

Picturing the News: Gender representation in newspaper photography

By Michelle Gunther

According to the Global Media Monitoring Project (2010)(GMMP) women are significantly underrepresented and misrepresented in global news media coverage. This large-scale initiative maps the representation of women and men in news media worldwide. On 10 November 2009, 1,281 newspapers, television and radio stations were monitored in 108 countries for the fourth GMMP. The research covered 16,734 news items, 20,769 news personnel, and 35,543 total news subjects. The 2010 global report revealed that only 24% of people in the news are women; an improvement of only 7% since the projects inception in 1995. The Australian GMMP study, which equalled the global average of 24%, concluded that female news sources still appear disproportionately as celebrities or victims, and that Australian women are severely under-utilised in stories about politics, business, and other parts of contemporary society (Romano, 2010). The outcome of this underrepresentation according to the GMMP (2010) is an imbalanced view of the world in which women are largely invisible. Women's voices are significantly absent which results in news that perpetuates a male-centred view of the world. In Australia, women have a much broader and diverse participation in public life than the media depicts, highlighting the need for activism, intervention and advocacy in this field.

Picturing the News: The Australian 1973-2013 (2014)(figures 7 & 8) is a strategic artistic intervention I have created to draw attention to the continued absence of news media representations of women and the frequently poor quality of women's media representations that do appear. The proposal is for the creation of a website that will allow the user to explore, arrange and interact with mass media imagery across time in order to create critical dialogue on the issue of gender representations in Australian news media. The project will use the artistic devices of appropriation and demystification to critique the media and its practises, as represented by *The Australian* newspaper's images. This paper will argue that *Picturing the News: The Australian 1973-2013* is a very effective project designed to clearly communicate the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women in Australian news imagery to a potential large audience in an engaging and interactive way. First it will examine the process of photographic communications to articulate why news photography is such a powerful communicator of ideology; secondly it will discuss the contemporary Australian news media in the context of feminist media critiques of representation, and finally it will examine how the successful artistic interventions of both Sarah Charlesworth and the Guerilla Girls relate to, and inform, my own work on gender representation.

According to Frank Webster (1980, 20), photographic communications generate an active process comprised of the encoding (putting together an image by the photographer and a photo editor in the example here of newspapers) as well as the process of decoding (reading the image). He states that this dual process of creating and interpreting meaning is an active one, that is often unconscious, as both photographer and public are communicating in a shared cultural framework taken for granted by both. Thus, cultural assumptions play a central role in this process. Press photographers who present traditional gender representations in their professional work are actively shaping public attitudes and behaviours at the same time as evidencing how successfully the photographers themselves have absorbed the imagery of our culture. Webster argues that photographers have a special role in influencing society, to change in the direction of male and female equality, as they are such powerful perpetrators in ways of seeing. He challenges them to decide 'whether what they transmit will be the orthodoxy that a traditional culture desires or a challenge to limitations discernable in a way of seeing' (1980, 88).

Victor Burgin (1982, 142-153) argues against looking at photos in the light of 'art' but rather as sharing attributes of language; creating meaning freely and familiarly, largely received without critique amongst the audience in which they circulate. News photographs are the sites of complex intertextuality; a reader's understanding of any news image is informed by a voluminous and overlapping series of photographic texts previously consumed. He concludes that photos are not mere windows to reality but rather,

that the photograph is a *place of work*, a structured and structuring space within which the reader deploys, and is deployed by, what codes he or she is familiar with in order to *make sense*. (153).

Our cultural familiarity with the codes of photography, and with photographic representations of women, greatly influence how we read the gender representations presented to us in the newspaper. According to Burgin 'femininity' itself is the product of representations (1982, 9) and so contesting the reality of an image is an irrelevant argument – representations cannot be tested against the real as the real is the product of the agency of representations. Burgin instead suggests that what is to be interrogated is its effects. Further to this Spears, Seydegart and Gallagher (2010, 20) contend that inaccurate and unethical news imagery that fails to depict the complex reality of gender and society only serves to distort reality, not reflect it. This distortion of reality in media imagery can have a profound effect on women:

Images formed from mediated precepts become part of a woman's conception of herself. Mediated precepts of the status and abilities of other women...affect her image of her own status and abilities. Plans are formed partly from the images of the roles that other women play. Never seeing women in some roles, and seeing women playing other roles

poorly, reduces the likelihood that a woman will attempt such roles herself... Although she may be able to ignore the affronts of language, she probably cannot eliminate media images from her "construction of reality" (Bulter and Paisley, 1980. 49-50 quoted in Luebke, Barbara F. 1989)

It can be argued therefore that any artistic intervention in this field should also attempt to interrogate the impacts of representation on women in order to be most successful.

Webster (1980, 218) asserts that visual matter is more easily absorbed than language because 'images alone are cognized with a minimum of effort as they appear more concrete and substantial than words'. This results in passivity in the reader of the news. Further to this, Barbara Luebke (1989, 122-3) contends that it is reasonable to assume that many times photos are the only representation of events to which people are exposed, for many people who do not take the time to read, or for those who cannot. Walter Benjamin, in *The Author as Producer* (1934, 24) sees photographic reportage as supplying a production apparatus without changing it. He demands photographers use captions beneath their works to confer 'a revolutionary use value' on them. Therefore it can be asserted that the strategy of adding feminist text as an intervention to appropriated news imagery would negate the passivity of the reader by intervening in the way it is cognized. Benjamin argues that an intellectual seeking social change must transform from a supplier of the production apparatus, in this case photographs, into 'an engineer' who instead adapts the apparatus to the revolutionary ends. Thus, the mere substitution of one image for another; one representation of gender for an alternative, is not a sufficient interrogation of the issue, nor, a strong enough revolutionary act. The addition of text to the image, in the form of a caption or annotation that reveals or demystifies it, has a more powerful impact in disrupting the traditional communication codes it contains. In order to be equipped to effectively deploy feminist text for revolutionary means, it is important to understand exactly how women are represented in Australian news imagery.

Within feminist media criticism the term symbolic annihilation has been used to describe the absence or under representation of women. In her seminal work Gaye Tuchman (1978) divided this concept into the omission, trivialisation and condemnation of women when examining sexism within the media. Susan Fountaine and Judy McGregor (2002) found that Tuchman's concepts still applied today in New Zealand. They concluded that although the quantity of women's representations in news media had increased with their greater political participation, the quality had not. Whilst women represented 46% of news coverage in New Zealand, well above Australia's 11% in the same period, they conclude that women are still condemned and trivialised in the media. New Zealand at this time had a female Prime Minister and eleven women ministers

as well as a female leader of the opposition. Fountaine and McGregor use the concept of media framing to show that although the quantity of women's representations in news media had increased in NZ, the quality had not:

While the visibility of women has increased, structural, systematic gendering of women in politics takes place daily in television and radio broadcasts, and in the print media...Journalism educators need to re-theorise gender in the news for the 21st century less in terms of visibility/invisibility and more in terms of the quality of media representation. (2002, 5-6)

At this point it would be helpful to introduce a specific case study from the project to effectively illustrate the *quality* of media representations of women, especially in politics. An example of the distortion of reality common across all media types, as outlined by Spears, Seydegart and Gallagher (2010, 20), is the difference in the portrayal of powerful women and politicians with that of their male counterparts. Male politicians are frequently shown in headshots, looking directly at the viewer, centrally filling the frame or alone at podiums addressing crowds. The message is inherent in the images is one of men's power and dominance. Women colleagues are often pictured as reliant and/or subservient to the men that surround them – they are rendered as gendered subjects; and frequently shown with reference to their familial status (Spears, Seydegart and Gallagher 2010, 20; Fountaine and McGregor, 2002; Luebke 1989, 121).



Figure 1



Figure 2

On the 15 December 2003 Ms Marion Scrymgour became Australia's first Aboriginal woman cabinet minister, in the Northern Territory. She was appointed by the Chief Minister Clare Martin. Figure 1 is the news image from the Australian newspaper published with the story of this historic event. Ms Scrymgour is depicted with eyes downcast, partially out of the frame and as both subservient, and subjected to the male gaze, of NT Chief Administrator Ted

Egan. Figure 2 shows the front page of the Australian newspaper on the 16 December 1993, in which two suited men whose bodies dominant the frame, the Federal Treasurer Kim Beasley and Prime Minister Paul Keating, are pictured striding confidently towards the reader; their gaze looking forward and in control. The message is that of male dominance and power.

These two contrasting images of politicians from *Picturing the News: The Australian 1973-2013* clearly show that newspaper representations of female politicians are gendered and harmful distortion of reality. Stuart Hall (1973 quoted in Luebke 1989, 123-4) contends that news photos of a particular event 'carry with them a meta-message: 'this event really happened and this photo is the proof of it''. However news images can distort the actuality of an event, either consciously or unconsciously, as these objective visual reports are value laden:

...[T]he choice of this moment of an event as against that, of this person rather than that, of this angle rather than any other, indeed, the selection of this photographed incident to represent a whole complex chain of events and meanings, is a highly ideological procedure. (Hall 1973, 188. In Luebke 1989, 124)

Whether conscious or not, an ideological choice was made by *The Australian* newspaper when depicting Minister Marion Scrymgour with Ted Egan, and *not* alongside Chief Minister Clare Martin, in a powerful stance akin to that of Beasley and Keating. In the complex chain of events, covered by the media, that formed the totality of this historic occasion for women and indigenous Australians, the published image serves only to reinforce sexist gender stereotypes.

The sexist inherent in the media's treatment of Australia's first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, has been widely recognised according to Ana Stevenson (2013, 53). It provides strong evidence of the Australian news media's unfair gender bias and mirrors the findings by Fountaine and McGregor (2002) of the New Zealand experience. The quantity of media representations of women in news rose sharply during Gillard's term as Deputy Prime Minister and subsequently as Prime Minister of Australia. However, these representations were marked by some of the worst trivialisation and condemnation of a female politician in Australia to date (Stevenson 2013, 53-60; Little 2012, 4-10). On 10 October 2012 in response to her treatment, the then Prime Minister Julia Gillard delivered a internationally lauded parliamentary speech on sexism and misogyny in the lower house of Parliament that gained her widespread international media and national social media support. According to Janine Little (2012, 5-6) the mainstream news media's critical reporting of the speech was a curious thing; it 'did not reflect the social network's luminous support of the Prime Minister taking to Mr Abbott's double standard with a blunt

instrument'. This stark contrast between public support for Gillard in social media and the news media's condemnation is further evidence of the Australian media's entrenched sexism: 'How could Australia's media report that Opposition Leader Tony Abbott was a misogynist, after all, when there were contenders in its own ranks for the taking of that crown?' (Little 2012, 4). It clearly evidences how Australia's mainstream news media's reproduction of sexist ideology prevents critical dialogue on the issue. On the issue of dialogue Webster (1980, 221) articulates that the problem with photojournalism is that it is often used to shock or to titillate, 'but never to challenge, or raise questions, to reach an audience but only to reinforce preconceived modes of thought'. However the dissenting views of this event, very clearly articulated on the internet, demonstrate the potency of online social media sites and independent digital media, as strong and effective sites for activism and resistance against the Australian mainstream media's perpetuation of biased gender representations.

Having examined the *why* - by understanding how photos communicate ideology and establishing the issue of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women and its impact - and the *where* - the internet as a suitable site of resistance with an ability to communicate with a large potential audience - it is time to examine the *how*. What have artistic strategies and modes of production have other artists deployed that are of relevance to demonstrating the effectiveness of the project at hand? In her *Modern History: April 21, 1978* series (Figures 3 & 4) Sarah Charlesworth appropriates newspaper front pages and removes all text, leaving only the paper's banner and it's images. According to Maria Edwards (2011), Charlesworth's work subverts both photography and the mass media, whilst bridging 'the gap between Photo-Conceptualism and the new modes of artistic production', aligning itself with the ideas of the Pictures generation (iv). Whilst conceptual artists used photography as a signifier of a particular idea, the Pictures generation artists used the medium of photography in its capacity to create images. They specifically used appropriated visual imagery as a tool to interrogate the specific roles played by images in contemporary culture. According to Edwards (2011),

Many Pictures artists attempted to show the mechanism through which images create and perpetuate ideas through their domination of the transpersonal realm of the mass media. (3)

In Modern history Charleworth has removed the newspapers' text leaving only the newspapers masthead and the images. Edwards (2011) argues this has the effect of demanding the viewer examines relationships of the photos to the structures of the newspaper and to each other. Without the use of text, Charlesworth has created an active demand on the viewer that highlights the

way news imagery creates and perpetuates ideologies. Her creative strategy in this work successfully negates the passive consumption of the reader of news imagery. Charlesworth's appropriations of newspaper front pages from September and November 1977 clearly exposes the lack of female representation. The scarce representation of women is characteristic of the entire series, suggesting the exclusion of women from social and political life as well as history. Edwards (2011, 65) states that through the work the artist hopes to raise awareness of the biased nature of reality and eventually create an alternative history.

The Guerilla Girls also deploy appropriation, coupled with demystification, to expose sexism in politics, art, film and pop culture. Their 1989 poster *Do Women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* (figure 5) appropriates Ingre's *Grande Odalisque* (1814)(figure 6) as well as the strategies of advertising imagery. Raphael Sassower and Louis Cicotello (2006) state that the Guerilla Girls art makes a 'witty reversal of the politics of those kinds of images as their text is from a feminist perspective'. The text used by the artists' acts to demystify the practises of the art gallery. Demystification as a strategy is used to raise up an issue and to point out or embarrass some aspect of it. The Guerrilla Girls have incorporated facts and statistics on the practises of art institutions to very effectively critique their curatorial bias, and hidden ideologies. According to Sassower and Cicotello (2006, 2) the poster mocks the exclusivity of museums and galleries and the way in which 'male gatekeepers' choose to interact with women 'only as objectified nude images readily available for consumption'. The Guerilla Girls strategic use of facts, humour and appropriation is a very effectively critique that reveals the lack of female representation in art galleries and the injustice of this situation. Their use production of mass reproduced art, in the form of posters, is very much in keeping with Benjamin's call to action for artists to become producers who challenge existing modes of artistic production. Their use of feminist captions and appropriated images is a powerful and successful artistic intervention.

Picturing the News: The Australian 1973-2013 is a website project in which five editions of *The Australian* newspaper are appropriated and restructured onto a single webpage each. The structure of the design allows for every image from that edition to be viewed simultaneously and for the images to be sorted by gender and a further range of categories based on the predominate role portrayed in the image including politician/public figure, businessperson, spouse and parent. The sort functionality readily shows the underrepresentation of women in an interactive and visually effective way. Tuchman's concept of omission is powerfully demonstrated in the work and made available to explore over time. The role categories further articulate the male dominance of news content within specific spheres of influence such as

politics and sport. By clicking on an image users can view it in full and to the scale of original publication, relative to the other images. The appropriated images are altered with humorous and demystifying text captions, as successfully deployed by The Guerrilla Girls, but in this project are directed at the media's gatekeepers rather than the art worlds.

By using a website I am attempting to respond to Benjamin's challenge to creating new form of artistic production in which users are encouraged to become more active participants in their experience and consumption of news imagery, and the artist becomes a producer. This work adopts the same strategy of appropriating newspaper images, and isolating them from their original text setting, as Charlesworth's *Modern History*, however the work moves into new territory by displaying the images digitally on the internet and allowing the viewer to interact with them. Critical to the success of this project is that it goes even further than Charlesworth in successfully negating the passivity of the reader. The interactivity build into the site acts strengthen the projects ability to activate the reader/user into thinking critically about the representations of gender visible in *The Australian* and how we encode and decode meaning within photographs.

This essay has clearly articulated how news photography is a powerful communicator of ideology and has demonstrated the need for change in the quality and quantity of Australian women's media representations. By restructuring news imagery in an interactive visual website, the project constructs a situation where the reader is confronted with a new way of experiencing news imagery that is no longer passive. The visual design, appropriated images, demystifying text and sorting functionality of the site work very effectively to encourage the user/reader to think critically about the media images they consume and how our cultural understandings of gender are mediated by news imagery. The placement of this work in a digital online setting allows for its ready distribution and promotion via social media and other online platforms to a broad audience.

News production is a process of gatekeeping in which reality is edited into manageable proportions. Webster (1980) concludes that the most important underlying factor in the selection of media images is that photojournalists see the world through the eyes of their culture. He argues that the values inherent in their culture without doubt inform their work,

In short, at the heart of photojournalism are the concepts of a particular culture at a particular time, and while the press is not necessarily responsible for this way of seeing it does contribute powerfully towards its upkeep and stability by transmitting the prejudices and particularities of that culture (236).

Thus, we can conclude that the photographic images from *The Australian* in this project, in their omissions, trivialisations and condemnations of women, clearly reveal to the user/reader the sexism and gender bias still inherent in Australian culture. Revealing existing bias is an important first step in any actions towards positive change on this issue and the project succeeds strongly at this stated goal. However it has been argued earlier in this essay that any artistic intervention in this field should also attempt to interrogate the impacts of representation on women in order to be more successful. The scope of the project has significant potential for future expansion by adding components to visually demonstrate the impact of unbalanced gender representations on women and propose effective ways in which the user/reader can advocate for meaningful cultural change in the Australian media. As the project's producer I am excited by, and committed to, its ongoing expansion and its creative potential to successfully highlight the need for activism, intervention and advocacy in the issue of Australian women's representation in the news.

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Images



Figure 1 *The Australian* newspaper, 16 Dec 2003



Figure 2 *The Australian* newspaper, 16 Dec 1993



Figure 3 Sarah Charlesworth, *Herald Tribune*, September, 1977 (Detail from *Modern History*), one of twenty-six black-and-white prints, 1977. Reproduced same size as original newspapers, 16" x 23", Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Switzerland, Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover Vancouver Art Gallery, British Columbia.

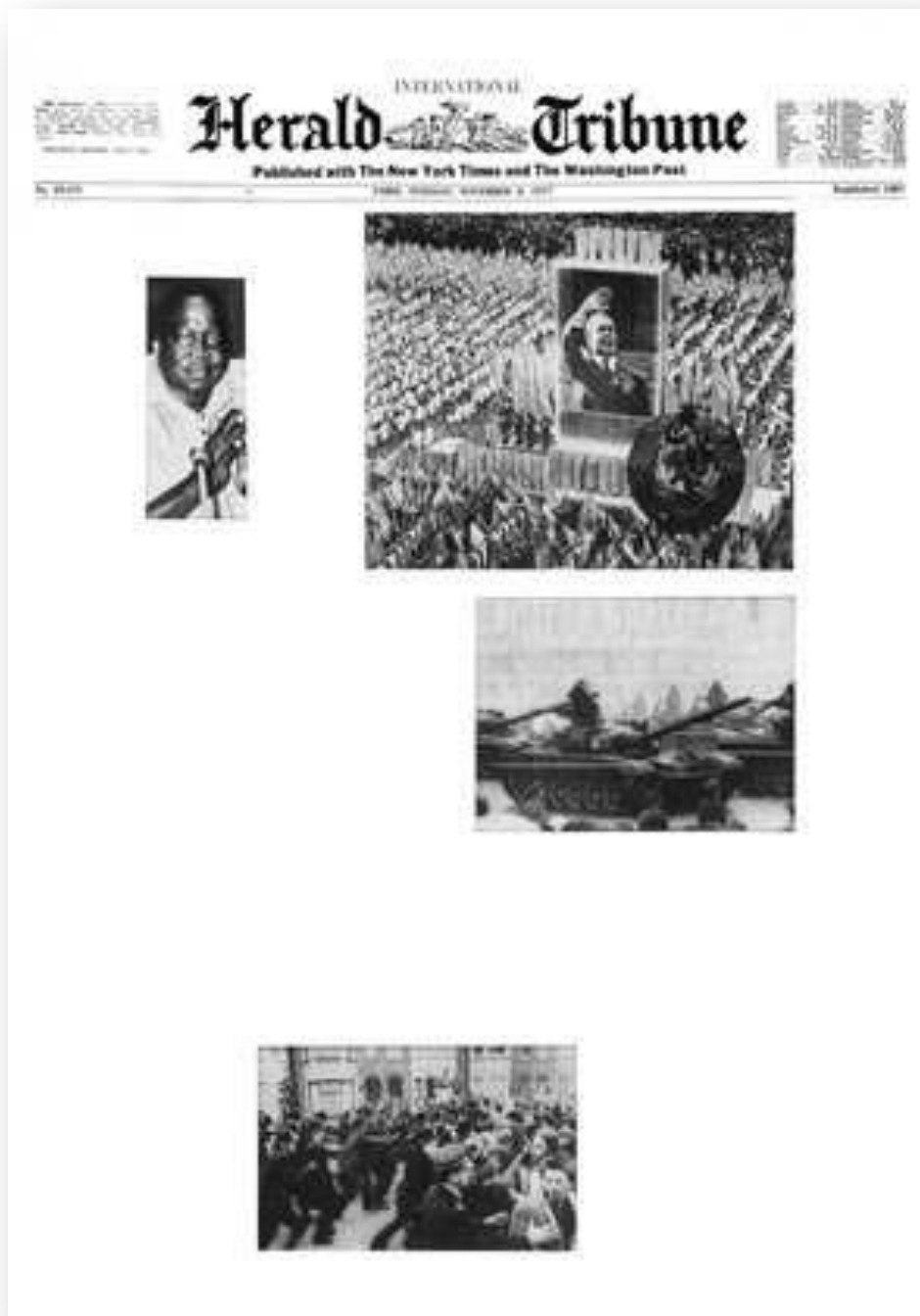


Figure 4 Sarah Charlesworth, *Herald Tribune*, November, 1977 (Detail from *Modern History*), one of twenty-six black-and-white prints, 1977, 16"x 23", Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, New York.



Figure 5 Guerrilla Girls. 1989. *Do Woman have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* Poster. Accessed 20 October 2014. Source: <http://www.guerrillagirls.com/posters/images/Naked%20Through%20The%20Ages/Naked1989.jpg>.

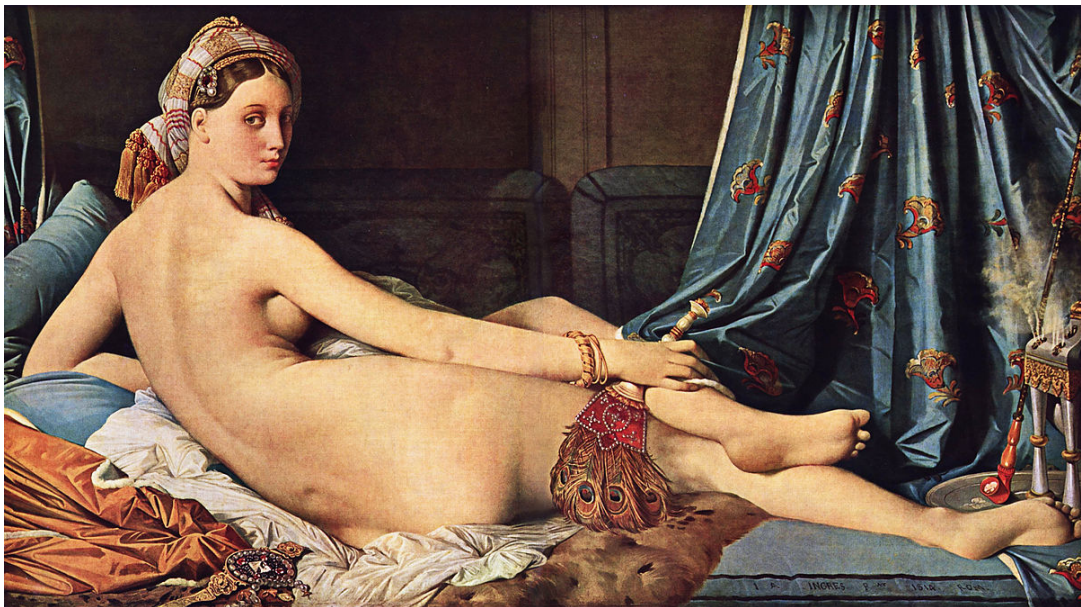


Figure 6 Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres . 1814. *Grande Odalisque*. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ingre,_Grande_Odalisque.jpg#mediaviewer/File:Ingre,_Grande_Odalisque.jpg



Figure 7 All news images of people from the 16 December 1993 edition of The Australian newspaper. Michelle Gunther. 2014. *Picturing the News: The Australian 1973-2013* (2014) website. (Work in progress)

<http://www.michellegunther.com.au/web/theaustralianimage/>



Figure 8 Images of women from the 16 December 1993 edition of The Australian newspaper. Michelle Gunther. 2014. *Picturing the News: The Australian 1973-2013* (2014) website. (Work in progress)

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