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Published

2005

Conference Title

JEA Conference 2005: Proceedings of the 2005 Journalism Education Association Conference

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Death of a Princess: the press, the public and the powerful in changing times

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Refereed paper presented to the Journalism Education Conference,
Griffith University, 29 November - 2 December 2005

Abstract

She was young, widely admired, and considered a breath of fresh air in an increasingly unpopular British monarchy. Her sudden death at a time when she appeared to be moving into a new phase of her life prompted an outpouring of public grief and a frenzy of media coverage. Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales died in November 1817, and the description above fits her as closely as it does Diana, Princess of Wales, who died almost two centuries later.

This paper compares *The Times* of London's coverage of these deaths and examines the changing role that the press has had in dealing with the elite of the day. It finds a number of similar themes in the coverage of and public reaction to both deaths and uncovers changes in attitudes to death and grieving. It also shows the major change in the role of *The Times* from that of mouthpiece of the establishment to voice of the people.

Introduction

When Diana, Princess of Wales died in 1997, the media described the display of public grief as unprecedented. However this display was not without precedent, as almost two centuries earlier, the death of Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales had prompted a similar, if smaller scale, outburst of public mourning. The deaths of both women also led to a frenzy of media reporting, and given the major changes to society over that time, it would be expected that coverage of these two women would reveal some major differences. That is indeed the case, but there is also a surprising amount of similarity in the reactions of the public and the press, and in attempts at news management (some more successful than others) by the royal families of both eras. This paper compares the coverage of those deaths by the *Times* of London, in order to examine the role that the *Times* held within the society of each era, and to see how some of the attitudes of that society were revealed by such coverage. Jackson (2001) argues that recent changes in the methodology of periodical research have led scholars to treat newspapers not simply as a mirror of society, but rather as a central component of that society, its role integrated with other parts of the culture. For the *Times*, this role has changed from acting as a mouthpiece for the ruling classes to reporting and supporting the will of the general public. However as an integral part of the culture in which it exists, the *Times*, and indeed all media, also offer the opportunity to learn about the attitudes and mores of any given era. This paper will begin with brief biographies of both women, in order to provide the context for the coverage. It will explain the changing relationship between the *Times*, its public and the elites from 1817 to 1997, and follow with an examination of how the reportage revealed differences and similarities in societal attitudes in both eras.

Method

Articles were collected from the *Times* for the period from the announcement of each woman's death to the editions detailing the funerals. A number of themes that became evident in the coverage were then examined in order to uncover the differences and similarities in societal attitudes. These themes include: attempts at news management; the body corporal and the body politic; attitudes to death and mourning; God and humanity as the cause of misfortune; and the hunt for the last image. These themes are discussed within the context of the society in which the individual women lived in their respective eras.

Biographical information and context of reportage

Born in January 1796, Princess Charlotte Augusta of Wales was heir to the throne in her own right. She was the only child of the Prince Regent (later King George IV) and Caroline of Brunswick, whose disastrous marriage ended with Caroline returning to the Continent. Charlotte was a rebellious teenager, and after refusing arrangements to marry William of Orange and having affairs with at least two other men, finally married Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg in May 1816. She fell pregnant in early 1817, her responsibility to provide a future heir to the throne all the heavier because her uncles were either childless or had fathered illegitimate children. With

her grandfather sunk in madness (now believed to have been caused by porphyria) and her father considered a wastrel, Charlotte was seen as the great hope for restoring the image of the royal family as well as ensuring the succession of the royal line. Without her and her child, England would have to look offshore for a future monarch.

During her pregnancy Charlotte was kept on a strict diet and bled regularly, leaving her in a weakened state when she finally went into labour on November 4, 1817. The labour was slow, but her doctors decided against intervening to speed up the process. It dragged on for 50 hours, ending with the still-birth of a son at 9 o'clock in the evening of November 5. At first, Charlotte was reported to have recovered well from the birth, but later that night she went into convulsions and died at 2:30 the following morning.

Diana, Princess of Wales was born the Honourable (later Lady) Diana Spencer in 1961, and married the Prince of Wales in 1981. She quickly ensured the succession, giving birth to her two sons over the following three years. However the marriage was unhappy, with Charles continuing an affair with another woman, and Diana suffering eating disorders and attempting other forms of self-harm as a result. Both sides admitted infidelity before the couple were finally divorced in 1996. On her divorce, Diana was stripped of the title 'Her Royal Highness', leading to the widespread view that the royal family had forced out a woman who would have modernised an increasingly outdated institution.

Diana was involved in a new relationship when she died early in the morning of August 31 1997, the victim of a car crash in Paris. Her lover Dodi al-Fayed also died, as did the driver, Henri Paul. Fayed's bodyguard Trevor Rees-Jones was the only survivor. To say that Diana's life has been well documented is a major understatement. Every aspect of her life, from fact to fantastical, was analysed from the time of her engagement to Prince Charles, and the interest shows no sign of abating. This, of course, is one the major differences in the coverage of the two women: the media in the late 20th and early 21st centuries are all pervasive and have the ability to find and disseminate information about Diana (regardless of its level of veracity) which the press at the time of Charlotte could only have dreamed about. The death of Diana also had an extra dimension in its impact over much of the world, with Cleghorn (1997) describing her as "the first Queen of the Global Village."

Successful news management: 1817

In 1817, the English mainstream press laboured under a Stamp Duty of 4d. per issue and an Advertisement Tax of 3s. 6d., which priced them out of the reach of all but the wealthy. The press at this stage were by no means independent: the government made direct payments to journalists and placed its advertisements only in those papers which supported the regime of the time. A lively radical press existed whose publishers evaded the taxes, but were subject to constant persecution (Williams, 1961). The *Times* was very much part of the establishment, i.e. those who benefited from and most likely supported the political and economic system of the time. The

reportage of Charlotte's death and the reaction of members of the royal family reveal what appears to be a close relationship between the *Times* and the family's staff, in addition to what would today be considered an extremely efficient public relations effort, which worked much more effectively than in 1997. When Charlotte went into labour, her doctors released regular official bulletins, and the Home Secretary, one of the senior Cabinet ministers who attended the birth, broke the news of Charlotte's death. A separate letter released by the Princess's staff provided the public with a vivid insight into the feelings of the royal family after the event: "All is dismay and grief, rejoicing turned into mourning ... The amiable and affectionate Prince Leopold is distracted and inconsolable, and the whole of the Royal establishment is in a similar state" (*Times* 7 November 1817, p.2). The Prince Regent was also later reported to be suffering, "... so deeply affected by the melancholy intelligence, that it became necessary to bleed him twice besides cupping him. This has given him bodily relief, though his mental sufferings appear to be as acute as ever" (*Times* 10 November 1817, p.2). Throughout the period leading up to funeral, the royal family's staff provided the papers with daily bulletins on how the various members of Charlotte's family were coping with their grief.

However it should not be assumed that the government of the time was open or tolerant of any but the most supportive news outlets. The Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth, was part of a government responsible for the Gagging Acts, which banned meetings of over fifty people and allowed for the jailing of radical journalists for seditious libel. Even the *Times* was cautious in outlining the royal family's history of disasters in the aftermath of Charlotte's death: "... all the vices and villainies of Henry VIII, numerous as they were, sprung from a servile Parliament, and the indulgence of an unrestrained will" (8 November 1817, p.2). The *Times* at this period appears to have walked a fine line between submitting to the government's oppression of the press and arguing against what it saw as unjust law. At this time Britons were living without the protection of Habeas Corpus, which would normally ensure that those detained by the authorities could have their cases examined by a court. After Charlotte's death, the *Times* reported that the Prince Regent had released some of those who were under detention, apparently as a means of commemorating his late daughter:

Our opinion is known respecting the confinement of persons under the act for the suspension of the Habeas Corpus. We therefore rejoice the more on learning, that orders were issued on Tuesday night for releasing from various prisons, ten men confined under that suspension" (14 November 1817, p.2).

Not surprisingly, the *Times* eulogised Charlotte and also reprinted the praise heaped on her by the provincial press:

"Blessed by nature with a masculine understanding – with a mind too firm to be misled by flattery – too great to find pleasure in the noisy nonsense and childish fascinations of fashionable life, too virtuous to participate in its vices ... she would have been the glory of her country,

and the honour of her age! (Exeter newspaper, quoted in the *Times*, 13 November 1817, p.3).

However not everyone held such a romantic view. Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote that the accident of Charlotte's birth had not made her death more worthy of grief, and went on to denounce the hanging, drawing and quartering of three men who had been among 300 people incited by a government agent into a farcical attempt to overthrow the government. The men were executed the day after Charlotte died, and Shelley made it clear that there was a more deserving subject to be mourned:

A beautiful Princess is dead: she who should have been the Queen of her beloved nation, and whose posterity should have ruled it for ever ... LIBERTY is dead. Slave! I charge thee disturb not the depth and solemnity of our grief by any meaner sorrow (Shelley, 1817).

The *Ghent Journal*, published in Belgium, also provided a more pragmatic view of the consequences of Charlotte's death, pointing out that with the loss of the two future heirs of the House of Brunswick, the people of England might dare start to hope for a new dynasty to rule them. The *Journal's* comment on the expected race by the Prince Regent's brothers to produce an heir reads not unlike a modern gossip column: "Four of them are unmarried; they must therefore begin by a marriage. It will not, therefore, excite surprise, if, before a year has elapsed, four nuptial ceremonies, and perhaps one divorce, enliven Old England ..." The *Times* reproduced this article while at the same time condemning its writer as 'the Jacobin of the Ghent press' who had a steady hatred of England and its people (14 November 1817, p.2).

Public relations disaster: 1997

The *Times* and other media outlets of 1997 obviously operated in a much more open environment. Far from being objects of respect and obedience, the royal family in the late 20th century had become something of a soap opera with its litany of affairs, divorces and misbehaviour on the part of its younger members. The royal family in this era is also part of a democracy, and people power, supported by the media, effectively hijacked the royals' agenda in the week after Diana's death. Unlike the effective public relations campaign of Charlotte's time, the royals' lack of communication in 1997 was a public relations disaster that for a time was perceived as a real threat to the future of the monarchy.

On the Sunday of Diana's death the royal family released a stiffly-worded statement that the Queen and Prince Charles had been 'deeply shocked and distressed by this terrible news.' Apart from attending a church service, where Diana's name was not mentioned, the royal family then disappeared into Balmoral castle and were not seen or heard from again until mounting public and media pressure forced them to join their nation in open grief four days later. The piling of tens of thousands of flowers outside sites linked to Diana became known as the 'floral revolution,' which was seen as much a rebuke of the family's perceived aloofness as a sign of respect for Diana (Greenhalgh 1999). One newspaper cartoon showed the Queen, Prince Philip

and Prince Charles fleeing a tidal wave of flowers (*Times* 7 September 1997, p.5). Two days before the funeral the *Times* did what it could not have done in 1817. It criticised the royal family for failing to allow flags to fly at half-mast, remaining at Balmoral rather than returning to London, and refusing to walk among the tens of thousands of mourners. The editorial in the *Times* (4 September 1997) urged the royals to forget protocol and listen to the people, warning that "Failure to gauge correctly the expectations of the public could turn a melancholy mood into an ugly one."

The tabloids were more strident in their condemnation of the Queen's seeming lack of heart: "Show us you care," read the headline on the front page of the *Express* (4 September 1997), while the *Sun* demanded: "Where is our Queen? Where is her flag?" (4 September 1997, p.1) When the royal family finally acceded to the public's demands, the *Times* welcomed the change, but added: "The Palace should not have needed reminding that the media must be used, promptly and creatively, if a modern head of state is to communicate with her people" (5 September 1997, p.19). It is an irony that the royal family of 1817 had grasped that concept, if only in order to protect its interests by playing on public sympathy as a means of bolstering support. As Schor (1994, p.220) argues, "... it is as though the monarchy assumed its most sympathetic face when the frailty of the royal family was revealed..."

Effect of the deaths on the body politic

The English monarch has for centuries been presented as having two bodies: the body natural and the body politic. The body natural is frail and human, suffers illness and eventually dies, while the body politic is part of the government and law, and survives death as the monarchy continues through the succession (Metcalf & Huntington 1991). Coverage of Charlotte's death reflected those two bodies, with the expression of very real grief at the loss of the much-loved young woman intermingled with concern as to how this death would affect the future of the throne:

At all events then, a turn in the succession must here occur, which will form an epoch to historians, and oblige genealogists to alter their line ... the British nation, both personally and politically, loved her while living, and lament her when dead (*Times* 10 November 1817, p.3).

Diana's death did not affect the succession, and Griggs (1997) argues that only her 'body natural' was mourned as one who had formed an empathetic link with the public that the other members of the royal family had failed to achieve. However the coverage of her death indicates that there was some 'body politic' influence, with the media of the day reporting the growing rift between the public and the royal family that, as mentioned previously, appeared to threaten the future of the monarchy. Pimlott (1997) described the public mood that influenced the royals' agenda in the week leading up to the funeral as: "... a sign that the monarchy must adapt or go ... the old notions on which the constitutional monarch rests look very threadbare."

Attitudes to death and mourning

In the 19th century death was part of the cycle of family life and treated as such. Accidents and wars aside, people generally died in bed, at home, surrounded by their loved ones, thus making death a familiar part of life. The pre-Victorian era also saw Britons becoming more open in their grieving: stoic silence was giving way to more obvious means of mourning, including building elaborate monuments and displaying one's own emotions more readily (Ariès 1974). Coverage of Charlotte's death indicates that this change was well underway, with the *Times* (11 November 1817, p.2) reprinting the local newspapers' reports of public reaction in towns around the country, including Bristol:

Dejection marked every countenance, and I think it is not too much to say, that 'tears gushed into every eye' ... Every public 'sign of woe' that could be made has been done by the tolling of church bells, by the hoisting of flags half mast high on public buildings and ships, and by the other usual demonstrations.

Coverage of the reaction to Diana's death echoed that of her predecessor:

Thousands of mourners gathered at Buckingham and Kensington Palaces from early morning as people learnt of the tragedy in Paris. In wide-spread displays of grief, men and women wept openly while others sat quietly on the ground with their head in their hands ... Hundreds of bunches of flowers were placed by mourners ... as well as candles and poems (*Times* 1 September 1997, p.4).

The public's overwhelming display of grief for Diana was a major reversal of the way death had been treated through much of the 20th century. During this period, people had become 'estranged' from death, as the last moments of life moved from home to hospital, allowing people to shut the reality of death out of their consciousness (Ariès 1974). According to Knox (1997), Diana's death was an uncomfortable reminder that our ultimate end could not be ignored: "... people grieving at Diana's death were ambushed by History, the experience something unwanted, a marker of mortality that was directly experienced, but was not of their direct experience." West (2004) refers to the grief displays of public weeping, laying flowers and signing condolence books as 'mourning sickness,' a self-interested and exaggerated form of grief from people who had never actually met the person they were mourning. However despite this ostentatious display of grief, the late 20th century mourners showed a reluctance to admit to the final reality of Diana's death. The *Times* of 1817 made it clear that Charlotte was dead and gone, and that she would quickly fade into history: "Even though few of our remarks were to reach, or be perused by, the succeeding generation, yet does the expression of feeling afford a present relief to it" (*Times*, 8 November 1817, p.2). The *Times* of 1997 stressed the influence that Diana would continue to have on the royal family and the charities she supported, while a reworked popular song performed at her funeral proclaimed that her legend would live on, and indeed that her "... footsteps [would] always fall here on England's greenest hills" (John & Taupin 1997).

From an act of God to a human failing

Another major difference in the attitudes of the times is in how the deaths were perceived. The loss of Charlotte and her child was believed to be an act of God: "It certainly does not belong to us to repine at the visitations of Providence, in whose power it is to draw good out of evil: but as the Almighty sometimes, for the most benevolent of purposes, deals severe chastisements on mankind, there is nothing impious in grieving for that as a calamity ..." (*Times*, 7 November 1817, p.2). No-one was to blame, and the *Times* was quick to defend the doctors from allegations that they may have botched the birth. One did not question the will of God, and the *Times* opined that following the loss of his wife and child, Prince Leopold should seek his solace in the divine: "he will, if he is as wise a man ... look for support and consolation, further than in human sympathies and perishable relations" (7 November 1817, p.2).

However the cause of Diana's death was, and still is, seen as much less than divine. Someone in the mortal world had to take the blame, and many candidates were put forward. The first and most obvious were the paparazzi who had been chasing the car before the accident, but that was soon extended to the media as a whole: "The large crowd clapped in unison when one angry onlooker [outside Kensington Palace] began a tirade against waiting photographers, shouting: 'The press killed her. You killed her, you bunch of vultures'" (*Times* 1 September 1997, p.4). Other candidates for blame came later, in the emergency teams that took so long in getting Diana to hospital, the drunk driver Henri Paul, and, in various conspiracy theories, the royal family and Britain's security services.

The change from accepting a death as the will of God to looking for someone human to blame can be seen as a result of advances in knowledge and technology that occurred in the 180 years that fell between the two deaths. Charlotte died more than 40 years before Darwin (1859) would question the basis of Judeo-Christian teaching with the publication of his theory of evolution. Advances in medicine meant that many deaths that would once have been seen as inevitable were now preventable, while advances in science meant that phenomena once believed to be the work of the divine could now be explained according to natural laws. In the secular West of the late 20th century, this meant that people needed to find a reason for a death that otherwise seemed senseless, and apportioning blame went some way toward furnishing that reason.

The paparazzi and their predecessors

The desire of the media 'vultures' to get a last image of Diana was not entirely modern. Diana was of course a constant target for photographers, and some of the paparazzi were still taking shots while emergency teams worked to get her out of the wrecked car. When Charlotte died in 1817 the first fixed photograph was still more than 20 years away, but a scandalised *Times* (13 November 1817, p.2) reported that

several artists had asked for permission to make a death mask of the Princess. This permission, the paper added, had been 'very properly' refused:

We are glad to see that a check was given to this professional avarice, and hope never again to witness, in the followers of an elegant art, conduct that argues, not merely a want of right feeling, but an ignorance of the common rules of decency and propriety.

A rebuke, perhaps, that could easily have applied to those photographers on their motorcycles.

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