

# The Impact of Local Independent Newspapers in South East Queensland

## Abstract

Largely unnoticed, the local independent press in south east Queensland is undergoing an extraordinary resurgence. There are about 50 local independent newspapers, which publish weekly, fortnightly or monthly. Their circulations range from as little as 800 to well over 30,000 readers and many are also available online. Little is known about this sector with respect to its journalism practices, its economy, its employment and training practices, and its impact on the local community. The popularity of the independent local press may be associated with the changing social conditions taking place in south east Queensland. About 1,000 people are moving into the region every week, and the population boom is putting pressure on housing, transport and essential services such as the provision of water and electricity. For many new residents, information about their immediate environment may only be available from their local independent newspaper. This paper examines the impact of the local independent press with a focus on their coverage of a particular issue of concern to the region: the management of water resources.

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## Introduction

The South East Queensland region is Australia's fastest-growing region. Over the past 20 years it has attracted about 55,000 new residents each year, almost doubling the population, which is currently about 2.7 million people. Part of the attraction is the climate, but more importantly, the region is experiencing rapid growth in employment, the result of its emergence 'as a significant economic hub with national and international recognition' (<http://www.oum.qld.gov.au/?id=465>). It is expected that in the next 20 years another million people will populate the region (<http://www.oum.qld.gov.au/?id=466>), and this has important social and economic implications, and will have an enormous impact on the region's natural environment. Some of the impacts are already being felt, with an inflated real estate market, urban sprawl, building industry labour shortages, increased traffic congestion, and severe water supply shortages, which, in turn, have put pressure on electricity supplies (Wardill 2007).

On June 30, 2005, the state government released the South East Queensland Regional Plan, to guide the region's growth and development over the next 20 years (Office of Urban Management <http://www.oum.qld.gov.au/docs/factsheets/new/SEQRegionalPlan.pdf>). A key objective of the Plan 'is to ensure future growth and change is managed in the most sustainable way possible', and it aims to 'protect biodiversity, contain urban development, build and maintain community identity, make travel more efficient, and support a prosperous economy' (<http://www.oum.qld.gov.au/?id=468>). Much of the Plan addresses key infrastructure issues, such as efficient land use planning, facilitation of growth in the Western Corridor (comprising Brisbane's western suburbs, the city of Ipswich and the outlying rural communities), transport and the construction of roads, tunnels and bridges, housing development (with an expected half a million dwellings to be constructed in the next 20 years), water supply and the construction of water recycling pipelines and new water storage dams, and electricity generation such as the construction of desalination plants on the Gold Coast.

The Plan also raises social and environmental issues such as the protection of the rural and regional landscape, and the region's biodiversity, (which, incidentally, has been described as being as more diverse than Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory), as well as the enhancement of and strengthening of the region's communities, with the provisions of community services and infrastructure. It emphasises 'community engagement (Part F section 6), defined as 'the connections between governments and communities on a range of policy, program and service issues. It encompasses information sharing, community consultation and in some

instances, active participation in government decision making', in order to build community capacity, which is described as:

The set of skills, relationships and networks that collectively exist in a community. These capacities provide social support, especially when people need assistance. The more capacity a community possesses, the more likely it is to be able to take part in and influence decisions and processes for change. In some communities, the capacity to become involved in planning, create community events and build relationships and connections is lacking. This is especially the case in newly developed communities. Enhancing community capacity building and community engagement will require cooperation between State and local governments and the community. Community capacity building events and activities can develop social capital and help to create a strong sense of identity and belonging in a community.  
(<http://www.oum.qld.gov.au/?id=476>).

The Plan discusses these issues in general terms, and provides little detail. For this reason, it is unclear how the State Government intends to meet these laudable aims. The role of communication and media is not addressed, except in Section 10 of Part F, where it mentions the aim of providing 'affordable access to high-speed broadband telecommunications'. However, the Plan notes that telecommunications is the principal responsibility of the Federal government, and that deregulation of the telecommunications industry has resulted in lack of consistency on the part of local government in their approvals for telecommunications infrastructure.

It can be assumed that the region's population explosion has implications for the region's communicative environment. However, except for mentioning the introduction of broadband by its federal counterpart, the Queensland government makes no mention of other communication infrastructure in its Plan, such as telephony, traditional broadcasting, and print media. Although media regulation is primarily the responsibility of the federal government, in other areas such as health, education, and major development projects such as roads, both the federal and state governments share policy and administration responsibilities. This suggests that there is a role for State and local authorities to formulate regionally and locally relevant media policies. Then again, it may be that policy makers and regulators, and indeed the community at large, are satisfied with the current media environment and do not recognise shortcomings or problems with our regional and local media

environment as a result of media consolidation and concentration (Dwyer et al 2006).

Nevertheless, the lack of policy attention given to regionally and locally relevant media suggests an assessment of local media and their impact on issues that affect regional populations, is long overdue. My research revealed an explosion in the emergence of the local press, about which we know very little (van Vuuren 2007). This paper presents some results from a comparison of five local newspapers and their coverage of the region's the water crisis. It is part of a larger study of regional media and water management.

### **South east Queensland and its media environment**

South East Queensland comprises an area of 22,420 km<sup>2</sup>, or about 200 km from north to south and about 150 km from east to west. It is geographically and ecologically diverse, and micro-climates vary from the coast to the Great Dividing Range. Coastal regions have benefitted from recent rain, but west of Brisbane it remains dry and water supplies are dwindling. The region is also socially diverse. Brisbane is an industrial and administrative centre, but there are also important agricultural centres in the region, for example, vegetable production in the Lockyer Valley, forestry near Nanango, and some dairying. When this study commenced in 2006, the south east Queensland region comprised 20 local government areas. However, in March, 2008 new council boundaries were introduced, reducing this number to 13. It is also politically diverse: urban seats are strongly Labor, while coastal areas are in the hands of the Liberal Party, and rural seats make up the National Party's heartland, although in the last 10 years we've seen a further shift to the right with the emergence of Pauline Hanson, One Nation and the independents that remain following the disintegration of the One Nation Party.

Given all these changes and characteristics, it seems odd that the central role of media, and in this case local media, receives so little attention in a policy document that ostensibly sets out to address the 'triple bottom line'. The population boom, combined with the worst drought on record as well as the uncertainty associated with climate change, means that as a community south east Queensland faces some difficult decisions. Since early 2005, local governments have introduced strict water restrictions, and water management issues are a top priority for most tiers of government. Water is therefore an important public issue and, in a democracy, such as Australia, it is important that the public is aware of and understands the range of concerns, opinions and possible solutions, to the water crisis.

While there is consensus over the view that Australia faces considerable environmental challenges, there is less agreement about the solutions that

will produce long-term, sustainable water management practices. Recently we have witnessed two controversial issues in south east Queensland—the proposed construction of the Traveston Dam, north of Brisbane, and the controversy over water recycling in Toowoomba—that suggest that water management is fraught with controversy. Furthermore, while regional public opinion finds expression in mainstream media services including the daily press, radio and television, this paper demonstrates that local opinions about water management vary considerably, and this has implications for the policies and programs that are put in place.

South east Queensland's media environment is characterised by abundance. The region is serviced by commercial, public service and non-profit (community) media, comprising:

- 6 daily and 30 weekly newspapers published by the corporate sector;
- 19 commercial radio stations;
- 4 free-to-air commercial television stations, as well as cable and satellite TV;
- 3 public service TV stations (including a digital service);
- 8 public service radio stations;
- 21 community radio stations;
- 1 community TV station;
- About 6 Ethnic and Aboriginal newspapers;
- About 4 Newspapers targeting youth, seniors, and environmentalists;
- About 50 community newspapers; and
- Numerous local websites and blogs, many of them published by the media listed above.

In addition, residents have access to dozens of weekly and monthly magazines; the national and international press, shortwave radio, the book-trade. Furthermore, the 13 local governments, state government, and university libraries provide access to specialist, as well as popular publications.

In the context of this regional media abundance the popularity of the local independent press is curious. As I have reported elsewhere (van Vuuren 2007), a News Ltd study found that two thirds of Australians consider their local news paper (monthly, fortnightly, or weekly publications) to be of most relevance to them (MacLean, 2005). The popularity of the local (a.k.a. 'community') press accounts for its attraction to the major media corporations: News Ltd dominates the sector with 95 mastheads in six Australian capital cities; APN News & Media has about 65; John Fairfax

Holdings Ltd has 45; and Rural Press Ltd also has a handful (MacLean, 2005). This sector was worth around \$692 million in 2004, and attracts around 20 per cent of all advertising revenue. Most of these corporate publications operate in communities where their circulations reach 30,000 or more (for example, one of two local weekly newspapers distributed in my own suburb, *The Ipswich Advertiser*, has an audited circulation of 33, 774). However, south east Queensland has many localities with much smaller populations, each with their own distinct character, as well as many peri-urban greenfield housing developments (Bureau of Rural Sciences, 2008: 2-3), and it is here where the independent local press appears to thrive.

### South east Queensland's local independent press

In 2006 I surveyed the local independent press to identify their location and describe their main characteristics. Table 1 lists the location of 49 local independent newspapers. It suggests that they are particularly popular in the Sunshine Coast and Gold Coast hinterlands, as well as in the Western Corridor, where most of population growth is taking place.

Most of the local independent newspapers are privately owned, although about half a dozen are published by non-profit organisations. A handful of publishers produce more than one local independent newspaper, often distributed in adjoining localities thus taking advantage of the economies of scale that such an approach offers. A handful of rural newspapers have operated since the early 1900s, but most have been established in the last 20 years. About 50 percent of the publications are published weekly; the remainder are published fortnightly or monthly. Most are distributed free-of-charge and available from local traders, on the pavement of the local shopping centre, or delivered to households. There is wide variation in their circulations, with some distributed to as few as 400 readers; and others to more than 30 000. About 70 percent are produced as quarterfolds, although weeklies tended to be published in a tabloid format. Weekly newspapers tended to have fewer pages (the median was 26), whereas the fortnightly and monthly newspapers had a median page range of 32 pages. All the publications included advertising, and about half, mainly the weeklies, included real estate advertising. Advertising accounts for 43 per cent of the content of the monthly newspapers, and 57 per cent of the content of the fortnightly and weekly newspapers. Finally, Table 1 shows that some localities support more than one independent local community newspaper. (For a more detail see van Vuuren 2007).

Table 1. South east Queensland independent press, 2006.

Location	Publication
Dividing Range (western edge of the region)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Kilkivan and District Community News (defunct)</i></li> <li>• <i>Nanango Country Focus</i></li> <li>• <i>Highfields Herald</i></li> <li>• <i>Crows Nest Advertiser</i></li> </ul>
Noosa Hinterland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Round the Ridges</i></li> <li>• <i>Cooroy Rag</i></li> <li>• <i>Mary Valley Voice</i></li> <li>• <i>Cooroora Connect</i></li> <li>• <i>Hinterland Voice</i></li> <li>• <i>Eumundi Green</i></li> </ul>
Bribie Island, Sunshine Coast and Hinterland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Coolum and Northshore Advertiser</i></li> <li>• <i>Sunshine Coast Eco News</i></li> <li>• <i>Caloundra City News</i></li> <li>• <i>Sunshine Valley News</i></li> <li>• <i>Range News</i></li> <li>• <i>Montville Times</i></li> <li>• <i>Buderim Chronicle</i></li> <li>• <i>Glasshouse Country News</i></li> <li>• <i>Island and Mainland News</i></li> </ul>
Brisbane	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Westender</i></li> <li>• <i>Spring Hill Times</i></li> <li>• <i>The Centenary News</i></li> <li>• <i>The Lake News</i></li> <li>• <i>The Suburban Star</i></li> <li>• <i>The Roundabout</i></li> <li>• <i>The Independent</i></li> </ul>
Brisbane River Valley, and western corridor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Brisbane Valley Kilcoy Sun</i></li> <li>• <i>Kilcoy Sentinel</i></li> <li>• <i>Fassifern Guardian</i></li> </ul>
Ipswich and western suburbs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Moreton Border News</i></li> <li>• <i>Ipswich Own (defunct)</i></li> <li>• <i>The Local News</i></li> <li>• <i>The Local Bulletin</i></li> <li>• <i>Western Echo</i></li> <li>• <i>Westside Weekly</i></li> <li>• <i>The Springfield Times</i></li> </ul>

Redcliffe, Dayboro, Mt Nebo, Northern Suburbs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Mango Hill News</i></li> <li>• <i>Redcliffe City News</i></li> <li>• <i>Bayside and Northern Suburbs Star</i></li> <li>• <i>Samford Village Pump</i></li> <li>• <i>The Westerner</i></li> <li>• <i>Mountain News</i></li> <li>• <i>Dayboro Grapevine</i></li> </ul>
Stradbroke Island, Gold Coast Hinterland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Straddie Island News</i></li> <li>• <i>Tamborine Mountain News</i></li> <li>• <i>Canungra Times</i></li> <li>• <i>Tamborine Times</i></li> <li>• <i>Beaudesert Times</i></li> <li>• <i>Jimboomba Times</i></li> </ul>

The functions and impacts of the local press have been succinctly described by Wendy Creighton, editor of the *Fassifern Guardian* (2006: 4), these include:

- The chronicling of local news and public affairs and the provision of information about local matters that are ignored by the mainstream daily press;
- The promotion of community events, services and businesses;
- The provision of a forum for local public opinion and protest;
- As a public watchdog that monitors the activities of the three tiers of government that affect local residents;
- The provision of publishing services such as photography, job printing, pamphlets and books; and
- The generation of employment and stimulation of the local economy.

According to Creighton 'their success is usually reflected in the growth and success of other local businesses. In turn, these businesses boost the prosperity of their communities and often become active in supporting community events' (ibid). Although about 50 percent of the content of these publications is advertising (van Vuuren 2007), an analysis of their content focusing concerning the management of the region's water resources indicates that they attract a wide variety of users, including the three tiers of government, local business, services and non-profit organisations. Most also include a forum for readers by way of letters to the editor. This paper presents results from two analyses: the first, a snapshot of 36 newspapers,

published in April 2006 that; the second, a longitudinal comparison of five publications that reflected the diversity of the population across the region.

The snapshot analysis counted a total of 133 water items, spread across news (51.9%), advertisements and advertorials (39.8%), letters to the editor (7.5%), and one editorial. About 32.3 percent of items were written by a reporter (although this figure does not indicate the number of stories sourced from press releases), 24.8 percent were from local business advertisers, 9.7 percent from local residents, 6.8 percent from local politicians, 5.3 percent from state or federal politicians, 6.8 percent from state or federal government agencies, and 5.3 percent from local government agencies. A more accurate description of content remains to be undertaken, but in general, the content of these newspapers largely reflects average Australia, with their emphasis on community participation in local cultural and sporting events, as well as domestic comfort and consumerism (van Vuuren 2007). Furthermore, contrary to expectation, they do report controversial local issues, but only where such controversy pitches the local community against forces outside it, as I will outline below, with a discussion of water management during the 2006 drought.

#### The local independent press and the water crisis

The analysis is restricted to a nine month period between December 2005 and August 2006. The sample was deliberately selected to coincide with the release of the Queensland Department of Natural Resources interim report 'SEQ Regional Water Supply Strategy', as well as the fierce debates surrounding two controversial issues: the announcements of the proposed construction of the Traveston Crossing dam on the Mary River in the Sunshine Coast hinterland, and the Tilley's Bridge dam at Rathdowney, south of Beaudesert; and the proposal to recycle sewage back into the water supply at Toowoomba (which received national and international media attention).

The current drought started in the year 2000, and parts of south east Queensland are still drought declared today, despite most of the state receiving above average rainfall during the 2007/08 wet season, and widespread floods in western and northern parts of the state. Combined water storage capacity for the south east Queensland region, where most of the state's residents live, was around 25 percent at the end of January, 2008. The optimism that comes with increased rainfall can certainly be tracked in the press coverage, as well as the arguments over access to particular water storages, but the focus of analysis here is the local coverage of this regional issue, which suggests a varied response that could be related to the severity as well as the local context of the experience by local communities. The

drought is not evenly distributed across the region, but varies from valley to valley. Coastal communities, for example, where water storages are at near-full capacity, have received much more rain, compared to the rural communities west of Brisbane where some dams are almost empty.

To demonstrate the variation in local media coverage, I compared five newspapers selected from different locations in the region, reflecting a range of land uses, settlement patterns and industries (Table 2). The selected newspapers all had very small circulations. Two papers, the *Cooroy Rag* and the *Dayboro Grapevine*, are produced by non-profit organisations, and are monthly papers, which accounts for the smaller number of water items counted. The *Beaudesert Times*, one of the three weekly papers, accounted for more than one half of all water stories, over the nine-month period.

Table 2. Comparison of five independent newspapers in south east Queensland\*

Newspaper	Circulation (n)	Pages (n)	Advertisements (%)	Water items (n=496)	Water items (%)
<i>Beaudesert Times</i>	4,500	38	54	253	51
<i>Highfields Herald</i>	2,150	12	51	69	14
<i>Brisbane Valley-Kilcoy Sun</i>	2,270	22	46	66	13
<i>Cooroy Rag</i>	5,500	36	60	55	11
<i>Dayboro Grapevine</i>	na	40	39	53	11

Table 3 presents the main categories of water stories, their proportion of the total number of stories, and the main source of the stories. Taken together, the newspaper sample indicates that the region's dams and weirs received most of the attention. The table also shows that advertisements for water tanks were the second biggest category of items, and this reflects the popularity of the state government subsidy available to residents to

encourage the installation of water tanks. There are some problems with the data, for example, stories were categorised according to overt source, but it is highly likely that many stories attributed to reporters are sourced from press releases.

Table 3. Categories of water stories and source.

Topic	% (n=494)	Main source
Dams and weirs	30.4	Reporter, reader, politicians
Water tanks	15.2	Advertiser
Restrictions and water conservation	13.8	Reporter, local government
Infrastructure	11.1	Reporter
Long-term future	10.9	Reporter
Recycling and water quality	9.9	Reporter
Rain and drought	8.7	Reporter

Curiously, the water referendum (coded under ‘recycling and water quality’) received very little coverage in the newspapers considered here, despite the *Highfields Herald’s* proximity to Toowoomba and that community’s dependence on the Toowoomba water supply. An explanation for this omission can partly be accounted for by the somewhat parochial interests reflected in the local independent press, and illustrated in Figures 1 to 5, which follow each paper’s trajectory of the coverage of topics over the nine-month period.

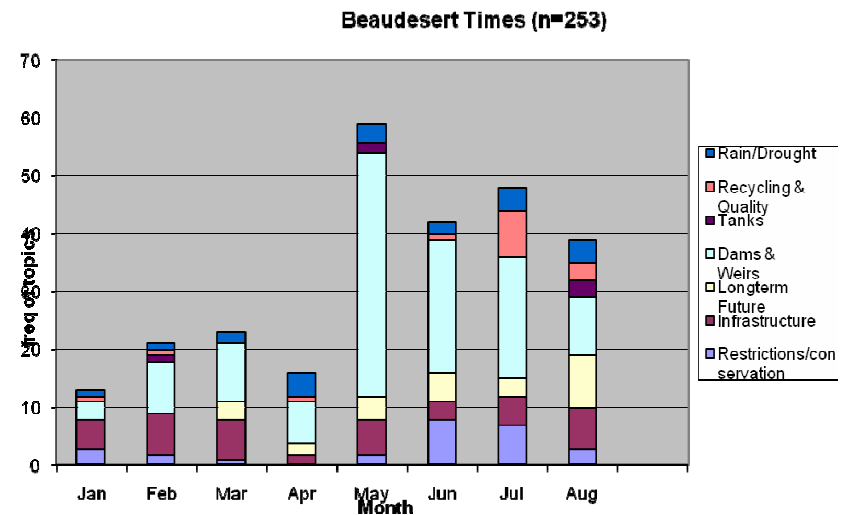
**The Beaudesert Times**

*Beaudesert Times* is a weekly paper (established 1930s), and it also publishes the *Jimboomba Times*, but that isn’t considered here. Beaudesert is a small town located in the Gold Coast Hinterland, on the western side of Mt Tamborine. The town itself has a population of more than 4600, but it is surrounded by agricultural lands, where dairying is an important industry.

The region’s rural heritage is strongly evident in the paper, even though the town’s male workforce is mainly employed in manufacturing and construction, while only about 6.3 percent of the towns population work in agriculture. Women are primarily employed in health and community services and retail industries. The median weekly household income is between \$700-800; and the state seat is held by Kev Lingard from the National Party.

Dams dominated the items, mostly in the form of news reports, as well as some letters to the editor. Figure 1 also indicates that dams and weirs have been part of the local public discussion prior to the State government’s announcement in April 2006, that it would construct a dam at Tilley’s Bridge in Rathdowney, a township about an hour’s drive south of Beaudesert. Figure 1 also shows that after that date, water recycling appears as a topic for discussion, as does the longer term future of the region. Most of the earlier dam-and-weir stories concern the water level of the Maroon Dam (south of Boonah), as well as the issue of water allocations for irrigated dairy farms on Running Creek and Christmas Creek, and the construction of a weir at Cedar Grove and its impact on farmer’s livelihoods.

Figure 1.



Following Premier Beattie's announcement that two major new dams would be built in south east Queensland, the *Beaudesert Times*' front page was dominated by the Tilley's Bridge story for three consecutive weeks in May. The paper reported being inundated with correspondence and telephone calls from local residents, and it reminded readers that a similar fight had been waged 17 years earlier when the Goss government proposed the Wolfdene Dam. In June the story simmered along inside the paper, and in July it was back on the front page, this time following the Government's announcement that it would not go ahead with Tilley's bridge, but build a dam at Wyaralong instead.

Although the Tilley's Bridge dam event was over in a matter of weeks, it stirred up a strong anti-dam campaign. A 'No Dams' group was quickly established, which utilised a range of communication techniques to vent their outrage at the decision. They quickly set up their own website, produced a video documentary, distributed leaflets, wrote letters to local and regional news papers, and used spray paint to paint messages on straw bales stacked near roadsides. The issue brought federal Greens Senator Bob Brown to town. However, Bob Brown's visit should be understood as a pragmatic move, rather than a sudden greening of this strong National Party heartland. In a similar pragmatic move, State National Party politicians fully supported the fight against the Tilly's Bridge dam, even though they asserted a strong pro-dam agenda in Toowoomba, about an hour's drive north-west of Rathdowney, which was facing the prospect of running out of water and a possible introduction of waste water recycling to top up its drinking water supplies. By the end of May, Premier Beattie backed down over the decision, and it was quickly seized upon as a victory for the Rathdowney No Dam group.

The Rathdowney community's anti-dam sentiments did not, however, spill over to other communities facing resumption of their properties or the flooding of their local environment. A few months later, in July, *The Beaudesert Times*' covered the protests of residents affected by the Wyaralong dam, to be constructed in the same local government area and only a short distance further north. This dam was really a non-issue; it had been foreshadowed in the context of the Cedar Grove Weir and the government was already in the process of land acquisition. It received little attention or community support and quickly disappeared from the public debate. Nor did the Rathdowney protestors actively join the campaign against the construction of the Traveston Dam, 200 km further north on the Mary River. Furthermore, one of the newspaper's regular contributors, Beaudesert Shire Councillor Dave Cockburn, had no compunction in supporting a proposal to construct a dam across the state border in northern New South

Wales, which would supply the needs of south east Queensland: 'I have been promoting the merits of the government investigating a dam on the Clarence River system in northern NSW... As Australians, we are all in this together and our vision shouldn't stop at State boundaries' (*The Beaudesert Times*, 30/08/06. p.17).

On the whole, the Tilley's Bridge dam issue was constructed within a parochial frame, focusing attention on immediate and local rural interests. It can be understood as a case of the Not in My Back Yard (NIMBY) phenomenon, with the rural community not against dams as such, but against the construction of a dam in their own locality. *The Beaudesert Times* supported their cause with its criticism of state government policy, and especially the Minister, and with the publication of letters to the editor, which all rejected the proposal to build the dam.

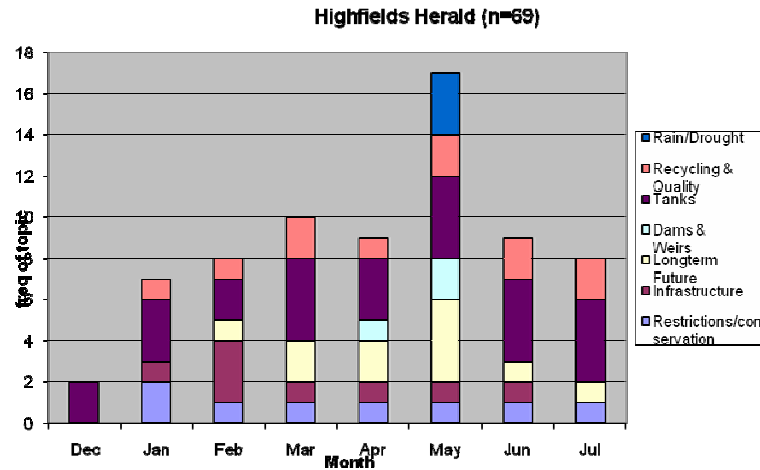
### ***The Highfields Herald***

The *Highfields Herald* is a weekly newspaper a paper published by a former University of Southern Queensland journalism tutor, who runs it with his wife. There is a rival independent newspaper in this area, *The Crows Nest Advertiser* (established 1905), which is not part of the comparison presented here. Highfields is located north of Toowoomba, in the Crows Nest Shire, and has a population of more than 3,600. The male population tends to work in manufacturing, construction and retail, while women work mainly in health and community service, retail and education occupation. Many residents commute to Toowoomba, a large regional city, for their work. Compared to the other locations considered here, Highfields residents are more educated, with 14.5 percent having completed a university degree, and nearly 25 percent with a qualification from a college of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). Residents also have a higher median weekly household income of between \$1,000-1,200. The township is located in the state seat of Toowoomba North, held by solicitor Kerry Shine, currently Attorney General in the Bligh Government.

Given its location north of Toowoomba, it is no surprise that water recycling received more media attention (Figure 2) compared to the *Beaudesert Times*. In July 2006, Toowoomba residents overwhelmingly voted against the introduction of waste water recycling, in what was a world-first referendum on this issue. The Toowoomba issue was divided along traditional political lines: the National Party campaigned against recycling, while at the same time arguing in support of constructing more dams. In contrast, the *Highfields Herald* reported strong community support for the introduction of recycled water in the city's water supply, upon which Highfields depends. Figure 2 also shows that the proportion of articles that framed the issue from

a longer term perspective, was greater compared to the *Beaudesert Times*. However, just how strong the support for recycling was in Highfields—a Labor seat—is unclear, because voters here did not participate in the 2006 Toowoomba water recycling referendum, which was won by the anti-recycling campaign.

Figure 2.



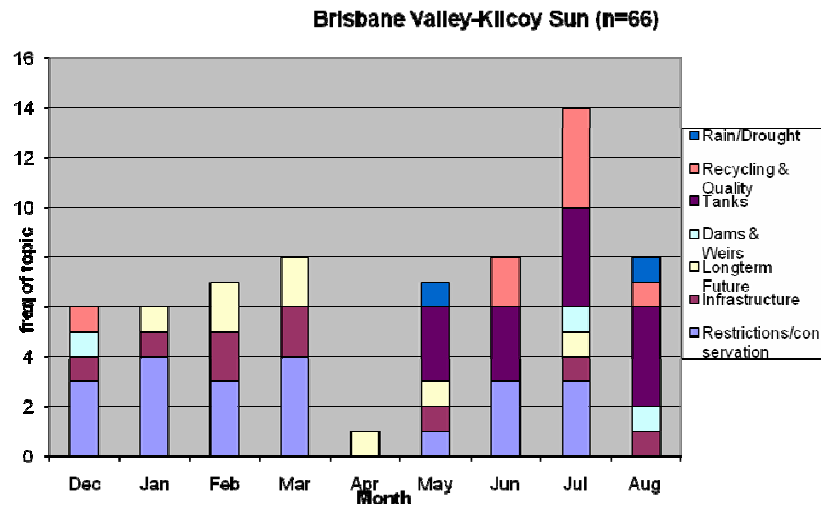
**The Brisbane Valley-Kilcoy Sun**

The *Brisbane Valley-Kilcoy Sun*, circulates in the Brisbane River Valley, where the main townships are Kilcoy, Esk, and Fernvale, but it appears to be primarily centred on the Shire of Esk, with a population of 14,029. The rural sector employs the largest proportion of male residents, followed by manufacturing. Women are employed in health and community services, retail and education, and also agriculture. The population’s median weekly income is between \$500 and \$600 per week. The state seat is held by Dorothy Pratt, an independent, but formerly with One Nation, Pauline Hanson’s old party.

This seat was previously held by controversial premier Sir Joh Bjelke Petersen (National Party), and was unsuccessfully contested in the last election by his son, John Bjelke Petersen. John Bjelke Petersen and his National Party colleagues were the only politicians that attracted some coverage in *Brisbane Valley-Kilcoy Sun*, and in relation to the issue of water rights to Cressbrook Creek, which flows into Wivenhoe dam, the region’s

largest and most important water storage. There is another smaller dam upstream on Cressbrook Creek, but due to the drought, water from this dam is diverted to Toowoomba’s water supply, much to the chagrin of the downstream graziers. The *Brisbane Valley-Kilcoy Sun* devotes much of the water discussion to the restrictions put on landholders’ riparian rights. The paper reports anger among some 40 farmers who claim that ‘farmers are treated unjustly’ and that ‘without water for farmers, Brisbane would get no crops’ or milk. They argue that rural users are treated different to industrial users and that that they are being discriminated against: ‘if we were a trade union, some conservation group, or a football conglomerate, there would be no problem’. In other words, the issue is framed in terms of the city/country divide.

Figure 3.



The April dam announcement appears to have made little impact on this newspaper, which is probably of little concern to local residents given their proximity to the region’s largest water storage dams (Figure 3). On the other hand, there was an increase in stories about water recycling during June and July, coinciding with the Toowoomba water referendum campaign. Given the emphasis on riparian rights and the diversion of traditional water sources, local readers would have a personal stake in the outcome of the Toowoomba referendum.

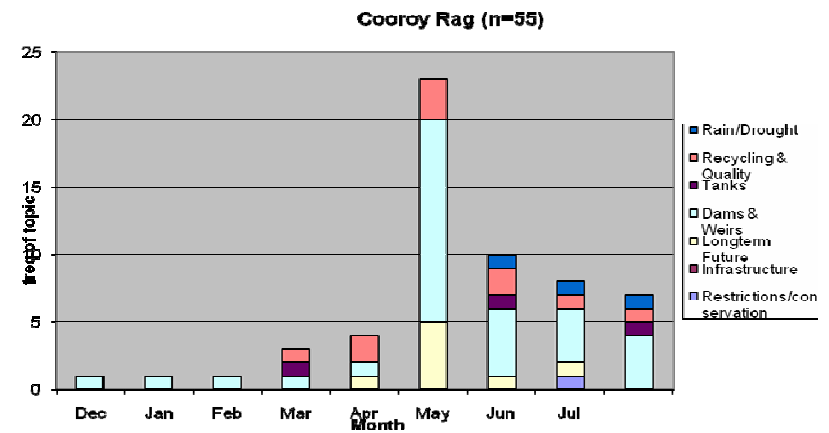


### The Cooroy Rag

The *Cooroy Rag* is published in the township of Cooroy in the Sunshine Coast hinterland, with a population of less than 2,000. The paper is also circulated to other nearby localities. Cooroy's male population is primarily employed in retail and manufacturing occupations, while females are employed in health and community services, and property and business services. Of the five papers examined here, Cooroy residents have the lowest median weekly household income of between \$400 and \$500. The seat is currently held by the Liberal Party, the result of Labor's Cate Molloy resigning from the Party in protest against the Traveston Dam, and then running unsuccessfully as an independent in the 2006 state election. Although the *Cooroy Rag* is published in the state seat of Noosa, it is distributed across state electorates, and this perhaps explains why it has a regular column from Elisa Roberts, independent member for the state seat of Gympie. The paper also carries advertising from local National Party politicians in the form of paid advertorials.

Figure 4 shows that most of the water items are about dams, but these were primarily announcements reporting dam levels, which would affect recreational uses. The month of May stands out, however, when the front page was dominated by the Traveston Dam announcement, and the paper ran two pages of comments and photos from local residents who stood to lose their property as a result of the dam. All these stories were about loss of lifestyle and income, there was some a mention of the threat to endangered species. There were also two editions of the paper published in this month, which further accounts for the peak in stories. In June the letters-to-the-editor page was dominated by the views of local, state and federal politicians. In July the paper reported the formation of the Mary River Coordinating Group, set up to raise funds to fight the dam. And Elisa Roberts, Independent Member for Gympie, published her support for recycled water. The protests against this dam resulted in a federal Senate inquiry, which published its recommendations in August 2007. The controversy over the Traveston Crossing Dam is still current, with Save the Mary River campaigners settling in for a long extended campaign, to the point of considering the possibility of land reclamation following the decommissioning of the proposed dam should it become a reality.

Figure 4.



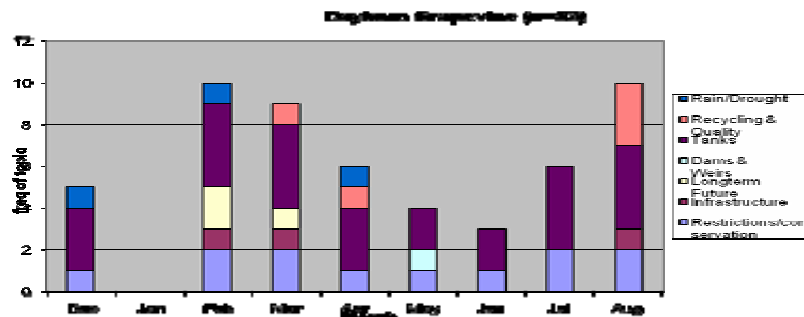
The *Cooroy Rag*'s coverage of the issue was minimal during the sampling time, but given that it is a monthly paper, and run by a non-profit organisation this is perhaps understandable. It published local concerns, provided access for a range of opinions through its letters column and from its regular political contributors. As was the case with the *Beaudesert Times* in the fight against the Tilley's Bridge dam in Rathdowney, here too, the local paper strongly supported local residents opposing the state government's dam construction proposal. Although there is undoubtedly a great deal of support for the campaign against the dam, an additional study is required to assess this paper's impact compared to other media operating in the Noosa Hinterland, where there are five other local weekly and monthly newspapers in the region, not to mention the *Sunshine Coast Daily*, and south east Queensland's only regular environmental newspaper, the *Sunshine Coast Eco News* published by the Sunshine Coast Environment Council.

### The Dayboro Grapevine

The *Dayboro Grapevine* is also a non-profit newspapers and run by volunteers. This paper services the township of Dayboro with a population of 855. Males are mainly employed in manufacturing, construction and retail; women in health, community services and education. The median weekly household income was between \$800 and \$900 per week, and residents had a high TAFE completion rate compared to Esk, Beaudesert and Cooroy. The state seat is held by the National Party. This paper had little to say about the water issue, with the majority of items comprising water tanks and restrictions, and these were mainly in the form of advertising (Figure 5). It published the smallest number of news stories, being primarily a vehicle for

community service announcements and local advertising. This suggests the paper has few resources to generate local news, whether sourced from press releases, or from the efforts of a local reporter.

Figure 5.



## Conclusion

One of the aims of this paper was to examine the impact of the local press, and specifically the impact of the local press as a forum for public opinion and protest, by looking at a specific issue that concerns all residents in south east Queensland: the worst drought in European memory and the proposed policies and programs designed to tackle the issue in the context of unprecedented population growth.

At present the data collected and analysed for this project are insufficient to establish a strong relationship between geography, demographics and media coverage. But it did provide some insights that provide a direction for further research. These include that:

- Local newspapers are parochial and they amplify local issues;
- They reflect local social structures and values, to be successful they must resonate with the dominant values and characteristics of the local community;
- Some local newspapers avoid reporting political news, while others restrict this political news to paid advertorials;
- Letters to the editor proved a popular vehicle for the expression of local opinion and news, particularly during controversies;
- They will confidently take on a partisan role and thus support their communities in the struggle against powerful groups such as state government, or others *outside* the community.

More text analysis as well as fieldwork is required here to explore the local nuances of the anti-dam and pro-water recycling positions; the content analysis has revealed that there are differences and that there is a connection between local political orientations, but it can not analyse the discursive frames that characterise these differences. In addition, the local press is only one of a range of local media that have been utilised to further the cause of anti-dam and anti-water recycling activists and lobbyists, and a consideration of these promise a fertile study of the power of local media in a media-rich environment.

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