

‘Parish pump’ or community forum: an analysis of The Observer’s reportage of the Stuart Shale Oil Project

Historically, the regional newspaper has been at the forefront in advancing its community’s economic needs. This article will examine the distinctive role of this medium in contemporary Australia and argue that ‘parish pump’ advocacy is still being pursued today. It will present the findings of a study into Gladstone’s daily newspaper, The Observer, and its reportage of the long-running Stuart Shale Oil Project. The project has been acclaimed as indicative of the city’s growth potential and the shale oil industry promoted as a possible answer to Australia’s future oil needs. However, its development has come at a cost. Nearby residents’ lives have been so affected, they are now leaving their homes and properties as the Queensland Government buys their land. Greenpeace protests have also attracted widespread negative media coverage. The organisation’s role in highlighting the development and The Observer’s reaction to this will be discussed. In light of the project’s negative impact on parts of the community, this article will address the question of whether a regional newspaper can present balanced coverage in a community heavily reliant on the economic contribution of industry.

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The media have reported on the controversial Stuart Shale Oil Project near the Central Queensland city of Gladstone for more than 20 years, from the first whispers of its potential in the early 1980’s to the Greenpeace protests at the end of the millenium and, more recently, its uncertain future. While there has been national coverage of the project’s mixed fortunes, Gladstone’s daily newspaper, *The Observer*, has reported

regularly about its impact on the nearby communities of Yarwun and Targinnie. This article will examine the distinctive role of the regional newspaper within the context of this reportage, analysing three periods of intense coverage in 1999, 2000 and 2001. It will outline how *The Observer's* approach has changed from that of the traditional 'parish pump' advocate to providing a community forum for debate and, in doing so, reflecting as much as leading public opinion .

The historical view of Australia's regional newspapers as 'parish pump' advocates has been well documented (Cryle 1996; Kirkpatrick 1984, 2000; Morrison 1992; Walker 1980). *The Observer* is still pursuing this role today as Gladstone's industrial growth continues. However, in relation to this troubled project, the early parochialism and pro-development line has shifted to an acknowledgement of community concerns about health issues and land values. The project's initial developers, Southern Pacific Petroleum and Central Pacific Minerals (SPP/CPM) along with Suncor Energy dominated the early reportage, but eventually had to share the headlines with Greenpeace activists and angry local residents.

This article will present an overview of a study that used content analysis and interviews with former *Observer* editors, to examine the three periods of reportage. During that time, Greenpeace received prominent local and national media coverage for its campaign against the project. *The Observer's* portrayal of it as a 'media circus' and an unwanted intruder in a local issue will also be discussed, as it provides further evidence of a regional newspaper's parochialism. However, it will be argued that the Greenpeace presence did, in fact, draw attention not only to concerns about the Shale Oil Project and its possible impact on the environment, but also spurred local residents to pursue their own activism, in relation to the project's negative impact on their lives.

The three periods of reportage analysed were approximately the same length. Each featured significant events in the project's history including the early commissioning of the demonstration plant, the Greenpeace protests, emission and technology problems and increasing community concerns about the industry. A new editor also took over at *The Observer* during 2001 after its owners, Australian Provincial Newspapers, asked the previous editor to take that role at *The Mackay Mercury*. This change, along with continued emission problems at the shale oil plant, resulted

in a more concerned editorial line in relation to the needs of the community rather than industry.

The periodisation approach was employed to demonstrate any significant changes in the reportage that may have occurred during the three years of the study. The content analysis examines the numbers of news stories, photographs, editorials and letters to the editor that were published to indicate the range of views presented. It also details the use of sources and story placement to reveal how balanced the reportage was, in presenting both industry and community views. This quantitative approach is backed up by qualitative analysis based on comments from the former editors who oversaw the reportage of the Shale Oil Project from 1999 to 2001 and the newspaper's editorial line.

Previous analysis of Australian regional newspapers and their journalistic practice is limited. Much of the literature has focused on historical developments (Cryle 1989; Kirkpatrick 1984, 2000; Manion 1982; Morrison 1992; Walker 1980). More recent work has examined the future of regional press since the restructuring of the mid-1980's (Cryle 1996;1998), as well as investigating the 'watchdog' role of the provincial newspaper (McDougall 1995), local press coverage of New South Wales state politics (Richardson and Murphy 2000) and the roles of local and suburban newspapers on the Gold Coast (Griffin 2002).

One of the key literature sources placing the contemporary role of regional newspapers into perspective is *Sworn To No Master* (Kirkpatrick 1984), a history of Queensland's provincial press. This study details the early development of regional newspapers as independent advocates for their communities. It leads to an understanding of why the parochial advocacy continues as towns and cities seek economic advantage over each other in the 21st century. Another historical study, *Country Conscience: a history of the New South Wales provincial press, 1841-1995* (Kirkpatrick 2000) highlights the advocacy role that these regional and rural newspapers played in their communities. In an analysis of regional newspapers since corporate restructuring in the mid-1980's, Cryle (1996, p.74) noted that regional journalists still thought "newspapers should remain uncritical advocates of regional economic development". Griffin (2002, p.105), in his study of the Gold Coast's daily newspaper, the *Bulletin*, and its suburban counterpart, the *Sun*, compares the former's constant need to establish meaning and identity in a local context with the latter's simple

pursuit of 'old-style' news. Together, these literature sources place the concept of parochial or 'parish pump' advocacy as central to the regional newspaper's rationale.

A British and an Australian study that examined regional press coverage of political campaigns (Franklin and Murphy 1991; Richardson and Murphy 2000) guided both the methodological and theoretical framework for this research. Analysis of *The Observer's* reportage has been based on their quantitative and qualitative approaches, while a similar theoretical framework has also applied. Against a background of wide national political coverage and partisan reporting of Britain's 1983 general election (Harrop cited in Franklin and Murphy 1991, p.154-155), the Franklin and Murphy study examined local press coverage of an election campaign to see if similar trends were repeated. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with respondents from local newspapers and major political parties, along with a content analysis of categories such as news stories and editorials. The Franklin and Murphy literature was instructive for its methodology as well as the regional context of the research and the issue of partisan reporting.

The British research was also relevant to the theoretical framework of *The Observer* study. Franklin and Murphy's study was based on Gramsci's notion of hegemony in terms of the media's ability to influence people's views. Hegemony can be defined as a state of ideological control where a group within society projects a view that becomes the consensus view (Bellamy 1994). It can be argued, in relation to the Franklin and Murphy study, that the hegemony of a local newspaper during an election can influence readers to accept a certain political viewpoint. This particularly applies if a newspaper has a monopoly over news dissemination, as *The Observer* does in relation to Gladstone's print media.

The notion of media hegemony and its influence in forming community consensus or attitudes is relevant to this analysis of the Shale Oil Project coverage. There has long been the belief that *The Observer's* reporting on industrial development has been dominated by industry views at the expense of farmers and environmentalists, who see themselves as marginalised. Data gathered from the first period of this study confirmed that pro-industry sources dominated the reportage. However, the second and third periods revealed a more balanced use of sources and story

placement with growing opposition to the development and more polarised views.

Richardson and Murphy's Australian study (2000) of regional press coverage dealing with two NSW state election campaigns in 1995 and 1999 also informed *The Observer* research. The researchers analysed the presentation of election candidates and their campaign messages in the *Northern Daily Leader*, a regional daily newspaper serving the Tamworth district. Specifically, they (2000, p.262) examined the portrayal of 'country mindedness' in press coverage of community debates, and how significant the notion was in the context of political communication. The term has been interpreted as an 'essentially capitalist and nationalistic discourse of domination' (Moore 1990 cited in Richardson and Murphy 2000, p261) and, therefore, suggests the notion of media hegemony again.

Reportage of environmental issues is central to this *Observer* study and there are a number of relevant literature sources. Roush and Fortner (1996) highlight the regular role of newspapers in reporting on the environment. However, Hungerford and Lemert (1973) argue that journalists ignore stories of environmental hazards in their own area, while reporting on these issues elsewhere. The implication is they feel safer to report on problems seen as more severe outside their region, rather than question local industries and cause conflict through the press. Lacy and Coulson (2000) examined American newspapers' use of sources in covering environmental issues and found government and business sources were used more often than activists and ordinary citizens. This finding supports the data from the first period of *Observer* reportage, where pro-industry sources were featured more frequently in news stories than activists or residents.

Hansen (1993) offers various perspectives on media coverage of the environment, from pressure groups and agendas to journalistic strategies for reporting long-term environmental issues and the relationship between media and their sources. Of interest for this study is Hansen's longitudinal analysis of Greenpeace and the press coverage it has received for its environmental campaigns. The organisation's presence in Gladstone from 1999 – 2001 was extensively portrayed in the reportage analysed for this study. Hansen (1993 p.xx) argues that this "highly successful pressure group has been able to influence both the amount of coverage and the frames of the debate". He suggests its authority has come from attacks

on developments already attracting media coverage. In the context of the Shale Oil Project, it can be argued that Greenpeace's protests in Gladstone drew even more attention to the story. However, these actions also strengthened *The Observer's* pursuit of localism with its editorials depicting the activists as outsiders performing stunts for the media and undeserving of serious attention.

Period One – 'Parish pump' advocacy

The Stuart Shale Oil Project is located about 15 kilometres north-west of Gladstone and has long featured in the city's projected industrial growth. Its development, to date, has been based on one oil shale deposit known as the Stuart deposit with a total shale oil resource of 2.6 billion barrels. There are 10 oil shale deposits representing more than 20 billion barrels of shale oil resources in Central Queensland. Shale oil is regarded as an experimental fossil fuel and is produced when the shale rock is heated, creating a vapour that becomes liquid oil when cooled.

The first period of reportage analysed for the study documented a formative part of the project's history and confirmed the regional newspaper's traditional role of 'parish pump' advocate was still relevant. It covered five weeks from July 20 to August 25, 1999 and featured intense coverage of Greenpeace protests against the project and associated issues. Other newsworthy events included the early commissioning of the Stage One demonstration plant, the first oil production and the plant's shutdown due to unexpected emissions. The plant's commissioning was a milestone for both the developers, Southern Pacific Petroleum N.L., Central Pacific Minerals N.L and Suncor Energy as well as Gladstone. This project had been anticipated for more than twenty years and *The Observer* was strongly promoting its community benefits. Editor, Jason Purdie was well aware of business and residents' expectations "for jobs and development" (Purdie 2002) , while there was only a minority within the community opposed to the project.

Greenpeace activists arrived in Gladstone on July 19 to coincide with the commissioning's early stages. Its subsequent protests at the plant site changed the newspaper's reporting focus from positive stories about industrial development to coverage of conflict and outside interference. The activists believed the development of the shale oil industry and its production of fossil fuels would exacerbate the global problem of climate

Period One – 'Parish pump' advocacy

change, through greenhouse gas emissions. They also saw the industry as threatening the future of the Great Barrier Reef, with global warming resulting in coral bleaching. While Greenpeace's 'world view' had a local focus, it contrasted strongly with the 'countrymindedness' of *The Observer* and many Gladstone residents who supported the project's development for economic and employment reasons.

Over four consecutive days, the newspaper focused on the conflict between activists and police, as well as subsequent court appearances. Its reportage in this first period was dominated by photographs and stories about Greenpeace activists from outside Gladstone protesting against the project and being escorted from the site by police, as well as local reaction to events. It was clear both the local media as well as political and industry leaders did not welcome the protests. They regarded the actions of people chaining themselves to fences and equipment as 'media stunts' and saw the activists bringing capital city values to a regional centre. Table 1 illustrates the dominance of photographs and stories over letters and editorials in this period.

Table 1
Breakdown of reportage in Period One (July 20 – August 25, 1999)

Content category	Total
Photographs	15
News stories	15
Letters	3
Editorials	2

With Greenpeace actively leading the campaign against the project at that stage, it was not surprising to see the strong photographic representation in *The Observer*. Anderson (Hansen 1993, p.56) has noted that Greenpeace deliberately plans its action to satisfy the needs of newspapers and television news for strong visual content. Cracknell (Hansen 1993, p.6) has also argued that the media attraction for environmental issues is based on a story's ability to be translated visually.

He suggests that aspects of environmental campaigns, such as their visual nature involving the natural landscape and the idea of local conflict where there is opposition to a particular development, “conform well with the selection principles of mass media arenas” (Hansen 1993, p.6). Cracknell also notes that environmental issues gain a visible media profile as a result of disasters, which can impact on both the surrounding natural and human communities. In relation to the Shale Oil Project, the issues of technical breakdowns and accidental emissions contributed to the visual appeal of the story for the media, as well as the very real conflict between the project and the nearby farming communities of Yarwun and Targinnie. Dr Alison Anderson’s research (Hansen 1993, p.56) has also found that Greenpeace is strongly orientated towards the visual content of newspaper and television news. The Programme Director of Greenpeace UK, Chris Rose, told Anderson in a 1990 interview that the organisation used its protests as a type of morality play. He argued that this approach took Greenpeace “out of the editorial system of gatekeepersÖit puts them into that sort of tabloid news and that’s what headline news in television is all aboutÖit has to beÖthirty second visuals” (Hansen 1993, p.56). Rose claimed that Greenpeace is “deliberately restricting most of their input using that one visible bit that you can see, using television newsÖand newspaper photographs” (Hansen 1993, p.56).

Further analysis of story sources, placement and editorial content in this period confirmed *The Observer* was playing the regional newspaper’s traditional advocacy role. It strongly pursued, both through news stories and editorials, the themes of localism and industrial development using a majority of pro-development sources, parochial language and tone. Twelve of the 15 stories were placed on the early inside pages while much of page one was reserved for photographs of conflict between activists and police. The only negative story about the project that appeared during this period followed unexpected emissions from the plant, and resulted in front page headlines about a shutdown. An analysis of sources used in these stories found pro-industry views dominated. They could be regarded as official sources as they represented the developers, local government or the Gladstone Area Development Board. This journalistic practice of relying on official sources more than environmental groups accords with the findings of previous studies noted by Anderson (Hansen 1993, p.52-53).

In editorials, Jason Purdie questioned the legitimacy of Greenpeace's tactics, portraying the organisation as only interested in performing stunts to gain media attention. He personally witnessed activists protesting at the plant, using professional planning and technology. However, national radio news coverage made him reflect on the role of the local newspaper because:

There wasn't a scrap of comment from the backers of the project or the community or Gladstone or anywhere. It really struck me that our role in this issue was to try to convey the things which were meaningful locally. (Purdie 2002)

Purdie unashamedly pursued localism, proclaiming his pro-development views using phrases such as "worthy project" (*The Observer* 25 August 1999, p.4) and describing Gladstone as "a city eager to play home to the emerging and, hopefully, expanding industry" (*The Observer* 25 August 1999, p.4). The two editorials written about the Shale Oil Project during this period both followed significant events involving protests and a plant shutdown. They prompted letters to the editor both criticising and supporting the protests.

The Letters to the Editor section of any newspaper is widely read, as well as being the focus for community views and debate on developing issues. It is the place, especially in a regional newspaper, where people can have their say, as opposed to trying to communicate views through a news story. As Conley (1997 p.124) points out "letters to the editor can be an important gauge of public moods" and, in this situation and at this stage of the project's development, they were. The three published letters were evenly divided in their views, as community attitudes towards the project were still forming. However, certain individuals and groups with recognisable links to particular views were voicing their opinions. The letters featured general themes such as criticism of Greenpeace and environmental concerns that would be pursued and expanded on in 2000 and 2001.

The Observer's reportage in this first period, with its emphasis on localism and support for industrial growth, set the scene for subsequent development not only of the project itself, but also for the regional newspaper's approach to future coverage of the story. Issues relating to

plant emissions and residents' concerns about health problems were unfolding and demanding further media attention. The role of the Yarwun and Targinnie communities in the project's future was also changing as residents realised they needed to communicate the message about their health problems through the local newspaper.

Period Two – Public opinion polarised

A significant change in *The Observer's* reportage on the Shale Oil Project was identified in the second period analysed for this study. It covered just over three weeks from June 1 to June 23, 2000. The plant's commissioning was continuing, but so too was the Greenpeace campaign and residents' concerns about the project's impact on their lives. Both groups' fears were being increasingly documented in the newspaper's Letters to the Editor section. While there was still considerable coverage of the project, Table 2 shows that letters dominated the content categories, compared to the first period.

Table 2
Breakdown of reportage from June 1 – June 23, 2000 compared with July 20 – August 25, 1999

Content category	1999	2000
News stories	15	4
Photographs	15	1
Editorials	2	3
Letters to the Editor	3	6

The content analysis revealed a fifty percent increase in letters, indicating a range of opinions were being formed and voiced more frequently. News stories and photographs were considerably down in number, as other major events such as the Sydney Olympic Games torch relay and a US nuclear submarine visit to Gladstone took precedence. Editorials increased slightly, continuing to argue strongly for the project and against the legitimacy of Greenpeace. Generally, the analysis during this period revealed that the reportage was beginning to reflect a greater complexity of issues and a polarisation of public opinion. The change can be explained in terms of the project entering a different phase, as well as reflecting the

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unpredictability of events and the ups and downs of daily news coverage. *New York Herald-Tribune* city editor Stanley Walker has described news as “more unpredictable than the winds” (Conley 1997, p.53). Reduced coverage of protest activity at the plant also reflected an argument put by Cracknell (Hansen 1993, p.17) that the media eventually tires of stunt-like tactics and no longer sees them as a novelty.

Four stories about the project were published during this period dealing with oil production and further Greenpeace protests. An overview of their content and placement reveals a balanced approach with both positive and negative stories appearing on page one and more neutral stories on page three. It could be argued that the oil production story headlined ‘SUNCOR SUCCESS’ on June 1 was provocative. In fact, editor Jason Purdie wrote in *The Observer’s* editorial that he was prepared for criticism on that point; an issue to be discussed later in this article. Analysis of source usage in this period revealed a more balanced approach than was found in the first period, with information coming from seven sources. Three represented the project, another three were speaking for Greenpeace and the final source was from Gladstone’s police.

Three editorials on the project and related issues were published during this period, with one written by another *Observer* staff member, in the absence of editor Jason Purdie. This is a regular practice that occurs when the editor is away. All three continued with the themes of localism and criticism of outside interference from Greenpeace activists. It should be noted that this criticism represented a trend contrary to evidence gathered by Hansen (1993, p165) who has argued that Greenpeace has been presented in a favourable way in the past, with little explicit criticism.

One editorial, in particular, saw Purdie join the debate about the role of newspapers, and the media generally, in reporting on industrial development. The June 1 column called ‘OBSERVER TELLS IT LIKE IT IS’ began with him predicting that Targinnie residents would be “disgusted” (*The Observer* 1 June 2000, p.4) with that day’s page one story (referred to earlier in this article). The story reported on what was claimed to be a successful test run of the shale oil plant where 15,000 barrels of oil were produced as well as claims made about reduced emissions. Targinnie residents could have interpreted the positive page one headline ‘SUNCOR SUCCESS’ as provocative and Purdie even

suggested he would be accused of being a “pro-development editor” (*The Observer* 1 June 2000, p.4) with a “pave-paradise approach” (*The Observer* 1 June 2000, p.4).

In defending *The Observer's* position, he reminded readers of a page one story that appeared in the first period of reportage discussed in this article. The story, headlined ‘BACKBURNER’, reported on serious technical problems at the plant, which caused it to shutdown. It painted a negative outlook for the project but was covered prominently on page one with a large headline and photograph. Purdie acknowledged the criticism the newspaper received about this story when “it was slammed as being anti-development by certain members of the business community” (*The Observer* 1 June 2000, p.4). He also said the paper had given extensive coverage to “the health concerns of residents arising from Suncor emissions” (*The Observer* 1 June 2000, p.4).

Reflecting on his editorship, Jason Purdie (2002) said he always tried to straddle the divide between promoting development and acknowledging community concerns. He argued that readers often forget how a newspaper’s daily reportage unfolds from one week to the next or one day to the next, and that it “reports things which people may not agree with” (*The Observer* 1 June 2000, p.4). He said a newspaper could only cover news and views as they happened, and they changed daily, along with the community. His main message was that a newspaper like *The Observer* was in a ‘no win’ situation when it came to reporting on industrial development and community concerns. On the issue of balance, he said:

if you went and talked to a Targinnie/Yarwun person they would say that we are incredibly biased towards Suncor, but if you went to talk to Suncor they would tell you that we were incredibly biased towards the community. (Purdie 2002)

In measuring the concept of balance for this study, however, the quantitative methodology of content analysis that has been used offers a more objective approach to determining how *The Observer* reported on the Shale Oil Project. Other studies such as Franklin and Murphy (1991) and Richardson and Murphy (2000) have

used the same methodology in their research into regional newspaper reportage, to determine balance and issues of representation.

While editorials continued to attack Greenpeace in this second period, letters to the editor were more supportive. Of the six published letters, five criticised the project's emissions' record or were supportive of the Greenpeace campaign. Only one letter defended Suncor Energy's record and the possible health effects on residents and that was from a Suncor employee. Of interest were two local correspondents who queried the "jobs,jobs,jobs argument overriding all environmental concerns" (*The Observer* 21 June 2000, p.4) and the "more industry at all costs" (*The Observer* 23 June 2000, p.4) philosophy. One of them wrote that "some of us continually worry about what this town is going to be like to live in in 20 years time rather than how much money we can make" (*The Observer* 23 June 2000, p.4).

The second period of *Observer* reportage revealed two significant trends in relation to the paper's editorial line and the role of letters, as well as a more balanced use of source and story placement. The editorial line of strong support for the project continued, as the importance of localism was emphasised over the protest messages of the Greenpeace 'media circus'. Environmental concern was also expressed, but only in the context of it being a local issue as opposed to a global one. Interestingly, people were responding to the editorial line in increasing numbers, with both angry residents and Greenpeace supporters criticising *The Observer* and querying the editor's right to speak for the community. Contrasting with the first period of 'parish pump' advocacy, this period saw the project's opponents voice a sustained argument against it. This opposition was increasingly evident in letters to the editor, whose writers used the newspaper as a forum to express their opinions. Franklin and Murphy (1991, p.9) suggest that another important role the local press can perform is to provide 'a relatively open and pluralistic forum for public discussion'.

Period Three – Residents join protest

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Throughout May 2001, the Shale Oil Project dominated *The Observer's* headlines. During this third period, news stories and photographs increased significantly, while editorials featured more

regularly than in both periods already analysed. Letters to the editor remained at the same level as in the second period. This suggested the wider Gladstone community was still engaged in the debate about the merits or otherwise of the industry. Table 3 compares the breakdown of reportage in the three periods analysed.

Table 3
Comparative breakdown of reportage for the three periods of analysis

ContentCategory	1999(July 20 –August 25)	2000(June –June 23)	2001(May 1 –May 31)
News stories	15	4	11
Photographs	15	1	7
Editorials	2	3	5
Letters to the Editor	3	6	6

The coverage included stories on more emission problems, the continuing Greenpeace campaign, the first oil shipment and a Queensland Health report describing the project as a “health nuisance” (*The Observer*, 18 May 2001:p.3). Photographs of frequent protests during this period captured local residents, for the first time, alongside Greenpeace activists. It was interesting to note how the locals endeavoured to increase their media profile, by forming their own group (the Yarwun Targinnie Representative Group) to lobby at different forums within the community. The other point to note during this period was the arrival of new editor, Alison Hill.

Eleven news stories about the project were published during this time, including five which appeared on page one. This was the highest number of front page stories noted in the three periods analysed for this study. This statistic could have been interpreted as an indication of the story’s importance for Gladstone, or simply that the issues covered were the most significant stories on a particular day. During May 2001, several major events were competing for page one headlines. They included the international military exercise, Tandem Thrust, the crash of the Capricorn Rescue Service helicopter and other stories about proposed industrial projects.

News coverage contained both positive and negative messages about the project. There were three general themes – the continuing problems of emissions and technology malfunction; further Greenpeace protests; and increasingly visible protests by local residents about the industry's impact on their health and general lifestyle. The issue of declining property values appeared in the reportage for the first time in this study, but, undoubtedly, it would have been reported on at other times from 1999 – 2001.

It was mentioned in a report covering a public meeting that brought together several interested groups. They included project personnel, Yarwun and Targinnie residents, the Department of State Development, representatives of the Environmental Protection Agency and Queensland Health.

Former editor Jason Purdie acknowledged the land values issue was one he would have liked to investigate further.

One of the areas that I think is still a bit of a sleeper in this issue is the land value. In retrospect, and again this is great with the luxury of hindsight, but I would have loved to have that as an issue central to the campaign. It always ran as a side issue, but I thought that there was a compelling moral argument for the company either to buy this land and get it over with, be it in commissioning stage or not, or it [the project] is off. I thought it was terrible that these people were left in a situation where their land was worthless and they still had this company belching stuff all over them. (Purdie 2002)

Purdie discussed this issue in the context of investigative reporting and whether *The Observer* did enough. The newspaper has given more coverage of the land values issue and subsequent buyouts by the Queensland Government since this study was completed in November, 2002. However, regional newsrooms face the same staff and financial pressures as metropolitan newspapers, and the stories have been more 'hard news' than 'investigative'. Conley (1997 p.45) suggests that Australian newspapers do not have a strong record in pursuing investigative journalism, despite the work of some individuals. He argues that factors such as time, money and legal constraints work against regular

detailed reporting of this nature and notes that 'most newsrooms are driven by day-to-day expediency'. In reviewing investigative journalist Chris Master's book, *Not For Publication*, Central Queensland University Journalism Professor, Alan Knight (2002), also cited financial pressures as 'having a corrosive impact on journalism'.

In other stories, Greenpeace made page one headlines with a dramatic attempt to stop a ship from berthing in Gladstone harbour to load the first shale oil shipment. The following day, further local criticism of the activists was reported on page one with police describing their actions as "irresponsible" (*The Observer* 10 May 2001, p.1). The story that caused the most controversy during this third period was about a Queensland Health report on the project describing it as "a health nuisance". It was placed on page three rather than page one where many Yarwun and Targinnie residents believed it should have been. Editor Alison Hill said the decision to place the story on page three caused "an uproar" (Hill 2001). She said she "had a couple of very angry phone calls that day saying why wasn't it on the front page?" (Hill 2001). Apparently, the report had been released a day or two before *The Observer* published the story. Local residents obtained a copy, but instead of going to the newspaper with it, they went to a Gladstone radio station that broadcast the story first. Hill said that was how *The Observer* heard about it.

It had been on the radio the morning before. The reason it was on page three was because it was essentially an old story by the time we came to have it. Most of the time, radio and television news in regional areas tend to follow the newspapers, but in this case it was the reverse. (Hill 2001)

Hill said the residents went to the radio station first, because they were not happy with the coverage the paper had given them. After some discussion, she said both parties reached a better understanding about how stories should be handled. In a sense, residents were questioning the 'community forum' role of the local newspaper, and at that point, believed the radio news service would better serve their needs in communicating a message.

An analysis of story placement revealed a varied picture. Five of the eleven stories made page one with a mix of positive, negative and neutral views. The remaining stories were found on pages two, three and five. These were mainly negative or neutral featuring residents' protests and concerns about health impacts and plant emissions. However, a major environmental incident at the plant did receive prominent page one treatment. The story (including photographs) received more column space than any other page one story about the project during this period. Alison Hill believed that in discussing story placement, the newspaper should be looked at as a total product.

I think people probably read more into placement of stories than is really there. I know different people believe that one side or the other gets better front page coverage. But the reality is a lot of the time, the placement of that story is also determined by what else is happening on that day. (Hill 2001)

Source usage was balanced continuing the same trend that was found in the second period, and in contrast to the industry dominated sources used in the first period. Of the 22 sources identified, eight were supportive of the project, nine were opposed and three were neutral. Photographs were again prominent with six of the seven appearing on page one. This indicated that the accompanying stories were of strong news value as they reported on protests involving both Greenpeace activists and local residents. In one case, both groups were protesting alongside each other. This contrasted with the first period where photos depicted only Greenpeace protesters, and confirmed the rising media profile of residents.

This third period featured five editorials, which was the most of any of the periods analysed for this study. This content category had gradually increased from the first period in 1999 when two were published, followed by three editorials in the 2000 period. The first two were written by News Director Chris Pammenter before the new editor, Alison Hill took over. A change in the editorials' tone was noted with the change in authorship. Pammenter was still offering support for the project in the face of emission problems and Greenpeace attempts to stop an oil tanker from berthing in Gladstone harbour. Hill was also critical of Greenpeace and their "insane" (*The Observer*

10 May 2001, p.4) actions but subsequent editorials contained mixed messages. She welcomed possible job creation, but warned "it should not be at the expense of people's health and safety" (*The Observer* 22 May 2001, p.4). She believed the project companies must realise that a viable future depended on having residents and local groups on side. Hill said the project had to be one of balance between industry and community concerns.

The letters to the editor continued to discuss one of the central themes identified in this study. Greenpeace's role was criticised by five of the six correspondents, as they used this forum for robust debate about the project. Some were critical of the activists' tactics, while others asked where Greenpeace had been when other industries were coming to Gladstone. One correspondent pointed out that the majority of protesters who appeared beside the activists, were local residents.

The intense coverage in all content categories during this third period indicated that the project's presence in and impact on the Gladstone community was attracting increasing scrutiny. The plant's commissioning was proceeding, albeit with emission and technology problems. Greenpeace was still pursuing its campaign vigorously and local residents were opposing the project at every opportunity, using the media frequently.

The Observer's new editor, Alison Hill, took up the issue of localism immediately as she joined the criticism of Greenpeace, but also warned of a need to balance community interests with those of the project.

Conclusion

Uncertainties and concerns about the Stuart Shale Oil Project have continued for both the developers and residents of the Gladstone area since this study was completed in late 2002. The Southern Pacific Petroleum Group was placed in receivership in November 2003, and has since been sold to Queensland Energy Resources Ltd. However, the project's future is far from certain. Residents continue to report emissions and offensive odours coming from the plant. Greenpeace is maintaining its protest campaign from afar, using both traditional media and its website, to attack the shale oil industry. Nearly 50 percent of families on affected properties in the Targinnie Valley have left the area, after the

Conclusion

Queensland Government finally bought them out. Many, however, have not been happy with their financial settlements.

This study of

The Observer's reportage on the Shale Oil Project and the intervention of Greenpeace affirms that 'parish pump' advocacy and localism continues to be central to the regional newspaper's rationale. Kirkpatrick (1984, p.29) noted that regional newspapers were originally established "by the necessities of time", and those necessities of economic advancement and job creation appear more compelling now than ever.

In discussing the nature of the regional newspaper, however, it is evident that there is another role to be played. *The Observer's* shift from advocacy to more balanced coverage, as revealed in this article, resulted from another 'necessity of time' – the necessity to listen to contemporary opinion about an industrial project that was polarising the community and affecting peoples' lives.

Public concern about the project began to increase during the second period of this study in mid-2000. Residents, both avowed 'greens' and others, wrote to *The Observer* questioning both the project's impact on Gladstone and the newspaper's role in promoting industry over lifestyle. In May 2001, the arrival of a new editor and continued problems at the plant resulted in a change in the newspaper's role. A more critical editorial line appeared rather than the advocacy evident earlier. This didn't prevent residents from, momentarily, by-passing the newspaper and using local radio as the preferred news outlet. Residents had progressed from receiving little coverage in 1999 to forming their own group (YTRG) to deal with the developers and the media constructively. In doing so, they were using *The Observer* as a community forum (Franklin and Murphy 1991) rather than accepting the earlier 'parish pump' advocacy.

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