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To cite this article: Rosemary Williamson (2025) Dry Spells, Drought, and Environmental Crisis: The Drought Feature in *Australian Women's Weekly* Magazine, 1939–2019, *Environmental Communication*, 19:2, 259-272, DOI: [10.1080/17524032.2024.2382472](https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2024.2382472)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2024.2382472>



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Published online: 23 Jul 2024.



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Dry Spells, Drought, and Environmental Crisis: The Drought Feature in *Australian Women's Weekly* Magazine, 1939–2019

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ABSTRACT

Drought in Australia is expected but with climate change will worsen. Popular magazines can draw attention to and depict drought in distinctive as well as conventional ways, as shown by an analysis of content on drought in *Australian Women's Weekly* from 1939 to 2019. That content, and in particular feature articles on drought, has established drought as a phenomenon experienced primarily by those who live and work on the land, promoted certain views of the experience of drought – and its significance for women – and advocated action of some kind. The features in later years also have placed drought in the context of climate change, including through prominent verbal and visual elements that draw attention to the plight of the environment. In these ways, the features illustrate the efforts made by the popular women's magazine to contribute purposefully to environmental communication in the public sphere.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 27 July 2023
Accepted 15 July 2024


KEYWORDS

Magazine; *Australian Women's Weekly*; drought; Australia; environmental communication

Introduction

Climatic extremes and what typically are called natural disasters have long characterized the continent of Australia, but experts warn that Australians will need to plan for and adapt to even more extreme weather because of climate change. They predict higher temperatures and more drought along with other changes to weather in coming decades (CSIRO and Australian Government Bureau of Meteorology, 2023, p. 3).

Despite its significance, drought has characteristics which affect its capacity to be news, unlike more sudden events. Fire and flood, for example, meet several of Harcup and O'Neill's (2017) news values: they are “bad news” (p. 1482) involving death or injury, generate stunning audio-visual material, and are dramatic. They have perceived beginnings and endings, even if they extend across weeks or months. Drought, however, can be more pernicious. Put simply, drought is “a prolonged, abnormally dry period when the amount of available water is insufficient to meet our normal use” (Australian Government Bureau of Meteorology [AGBM], 2023b). According to the Australian Government (2019), drought is a “normal” and “regular feature of the Australian landscape” but not a natural disaster (p. 3). Rebecca Jones (2018) gives an alternative view by exploring the “emotional landscape” of droughts, which are “slow catastrophes that generate a particularly profound level of uncertainty;” they “are not events or incidences but absences” that may span years and “lack an obvious ignition point” (2018, pp. 13, 16, 17). Personal and official views of drought in Australia may differ. A state government determines drought status by region but will not

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necessarily declare the end of a drought when rain falls (Bettio & Symons, 2020). The metropolitan news media show “sporadic interest in droughts,” usually when specific events or actions make them newsworthy (Cockfield & Easton, 2003, p. 166).

Popular magazines have qualities that set them apart from the news media and therefore have the potential to inform and influence perceptions of drought in notable ways. Abrahamson (2008), who refers to “magazine exceptionalism,” contends that magazines have a unique capacity to both reflect and form communities and be “a catalyst for social change,” albeit to varying degrees, including through editorial content intended to produce action of some kind (p. 146). Moreover, magazines encourage certain reading practices. They are read more slowly than newspapers or news websites but more quickly than books and occupy a “mid-temporal media space” that accommodates “contemplation and desire” (Le Masurier, 2014, pp. 11, 14).

This article answers the question of how the popular magazine has presented drought as a phenomenon experienced by Australians. It examines *Australian Women’s Weekly* (1933+), or *The Weekly* as it calls itself, one of Australia’s longest-running and most widely-read magazines. The article identifies and analyses *Weekly* content on Australia’s “historical droughts” from 1939 to 2019 (AGBM, 2023a). By doing so, it responds to Hansen’s (2015) call for more longitudinal studies of environmental communication beyond the news media. The article relates its findings to those from studies of Australian news media coverage of drought to reveal *The Weekly*’s distinctive contribution to environmental communication.

Contribution to scholarship

The article advances understanding of natural disaster, the media, and environmental communication in a novel way. Hansen (2015) observes that research “since the 1970s has overwhelmingly focussed on the news media and their reporting on environmental controversies and problems” (p. 150), which extends to research on the media and natural disaster as overviewed here. A body of literature investigates news media coverage of sudden natural disasters in regions (e.g. Ploughman, 1995; Tierney et al., 2006; Vevea et al., 2011), including Australia (e.g. Bohensky & Leitch, 2014; McKay, 1996; Yell, 2010). Found less frequently are studies of media depictions of disaster that span decades, such as those by Furedi (2007) and, in an Australian context, Duffy and Yell (2014). Research on news media coverage of drought also focuses on specific times and places (e.g. Augustenborg et al., 2022; Dow, 2010), including Australia (Cockfield & Easton, 2003; Mules et al., 1995; Rutledge-Prior & Beggs, 2021; Twigg et al., 2023).

Studies of magazine content on natural disaster are rarer, which is indicative of a broader field of research – on magazines and the natural environment – that is under-developed despite its significance at a time when more severe and frequent disasters are associated with climate change. Boykoff (2019) nominates magazines as one of the recognized “pathways for large-scale communication” on climate change, offering as an example David Wallace-Wells’ 2017 “The uninhabitable Earth,” the most-read article in the history of *New York Times Magazine* (pp. 3, 30). Rodriguez and Dahlstrom (2018) observe increasing interest in research on magazines’ capacity to shape cultural views of nature and “a role for magazines in constructing a social definition for and public understanding of the environment and issues related to it” (p. 329). Questions of whether and how magazines embrace that role have been explored by Podeschi (2007), who considered representations of nature in American general-interest magazines from 1945 to 1980 and found little relationship between the magazines and environmentalism; Tillinghast and McCann (2013), who examined four American and Canadian news magazines from 1989 to 2009 and discerned a move away from the term “greenhouse effect” toward “climate change;” and Meisner and Takahashi (2013), who analysed news-magazine *Time*’s covers from 1923 to 2011 to find that even though depictions of the natural environment occurred more frequently over time, as has occurred in other media, overall the magazine took “a shallow position on environmental affairs” (p. 272). Studies such as these support Hansen’s

comments (2015) on the value of tracing longer-term trends in media coverage of the environment to discern continuities or changes in representations and understandings of the environment. They also move beyond the news media to the magazine.

This article similarly explores magazines' role in environmental communication but differs from these earlier contributions most obviously by its choice of a women's magazine produced primarily for readers in Australia. Two considerations influenced this choice: these magazines can have large readerships, and they can exert an influence beyond their traditional concerns. *The Australian Women's Weekly* is illustrative. It commenced publication in 1933 and continues today. It is "a national media institution" read in one in four Australian homes during the 1950s and 1960s (Sheridan et al., 2002, p. 1). From 2022 to 2023, its estimated readership (print and online) rose by 8.8% and at 1,309,000 in 2023 represented 6.1% of the population over 14 years of age. It is Australia's most popular mass-market women's magazine and second most widely-read commercial print magazine (Roy Morgan, n.d.). *The Weekly's* sociocultural importance has been established through studies of content on, for example, food culture (Samuelsson, 2020), Cold War politics (Viney, 2020), visual art (Warren, 2018), and flood (Williamson, 2018).

This article extends earlier work (Williamson, 2018) that approaches *Weekly* features on natural disaster as widely consumed, constructed narratives of human-nature interactions. Features, also called feature articles or feature stories, are fact-based but typically longer and more discursive than news reports, and they use story-telling techniques to engage readers. *The Weekly* has always published features on "bad" weather. In 1934, for example, it published one that not only foregrounds the inconvenience of extreme weather events to Australian women but also places these events in an international context and cites conjecture by scientists that the sun might be the cause (Williamson, 2018). *The Weekly's* content on drought has yet to be studied, and this article begins to fill that gap in scholarship.

Critical approach

Weekly content on drought was located by searching for "drought" in databases accessed through the National Library of Australia or by manually searching print copies held by the library. The databases were Trove, which has digitized *Weekly* issues from 1933 to 1982; the Australian Key Journals Periodicals Contents Index, which listed *Weekly* content from 1957 to 1990; and Australia/New Zealand Reference Centre Plus, which reproduces, online, print versions of the *Weekly* from 2002. Content from 1991 to 2001 was not searchable via databases and so paper copies of *The Weekly* were searched manually. Searches extended from 1933 (*The Weekly's* first year of publication) to the end of 2019 (the final year of the "historical droughts" (AGBM, 2023a)). Despite *The Weekly's* move to online as well as print publication in the later years of this period, the analysis uses only print versions, which suits a historical comparison. Content with drought as a primary focus was selected, which yielded two editorials, one book review, five reader contributions, and 19 feature articles. All of these are included in the analysis although more attention is given to the feature articles, which are the primary means by which *The Weekly* covers drought.

The next section of this article analyses the content. It largely concentrates on written text, including types of written text that commonly are used in the layouts of magazines – words or phrases given visual prominence as headers (text at the top of a page) or straplines (text supplementary to headings) – because, as Ytre-Arne (2011) observes, such textual devices can attract readers' attention (pp. 223–224). Images are at times acknowledged as a form of visual rhetoric inextricably connected to word. Detailed analysis of images is a valuable line of enquiry (see, e.g. Peeples, 2011) but is beyond the scope of this article.

Rhetorical criticism, a common approach to studying environmental communication (Peeples & Murphy, 2022), guides the analysis of *Weekly* drought content presented in the next section. Rhetorical criticism involves taking a "rhetorical perspective," which "focuses on purposeful and consequential efforts to influence society's attitudes and ways of behaving through communication"

(Cox & Pezzullo, 2016, p. 371). The analysis, therefore, examines *The Weekly's* efforts to promote certain attitudes towards and behaviors around drought. Determining whether individual magazine journalists or editors are instrumental in these efforts, and the impact of these efforts on readers, is beyond the scope of this article.

Pezzullo (2016) traces a tradition of rhetorical criticism from the 1980s that concerns environmental communication and identifies the two critical frameworks used for this article: close textual analysis, and genre. Close textual analysis is a form of interpretive close reading. The characteristics of drought outlined at the outset of this article suggested three related foci for this analysis: whether and how *The Weekly* has established drought as a distinct phenomenon, promoted certain views of the experience of drought, and advocated action of some kind. Leading on from the analysis, *The Weekly's* feature articles on drought are discussed in relation to the principles of Carolyn R. Miller's (1984) landmark theory of rhetorical genre, which conceptualizes genre as social action. For Miller, genre is a recognizable type of discourse that arises from a recurrent rhetorical situation at the center of which is an exigence, "a form of social knowledge – a mutual construing of objects, events, interests, and purposes that not only links them but also makes them what they are: an objectified social need" (p. 157). To apply that to *The Weekly*, an identifiable type of content – on drought – arises because of a shared understanding of drought as a crisis that demands action. A genre is meaningful because of its social function. This aspect of *The Weekly's* drought content, especially its feature articles, will be discussed following the analysis.

Analysis of *Weekly* content on drought

The World War II drought: 1937–1945

The so-called World War II drought of 1937–1945 (AGBM, 2023a) occurred in *The Weekly's* first decade of publication. January 1939 saw the first of the magazine's feature-length pieces on drought. "How they live when there isn't any rain!" with the strapline "Brave women in homely dramas of the dry west" (Our Special Commissioner, 1939) projects the cheerful resilience and optimism of rural Australians and the capacity of women to uphold exemplary standards of presentation for self and home. Despite repeatedly referring to "drought," the article points out that rural Australians perceive conditions differently: "Heat and dry weather are always experienced inland during the summer – and drought is only a long dry spell. It takes city folk to make trouble out of a drought" (p. 3). *The Weekly's* "special representative" who toured the dry landscape, vividly described, "ventured to mention the word 'drought'" and was rebuked; a local said "Drought! This is not what you'd call a drought ... It's only a longer dry spell than usual" (pp. 3, 32). The reporter is awed and humbled by locals' optimism and resilience.

This rural stoicism was echoed in 1940 in an editorial that named drought, along with floods and bushfires, as one of "the three great natural phenomena" of life in a "primary producing country" where "the weather is a matter of life and death" (Editor, 1940, p. 20). The editorial shifts attention to "the weather-man" (sic) and meteorology as a science, which "saves the nation millions of pounds a year" by predicting extreme weather conditions. Readers are discouraged from disparaging the weather forecaster and encouraged take a more informed, scientific view.

Two years later, *The Weekly* alerted readers to drought not as a natural phenomenon but as a consequence of anthropogenic harm. It outlined prominent Australian writer Ion Idriess' idea for replenishing "three great dead rivers" and revitalizing "enormous drought-stricken areas," including the so-called "Dead Heart" of the continent ("Author's plan to revive dead rivers," 1942, p. 25). *The Weekly* passed on Idriess' warning "that man has extended the desolation of the Dead Heart" and that "overstocking and consequent soil erosion ... has wreaked destruction over the last 70 years. Great dust storms have blown literally millions of tons of soil away, and blocked watercourses." The article functions as a review of Idriess' book, *The Great Boomerang*, which proposes environmental restoration.

The Weekly elsewhere associated the plight of rural Australia with government failures and demographic changes and called for action. The editorial “The toll of drought” (Editor, 1944) notes the novelty of dust-storms reaching Sydney and the decline in food production caused by drought. “Australians must feel ashamed, as well as alarmed,” it says, “to see the interior of their country turning into a dust-bowl. Successive Governments, with their eyes fixed on the problems of the moment, have not given enough thought to long-range planning” (p. 10). While conceding that droughts are inevitable and unpredictable, the editorial ends by complaining about “the drift of land-dwellers to the city [that] has become a disturbing feature of Australian life,” which will worsen without efforts to improve rural life (p. 10). Shortly after, Australian resilience was emphasized in “Cheerful courage amid desolation,” with the strapline “Prolonged dry spell proves again tough spirit of men and women of outback” (Pout, 1944). It pictorially depicts the suffering of animals and describes “what drought meant for the womenfolk” (p. 14) who, as in 1939, happily maintain domestic standards. The following year saw another illustrated feature, “Drought brings dairymen’s grievance” (Drain, 1945). It expresses concern about the movement of “the youngsters” to cities and farmers necessarily relying on unpaid family labor, and the need for a basic wage for farm employees and fair prices for dairy produce (p. 17). The feature quotes an official who places responsibility for the conservation of water with the government.

The 1965–1968 drought

Drought extended across Australia from 1965 to 1968 (AGBM, 2023a). *The Weekly* published “We’ll hang on somehow. We’ve got no choice” (Keavney & Berg, 1966), about “soldier-settlers and their families” who acquired small land-holdings – “a place of promise ... a place of their own” – but then faced “the Big Dry,” described as “the worst drought in history” (p. 10). Once again, city-dwellers are ignorant – “Sometimes there were storms. Then the city people would tell each other, ‘The drought is over’” (p. 12), and women face privation with good humor – one “cheerfully poses with her one lamp” in a “cold, cheerless” home without electricity because she cannot afford it (p. 10). Yet *The Weekly* also depicts vulnerability. It introduces a widow “who said everything quietly and without self-pity” yet was overwhelmed by emotion: “Her hands began to tremble. ... quiet, courageous Mrs. Davis was crying” (p. 10). After outlining the effects of drought on land, family, and home, the feature quotes a farmer who says, “I have faith in nature. She sends drought for a reason – to rest the soil” (p. 12).

As well as mediating the experiences of people on the land, *The Weekly* published readers’ own accounts of drought. In “Drought: The end of old Daisy, and Cherry, and Roaney, our friends” (1966), the author narrates a typical day. After rising at 3am to prepare her husband’s breakfast, she does “housework” before moving outdoors to help animals whose suffering is described unsparsingly (p. 61). Another first-hand account, from “A reader from Central Queensland” (1969), rebukes those who see advantages to drought, such as fine weather. Despite the demands of farm work, she manages to attend her children’s school events where she enjoys “the town women’s conversation” although “the drought means nothing to them” (p. 65). Another reader contribution appeared in 1974. In “Drought: The suffering – and the terrible uncertainty,” author Amy Miller (1974) clarifies that “droughts are not to be confused with dry times” (p. 103) and explains that “As winter is part of the climatic pattern in Europe and North America, so drought is part of the Australian climatic pattern” (p. 103). She “prays for strength to see the present drought through, and wisdom to try to mitigate the effect of the next” (p. 103). She admits that the drought “may not have been all our fault, but we had to shoulder some of the blame” (p. 103). No reason for the blame is given.

The 1982–1983 drought

Even though Australia’s next major drought officially occurred from 1982 to 1983 (AGBM, 2023a), *The Weekly* published a feature article that declared drought as a national crisis in 1978. “The big

drought” was one of the most prominent stories for the magazine’s February 1978 issue, which was signaled by it being promoted on the cover. According to the feature’s strapline, “drought had its cruel stranglehold on masses of farming and grazing land” and farmers face “heart-rending” decisions. The article begins by outlining the effects of the drought on “city people,” who will “feel the bite” because of higher food prices (p. 4), before providing state-based evidence of various kinds to illustrate the severity of drought.

A cluster of five feature articles followed in 1980. The first two, “The agony of the long drought” (Finlay, 1980, February 6) and “Drought: The despair of the dying countryside” (Finlay, 1980, April 30), unambiguously name conditions as drought although it is “a strange drought” with isolated rainfall (p. 2). One woman describes a fruitless “vigil of ... blue-black storm clouds” (Finlay, 1980, February, p. 3). The third feature (Brass, 1980b, June 4) observes another unusual drought. It shares the reminiscences of two women who explore the ruins of their childhood town, once submerged by a dam but now visible because of “a great Australian drought” (p. 8). While drought “appears to be part of the Australian way of life,” and “the long, hot drought” affects everybody – including “city folk” – the “winter drought” is different: it is a “grey, cold drought” with a “bitter face” invisible to “city people,” according to a local (p. 8). The fourth story introduces “Australia’s new nomads” (Brass, 1980a, August 13), families who travel with their livestock to escape drought. A nomad describes reading *The Weekly*, “hungrily devouring words and pictures of how the ‘other’ half lives. I think the other half should know something about us, here, battling the drought,” she says (p. 3). *The Weekly* reports her efforts to cook, wash clothing, and bathe when traveling. The fifth article (Brass & Douglas, 1980) outlines the imminent failure of Australia’s wheat crop because of drought, and delays in the provision of federal government aid. Both a “farmer’s wife” and an agronomist declare the drought to be unprecedented (p. 4). Finally in 1980, a reader’s story (Owen, 1980) defines drought: “a state of continuous dry weather, but to me it is a personal adversary, a devil who comes with dust and dry winds as his attendants and death his objective” (p. 123). As with earlier readers’ contributions, this one provides an unsparing, first-hand insight into the horrors of drought.

The Millennium drought: 1997–2009

The so-called Millennium drought extended from 1997 to 2009 (AGBM, 2023a), but *The Weekly* published drought features in preceding years. “Crisis on the land. Bush families in drought and despair” (Johnston, 1992) highlights the challenges faced by women who go droving with their families or manage farms and families single-handedly. The article conveys attempts to continue familiar routines – one woman “always tries to dress well and wear make-up” for her husband – but contains no cheerful resilience: the same women “broke down and wept” (pp. 22, 23). Another is “thin” with eyes “dull with exhaustion,” and another has tears “always just beneath the surface” (her husband says, “I know she’s really depressed, and I don’t know how to help her”) (p. 25). After imparting the women’s views of inadequate government support and inequities between city- and country-dwellers, the article concludes with one woman’s view that, “This land has not changed. There will always be drought and flood ... but Australia has forgotten its farmers – that is what has changed” (p. 25). The following year, landowner Cathy Kennedy’s “Anguish and despair on the land: I feel like giving in” (1993) reflects on being “hard” and “bitter” (p. 33). Her plight is exacerbated by banks, which she likens to the wild pigs that eat her stock live. Unlike “swift disasters,” she says, drought “eats away at you like a cancer” (p. 33).

A feature article of 1994 both continues themes familiar by now and changes tack in a notable way. It is an extended report on what the strapline refers to as “the most crippling drought this century” that is “devastating” although people “find the courage to hang on” (Lollo et al., 1994, p. 20). The main title – “Our land is dying” – is superimposed on an image of a smiling man and woman against a parched landscape, which signals the article’s focus on resilient farming couples. The article also profiles a “tenacious” widow who manages her land alone and says that drought, an

expected “way of life,” “will not beat” her (p. 23). As in previous years, women admit the emotional toll of drought – one cries when seeing the skeletons of livestock because even though “You get hardened ... it just gets to you after a while” (p. 24) – and there is “a remarkable spirit that you could never get in the city” (p. 25). In a departure from earlier drought features, however, the article concludes with break-out text (text set apart from the main story) and graphics that explain the weather phenomenon of El Niño and its connection to drought (p. 27).

“Drought heartache” (Fetherston, 1998), published during the Millenium drought, also opens with a prominent image of a farming couple against a parched landscape. David Glasson says that city people “don’t realise what is happening here;” Jane Glasson says that “It is hard to explain to city people how you feel, but those of us who have lived on the land for a long time see it as a living thing. As with any loved thing, its death creates a sadness that affects your attitude to the world” (p. 32). The penultimate paragraph quotes a rural counselor who is “lost in admiration” for women, “the backbone that has kept many properties afloat” (p. 33). The article expresses hope that a weakening El Niño weather system may bring rain, and at the end break-out text gives a scientific explanation for “the current dry spell” and predictions for El Niño weather patterns (p. 33).

The Weekly published two drought features in the 2000s. “The big dry” (Duncan, 2002) opens with an image of a farming family against the drought-stricken landscape. According to the strapline, farmers endure horror with “shoulders hunched in disappointment” (p. 87). Drought is perceived subjectively: “one day, you realise you’re talking about ‘drought’ instead of ‘dry’ and that’s the day you stop looking out your window at the sky;” “this will be another drought, say locals, when only the toughest will find the energy and courage to rebuild” (p. 88). Along with weather predictions supplied by “meteorologists [who] mutter about the return of El Niño” (p. 88), hope for rain fades. Amid the gloom is Sue, “a woman who laughs easily and who loves the land as much as her husband,” who “doesn’t care that she has to cart water from a distant rainwater tank to the house just to make a cup of tea,” and who “shrugs off the danger” of driving on treacherous roads (p. 91). As in previous features, economic hardship and inadequate government support are described as well as home and family life. The article also details the challenges faced by a woman who found herself widowed and managing a farm and family alone. The second drought feature of the 2000s (Williams, 2007) explains the financial and emotional consequences of a “green drought,” when enough rain falls to green the landscape but not enough to replenish water supplies.

The 2017–2019 drought

Australia’s most recent major drought occurred from 2017 to 2019 (AGBM, 2023a), during which *The Weekly* published features that open with prominent images of denuded landscapes, without people, and that have repeated headers (text at the top of a page). The first two appeared in 2018. “Running dry” (Robertson & Gannon, 2018) has a strapline stating that farmers “have reached breaking point.” The introductory paragraph refers to the lesser “dry spell,” but it is “boundless.” Then “one of the worst, most widespread droughts that Australia has been hit with in at least a century” is described by drawing on the experiences of women on farms – they “have fought ... battles with nature” and are “tough mothers” – historical records, government actions, and expert opinion (pp. 32, 33). The following month, *The Weekly* published “Meet our drought heroes” with a strapline reflecting the tenor of the article: “Australians have a history of pulling together in adversity, and in times of drought we see that in spades.” It provides abundant evidence of drought, referred to as “natural disaster.” One feature has the header “Rural issue” (Robertson & Gannon, 2018), the other “Charity” (Brown, 2018). Each shows readers what can be done to help farmers, by suggesting charities to which readers can donate (Robertson & Gannon, 2018) and by profiling inspirational fund-raisers (Brown, 2018).

The Weekly changed tack the following year with “When the river runs dry” (Trenoweth, 2019, April). Unlike its predecessor articles, this one picks up on “an ignition point” (Jones, 2018, p. 17), a

grimly spectacular event widely reported by the news media earlier that year: mass deaths of fish in the Murray-Darling Basin, which drew public attention to the need to better protect an ecologically critical environment. The strapline states that:

Fish are dying, rivers have stopped flowing, and farmers are without water for their stock and families. Author Samantha Trenoweth meets four women who live and work in the Murray-Darling Basin, and asks whether it's too late to save our most critical ecological and agricultural asset. (pp. 32–33).

The order of words used here – fish, rivers, farmers; ecological (asset), agricultural asset – subtly communicates the natural environment as a more significant priority than people and farming. Women's experience of drought opens up a discussion of a broader environmental context, including the mismanagement of the Murray Darling Basin. The article shares details of four women's home and working lives as well as the women's political views, their informed suggestions for solutions, and their lobbying. In an echo of the 1944 editorial complaint about the movement of rural dwellers to cities (Editor, 1944, p. 10), one woman states that “We need these kids [her sons] to come back to agriculture and we need regional Australia to stay alive,” which requires government action to improve water management (Trenoweth, 2019, April, p. 37). The feature also differs from its predecessors by overtly aligning drought with climate change – “climate change is making water security in the basin increasingly precarious” – and it notes scientific predictions of “worsening drought, diminishing rainfall and decreased runoff over the next 10 years and from there into the future” (p. 35). By quoting a First Nations woman, *The Weekly* draws attention to the benefits of managing the waterways with the traditional custodians of the land (pp. 37–38). This time, headers are “Environmental crisis.”

“Running on empty” (Trenoweth, 2019, September) similarly links drought to climate change and looks to the future, but it also includes criticism of Australians. The header is “Water crisis,” and the strapline signals that readers will be introduced to “farmers, scientists and thinkers charged with securing Australia's water for the future.” Australia is “the driest inhabited continent ... on earth – a land where water security should never have been taken for granted” (p. 47). There is some domestic detail of life on the land (one woman has some tank water “only because she tips her shower and dishwashing and flower vase water back into it”) and admission of vulnerability (the same woman “blink[s] back tears” when describing her dying garden) (pp. 47, 48). However, much of the article provides factual information, and information from experts, on climate change and how to address it. Climate scientist Dr Joëlle Gergis acknowledges the inevitability of drought, but she also “blames old-fashioned Aussie stoicism and optimism” for its severity (p. 48). Despite inhabiting “the most vulnerable nation in the developed world when it comes to climate change,” Dr Gergis says, Australians are “having this stoic, ‘she'll be right’ conversation,” here using an Australian colloquialism suggesting no cause for concern (p. 48). The article passes on the knowledge of a First Nations woman who “knows how to care for country” and is concerned about the “greed and mismanagement” that harm her local waterways and her people (p. 50).

Discussion

The Weekly overall has presented drought as an event expected on a dry continent yet always remarkable because of the suffering it produces and because of the (Australian) resilience it draws forth. This is evident in different types of content – the editorial, reader's contribution, and feature article – but is most fully developed in what can be thought of as “drought features.” Through these longer articles, *The Weekly* since the 1930s has produced records of human responses to drought as well as prevailing perceptions of the relationship between people and the environment. The drought features are mediated and contrived compilations of first-hand accounts, evocative description, factual detail, and supporting images intended to enable readers to vicariously experience life on a denuded land.

As with all feature articles, the drought features purposefully employ story-telling techniques along with factual detail to “demand reader reaction” and “tell us much about the human condition” (Garrison, 2010, p. 7). Some variety across eighty years of the drought features – differing angles, lengths, styles, and so on – is unsurprising, reflecting as it does that those who produce magazines tailor content to suit the times, and that the feature article is a highly flexible form. Nonetheless, all drought features display defining characteristics of the human-interest feature, which is about “people who have been involved in real dramas” (Garrison, 2010, p. 127). Human-interest features about natural disaster usually are what Garrison (2010, pp. 216–220) calls “aftermath” features, which concern a significant, unwelcome event shortly after it has occurred. The drought features, on the other hand, are produced and published during the event.

As responses to crisis, the drought features have shared social functions and can, therefore, be seen as a rhetorical genre of communication as theorized by Miller (1984). Those social functions are explicated in the following section, according to the empirical foci of the analysis outlined previously. The following section also relates its findings to research on news media coverage of drought, to reveal the ways in which *The Weekly* offers a distinctive type of environmental communication to its readers.

Identifying drought

As with any magazine, *The Weekly*'s very publication of content on drought is significant. In this way, the magazine attempts to influence perceptions of climatic crisis without being reliant on either the news values that determine what is reported by the news media or the “official” view of what constitutes drought. *The Weekly* did cover those droughts listed by the Australian Government Bureau of Meteorology (2023a) as Australia's most significant but also covered drought in other years. Both temporally and qualitatively, those who produced the magazine purposefully mediated the experiences of those who live on the land to communicate perceptions of climatic crisis.

Research shows that the Australian news media have tended to report drought as crisis rather than a normal phenomenon (Rutledge-Prior & Beggs, 2021, p. 111). *The Weekly* has presented drought as both. It consistently has quoted farmers – and scientists in later years – who see drought as normal, and it has depicted drought as a crisis for people, land, and animals. The naming of drought is instrumental to these depictions. Naming as a practice constitutive of human perceptions of, and behavior toward, more-than-human others is an enduring concern in scholarship on environmental communication (Muller, 2022, pp. 3–4), as illustrated by analyses of a range of communication forms (see, e.g. Muller, 2022; Opt & Low, 2016). *The Weekly*'s use of “drought” and its variants (“winter” and “green” drought), “dry spell,” drought as “natural disaster,” drought as “the worst,” or drought as “environmental crisis” definitionally orients readers to an identified state of the natural environment and establishes that state as a crisis which the magazine addresses discursively, including on the authority of those who live on the land. Only one article analysed (Our Special Commissioner, 1939) disputes the status of drought, by setting up a metropolitan-rural divide on the authority of locals who insist on the lesser “dry spell” that calls for nothing more than cheerful perseverance. The visiting journalist responsible for the story nonetheless makes clear to readers the severity of environmental degradation witnessed. By communicating women's own views of drought – for example, drought as “a personal adversary, a devil” (Owen, 1980, p. 123) or a “cancer” (Kennedy, 1993, p. 33) – *The Weekly* has also shared more personal definitions.

In *The Weekly*'s later years, another type of naming occurs: the use of particular words or phrases, strategically positioned on the page, to signal to readers the type of drought feature being presented to them. Such devices can signal familiar structures across issues of a magazine and help readers to navigate and choose content (Ytre-Arne, 2011). In effect, they function as a type of labeling intended to function normatively in terms of readers' expectations of the type of content published by the magazine.

The function of headers as a type of labeling extends beyond formal utility. Headers can work with other devices to distill the central message of a feature and therefore direct readers' attention and interpretation of content. Those used in the 2010s are illustrative. In "Meet our drought heroes" (Brown, 2018), the header "Charity" connotes people and altruism, which is reinforced by opening images of human "heroes" and of the emaciated cattle the heroes presumably are saving. "Running dry" has the header "Rural issue" (Robertson & Gannon, 2018), with an opening two-page spread showing only sheep on denuded ground, from ground level, which directs attention to land and animals. The two-page opening spread for "When the river runs dry" (Trenoweth, 2019, April) shows an aerial view of the drought-stricken landscape and dry river, with neither people nor animals in sight. The header, "Environmental crisis," communicates drought as a symptom of a broader, catastrophic phenomenon. "Running on empty" has an opening two-page spread dominated by an aerial view of a denuded landscape sparsely populated by cattle, and the header "Water crisis." In these ways, *The Weekly* shifts attention from people to land. Another article from the 2010s, while not focussed on drought (Gannon, 2017), has the header "Environment," which further suggests the magazine's deliberate foregrounding of the environment.

Experiencing drought

The Australian news media have long published human-interest stories about drought and adversity (Cockfield & Easton, 2003, p. 168) and have conceptualized drought as an agricultural phenomenon (Rutledge-Prior & Beggs, 2021, p. 113). In these stories, drought becomes what Mules et al. (1995) call "a symbolic event that involves strategic positioning of meanings about what it is to be a farmer" (p. 243). For *The Weekly*, these stories typically also have been about what it is to be a woman on the land. By continually foregrounding women's experiences, albeit to varying degrees across the years, *The Weekly's* construction of a "female-centred world" for its readers (Sheridan et al., 2002, p. 8) has extended to a world in which the natural environment can be hostile and cruel. Women who inhabit this world are shown as resourceful and resilient and, from the 1960s, more of those women than in earlier issues of *The Weekly* are shown as heads of farming enterprises, a role traditionally occupied by men. They are cheerful and tenacious but come to admit their emotional vulnerability, as do men, which aligns with a move toward a rhetoric of vulnerability in news reports of natural disaster in Australia as well as the UK (see Duffy & Yell, 2014; Furedi, 2007).

Through these human-interest stories, *The Weekly* has perpetuated but also disrupted stereotypes of rural women. Even though the news media have used domestic detail to illustrate the consequences of drought (see, e.g. Mules et al., 1995, pp. 252–253), the recurrence of such detail in *Weekly* drought content reflects the traditional promotion by women's magazines of gendered stereotypes around home and family. Margaret Alston (1995) observed "the cultural neglect" (p. 88) of Australian rural women that relegates them to the domains of home and family and neither recognizes nor records the significant work they do on the land. Alston demanded that Australia, "give value to their work and ... hear and understand their opinions and concerns" (p. 94). While reinforcing gendered stereotypes in its drought content to some extent, *The Weekly* also has acknowledged women's agricultural contributions and expertise, especially from the 1990s. Its drought content respects and records the experiences, attitudes, and opinions of these women.

The Weekly has promoted a view of rural life, and farmers, as having special status. In doing so, it has perpetuated views of rural Australia that arise from the nation's reliance on agriculture following white settlement, views that endure in the news media (Cockfield & Easton, 2003, pp. 168–170; Rutledge-Prior & Beggs, 2021, pp. 119–121). In *The Weekly*, this special status has been manifested in expressions of the connections between people on the land, and people and the land. Farmers are united by the challenges they face, their fortitude, and their commitment to rural life, which is accentuated by contrasts with city dwellers. These contrasts recur in Australian news media reports of drought (see, e.g. Mules et al., 1995, pp. 247–248; Twigg et al., 2023, pp. 10–11). In 2019, however,

The Weekly also drew attention to First Nations people's connection to the land and their expertise in land management. A study of 2018 coverage of drought by the Australian news media (Rutledge-Prior & Beggs, 2021) found that any discussion of reforming the agricultural sector made almost no reference to First Nations people's land management practices (p. 116). *The Weekly* has shown itself open to offering an alternative. Another feature article published in 2020 (Smethurst & Shapiro, 2020), although not one on drought, supports that view. It profiles the leader of an all-women, First Nations fire crew who uses her traditional knowledge to protect the land.

Promoting action

The Weekly has a national readership dispersed across a continent populated mainly close to the coast, so its drought features connect urban Australian readers with their rural counterparts for whom drought has the most acute impact. At the very least, *The Weekly* may instill in those readers outside of drought-prone areas a sympathetic mindset to the plight of the land and those who dwell on it and consequently heighten readers' receptivity to whatever they themselves might do to help mitigate against future drought and its impact.

Through the drought features, the magazine also has identified or alluded to specific actions to improve life on the land. It has, for example, demanded government responsibility for water conservation, sought to correct ignorance of the realities of rural life, advocated for more timely and higher levels of government support, and encouraged personal donations to charities, all of which the Australian news media have done (see, e.g. Cockfield & Easton, 2003; Rutledge-Prior & Beggs, 2021, pp. 116–119; Twigg et al., 2023, pp. 13–15). As early as 1942, *The Weekly* drew attention to anthropogenic harm to the environment although subsequent drought content typically focussed on the hardships experienced by farmers. However, as the analysis shows, *The Weekly* in the late 2010s placed greater emphasis on anthropogenic harm to the environment than it had in earlier decades, and it now explicitly advocated for informed and collective responsibility for addressing climate change, with women's voices prominent in that advocacy. Augustenborg et al. (2022), who analysed news reports of Ireland's 2018 drought, concluded that "Drought communication in the media should ... recognize the link to anthropogenic climate change ... to support the behavioral changes needed for effective climate adaptation and mitigation" (p. 453), but this does not always occur in the Australian news media (Rutledge-Prior & Beggs, 2021, pp. 124–125). *The Weekly* has shown the capacity of the popular women's magazine to contribute to environmental communication in this way.

Concluding comments

Across eighty years of publication, *The Australian Women's Weekly* has established drought as a phenomenon primarily affecting farmers and their families, promoted certain views of drought – and women who experience drought – and advocated action of some kind. As a magazine for women, *The Weekly* has presented drought to its readers in ways that continue, but also extend beyond, its traditional concerns with domestic life. *The Weekly* has done so via content typically found in magazines: the editorial, the book review, the reader contribution, and the human-interest feature. Through this content, *The Weekly* has sought to draw readers into the "mid-temporal" space of magazines (Le Masurier, 2014, p. 11) that encourages leisurely and contemplative reading. *The Weekly* consequently may heighten readers' awareness of drought, along with its contexts, in ways that differ from the news media, which rely on more rapid consumption of information via less discursive forms of communication, and which are driven by news values that favor more sudden and spectacular natural disasters.

Of the content analysed, *The Weekly's* drought features most consistently reveal the efforts made by the popular women's magazine to influence readers' attitudes and actions as environmental advocates although not necessarily so overtly that readers would perceive themselves in that way.

These drought features, therefore, have a social function and can be conceptualized as a rhetorical genre of communication central to which is the promotion of an understanding of both the phenomenon and the experience of drought, and action of some kind. There are signs that in more recent years, *The Weekly* has moved to overtly promoting a view of environmental crisis at a time when not everybody accepts the weight of scientific proof of climate catastrophe. It has purposefully engaged in a form environmental communication not usually associated with the popular women's magazine yet with potentially far-reaching influence on perceptions of human relations to the natural environment.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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