EMOTIONAL FRAMING IN AUSTRALIAN JOURNALISM
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Introduction
The aim of this study is to explore the use of emotion as an important media frame in Australian journalism. The paper will strive to identify and document the extensive use of emotional representation as the narrative focus in news headlines and stories. This framing strategy is especially prominent in political reporting, but also frequently occurs in sports and business stories.

The paper describes two general types of narrative strategies in the deployment of emotional framing. Attributed emotional frames invoke fear, shame, embarrassment and hate as an interpretative scheme. Accredited emotional frames focus the attention on representations of sorrow, loss and grief as well as tearful ecstasy and emotional release, typically in relation to victory rather than failure. Both of these framing devices rely primarily on negative emotions, striving to intensify the reader’s emotional disposition toward the information, persons and images represented in the story.

This study will inevitably raise tantalizing questions: Why is emotional framing – often patently sentimental, sensational and lacking in credibility – an habitual device in the ‘quality’ press? Is emotional framing in journalism related to trends in other media or to wider cultural trends emphasising sensual experience and stimulation? How do Australian practices in this regard compare with news reporting in other countries? These questions cannot, of course, be seriously addressed in this paper. Rather, the central aim is to define and develop the conceptual scope of emotional framing; and then to present illustrative evidence to show how this device is employed in contemporary Australian journalism.

An Illustrated Typology
In attributed frames, public figures are typically claimed to be ‘shamed’ or ‘embarrassed’ as a result of their exposure for misfeasance, deception or hypocrisy.

THE AUSTRALIAN
WEDNESDAY APRIL 5 2006
KEEPING THE NATION INFORMED

Red-faced minister forces abattoir to reinstate workers

Red-faced when talking about the 1000 workers in South Australia it’s time for the minister to take action.

The minister should find out what is happening and take action. He should not just sit on the sidelines and watch what is happening.

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“AUSTRALIA’S largest investment bank has delivered a slap in the face to directors of the London Stock Exchange by reiterating a takeover bid they derided a week ago.”

Marc Moncrief, The Age, December 16, 2005

‘Fear’ and ‘hate’ are also used as attributed emotional frames, as the following examples illustrate.

Vaccine sparks promiscuity fears

Fears as Sunnis sink in Iraq poll The Australian, 21/12/2005
Attack fear as shark sightings rise The Weekend Australian, 17/12/2005
Pastors vow to go to jail on hate case The Age 23/06/2005
Muzzling the haters doesn’t mean that hate has vanished The Age 04/01/2005

The accredited emotional frame has alternative emotional valences. Often accompanied by photographic illustration, persons are shown to express the tearful but positive emotions of elation and gratitude on the occasion of success, victory or good fortune; or ‘breaking down’ and shedding tears of sorrow on the occasion of loss, grief or failure. I designate this frame as accredited in so far as the emotional display is both psychologically credible and frequently photo-documented.
I will argue below that the attributed frame tends to lack psychological credibility. Even within the body of the news report itself, the attribution is often counter-factual. The framing device, nevertheless, establishes for the reader an emotive interpretative scheme. If, indeed, as the story is framed, the politician is ‘caught out’ and yet offers no sign of shame or embarrassment, this absence or denial is, in the frame of the report, ‘unfeeling’ or ‘brazen’ hypocrisy.

Media reports routinely attribute ‘red-faced’ embarrassment to politicians even though the accompanying story typically reveals no evidentiary support for the attribution. The subject in question, in fact, often directly rebuffs a journalist’s repeated inquiry about the embarrassment. The shame, in other words, is in the eye of the beholder. The story implicitly elides into being a report about the reporter rather than the subject.1 The journalist and, if the established frame is effective, the reader (or television viewer in the case of televised interviews) who experiences the emotion.

Howard 'not surprised' at Cole request

The Prime Minister John Howard says he is not embarrassed that two of his senior ministers have been called on to provide statements to the oil-for-food inquiry.

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1 A Google Australia internet search of the phrase ‘Howard embarrassed’ produced 75,700 hits on 12 April 2006.
Accredited emotional frames are more complex and seductive. For example, lavish illustrations of tearful and emotionally overcome athletes have become an important news genre. The tears and apparent emotional vulnerability emphasised in these stories set up an interesting and engaging tension. Manifestly, elite athletes are both physically and emotional powerful. They are trained to endure pain and be resilient in their arduous and physically dangerous play. They are schooled in highly disciplined performance. Trained to think positively, they endure pain and injury bravely, and routinely describe defeat in terms of ‘learning’ and a beneficial preparation for future successes. These are sentiments often expressed by politicians and public figures. It is interesting that the tearful displays, for both sports figures and politicians, tend to be more lavishly reported and emphatically framed in victory than in defeat.

Politicians and sports figures do not readily shed tears in defeat, and there are perhaps a number of important reasons why this is so in relation to cultural and gender values of strength, good form and emotional control.

This provides another opportunity for an emotional frame in the media. Subjects displaying stoic resolve in the aftermath of defeat are asked about their ‘feelings.’ The frame, again, takes on an adversarial character analogous to the attribution of shame and embarrassment. The subjects are effectively invited to castigate themselves and ‘admit’ shortcoming and failure – indeed encouraged to reveal remorse, sorrow or anger.

Whether they win or lose in their contests, the cameras are carefully poised to record emotional overflow: tears of remorse in defeat or tears of joy in victory. Judging by the reports and photo illustrations, it seems that the real story is the expression of emotion. Emotional expression is a generic story; failure to express emotion is an alternative.

2 In news reportage of a tabloid kind, the photos are in effect the story; ‘article’ or report for which the photos may be said to serve as illustrations.
narrative of the same frame. For example it became the reporting frame for Dale Begg-Smith, the freestyle skier for Australia who won a gold medal in the moguls skiing event in the 2006 Winter Olympics.3

**Framing Theory**

There is a voluminous theoretical and empirical literature on media framing (Nelson et al., 1997; Entman, 1993; Pan and Kosicki, 1993; London, 1993; Price et al., 1997; Valkenburg et al., 1999; Simon and Xenos, 2000).4 The concept of framing, now a central tool of analysis in media research, draws on the seminal work of Erving Goffman (1974), in which he describes frames in a much wider range of social organisation, experience and expression. Framing has been defined as ‘how pieces of information are selected and organised to produce stories that make sense to their writers and audiences’ (Ryan, 1991, 53). Harrington (1998) emphsises the ‘elusiveness’ of media frames implicit in the emphasis Goffman places on presentational effects, as Gamson (1985, 617) indicates:

> News frames are almost entirely implicit and taken for granted. They do not appear to either journalists or audiences as social constructions but as primary attributes of events that reporters are reflecting. news frames make the world look natural..... They determine what is selected, what is excluded, what is emphasised, in short, news represents a packaged world.

This study adopts a wider understanding of frames as textual, visual and communicative devices for focusing and refocusing mediated information, such that it is understood not only in a framed context, but with the additional magnification of a lens which selects, focuses, intensifies, and inevitably re-contextualises a narrative theme. Thus, for example, when a news story frames a government official’s controversial decision as ‘another Watergate,’ the story is placed in a frame of meanings which ripple in ever wider circles of imputation, connotation and interpretation. The frame does not merely ‘select’ what you see but literally creates meaning in a rich context of connotations, associations and appraisals.

**Research Method and Materials Consulted**

To provide an evidentiary basis for the conceptual approach and indicative arguments in this study, the on-line archives of three broadsheet newspapers5 have been used to document and provide indicative aggregate measures of emotional framing in *The Australian* media’s stories and headlines for the year 2005. and are presented in this study. Illustrative evidence of emotional framing in other media examples will also be presented as graphic illustrations of the salience of the phenomenon.

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3 ‘He rode the bumps and made the jumps and won the gold medal, and when it was done, he scarcely raised a smile, let alone uttered an "oi". He was an emigre-of-convenience from Canada at 15 and a self-made internet millionaire at 20, with a Lamborghini in the garage of his apartment in Vancouver. His coach says he never betrays weakness because he never feels it. He is Dale Begg-Smith, Australia's newest Olympic hero. He is the iceman…. [Coach] Desovich said he had never seen Begg-Smith lose his composure. “I haven't seen any cracks. He's inhuman that way,” he said. "He's absolutely impenetrable. He never, absolutely ever shows weakness. I don't think he feels it. That's the way he is”’ (Baum, 2006).

4 The extensive research on framing, and the related concept of ‘priming,’ is suggested by the bibliography available at: http://info.wlu.ca/lispop/ires/fram_prim.htm

5 The Australian, The Age (Melbourne), and The Sydney Morning Herald.
Content and quantitative analyses of frequency, trends over time, and the proportion of emotional frames occurring in different news formats and reporting areas could be a salutary effect of this paper if it were to encourage more sharply focused, fine-grained research on the deployment of strategies and devices to accentuate emotional effects in mediated communication. However, for present purposes, given the ready familiarity presupposed of communications scholars, it seems inadvisable to construct an elaborate data sample and analysis of the rhetorical styles and emotive character of Australian news reporting (Corcoran, 2001; 2004).

The central aim of this paper, then, is to develop the concept of emotional frames; to indicate how they function as mediating devices; and to pose questions about the apparently growing salience of emotional expression in the mass media. For example, what are the implications of emotional mediation – not just as a qualifying or ancillary feature of a story, but as a communicative strategy – for reportorial distance, authoritativeness (both as a style and an institutional asset) and ‘factual objectivity’?

**Emotional Frames in Media Content**

On-line searches of Australian broadsheet newspaper archives for emotive key words in headlines and story texts confirmed the hypothesis that emotional framing is both frequent and extensive across a range of news reportage. *Shame, fear, embarrassment, red-faced and hate* seem to abound as much in the business sections and the sports pages as they do in general and political ‘news’ stories. By the same token, these emotive cues are widely employed by sub-editors in the same sections in devising headlines.

**Table 1. Emotional Frames: Headline Keywords, 2005**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper/Frame</th>
<th>shame</th>
<th>fear</th>
<th>hate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The Australian</em> + Wkd.</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Sydney Morning Herald</em></td>
<td>22</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Age</em> + Sunday</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These figures from the on-line archival search facilities of News Ltd. and Fairfax Ltd. must be regarded with considerable caution. The three web facilities may be based on different retrieval protocols. It is not possible to check duplications, differing file constraints (for example in distinctions between heads, subheads, captions, etc.) or other sources of incommensurability. Nevertheless, the gross figures as presented in Table 1 clearly indicate that emotional cues in the story headlines establish a frame for the reader even if the story text does not provide convincing internal support for the headline.

The frequency and variability of emotional frames in the broadsheet press is further attested by other searches. For example, an archive search of *The Age* for 2005 indicated that only one headline included variants of the word embarrass, whereas 59 articles contained that keyword in the text. The equivalent archival search of *The Australian* revealed nine headlines signalling that frame, but no fewer than 1,049 occurrences in article texts. Over the course of the research, there formed the distinct impression that *The*

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Australian relied upon emotional framing as one of its major communicative strategies.

A clearer impression of the reliance upon emotional framing in Australian ‘quality’ journalism may be conveyed simply by citing a list of headlines typical of this strategy.

### Shame Frame

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headline</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muslims to shame extremist teachers</td>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>28/12/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italians fear return to chaos in PM’s electoral overhaul</td>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>16/12/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our mandatory law shame</td>
<td>The Age</td>
<td>06/12/2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shame rises like surf of childhood</td>
<td>The Age</td>
<td>13/12/2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hall of shame</td>
<td>Sydney Morning Herald</td>
<td>26/12/2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>Our racist shame</td>
<td>Sydney Morning Herald</td>
<td>12/12/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child obesity / blame and shame too much the game</td>
<td>Sydney Morning Herald</td>
<td>02/12/2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shame and humiliation common suicide triggers</td>
<td>Sydney Morning Herald</td>
<td>01/09/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financier faces shame of animal cruelty charges</td>
<td>Sydney Morning Herald</td>
<td>13/08/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guantanamo: America’s shame</td>
<td>Sydney Morning Herald</td>
<td>02/08/2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neighbours star tells of drug shame</td>
<td>The Age</td>
<td>25/10/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government beyond shame over ads</td>
<td>The Age</td>
<td>14/10/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our crying shame of child abuse</td>
<td>The Age</td>
<td>15/04/2005</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Fear Frame

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Headline</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Riots fear brings out extra show of force</td>
<td>The Weekend Australian</td>
<td>31/12/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fears for family abducted in Gaza</td>
<td>The Weekend Australian</td>
<td>31/12/2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bird flu fear in rural NSW</td>
<td>The Weekend Australian</td>
<td>24/12/2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>Christmas – the season of fear and violence</td>
<td>Sydney Morning Herald</td>
<td>17/12/2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>Locals talk of fear and disgust after violence of bloody Sunday</td>
<td>Sydney Morning Herald</td>
<td>12/12/2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>Edge of fear for MPs on work changes</td>
<td>Sydney Morning Herald</td>
<td>29/11/2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>Labor and Liberal, workers united in fear of the future</td>
<td>Sydney Morning Herald</td>
<td>16/11/2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muslim leaders fear vilification</td>
<td>Sydney Morning Herald</td>
<td>09/11/2005</td>
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These headlines represent only a small selection extracted more or less at random from the newspaper archive search records. It would be pointless in the present study to speculate whether this selection from the 2005 calendar year is unrepresentative, or indeed unusually influenced by the political context of the war in Iraq, the London bombings or perceptions of international terrorism. Undoubtedly these are relevant influences on the topics of news reports as well as their tone and treatment. Nevertheless a cursory reading of the headlines indicates that emotional framing is employed across a very wide range of issues, many of which are not obviously related to the urgent concerns of war and terrorism.

An even clearer impression of emotional framing is suggested by the graphic presentation of news reporting. The following images reveal how framing is established visually by graphic illustration, spatial layout and
dramatic photographic material. These examples illustrate the way the news frame is itself the story, with the text and imagery merging into a visual unity.


Conclusion: Strategic Functions of Emotional Frames

**Identification.** Whether by attribution or accreditation, emotional framing establishes, indeed imposes, a reader/viewer perspective. Rather than merely a ‘window’ through which a story is both revealed and constrained, the cued emotion becomes the ‘hook’ for reader attention as well as the narrative strategy that establishes the story and determines its message. Although the emotional frame is intense, as indicated by the illustrations presented above, the effectiveness of the device is not only due to the presentational style of tabloid journalism – though of course emotional themes clearly lend themselves to such representations.

Perhaps more importantly, the effective force of these frames arises from the ease and immediacy of a reader’s identification with the emotional theme. While a reader may have affective access at the fantasy level to the lives and experiences of celebrities, the super-rich and the power-elites, this same reader readily identifies with their joys and sorrow, and easily feels empathy or antipathy to their fears and shame. Hence the outpouring of praise for Roger Federer’s tearful breakdown following his tennis championship cup being presented with an embrace from Rod Laver; hence the release of popular (media-fed) anger, resentment and scorn when Jana Pittman fails to follow the script of modesty and grace in defeat and victory.

**Intensification.** Emotional frames are powerful devices to achieve this standard function of the mass media. Other framing devices and styles of representation – the focus on controversy, conflict, violence, score-keeping, winning and losing – also perform this function. However, the depiction of strong negative emotions is clearly important in building a powerful and dynamic narrative in which emotion itself becomes the story’s subject matter. It may be the bushfire season, as it is every summer, but to announce this with an emotional frame – ‘Rear returns to the bush’ – intensifies the story well beyond a seasonal account of weather patterns.

**Simplification.** Simplifying a story in the popular media is both a strategy and a necessity, given the limitations of time and space, and the imperative of gaining and holding a reader’s attention. Simplification involves a reduction in the amount and complexity of information, as well as an easily understood and familiar style of analysis. The narrative itself becomes the analysis when the frame predisposes the reader to experience or identify with the attributed or represented emotional content. Thus with the frame established with a familiar cliché – ‘Minister embarrassed by leaked memo’ – the facts and details, the sequence of events, the finding of misfeasance and the fact or otherwise of the official’s emotional response to incompetence are all telescoped into a story which simply presumes the information. The focus of the story is not accuracy or veracity but the attributed emotion. Readers are easily able to identify with the emotion of shame or embarrassment and respond with humour, *Schadenfreud*, anger, or some other emotional association.

**Narrative structure.** Implicit in the functional character of media frames is their value in coping with the pressures of daily – indeed round-the-clock – journalism. Framing devices facilitate speedy, formulaic story formation. Emotional frames work in part because of their inherent simplicity. The emotions are limited in number, and they are all ‘interesting’ because they form a universal repertoire of human experience. Moreover, they can in effect
be layered onto other dramatic frames: fear caused by danger; sorrow and
sorrow and
grief arising from violence, crime and death; exhilaration and tearful joy
resulting from good luck or victory.

Laziness. At the risk of coming to a censorious conclusion, it might be
suggested that emotional frames are so commonly used in newspaper
reporting because they do offer story templates and thematic clichés. Reading
through the list of news headlines presented above, it is difficult to avoid the
impression that news writers often establish the ‘nose’ of their stories, as sub-
editor affix their headlines, out of an indifference to the underlying story, a lack
of motivation to inform their readers, and a predilection for easy, pre-packaged
commentary. If you aim to write an informed story about the minister’s
genuine red-faced embarrassment or the farmers actual fear, you would have
to go out and do interviews, take photos and record some harrowing
confessions. But with emotional frames, none of that work is necessary.

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