

# Sydney's water supply and the press

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## **ABSTRACT**

Sydney is the largest of Australia's major cities and is credited as being responsible for 23 percent of the nation's value added wealth. Labelled Australia's "economic powerhouse", Sydney's economic outlook affects the mood of the country – when Sydney is going well, the country's economic prospects look good.

Current metropolitan planning for Sydney has highlighted significant concerns about the long-term sustainability of the city. Leaving aside the big-ticket items of transport and electricity, Sydney is using more water than the catchments can provide. The situation has been exacerbated by an unusually long period of below average rainfall, now generally accepted to be the beginnings of climate change.

Sydney's water supply is sourced from a network of dams and reservoirs in the catchments of four river systems that extend as far as the Shoalhaven. Warragamba dam, within the catchment of the Hawkesbury-Nepean River, has the largest capacity (around 80 percent of total supply).

Compulsory water restrictions have been in place since October 2003 and have reduced consumption. The dam levels have fluctuated (mostly downwards) and are now at 39 percent of capacity.

Sydney's water future has become one of the longest running news issues for some time. This paper presents the findings of research undertaken as part of final year postgraduate Journalism studies. The paper considers the how the water issue has been handled by the press in terms of framing, sensationalism, use of language and examples of press campaigning.

The main findings are set out below.

## **Framing the issue and agenda setting**

When voluntary restrictions were first introduced press coverage was mainly concerned with short term impacts to water consumers. The focus of coverage changed towards the bigger picture and longer-term issues of sustainability as the restrictions have become more stringent. The change in direction occurred around the time that the government released its Water Plan.

In the early stages of restrictions the news agenda was generally following the political agenda. As the situation has progressed community interest in sustainability and water recycling was facilitated by the press, with the politicians playing "catch-up".

## **Sensationalism**

All papers have struggled to maintain an appropriate balance between conveying the significance of the situation without over-sensationalising. Emotional language and terms like "crisis" and 'scandal' have contributed to the community's perception that the city's water future is not secure.

### **Press campaigning**

The media's primary functions are to inform, educate and entertain. Despite some examples of campaign-style coverage, the papers have been generally successful in raising community knowledge of the issue, particularly in terms of conveying complex issues to the public in an informing way. Some coverage came close to consumer advice journalism.

### **Local and regional issues**

Local and regional papers generally approach the issue from the perspective of their area or region. The broadsheet papers with wider readership typically included in-depth analysis and commentary that took up the "bigger picture" perspective.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sydney is the largest of Australia's major cities. It is credited as being responsible for nearly one quarter of the nation's value added wealth and supports the largest regional economy in the country (DIPNR 2004b). Known as Australia's "economic powerhouse", Sydney's economic outlook affects the "mood" of the country - when Sydney is going well, the country's economic prospects look good.

The metropolitan area extends from the Central Coast to Wollongong and west to the Blue Mountains. The current population is approximately 4 million people and the state government estimates that Sydney is growing by around 1,000 people per week. The growth scenarios adopted by the Metropolitan Strategy expect the city's population to reach 5 million by 2022.

Despite its image as one of the world's great cities, Sydney is facing major challenges in securing its long-term sustainability. Many of the big issues for the city's future are infrastructure related - transport, electricity and water. The challenge in terms of water is to secure the supply within a sustainable yield (DIPNR 2004b).

Sydney faces an enormous task with water. The current drought is one of the most severe since the 1930s. At the same time climate change is likely to mean more prolonged dry spells and uncertain rainfall patterns. The added pressures of population growth have tangibly increased the size of the task.

Sydney is not alone in this area. Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne and South-East Queensland are all facing similar problems.

This paper examines press coverage of aspects of the water supply challenge for Sydney. The analysis is based on research into coverage between May 2003 and March 2005 and seeks to critically assess reporting conventions and approaches.

The main issues that emerge from the analysis are changes in the focus of the papers from short-term concerns to the longer-term "bigger picture", particularly as the situation has become more extreme. Despite a tendency to sensationalise the issue and use emotional language, the press have been generally successful in their primary role of informing the community.

## **BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

### **The water supply**

Sydney's drinking water is sourced from a network of dams and reservoirs that collect runoff from four river catchments. These are the Hawkesbury-Nepean River, Shoalhaven River, Woronora River and the Macquarie River (Fish River scheme).

Warragamba dam, on the Nepean-Hawkesbury system, is the largest of Sydney’s dams and has 1.8 million megalitres of water stored in Lake Burragorang behind the dam wall. Warragamba accounts for nearly 80 percent of the city’s total supply. In comparison, the Blue Mountains dams comprise a network of six small dams that are collectively the smallest in the system and provide 0.12 percent of the total supply. Details of the dams are set out in Table 1.

**Table 1 - Dams supplying Sydney's water**

River system	Dam	Full operating storage		Dam levels (%)		
		(capacity - ML)	Percent of total	May 03	March 05	Sep 05
Upper Nepean	Cataract	94,300	3.95%	32.3	51.2	41.7
	Cordeaux	93,640	3.93%	34.7	50.7	54.9
	Avon	146,700	6.15%	46.0	51.3	53.7
	Nepean	40,810	1.7%	55.7	65.8	49.7
	Woronora	Woronora	71,790	3%	80.3	56.2
Hawkesbury-Nepean	Warragamba	1,857,000	77.85%	58.5	38.3	36.6
	Prospect	8,870	0.37%	55.9	41.7	46.9
Shoalhaven	Wingecarribee	24,100	1.0%	73.6	76.3	94.4
	Fitzroy Falls	10,000	0.42%	84.4	87.5	62.8
	Tallowa	35,300	1.48%	100	83.5	50.5
Blue Mountains	Blue Mountains	2,790	0.12%	82.1	75.3	86.0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>2,385,300</b>	<b>100 %</b>	<b>57.3</b>	<b>42.4</b>	<b>40.0</b>

Source: Sydney Catchment Authority, Bulk Water Storage and Supply Report

### Capacity and city growth

Warragamba dam was built in the post war period. Even as construction was finishing in 1960 there were concerns that Warragamba may not be sufficient to support Sydney’s rapidly growing suburbs at some point in the future. The Shoalhaven scheme was built to augment Sydney’s water supply and construction of Tallowa dam finished in 1977. The Shoalhaven dams have given Sydney a long period with a relatively secure water supply.

The collective capacity of Sydney’s dams, at 600 billion litres of drinking water per annum, has been sufficient for Sydney’s needs until recent times. The city’s water consumption has exceeded the safe yield by an average of 5 percent or 30 billion litres for the past three years (DIPNR 2004a).

### Reducing consumption

Voluntary water restrictions were introduced in November 2002 when Sydney’s dams were at a combined capacity of 67.4 percent. The voluntary restrictions were the first stage strategy to reduce water consumption. The key limitations of the voluntary restrictions were:

- Watering systems could only be used in the morning (before 8am) and in the evening (after 8pm)
- No hosing hard surfaces.

Over the following year the dam levels fluctuated, hovering around 60 percent of capacity. Level One mandatory restrictions became effective on 1 October 2003. At the time the dam levels were 59 percent. The Level One restrictions banned sprinklers and hosing hard surfaces including paths and buildings. For the first time residents had to use buckets to wash their cars. Hand-held hoses could be used in the garden at any time. The fine for infringements was set at \$220.

## Infrastructure 05

More stringent Level Two restrictions came into force on 1 June 2004 when the dam levels were at 49.3 percent. The Level Two restrictions allowed residents to water gardens with a hand-held hose before 10am and after 4pm on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays. The ban on sprinklers and using hoses to wash cars and hard surfaces continued.

The Metropolitan Water Plan was released in October 2004. The plan set out the government's response to the water task, including immediate strategies to access "deep" water storage areas in Warragamba and Tallow dams and redirecting flows from the Shoalhaven system to augment the Sydney dams.

On 1 June 2005 Level Three restrictions took effect in Sydney. The Level Three restrictions have reduced the days on which watering the garden is permitted to Wednesdays and Fridays and tightened the conditions for businesses. Hosing hard surfaces, including cars, is still banned.

The restrictions have reduced water consumption in Sydney. The current (September 2005) daily average consumption of water in Sydney is 1,380 megalitres, down from 1,794 megalitres a day at the same time in 2003.

### THE RESEARCH SAMPLE

The following parameters were used to generate a suitable research sample of newspaper reports:

- Inclusion of coverage extending before the introduction of mandatory restrictions on 1 October 2003
- Selection of material from broadsheet and tabloid newspapers covering both the metropolitan area and selected local and regional areas
- Inclusion of coverage from the major publishing groups
- Inclusion of articles with a mix of lengths, from brief reports and analysis to in-depth commentary.

A total of 135 articles were selected from the *Daily Telegraph*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *Financial Review*, *Illawarra Mercury* and the *Penrith Press* using the Factiva database as shown in Table 2. Comments on the relevance of each publication to the selection criteria are also included.

**Table 2: Research sample**

<b>Paper/publisher</b>	<b>Details and relevance to criteria for inclusion</b>	<b>Sample</b>
Daily Telegraph (News Limited)	A major daily tabloid covering the Sydney metropolitan area.	48
Sydney Morning Herald (Fairfax)	A major daily broadsheet covering the Sydney metropolitan area.	37
The Australian (News Limited)	Daily broadsheet with national readership. Represents a major national paper owned by News Limited.	7
Financial Review (Fairfax)	Daily broadsheet published by Fairfax with national readership. Represents a major national paper with a focus on business.	4
Sunday Telegraph (News Limited)	A major weekly (Sunday) tabloid with state wide readership. Includes special interest and lifestyle sections.	12
Illawarra Mercury (Fairfax)	Daily regional paper covering the Illawarra region and South Coast. Particularly relevant as Sydney is increasingly reliant on South Coast water sources.	20
Penrith Press (News Limited)	Weekly local paper published by the Cumberland Group (News Limited) and distributed in Penrith, an area of western Sydney close to Warragamba dam and within its catchment area.	7
Total		135

The majority of the articles in the sample are from the two major daily newspapers serving the Sydney area being the *Daily Telegraph* (48 articles) and the *Sydney Morning Herald* (37 articles). The third largest sample is from the regional *Illawarra Mercury* (20 stories). The two papers with national distribution (*The Australian* and *Financial Review*) contained the least number of stories of the sample. A full list of the articles collected is included in Appendix 1.

## **ANALYSIS OF PRESS REPORTING**

Between May 2003 and March 2005 Sydney's dams fell from 57 percent of capacity to 43 percent. Warragamba dam hit a record low level of 38 percent in January 2005, and is now at 36 percent. Other than a few occasions when rain fell in the catchment areas, the city's water supply contracted by 14 percent in eighteen months.

The fate of Sydney's drinking water has been one of the longest running news issues for some time. The dropping dam levels and frustratingly dry skies have been the subject of many words across the papers. Treatment of the issue has evolved with the increasing severity of the problem. Water restrictions were headline news in late 2003. Now it's desalination.

The reporting has brought an array of perspectives to the debate. Former Utilities Minister Frank Sartor was virtually synonymous with dam levels in Sydney during 2003, and maintained a very high profile on behalf of the dams throughout 2003 and 2004. A range of academic and "water" experts have shed light through the press on why Sydney has so little water in the dams and the options and responses for the city.

Coverage was analysed to consider the following issues and reporting conventions:

- Framing the issue and agenda setting
- Sensationalism and language
- Press campaigning and consumer advice journalism
- Local and regional interests

These are considered in turn below.

### **Framing the Issue and Agenda Setting**

#### *Framing*

All press stories are framed to present a particular angle or perspective. Framing is necessary to simplify complex information and to make stories interesting, but can also be used to convey a particular impression, consciously or unconsciously. The framing of coverage on Sydney's water supply evolved over time as the severity of the situation increased and major political and management responses emerged. These are summarised in Figure 1 and discussed in more detail below.

In May 2003 Sydney had been subject to voluntary water restrictions for six months. Reports between May and July 2003 convey an underlying expectation that mandatory restrictions were imminent. In this phase coverage was upbeat about rain events and rises in dam levels when they occurred while being careful to caution against the community not taking the need to reduce water consumption seriously.

In early September 2003 the papers began talking openly of compulsory restrictions. Reporting was complicit with the political agenda in terms of softening up the community to the idea that the restrictions would change to compulsory when dam levels reached 60 percent. When the Level One

restrictions took effect at the beginning of October 2003, the press turned their attention to the sustainability of water consumption in Sydney and long-term supply options.

Over the summer of 2003/2004 dropping dam levels led to warnings of the likely need for tougher restrictions, including the potential for permanent low-level restrictions. By May 2004 the focus moved to supply options and water pricing. The strong likelihood of the next level of restrictions was an underlying theme across coverage.

The environmental campaign ramped up in June 2004. From this time coverage began to question the long-term sustainability of the city's water supply. Water recycling was now a prominent news angle. Coverage continued to focus on long-term sustainability during July and August 2004 as rainfall was intermittent, falling mostly in coastal areas away from the catchments. Reflecting their underlying commitment to the Farmhand Foundation, an interest group best known for its plans to "drought-proof Australia", the News Limited papers responded with frustration that coastal showers consistently missed the catchment (*Daily Telegraph*, 18 August 2004; *The Australian* 26 August 2004).

By the time the government's Water Plan was released in mid-October 2004 debate was raging about the sustainability of the city and the environmental credentials of the Carr Government. By the end of the year groups interested in recycling were given a voice in the press, adding to the building momentum in public opinion for alternative options to be considered as part of the city's water strategy. The need for permanent restrictions re-emerged as an issue in early 2005.

Overall, the framing of the issue evolved from an interest in short-term concerns like the implications of water restrictions and their effects on day-to-day activities in the early stages to a concern with long-term "bigger picture" issues of sustainability. The change in direction occurred mid-2004. The release of the state's Water Plan in October 2004 gave further impetus to the public debate on the "bigger picture".

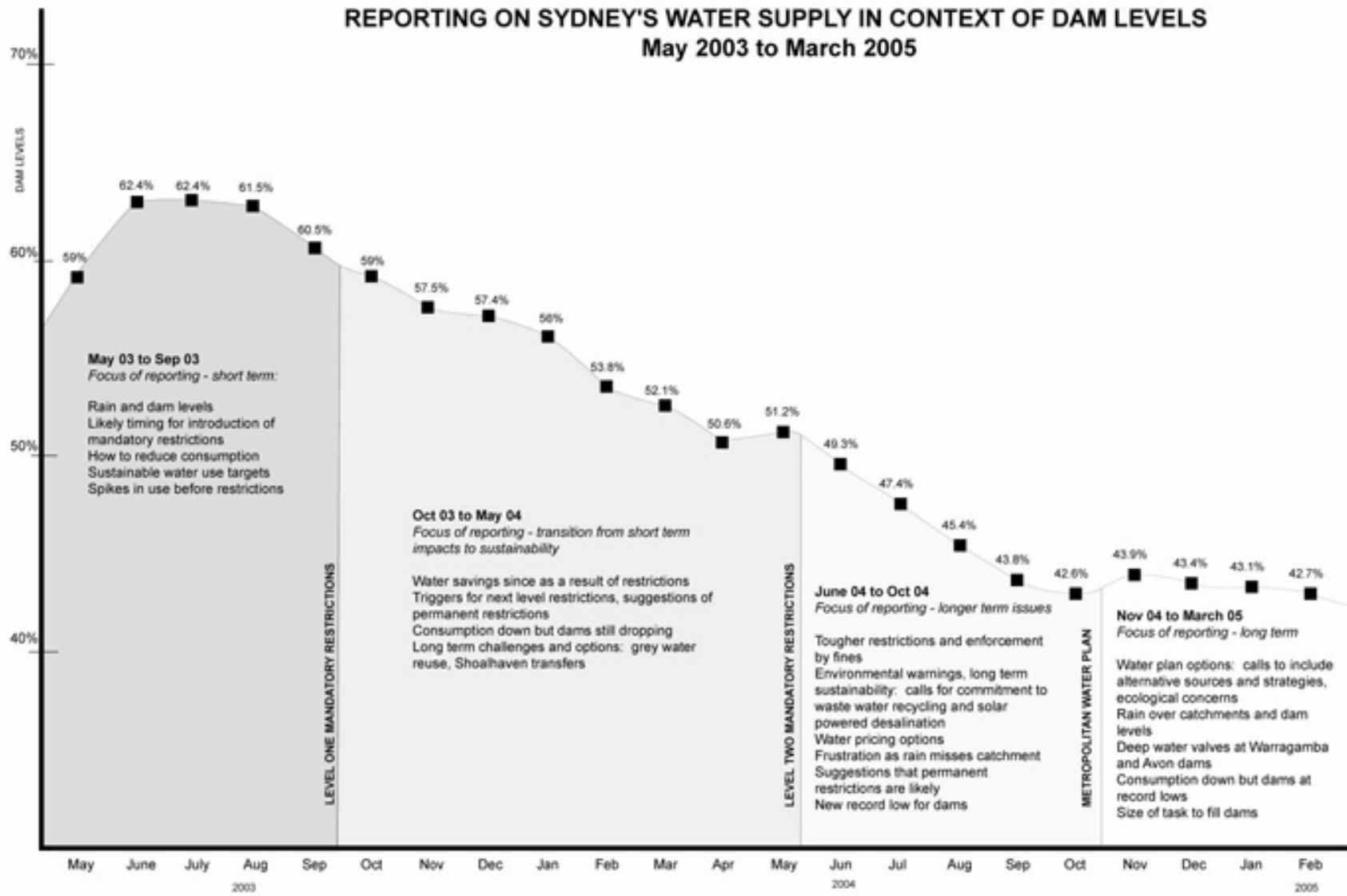
### *Agenda setting*

In the early phase of restrictions the Utilities Minister held a strong command on the water agenda. Frank Sartor, who has a reputation in NSW as a strong willed politician, moved seamlessly from his position as Sydney's Lord Mayor to take up a seat in the state parliament as the member for the southern Sydney area of Rockdale.

Sartor was immediately promoted to the front bench of Bob Carr's labor government and given the Energy and Utilities portfolio. He approached his new duties with the impatience and emotional connection that has characterised his public life. Coincidental or not, news interest in the dam's fluctuating fortunes increased exponentially around the time Sartor became Utilities Minister.

Minister Sartor and the Sydney Catchment Authority's Debbie Low were the primary sources quoted in the press reports on dam levels and water use. Sartor seemed to recognise the need to change the community mind-set if longer-term water shortages were to be avoided. He actively engaged with the media and became a daily fixture in the press talking about dam levels and the importance of conserving water. At this point the press were definitely following the political agenda.

Sartor was successful in sustaining the interest in the topic over a remarkably long time. Reporting on dam levels was one of the few news angles that spanned the two year period from May 2003 to early 2005. The direct and constant involvement of the Minister also established the water issue as a priority for the news editors of Sydney's major papers. It was something that people cared about, and that the paper's had a responsibility to report.



The introduction of compulsory water restrictions in late 2003 focussed public opinion on the significance of the situation. Environmental lobby groups like the Total Environment Centre were becoming increasingly nervous about the likely options the government would consider to secure the city's water supply. Debate on the defunct Welcome Reef dam, reignited by the NSW Opposition in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in November 2003 (SMH, 15 November 2003), drew the environmental lobby and the regional Illawarra interests together.

Sensing a change of tone, the press began exploring the environmental agenda. As part of its holiday season coverage the *Sydney Morning Herald* took a close look at some of the environmental issues facing the Nepean River system.

*Sydney Morning Herald* Environment Reporter James Woodford's "Up the Creek", published on 2 January 2004, described the "pathetic dribble" of water released each day from the upstream dams of the Nepean River system in the name of "environmental flows". Woodford drew parallels between Sydney's daily water use (and waste) of more than 1600 Olympic swimming pools and the 45 Olympic-sized pools released back to the river.

Woodford's commentary was one of the first in-depth articles to consider the environmental agenda in the context of the city's water future. It was the start of a new phase that was to lead to a convergence between the environmental lobby and the water industry. Sitting between them, the press facilitated, encouraged.

Four months later, as the city was faced with the prospect of Level Two restrictions, "grey water reuse schemes" - water recycling - became topical. From here things got murky. By June everyone had a view.

Columnist Miranda Divine used her space in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 3 June 2004 to have a go at Frank 'The Punisher' Sartor and his "punitive" attitude to fixing the city's water problem. She lashed out at the state government for "playing on the guilt of Sydneysiders" because they were being asked to curb their water use. Divine's answer turned out to be the most simplistic of all solutions – build another dam.

Three weeks later the *Sunday Telegraph* went straight to the heart of recycling. The report "Hard act to swallow" on 27 June 2004 didn't hold back describing the prejudices influencing the government's resistance. The "unpalatable prospect" of "drinking your own waste" was stumping recycling because the community wasn't ready for the idea of toilet-to-tap. Inspiring some classic cartoons, sustainability became the agenda.



Source - Wilcox, Sydney Morning Herald

The release of the government's water plan in October 2004 generated robust debate. Responding to the community mood, coverage across the press gave the impression that not all options had been given complete treatment.

John Brogden's opposition had raised the profile of recycling alternatives giving the water industry a chance to catch the attention of the press. The papers responded with in-depth analysis as considered in more detail below.

Paul Perkins of the Barton Group has been a prominent source for the press. Perkins was critical of the government's lack of commitment to recycling in the water plan, and the historical lack of commitment to water conservation (*The Australian*, 23 October 2004). His views gave credibility to the claims of environmentalist lobby groups like the Total Environment Centre as expressed in informative feature articles in the *Sydney Morning Herald* ('A lot of hot air', 20 November 2004 and "The natural disaster in our midst', 3 January 2005).

The *Daily Telegraph's* response was to focus on community apprehensions about recycling sewage ('Tapping in to sewage supply', 25 October 2004) and to investigate more politically palatable recycling options ('Sewage piped to power plants', 1 November 2004).

Three months ago letters in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Daily Telegraph* were supporting recycling. Frustration at the state's crumbling infrastructure has also been a recurring theme. On 5 July Sartor responded with an editorial in the *Herald* pooh-poohing recycling as the answer to the city's problems.

The situation has been a "crisis" in the minds of the press since late last year. The dams were at record lows in January 2005 and have barely recovered since. The cartoonist's have reflected the community mood of uncertainty about the future. Meanwhile the debate has moved on to desalination.



Source - Sydney Morning Herald, Moir

### Sensationalism

The Macquarie Dictionary defines sensationalism as "the exploitation of cheap emotional excitement by popular newspapers, novels, etc". Sensationalism has traditionally been associated with tabloid papers, but the emotive nature of the water issue challenged both tabloid and broadsheets to maintain an appropriate balance between informing and alarming the community.

Dam levels were at 60 percent when Level One restrictions came into effect in September 2003 and yet the *Sydney Morning Herald's* headlines were "Running on Empty" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 September 2003). The restrictions were targeting "water guzzlers", an adaptation of the label normally reserved to describe the petrol consumption of large 4-wheel drive vehicles. Water "guzzlers" and "wasters" have now appeared so many times in print across the spectrum of papers that they have become part of the lexicon.

Public perception about the severity of the situation was undoubtedly fuelled by continual references to the water "crisis" and the "scandal" of the dam levels.

Details of plans to pump water from the Shoalhaven's Tallowa dam to Warragamba dam to augment the city's water supply were translated to a personal reality by the *Herald's* Mark Coultan (2004) with the opening line "next time you take a shower it might well be in Shoalhaven River water". What Coultan's article failed to acknowledge was that the Shoalhaven dams were built as a back-up supply to Warragamba dam because of concerns that the large dam may eventually prove inadequate to supply Sydney's water needs.

A feature article published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in mid-June 2004 ('Wake up Sydney – Life is only going to get thirstier, 19 June 2004) set the tone towards sensationalism for the next phase of commentary. Labelling the unprecedented low level of Warragamba dam a “scandal”, Woodford asked “at the heart of Sydney’s water crisis is a simple question: how has such a stunning feat of thirst been possible?” The article goes on to press the warnings of “scientists, water engineers, bureaucrats and conservationists” that a “head-on collision” is “inevitable between population growth, the environment and the water supply”.

In September 2004 the *Daily Telegraph* upheld the true tabloid tradition with the headline “December 15, 2006 – That’s the day we will run out of water – SYDNEY’S WATER CRISIS” (*Daily Telegraph*, 18 September 2004). The carefully chosen page one words set a new equilibrium in the balance between informing and alarming the community.

The *Telegraph*’s proclamation of impending doom stands out as one of the more extreme examples of sensationalism in the reporting on Sydney’s dwindling water supply. Why let a good headline stand in the way of the story. Predictably, when you read the copy, the story is based on comments made by then Utilities Minister Frank Sartor to an Upper House budget estimates inquiry. Sartor told the inquiry that there was “118 weeks” of water left and, although that was the “absolute worst case”, it would only eventuate is “there is zero rain”.

The *Telegraph* headline picked up on an absolute worst-case prediction to prey on a fear factor that the community was increasingly nervous about: would the city actually run out of water. The article went on to quote water expert Derek Eamus from the University of Technology. Professor Eamus gave perspective and counterbalance to the startling headline: what we need is enough rain to recharge the dams and until then, Sydneysiders should just get used to restrictions and try to cut water use as much as possible. An important message, but somewhat dwarfed by the effect of the opening lines. The underlying framing of the article also gave readers the impression that the city’s water supply could be under threat of catastrophic failure.

The Metropolitan Water Plan’s release drew the broadsheet papers back to their natural reporting style. According to theory, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Australian* should typically explore the issues behind a story where a tabloid would concentrate on the personal impacts (Conley 2002). Within a week of the Water Plan’s release both paper’s published in-depth analysis on the issue (“Planning for the bigger dry”, *The Australian*, 23 October 2004) and the (“Water lifeline meets resistance”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 October 2004). The tempered analysis of this phase was more successful in raising public understanding of the complex issues involved.

### **Press Campaigning and Consumer Advice Journalism**

The media’s primary functions are to inform, educate and to entertain. The task of informing the community is critical to ensuring a well-informed community, particularly on matters of significant public interest (Conley 2002). Professional standards demand objectivity and expect editorialising to be confined to the opinion pages.

The *Daily Telegraph* and local paper the *Penrith Press* have displayed particular interest in monitoring dam levels and consumption rates through brief reports like “Rain can’t fill basin” (13 March 2004), “Dam supply falls to 41%” (4 September 2004) and “Dams get a 0.7pc boost” (26 February 2005). This reflects their natural preference as tabloid and local papers respectively, to pick up on issues of direct relevance to the day-today issues facing their readership.

Many of the brief reports on dam levels included details on the restrictions - no washing cars with a hose, watering the garden only allowed between certain hours on certain days. Reports typically included advice on how residents could save water around the home. The reporting came fairly

close to the fine line that divides the media's role to inform from consumer advice journalism, but generally stopped a safe distance from direct consumer advice. Both the *Telegraph* and *Sydney Morning Herald* gave readers the links to find further information about the restrictions from Sydney Water.

A lot of the *Telegraph's* dam level updates were very helpful in raising the profile and community awareness of the issue, all of which goes to serving the public interest. The *Telegraph* came close to press campaigning in its enthusiasm to involve the community in the water saving challenge.

The otherwise straight reporting of facts about dam levels by the *Telegraph* was spiced up by details of local Council ranger's new powers to patrol and issue fines for breaches. The idea of being fined for things that have been seen as a personal "right" for many years, like washing your car with the hose, was confronting, and must have registered with the *Telegraph's* editors as important to their readers. The paper picked up on Minister Sartor's suggestion that residents could get into the community spirit by "dobbing in water wasters". Images of track-suited suburbanite vigilante groups patrolling the streets looking for errant gardeners or overzealous domestic car washers were conjured up.

In September 2003 the *Telegraph* put a call out to readers asking for details of "anybody wasting water?" The classic "just let us know". Unfortunately the parks staff at Parramatta Council, a local authority in the heart of Sydney's west, forgot to turn off the automatic timing on sprinklers in one of their many parks during an unexpected downpour in November 2003. It was a simple mistake. New turf had been put down and the Council's five-week exemption from the restrictions had run out two weeks before.

The *Telegraph* made an example of the Council's mistake, and juxtaposed the Council's indiscretion against the Minister's call on householders to "drastically" cut back on water use and "enthusiastically dob in neighbours who don't". An "embarrassed" Council spokesman admitted there were "no excuses" for the slip up and the paper moved on.

Ultimately the coverage didn't serve any significant purpose other than to give the Minister another chance to raise the profile of the restrictions and threat of fines at the expense of Parramatta Council. Beyond that, the story probably had more coverage than it deserved in terms of newsworthiness, particularly for a metropolitan paper. It was a beat-up.

Meanwhile the *Telegraph* moved on to other areas of water waste, taking up interest in water lost through leaking pipes. It was at this point that coverage really became campaign-like. Sydney Water's January 2004 announcement that it would increase spending to fix leaking water mains was virtually claimed by the *Telegraph* as a "win" because the paper had "exposed" the problem ('\$10 to plug dripping pipes', 29 January 2004).

Attracting interest from the broader media, Sydney Water's problems peaked six months later as the drought led to an escalation of the problem with leaks. This time under siege from the *Sunday Telegraph*, Sydney Water spokesman Colin Judge was defending the outbreak of "900 incidents in June alone". Judge's explanation in the *Sunday Telegraph* on 4 July 2004 captured the simplicity of the problem. "The ground dries out, particularly the clay soils, and it cracks and moves and then the pipes crack", he said.

Despite the distractions of leaking pipes and other examples of near-campaign coverage, the press was largely successful in raising community knowledge and understanding of the issue.

### **Local and Regional Interests**

The analysis touched briefly on local and regional aspects of the coverage particularly through reports published in the Penrith local paper (*Penrith Press*) and the regional *Illawarra Mercury*.

The reports collected from the *Penrith Press* were mainly news briefs conveying information on rain events, changes in dam levels, water consumption rates or restrictions. In comparison, the same types of reports from the *Sydney Morning Herald* or *The Australian* were more likely to report on these aspects of the issue within a broader context of more detailed analysis.

The regional *Illawarra Mercury* took a strong interest in issues affecting the Shoalhaven and South Coast region. Debate in November 2003 about the defunct “twelfth” dam at Welcome Reef on the Shoalhaven attracted strong interest of the paper. Despite having been dismissed as an option by the government some years before, the *Mercury* made its view clear in a package comprising an editorial and barely disguised opinion driven “news” item. Abandoning any pretence of objectivity, the “news” item concluded, with little chance of misinterpretation by the reader, “...make no mistake, any revival of the Welcome Reef Dam plan would have major electoral repercussions” (*Illawarra Mercury*, 20 July 2004).

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper considers press coverage of Sydney’s water supply from selected papers between May 2003 and May 2005. The analysis draws the following conclusions and observations:

- The focus of coverage evolved as the severity of the situation increased and major government decisions were made. This saw a change from an interest in short term implications of water restrictions and dam levels to an interest in the long-term, “bigger picture”;
- In early 2003 the government had a strong hold on the news agenda through the involvement of then Utilities Minister Frank Sartor. Subtle changes in control of the agenda began occurring around the time that the restrictions became compulsory. By the time the government’s Water Plan was released in October 2004 the news agenda had moved to sustainability questions. Press coverage facilitated the merger of the water industry and environmental lobby who had common interests in raising the profile of recycling and alternate long-term solutions for the city;
- All papers struggled to maintain balance between conveying the significance of the situation without sensationalism. Emotive language and references to the dam levels as a “crisis” contributed to this perception;
- Despite some examples that were close to campaign-style coverage, the papers were generally successful in raising community knowledge of the issue;
- Coverage from the local and regional paper approached the issue from the perspective of their readership. Conversely, the broadsheet papers with wider readership considered similar issues in the context of the “bigger picture”.

Overall press coverage of Sydney’s dwindling water supply was successful in bringing a range of views to the debate and was successful in presenting complex issues to the public in an informing way.

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Sydney Catchment Authority 2002, Dams of greater Sydney and surrounds: Upper Nepean, Sydney Catchment Authority, Penrith

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'\$10m to plug dripping pipes', *Daily Telegraph*, 29 January 2004

'Dam little good in a meteorological no-go zone', *The Australian*, 26 August 2004

'Dams get a 0.7pc boost', *Daily Telegraph*, 26 February 2005

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- 'Dam supply falls to 41%', *Daily Telegraph*, 4 September 2004
- 'Mixed reaction to water reform', *Financial Review*, 21 October 2004
- 'New dam an unwelcome water plan', *Illawarra Mercury*, 20 July 2004
- 'PIPE DREAMS - \$800m vision to pump water into Sydney', *Daily Telegraph*, 19 October 2004
- 'Planning for the bigger dry', *The Australian*, 23 October 2004
- 'Rain can't fill basin', *Daily Telegraph*, 13 March 2004
- 'Rain misses dams', *Daily Telegraph*, 18 August 2004
- 'Shoalhaven River faces ruin', *Illawarra Mercury*, 20 July 2004
- 'Tapping in to sewage supply – State of drought: The grass and water which aren't what they seem', *Daily Telegraph*, 25 October 2004
- 'Water drying up', *Illawarra Mercury*, 24 September 2004
- 'Water lifeline meets resistance', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 October 2004

## APPENDIX A – Newspaper articles covering Sydney’s water supply, May 2003 to March 2005

REF	Date	Paper	Headline
1	5-Mar-05	Daily Telegraph	Storms keep dam levels up (90)
2	26-Feb-05	Daily Telegraph	Dams get a 0.7pc boost (92)
3	26-Feb-05	Daily Telegraph	Storm chasers: wet, wet, wet (774)
4	22-Feb-05	The Australian	Water restrictions are here to stay (513)
5	18-Feb-05	Penrith Press	Dam levels on rise (123)
6	8-Feb-05	Penrith Press	Dam levels up, but supplies still low (163)
7	8-Feb-05	The Australian	Water restrictions have taken root (379)
8	5-Feb-05	Daily Telegraph	Dam levels up slightly (86)
9	4-Feb-05	Daily Telegraph	Dam levels rise slightly (96)
10	3-Feb-05	Illawarra Mercury	Rain fell in right place, but dams didn't notice (308)
11	3-Feb-05	Daily Telegraph	Heavy rain makes for a likely drop in water restrictions (253)
12	31-Jan-05	SMH	Reserves at 40% despite rainfall (103)
13	22-Jan-05	Daily Telegraph	Dam levels at all-time low (125)
14	22-Jan-05	Daily Telegraph	Poor reward (349)
15	15-Jan-05	SMH	Sydney's thirst a threat to river (490)
16	14-Jan-05	SMH	Household water cuts a drop in the bucket (446)
17	7-Jan-05	Daily Telegraph	Ominous decline in water reserves (198)
18	6-Jan-05	SMH	Fines encourage city to wise up on water (603)
19	3-Jan-05	SMH	The natural disaster in our midst (1,065)
20	1-Jan-05	The Australian	Dam's level lowest ever (168)
21	1-Jan-05	Daily Telegraph	Dams at record low (151)
22	18-Dec-04	Daily Telegraph	Tap water 'too good' for cars (235)
23	6-Dec-04	Daily Telegraph	Dam supply upgraded (109)
24	5-Dec-04	Sunday Telegraph	Refit at key dam - \$32m for valves (243)
25	20-Nov-04	SMH	A lot of hot air (1,280)
26	9-Nov-04	Penrith Press	Plan to dig deep (455)
27	1-Nov-04	Daily Telegraph	Sewage piped to power plants (481)
28	26-Oct-04	Daily Telegraph	Saving water has got a catch (626)
29	25-Oct-04	Daily Telegraph	Tapping in to sewage supply - State of drought: The grass and water which aren't what they seem (459)
30	23-Oct-04	SMH	Rain gives us a two-month stay (101)
31	23-Oct-04	The Australian	Planning for the bigger dry (1,765)
32	22-Oct-04	Daily Telegraph	The scene all of Sydney has waited 15 months for .... Water pouring into Warragamba Dam - THERE SHE FLOWS (463)
33	21-Oct-04	Financial Review	Mixed reaction to water reform (491)
34	19-Oct-04	Illawarra Mercury	Water Fight (420)
35	19-Oct-04	Daily Telegraph	We must diversify - THE WATER CRISIS (196)
36	19-Oct-04	SMH	Water lifeline meets resistance (775)
37	19-Oct-04	SMH	Experts hose down plan to dig deep for water (503)
38	19-Oct-04	Daily Telegraph	Dam levels unchanged by rain - THE WATER CRISIS (334)
39	19-Oct-04	Daily Telegraph	PIPE DREAMS - \$800m vision to pump water into Sydney (1,089)
40	19-Oct-04	Financial Review	Recycling water to cost \$560m (608)
<b>STATE GOVERNMENT 25 YEAR WATER PLAN RELEASED</b>			
41	18-Oct-04	Daily Telegraph	\$106m WATER CURE - Carr plan to unplug lost dam supplies (455)
42	17-Oct-04	Sunday Telegraph	Carr must fix state of shame (449)
43	16-Oct-04	SMH	Salt water solution in play as hot spell looms (563)
44	15-Oct-04	Financial Review	Telstra waste water for sports ground (160)
45	9-Oct-04	Daily Telegraph	A drop in the ocean gets us a little rise (459)
46	4-Oct-04	Daily Telegraph	Grey days more than welcome (289)
49	25-Sep-04	Daily Telegraph	Dam it: Our new low - Drop in water use fails to prevent supply shortages (408)
50	24-Sep-04	Illawarra Mercury	Water drying up (641)
51	18-Sep-04	Daily Telegraph	Dec 16, 2006 - That's the day we will run out of water - SYDNEY'S WATER CRISIS (360)
52	11-Sep-04	Daily Telegraph	Dam levels fall again (102)
53	11-Sep-04	SMH	Under pressure (1,112)
54	4-Sep-04	SMH	Warragamba dips below 41% (116)
55	4-Sep-04	Daily Telegraph	Dam supply falls to 41% (120)
56	26-Aug-04	The Australian	Dam little good in a meteorological no-go zone (759)
57	22-Aug-04	Sunday Telegraph	Investing in our future (515)
58	19-Aug-04	Daily Telegraph	It's a dam shame - Our precious rain flows out to sea (489)
59	19-Aug-04	The Australian	Rains bring death and chaos, but no dam relief (374)
60	18-Aug-04	Daily Telegraph	Rain misses dams (261)
61	3-Aug-04	SMH	Making every drop cost (537)

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62	31-Jul-04 Daily Telegraph	Use more, pay more if limits tighten (321)
63	28-Jul-04 SMH	How healthy is our city? (3,682)
64	24-Jul-04 SMH	Water plan could leave platypus up the creek (455)
65	20-Jul-04 Illawarra Mercury	New dam an unwelcome water plan (356)
66	20-Jul-04 Illawarra Mercury	Shoalhaven River faces ruin (404)
67	15-Jul-04 Daily Telegraph	Down the drain (276)
68	8-Jul-04 Daily Telegraph	Clouds deliver a silver lining to parched city (383)
71	2-Jul-04 Illawarra Mercury	Brogden bucket on water-saving ideas (389)
72	1-Jul-04 SMH	Radical water plan looms as drought bites (768)
73	27-Jun-04 Sunday Telegraph	Hard act to swallow (1,965)
74	22-Jun-04 Daily Telegraph	Town rises from the depths - Dam level reveals secrets from 40 years ago (409)
75	19-Jun-04 SMH	Wake Up Sydney - Life is Only Going To Get Thirstier (1,923)
76	19-Jun-04 SMH	A long season of dry spells (361)
77	3-Jun-04 SMH	A drop in Reserve (1,112)
78	3-Jun-04 SMH	Carr is Leaving Us High and Dry (967)
79	2-Jun-04 Daily Telegraph	New level of water wake-ups (462)
80	1-Jun-04 Daily Telegraph	As tough level two water restrictions come into force this reservoir close to Sydney is nearly full - But it's no dam good to anyone (615)
<b>LEVEL 2 MANDATORY RESTRICTIONS INTRODUCED - 1 June 04 (Dam levels at 49.3%)</b>		
81	29-May-04 Illawarra Mercury	Dam levels shrink to 20-year low (218)
82	28-May-04 Daily Telegraph	What will we do of the well runs dry (801)
84	22-May-04 Financial Review	NSW Takes The Plunge on Water Use (369)
85	22-May-04 Daily Telegraph	Watering three days a week but not 9 to 5 (600)
86	29-Apr-04 SMH	City of Guzzlers: Restrictions Fall To Quench Thirst (600)
87	24-Apr-04 Illawarra Mercury	Dams Fall Despite Best Efforts (205)
88	14-Apr-04 SMH	Tougher Water Restrictions In The Pipeline (815)
89	14-Apr-04 SMH	Join Dams To Boost Supply, Says Debus (489)
90	14-Apr-04 Daily Telegraph	New restrictions on water usage (623)
91	13-Apr-04 SMH	South Coast Rains For Sydney Consumers (418)
92	6-Apr-04 Illawarra Mercury	Dam levels start to rise (185)
93	22-Mar-04 Daily Telegraph	Dam level below 50pc (125)
94	13-Mar-04 Illawarra Mercury	Sydney dam levels drop despite rain (89)
95	13-Mar-04 Daily Telegraph	Rain can't fill Basin (150)
96	4-Mar-04 SMH	Don't be a drip (836)
97	23-Feb-04 The Australian	Heat heralds more water restrictions (279)
98	14-Feb-04 SMH	Heat sends water savings down the drain (586)
99	12-Feb-04 SMH	The heat is on, but at least one fan's working (260)
100	10-Feb-04 Penrith Press	Doing our bit to save water (293)
101	29-Jan-04 Daily Telegraph	\$10m to plug dripping pipes (172)
102	29-Jan-04 SMH	Soaked through (809)
103	16-Jan-04 Penrith Press	Dam water level drops (140)
104	11-Jan-04 Sunday Telegraph	More restrictions in pipeline (148)
105	10-Jan-04 Daily Telegraph	NSW drought tightens grip (117)
106	2-Jan-04 SMH	Water savings paying off, but don't dream of hosing that driveway yet (352)
107	2-Jan-04 SMH	Up the creek (1628)
108	28-Dec-03 Sunday Telegraph	Warragamba fenced off (189)
109	6-Dec-03 Daily Telegraph	Rain falls but so do dam levels (484)
110	25-Nov-03 Daily Telegraph	Grey skies, red faces - Council wastes water while dobbers pipe up (434)
111	24-Nov-03 Illawarra Mercury	Good rain not enough to break drought (377)
112	22-Nov-03 Illawarra Mercury	Water use on target (159)
113	15-Nov-03 SMH	Damned if we do (1,354)
114	15-Nov-03 SMH	Filling dam would dry up river for a decade, says expert (482)
115	13-Nov-03 Illawarra Mercury	Dam no solution to water supplies (273)
116	8-Nov-03 Illawarra Mercury	Dam levels fall, while water use creeps up (163)
117	1-Nov-03 SMH	Learn to live with less water says Carr (573)
118	25-Oct-03 Illawarra Mercury	Bubblers miss blitz on water (402)
119	19-Oct-03 Sunday Telegraph	Liquid gold a vital asset - Water Week: A Special Report (571)
120	19-Oct-03 Sunday Telegraph	Seeking a change in attitudes - Water Week: A SPECIAL REPORT (411)
121	11-Oct-03 Daily Telegraph	Not a bad drop as water bans begin (419)
122	1-Oct-03 Illawarra Mercury	Councils draw waterline (546)
123	1-Oct-03 Daily Telegraph	Last drinks: city braces for water restrictions (422)
<b>LEVEL 1 MANDATORY WATER RESTRICTIONS INTRODUCED - 1 October 03 (Dam levels at 59.0%)</b>		
124	30-Sep-03 SMH	No benefit in hindsight (852)
125	30-Sep-03 SMH	Running on empty (1,254)
126	29-Sep-03 Daily Telegraph	The outlook is fines for spring's water wasters (731)
127	25-Sep-03 SMH	Guzzlers will pay in drive to save water (688)
128	14-Sep-03 Sunday Telegraph	The Premier tells why water restrictions are necessary for the Sydney region (680)

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129	12-Sep-03 Daily Telegraph	Restrictions ban washing the family car (586)
130	12-Sep-03 Illawarra Mercury	Rescue this dam from drought (755)
131	31-Aug-03 Sunday Telegraph	Rain didn't help low dam levels - WATER CRISIS: Our dwindling supplies (450)
	10-Aug-03 <i>Sun Herald</i>	<i>Rebuilding the rundown state (1,515)</i>
132	4-Aug-03 SMH	Love affair with wasting water may soon dry up (861)
133	22-Jul-03 Penrith Press	Spillway topping up safety standard (344)
134	9-Jul-03 Illawarra Mercury	Water shortage far from over (409)
135	20-May-03 Penrith Press	It's good news - for now (129)
136	17-May-03 Illawarra Mercury	Dams filling but drought not over (480)
137	16-May-03 Daily Telegraph	Water storage on the rise - SYDNEY FLOODS (122)
138	15-May-03 Illawarra Mercury	Heavy rains lift level of dams (275)
134	TOTAL	