't give a monkey's about the creature would have upset a lot of people." This factor was also noted by one of the quality newspaper journalists (QJ2): "there's a slight class/money element to it, which newspapers love: the idea that a City fund manager or foreign hunter could kill this famous creature." The same journalist also cited aesthetic and hermeneutic factors as key reasons for the story's success: "the opportunity it gave for newspapers and websites to print dramatic pictures of this beautiful animal [...] and the sheer mystery of what happened."

Another quality journalist (QJ3) proposed that the success of the story might be attributed primarily to the fact that its mythic structure had already been established within the news media: "I believe the reason the story caught the attention of editors was because it reminded them of the Beast of Exmoor story from a couple of years previously. Editors tend to like stories that follow a tried and tested pattern – they knew the Beast of Exmoor had been a popular story; it followed that the Emperor would catch the public imagination in a similar way."

Another reporter (QJ4) commented that:

Animal stories always prove hugely popular. Readers seem to take tales of perceived animal cruelty to heart and are more likely to respond to such stories than many others. I took several calls on this story from outraged readers, a couple of them lawyers, who demanded we do everything in our power to find who was responsible. I don't know why, but in my experience animal stories always provoke the most reaction from readers. I would guess that the pictures are emotive and animals are considered helpless at the hands of humans.

RTJ argued that this emotional impact was specifically dependent upon the personalisation of the victim:

It looked so majestic and it had already been given a name. Whenever you do an animal story you always give it a name so that people have affinity with it. Personalising things made it a goer in newspaper terms. If I wrote a story that 50 stags had been killed on Exmoor it probably wouldn't have got much coverage. I was thinking back to the Vietnam War – to that famous picture of the little girl on the street – if you'd written a story about 5,000 killed in Saigon it wouldn't have had such impact. I mean, this was just an animal, but it had that personalised kind of impact.

The synthesis of emotional impact depends upon such processes of personalisation. Primo Levi (1989, p.39) suggested that "a single Anne Frank excites more emotion than the myriads who suffered as she did but whose image has remained in the shadows" and the impact of photographer Nick Ut's 1972 image of Kim Phuc clearly illustrates Levi's point. Yet, in this case it is unclear whether the humanisation of the animal prompts real human sympathy or whether it merely synthesizes the kind of Disneyfied sentimentality against which Giles Coren so railed. Coren's perspective was supported by journalist QJ1:

I don't know if it's isolated to British people – a bizarre, perverse interest in issues of animal welfare over human welfare. A dozen stories about children dying in Africa never see the light of day in a newspaper, but one deer attracts the frenzy that it does. Perhaps it represents Man's callousness that a deer being killed takes more prominence than the loss of human life. It was a not-very-big deer that needed culling. It was shot. That was my personal feeling about it.

Joe Dimpleby, news editor of the *Shooting Times*, offered a similar view. On 3 November, Dimpleby published a piece that complained that the mainstream coverage of the deer's demise displayed "a **'Disney' view of wildlife.**" This was followed in the same publication by a rather more zealous opinion piece by Alasdair Mitchell (19 November) which blasted "the usual bunch of wildlife video-makers, tourism parasites and rent-a-gob protectionists taking advantage of the media feeding frenzy to promote their own vested interests."

Interviewed for this study, Joe Dimpleby suggested that the popularity of the story lay in its deployment of "the Disney factor". He added that "the Disney version of wildlife [has] become more widespread as a thoroughly urbanised society loses touch with the countryside and the natural world." Dimpleby also blamed the hysteria of the mainstream media for the way in which the story appeared to run out of control:

There is the moral outrage factor akin to the paedophile witch-hunt mentality. Panellists on prime-time BBC discussion programmes were calling for anyone who shoots a deer to be imprisoned for life, comparing stalking to hunting slaves for sport in the British colonial era and arguing that stalkers must be emotionally deprived.

Dimbleby also critiqued the professionalism of the coverage of this story, suggesting that “journalism is less balanced due to the fact that staff numbers have been so reduced across the board. Hard-pressed newspaper journalists no longer have the time properly to research stories and as such the quality of reporting suffers. A broadsheet newspaper should not carry front page headlines that are as misleading as calling the Emperor the biggest wild animal in the UK.”

Dimbleby was not alone in his criticisms of the poor reporting of this story by the mainstream press. The *Telegraph's* columnist (and former editor) Charles Moore emphasized that “from a media point of view, the most interesting aspect of the story is how badly covered it was – reporters were credulous, ignorant and lazy, in a way they would never be about a political or business story. The most basic checks were not conducted. This is often true with rural stories. It is interesting to ask why.” One might suppose that the metropolitan hacks simply do not take the reporting of such country matters seriously: it might appear that many take the view that rural and provincial news is *de facto* soft news. Moore’s condemnation of this lack of rigour was supported by the comments of two other journalists who pointed out that “there’s an element of hyperbole in the story – which probably wasn’t strictly true in retrospect” (QJ1) and that “one Exmoor official told me that some pics supposed to be the Emperor were of other stags” (QJ2). It was partly as a result of this lack of journalistic rigour that the uncritically sentimental and jingoistic elements of the reportage discussed above were able to filter through.

It seems significant that these journalists, like the press commentators and politicians cited above, discovered remarkably similar key themes in the construction of this story: (a) folklorish iconicity, cultural antecedence and narratological recurrence (Naughtie, QJ3; see also Knight, Moore, Chancellor, Vidal, Harris, Madeley & Finnigan, Bottomley, Russell, Sanders and Connarty above); (b) nationalism, patriotic symbolism or ‘majesty’ (Naughtie, RTJ; see also McCarthy, Moore, Chancellor, Vidal and Nicoll above); (c) economic symbolism (RTJ, QJ2; see also Moore, Johnson and Connarty above); (d) sentimentalization, anthropomorphism or personalisation (QJ1, QJ4, RTJ, Dimbleby; see also Coren, Evans, Prince and Liddell-Granger above); (e) pictorial aesthetics (Naughtie, QJ2, RTJ; see also McCarthy, Liddell-Granger, Bottomley and Russell above); and (f) professional, practical and factual failings of reportage (Dimbleby, Moore, QJ1, QJ2; see also Harris, Moore, McCarthy and Liddell-Granger above). It is evident that the culturally retrospective aspects of the story’s representation [a] are nostalgically related to its patriotic tone [b], and it would appear that these are prompted as an escapist or nation-reaffirming response to a period of economic hardship [c]. This nationalistic nostalgia is echoed in (and tonally reinforced by) the sentimentalization of the subject matter [d] – that is, the Bambi-like sentimentalization of the death of the deer reflects the story’s broader nostalgic sentimentalization of the demise of great Britishness. This sentimentalization is supported (indeed, made possible) by the pictorial aesthetics [e] and by the story’s echoes of folklore [a]. The patriotic, nostalgic and sentimental tone of the accounts – curiously at odds with the perspectives of the journalists who commented on them – reveals a level of professional inconsistency which exposes an institutional hypocrisy reflected more broadly in the factual and practical inadequacies of much of the reportage [f].

Discussion

According to ancient Roman tradition, the Emperor’s deer wore collars which were inscribed with the words “do not touch me for I am Caesar’s” (*noli me tangere quia Caesaris sum*). Petrarch refers to this in his sonnet ‘Una Candida Cervae’ as does Thomas Wyatt in his homage to Petrarch’s poem, ‘Whoso List to Hunt’. These inviolable deer were the Emperor’s; just as the Exmoor Emperor, in its violation, became the nation’s, an emblem of national identity. *Noli me tangere*: these words, we are told by the Gospel according to St John, were also spoken to Mary Magdalene by the resurrected Christ. The narrative of the Exmoor Emperor, this curiously Christ-like deer, transfigured, sacrificed and resurrected, thus invokes a folkloric tradition which can be traced from the transformation of Actaeon to the death of Princess Diana.

On 26 October 2010 *The Sun's* leader column compared the death of the Exmoor Emperor to that moment in Stephen Frears’s 2006 film *The Queen* when Helen Mirren encounters a dead deer. In Frears’s film the stag is described as an “imperial” shot by “an investment banker [...] from London.” The deer in the film may appear analogous to the late Princess Diana, an interpretation reluctantly acknowledged by the screenwriter Peter Morgan in the commentary accompanying the 2006 DVD release. Whether the analogy in Frears’s film was intentional or not, one might note that the Exmoor Emperor, hounded to its end as a result of press interest, enjoyed a similar outpouring of public and media grief in its death as the late Princess of

Wales. Diana – the princess and goddess and huntress – became the hunted; the star became the martyr to her own celebrity, pursued to her death by what Tony (formerly ‘Bambi’) Blair would later (in June 2007) describe as the “feral” media pack. The Exmoor Emperor may have met a similar fate, yet his posthumous reign was brief, deposed as he was in the journalistic and public imaginations by the new Diana, the princess in waiting anointed by royal engagement on the very day that the Emperor’s heir was announced by the press, the future Princess Catherine.

The Emperor’s story stands then as a narrative of national identity. If symbolic discourse develops and sustains a sense of nationhood, then, as Wodak et al. (2009, p.27) argue, it does so by isolating and emphasizing the unique selling points through which a people may be proud to call themselves a nation. The red deer – like the red squirrel or the red cross on the flag of St George – represents the Little Englander within the Middle Englander, the ordinary Englishman ousted by the influx of foreigners and foreignness, and at the same time Britain’s nostalgia for monarchic and imperial glory. The dead red deer in Stephen Frears’s film *The Queen* serves a similar symbolic function: it is at once majesty and humility; it is the subject of an outpouring of grief for something bigger than itself, for the lost glory it represents.

Yet it remains unclear whether media discourses reflect national identities or whether they originate them. Do, for example, the nationalism and xenophobia implicit to much mainstream journalism – as witnessed in these accounts of the death of an even-toed ungulate – reflect the ideological positions of their readership, or do they provoke those positions? Temple (2010, pp.195-198) suggests that press racism may articulate a broader racism ingrained within the British populace. Yet, whether or not media racism is responsible for originating public prejudice, it may play a role in perpetuating that prejudice. It is in the media’s power to naturalize ideology – to make ideology appear unideological – that the press might be seen as at their most influential, insofar as ideologies are most insidious when they are least visible. It may therefore be the case that it is the stories that appear the least political (such as this beastly tale) whose political influence proves most potent.

Conclusion

If journalists are to maintain their roles as gatekeepers, then they must ensure that they know what gets through the gate; if they are to function as the fourth estate, then they should not uncritically or unwittingly transmit the subliminal messages of power; if they are to speak truth to power, and mediate between their publics and that power, then they must understand the nuances of those truths and of those processes of mediation. The International Federation of Journalists lists as the first of its Principles of the Conduct of Journalists that journalists should demonstrate “respect for truth and for the right of the public to truth.” It is therefore essential for any journalist to understand the meanings which underlie the narratives they disseminate. The National Union of Journalists asserts that “a journalist has a duty to maintain the highest professional and ethical standards.” A journalist must therefore comprehend the need to base even the softest news stories in rigorously evidenced and expressed reportage, insofar as those softest stories might communicate the most ethically controversial subtexts. The Press Complaint Commission’s code of practice requires that the press “whilst free to be partisan, must distinguish clearly between comment, conjecture and fact.” The press must therefore be open about its partisanship, must be explicit (to its readership and to itself) as to the politics of even that which appears the least political. Journalism must thus learn to analyse its own discourses and practices: because this interrogation of the relationship between truth and power is not only what academic researchers and educators do – it is also what journalists are expected by their audiences and by their own defining ideals to do. The phone-hacking scandal which engulfed the British press in 2011 offers the most prominent example to date in support of the argument for the urgency of such reflection upon professional and institutional practices.

There are powerful imperatives for journalists to narrativize – for the sake of their readers’ pleasure and for the benefit of their proprietors’ profits. Indeed, these narratorial approaches clearly have advantages beyond pleasure and profit: they contextualize stories within familiar frameworks which make their complexities more coherent and accessible. However, they also require that such complexities fit frameworks with which they may not be entirely consistent. Journalistic practice cannot stop telling stories, but might usefully make explicit where those stories have originated and how they work.

In the case of this particular story, a number of the press’s own commentators endeavoured to reflect critically upon this narrative; and it is evident from this paper’s interviews with journalists who covered the story that they also engaged in such reflection. Yet it is also apparent from the majority of the stories themselves that there has been little place, space or time for reflection in their original construction. This may be because of professional or institutional imperatives (make the story reader-friendly), practical considerations (no column inches available) or resourcing issues (limited sources, no one on the scene and

There is a tendency in some areas of journalism education to focus upon technical skills rather than underlying theoretical and contextual issues. This appears in part to offer a somewhat myopic response to the exigencies of employability. Rapid technological developments are calling into question such an approach: as shorthand gives way to web design, and when we can barely imagine the multiplicity of platforms upon which future journalists will perform, it seems clear that the enduring skills offered by journalism education are critical and analytical.

Wodak et al. (2009, p.8) have argued that discourse constructs, legitimises and maintains the social order, but that it may also transform that order. This is why we research, study and teach journalism – not simply as a technical skill, but as an academic exploration of a field of practice whose societal impact functions in more profound and complex ways than superficial observation or literalist interpretation might at first perceive.

The journalist's potential for a critical citizenship which investigates the societal contexts and ideological subtexts of her/his practice is essential for her/him to function as an ethical professional. The press coverage of the death of a deer may be insignificant in itself, but, in that it leads us towards further-reaching questions as to the formulation of media meanings, the discovery of significance within the ostensibly insignificant affords a perspective of some value and pertinence to a progressive and constructive notion of journalism and of journalistic education.

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