

# Bringing up 'El Niño': rainfall outlooks in the Victorian print media, June-November 2002

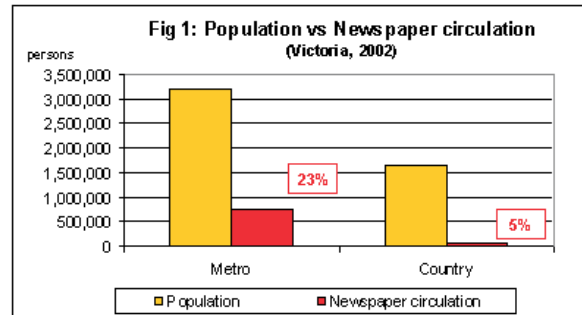
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Drought was a hot topic for Australia in 2002, noted as the fourth driest year on record. This drought occurred during an 'El Niño' event – a cyclic phenomenon usually occurring every four to seven years and often reducing rainfall over large parts of Australia. Warning the Australian public of impending rainfall shortages is an important function of both the Australian Bureau of Meteorology (Bureau) and the mass media.

This study examines long-term rainfall outlook information in four Victorian newspapers for the period June-November 2002 inclusive. Of particular interest were articles that cite the Bureau, and their presentation. The study formed a minor thesis as part of a Masters of Arts (Communications) at RMIT, completed in 2003.

Content analysis was undertaken on two Melbourne metropolitan newspapers (*Herald Sun* and *The Age*) and two Victorian rural newspapers (*Weekly Times* and *Stock and Land*). Interviews with four key journalists - one from each paper - provided additional insight. Previous studies by Walsh (1998) and Kestin (2000) on El Niño depiction in the Australian print media also provided useful background.

Public User surveys conducted by the Bureau show that most users access their weather information via the mass media (Commonwealth Bureau of Meteorology 2002, Commonwealth Bureau of Meteorology 2003a). While the majority audience is with television and radio, print media still provides information to a large group of people (822,728 Victorians for the papers studied). Newspaper circulation figures show that the metropolitan papers examined reach 23% of Melbourne's population, but only 5% for the rural equivalents (Gee 2002, Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002) - see figure 1. The Bureau needs to promulgate their rainfall outlook information widely and (ideally) cheaply – print media is an important avenue for this.



Drought articles were mostly recovered from the 'Lexis Nexis' database, using the search terms 'rainfall' or 'drought' or 'Bureau of Meteorology'; with 'drought' being the most common term found. Seven media releases containing rainfall outlook information were issued from the Bureau during the period chosen. Releases were issued monthly, with an additional release in June 2002 titled 'El Niño Odds shorten'.

'Drought' was often used in non-meteorological contexts – sports, real estate, business, drugs (e.g. 'drought' of heroin). Use in these altered contexts demonstrates the newsworthiness of the topic, implying good access to the media for those promulgating information related to drought.

## Findings

For the six-month period examined, 653 drought articles were identified. From this set, **only 19% of drought articles contained a rainfall outlook**, which equates to 1-2 articles per week across 4 newspapers. In this subset, **46% of articles attributed the rainfall outlook to the Bureau**, known as Bureau outlook articles. Interviews with journalists indicated that this number should be higher - all said that they would almost always seek out Bureau information for their base and include this information in their article, but perhaps had not clearly attributed the source.

**Thirty-five authors were named for 47 Bureau outlook articles** (9 articles had no acknowledgement) i.e. fewer than two articles per journalist. This is not unusual in itself – rainfall outlooks and drought articles can apply to the rounds of many different journalists. However, if the Bureau was trying to educate a journalist about the intricacies of El Niño and rainfall outlooks, it would be difficult to build up a bank of knowledge

Pages one and three are considered the most important pages in the paper – 30% of Bureau outlook articles made these pages.

Bureau media releases did not account for the trigger of the majority of articles- **only 12 articles (20%) related directly to the media releases** from 56 articles written. This reinforces the need to have information available in between monthly media releases.

## Accurate messages

High levels of accuracy were demonstrated with **49 articles (87%) of Bureau rainfall articles were judged to be accurate.** Of the seven articles judged as inaccurate, six were written in late spring (October/November 2002) on the premise of a ‘hot, dry summer’. The Bureau had a difficult message to convey – that El Niño events *usually* breaks during late summer (with resultant rains), but they couldn’t say exactly if or when the prevailing event would end. However, confusion in the Bureau’s message resulted in confusion in the translation by the print media.

At interview, journalists were shown the corresponding media release (summer 2002 outlook) and were asked ‘what would your article be like from this?’ Most correctly noted the ‘50:50’ odds for summer rainfall, or ‘toss of a coin’ messages. Three noted that the most important information was too far down – in the fourth paragraph of the release – stating that El Niño commonly broke down in summer, with resultant rainfall. All commented on the difficulty of making a story from probability information such as ‘50:50 odds’.

## Conflicting views

**‘Mackinnon study labels seasonal BOM forecasts as “useless”**’ (Cumming 2002 was the only article that questioned the credibility of Bureau information for the period studied. Appearing on page 11 of *Stock and Land*, it was a good story by newsworthy values and fairly allowed equal space to both experts, although the angle was against the Bureau. The controversy was a one-off and was not picked up by other newspapers.

Media messages from the Bureau and Melbourne Water seemed in conflict. In July, the Bureau outlook was for ‘below average falls for eastern Australia during August-October 2002’. Mr Bayley, managing director for Melbourne Water, was quoted in *The Age* as saying:

“I’m not too concerned at this stage. By early November we’ll be in a really good position to tell how we’ll go over summer...The bottom line basically is that we need to get decent rain over the winter and spring period.” (Baker 2002, p.6)

This day-to-day approach seemed at odds with the Bureau’s messages. Conflicting messages from different sources may result in confusion for the reader.

## Bureau-media practices

Journalists interviewed said that they were happy with information provided by the Bureau. Regularly updated information on the web site as well as fax/e-mail delivery of releases helped towards inclusion of Bureau information in their articles, particularly in between monthly media releases. Despite articles appearing as uncontrolled media (versus controlled media such as paid advertisements), the Bureau has reasonable access to the print media. Distribution of rainfall outlooks through these avenues of minimal cost and reasonably accurate presentation of information worked well. The newsworthiness of drought information assisted in this process.

Bureau media releases did not always adhere to the principles of making information media friendly (White 1995, Johnston & Zawawi 2000). Presentation of information was not always in

inverted pyramid style, there were no quotations attributed to people, and some scientific jargon was used. Releases should focus on providing journalists with two or three key points about rainfall outlooks, to aid story construction and potentially improve coverage.

The Bureau chose not to have a press conference in 2002 to confirm the El Niño event. It did issue a one-off release on Tuesday 18 June 2002 titled 'El Niño odds shorten', triggering perhaps one article. For Kestin (2000), June 1997 (release and press conference) had the largest number of articles for the 12 month period studied. If you want to warn your publics about impending low rainfall (possibly drought), June is the best time to do it – rainfall outlook reliability is good, and from the publics' point of view, the earlier the better. Using the press conference was *far* more effective than a media release alone to generate mass media interest (and coverage) in an impending El Niño event.

## Conclusions

The Bureau should be pleased overall with the rainfall outlook information communicated by the print media for the period studied. Clear, consistent media messages are needed, and pro-active media strategies should continue. Print media is an important but not unique channel for rainfall outlook information. Good communication is just as important as good forecasts.

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