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A Study of Patterns of Environmental Protest in Sydney, Australia

As a global city and commercial capital of Australia, Sydney occupies an important place in the national imagination. Attention is naturally drawn to the city, making it a valuable target for those seeking to present claims and challenge those in power. This article draws on a unique protest-event catalogue to examine patterns of environmental activism in Sydney over the 1997–2018 period. The article draws out the key issues, actors and actions, and shows how these have changed over time across the Sydney metropolitan region. The findings suggest that the affordances of the urban environment play an important role in shaping the patterns of protest. A central division is between actions in the City of Sydney and those in surrounding local government areas. The greater availability of targets in the City of Sydney facilitates larger-scale actions, whereas those in the wider metropolitan region are

Keywords: environment, global city, protest event analysis, Sydney, urban

Introduction

On 17 November 2002, 3000 people gathered for a rally at Lindfield in Ku-ring-gai, North Sydney to oppose more than 100 planned developments that aimed to increase the housing density of the suburb. Addressing the rally, New South Wales (NSW) president of the National Trust, Barry O’Keefe, stated:¹

What is proposed will ensure the immediate downgrading of the heritage values that are the very essence of this beautiful, this sylvan, this very, very special part of Sydney....Those who have lived in gardens and houses do not want to be transformed into bird-like existences

¹ Deborah Smith and Claire O’Rourke, C. “Wall of Humanity Lines Up Against Councils,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 18, 2002.

Ten years later, on 15 March 2012, opponents of coal seam gas (CSG) exploration were thrown out of the upper house of the NSW Parliament for shouting at government MPs who had blocked a proposed moratorium on new projects. Anti-CSG activists were also thrown out of the lower house later in the day for shouting at government MPs following a brief debate of their 30000 signature petition. As these events took place, 60 protesters set up a mock gas drill outside on Macquarie St.² These two sets of events represent different aspects of environmental contention in Sydney, focusing on very local and state level issues respectively. What they share is a setting within the Sydney metropolitan area. As Australia's largest city and commercial hub, Sydney occupies an important place in the national imagination. Examining the range of actions taking place there can draw out the diversity of claims presented by residents and how contention is distributed across the urban core and wider metropolitan region.

Contemporary environmental activism has been strong in Australia since the 1960s, with campaigns to protect the Little Desert, Franklin River, and Terania Creek³ shaping perceptions of the physical environment. At the same time, there have been significant actions targeting urban environmental issues. Although these may not be as dramatic as those protecting 'wild' spaces, they have the potential to shape and change attitudes and practices towards the environment. One of the most notable in the case of Sydney was the Green Ban movement of the 1970s that brought together unions and community groups to challenge untrammelled

² "CSG Moratorium Fails in NSW Parliament," *Australian Associated Press*, March 15, 2012.

³ Vanessa Bible, *Terania Creek and Forging of Modern Environmental Activism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2018); Drew Hutton and Libby Connors, *A History of the Australian Environmental Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

urban development.⁴ This presented a different form of environmental action, addressing the urban environment and forcing people to recognise the environment as an everyday feature, rather than something wild and remote. Actions such as this were significant but they also echo the everyday, small-scale actions taken by local communities to protect the environments close to them. Paying attention to the use of the urban captures the interaction between these more local, everyday issues and more dramatic large-scale threats to the natural environment. Urban environmental activism also capitalises on opportunities afforded by the urban to target sites of symbolic importance, ranging from culturally significant locations through to the headquarters of corporate actors. There is much to be gained by considering the distribution and interplay of action operating at these different scales when considering the city as an incubator of action.

This article examines patterns of protest focused on environmental issues in Sydney over the 1997-2018 period. Sydney presents a valuable case for analysis given its status as a global city, characterized by the concentration of economic interests and as the representation of the idea of Australia.⁵ However, Acuto⁶ argues ‘the identity that *Sydney* has in the popular imagination often hinders a full appreciation of the extreme intricacy of the cross-related political processes that underpin it.’ This makes it necessary to explore the ways contentious actions have emerged and unfolded across the metropolitan region, which leads to the following questions:

(1) How did actions in the central city differ from those in the wider metropolitan area? (2)

⁴ Kurt Iveson, “Building a City For ‘The People’: The Politics of Alliance-Building in the Sydney Green Ban Movement,” *Antipode* 46 no. 4 (2014), 992-1013.

⁵ Donald McNeill, Robyn Dowling and Bob Fagan, “Sydney/Global/City: An Exploration,” 29 no. 4 (2005), 935-44; Ronald K. Vogel, Roberta Ryan, Alex Lawrie, Bligh Grant, Xianming Meng, Peter Walsh, Alan Morris and Chris Riedy, “Global City Sydney,” *Progress in Planning* 136 (2020), 1-49.

⁶ Michele Acuto, “Ain’t About Politics? The Wicked Power-Geometry of Sydney’s Greening Governance,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 36 no. 2 (2012), 388. Emphasis in original.

What does this say about the importance of visibility to targets and observers? To answer these questions the article draws on a unique protest event catalogue that identifies key actors (claimants and targets), locations, issues, and forms of action over the 1997-2018 period. The remainder of the article is divided into four sections. The first section considers role of urban environments in shaping and enabling the actions of social movements. The character of Sydney is examined in the second section, capturing the way the city is governed and contested by social movement and community actors. The methodology is outlined in the third section introducing the construction of protest event dataset that underpins the article. Patterns of environmental protest in Sydney are outlined in the fourth section, identifying the number, issues, targets and forms to determine how the opportunities afforded by the urban (and suburban) space influenced actions. Finally, the article draws on the findings to address the nature of environmental protest in Sydney.

Urban Activism and Cycles of Contention

Protest is by its very nature disruptive, potentially creating tensions that threaten existing social relations. Considering the broader perspective of contentious politics within which protest can be located, Charles Tilly argued it entails:⁷

interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interests, in which governments appear either as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties. Contentious politics thus brings together three familiar features of social life: contention, collective action, and politics.

⁷ Charles Tilly, *Contentious Performances* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5

By noting the centrality of state actors in such actions, Tilly highlights the fact that protest is productive, as claims are presented to bring about or resist change in current conditions. These actions take place within a particular social and political context, meaning those involved must be conscious of the opportunities (and threats) available. Describing the scope of such actions, Tarrow⁸ argues the 'repertoire of contention offers movements three broad types of collective action – disruption, violence and contained behavior.' Events will draw on a combination of these depending on the physical and social space available, as turning to violence (including property destruction) may undermine the claims being presented by distracting from the message. By contrast, contained behaviour may simply be ignored where it does not require a response of acknowledgement from those being targeted. The result is that protest actors are required to calibrate their actions to maximise the potential impact.

Social context is central in shaping the range of potential actions are available to those making claims. Meyer and Minkoff⁹ point to the importance of context in the form of political opportunity structures consisting of:

exogenous factors [that] enhance or inhibit prospects for mobilization, for particular sorts of claims to be advanced rather than others, for particular strategies of influence to be exercised, and for movements to affect mainstream institutional politics and policy.

Categorising these structures, Tilly¹⁰ pointed to openness of the regime, coherence of the elite, stability of political alignments, availability of allies, and repression/facilitation. These

⁸ Sidney Tarrow, S. (2011) *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 99.

⁹ David S. Meyer and Debra C. Minkoff, "Conceptualizing Political Opportunity," *Social Forces* 82 no. 4 (2004), 1457-8.

structures are not static, so Tilly identified the rate of change as a sixth factor. The ability of actors to recognise the nature of these opportunities (and threats) is complicated by the need to distinguish between signals sent from the political system and more substantial structural changes.¹¹ Changes in political composition leads to changes in the nature of opportunities, with movement actors shifting their attention accordingly. This complicates the picture slightly, as the absence of avenues to pursue claims through institutional channels may lead to extrainstitutional protest actions regardless of the favourability or otherwise of the opportunity structure. These considerations may be heightened in the case of environmental activism, where the irreversibility and time sensitive nature of issues means waiting for more favourable conditions is less of an option.

Protest actions can cause significant disruption for those not directly involved, particularly in urban environments where the everyday flows may be more easily upset. This can in turn cause resentment, anger, and counteractions, at the same time it also generates greater awareness around claims. For this reason, Tarrow¹² notes that 'Few dare break the crust of convention... [those who do] create the opportunities and provide the models for others'. Where action is taken to present a claim it may point to the presence of more favourable opportunities or heightened threats, inspiring others to follow. Where this leads to consolidated action targeting

¹⁰ Tilly, *Contentious Performances*.

¹¹ Meyer and Minkoff, "Political Opportunity".

¹² Sidney Tarrow, "Cycles of Collective Action: Between Moments of Madness and the Repertoire of Contention", *Social Science History* 17 no. 2, (1993), 302.

particular issues, a cycle of contention may develop, whereby the actions become self-reinforcing. Tarrow¹³ defines a cycle of contention where:

co-occurrence and coalescence are furthered by state responses rejecting the claims of early risers – thereby encouraging their assimilation to other possible claimants, while lowering constraints and offering opportunities for broader contention

The failure or inability of targeted institutional actors to address claims serves as fuel for further action, as protest actions publicise this failure and draw attention to the issue.

Urban environments present considerable opportunities for contentious action. At the simplest level, the ability to restrain contention in urban settings is challenged by the greater concentration of numbers and the ability to circulate. The physical space of the city provides opportunities for mobilisation and symbolic acts to present claims and highlight the actions of targeted individuals and collectives. Miller and Nicholls¹⁴ point to the importance of the urban environment, arguing that:

Cities can... accommodate large numbers of individuals of particular groups, providing the 'critical mass' needed to create and sustain associations, media, socializing venues, religious organizations, and other social institutions

This is significant in the context of cycles of contention, as the co-presence of observers and potential participants in the urban space makes it more likely that action can be sustained. In this way, urban settings create spaces that can facilitate the accumulation of resources necessary to initiate and sustain action. This potential will vary across the urban space, meaning

¹³ Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 201.

¹⁴ Byron Miller and Walter Nicholls, "Social Movements in Urban Society: The City as a Space of Politicization," *Urban Geography* 34 no. 4 (2013), 459.

that greater concentrations will be possible in the core and also where there are greater resources within the community available for action. Reflecting on the distinct characteristics of global cities, Sassen¹⁵ argued 'that the Global City was a production function inserted in complex existing cities, albeit a function with a vast shadow effect over a city's larger space.' This distinction between core and periphery presents opportunities to consider variation across the urban space.

The significance of the urban environment goes beyond its utility in providing opportunities to concentrate people and resources. Protest actions in this setting can be seen as attempts to embody and present an alternative imaginary. Iveson¹⁶ points to the complex nature of this contest, arguing:

The shaping and reshaping of urban spaces is a product of complex power-geometries, as different actors seek to determine who and what the city is for. Among the resources mobilized in these power struggles are capital, property rights, planning codes, spatial design, law, various policing techniques and technologies, education, socialization, and labour.

The fact that people form connections and identities around their interaction with the urban space means that the outcomes of these power struggles are significant to them. Decisions to engage in protest necessarily involve contesting the range of restrictions Iveson identifies, thereby impacting someone's interests. These restrictions will necessarily be most tightly

¹⁵ Saskia Sassen, "The Global City: Enabling Economic Intermediation and Bearing Its Costs," *City & Community* 15 no. 2 (2016), 97-108.

¹⁶ Kurt Iveson, "Cities within the City: Do-It-Yourself Urbanism and the Right to the City," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37 no. 3 (2013), 942.

policed in the urban core but can also be seen to radiate out to more suburban spaces where actions threaten established practices and interests.

Behind the motivations of activists rests a desire to go beyond the urban as a space of accumulation, drawing in deeper considerations of identity and belonging. This is embodied in the right to the city, reflecting the sense of attachment people feel to particular spaces and the desire to protect these. Expanding on this notion, Vasudevan¹⁷ argues that it should be seen:

as a right that is operative across multiple sites and territories and that it is characterized by a *constituent* desire to participate in the production of urban space... [claiming] a recognition that the city encompasses a wide range of political imagination and that a conceptual architecture is needed that accommodates this diversity.

Through their actions, those engaged in protest challenge the perception of the right to the city as 'a narrow, individual right, reserved for a limited economic and political elite'.¹⁸ Protest in urban environments draws on spaces to present claims that challenge dominant narratives, presenting it as a complex blend of diverse and conflicting interests, even if only for a short time. The article now turns to the case of Sydney to illustrate how the urban environment has been shaped by the interaction between regulation and activism.

Governance and Activism in Sydney

¹⁷ Alexander Vasudevan, "The Autonomous City: Towards a Critical Geography of Occupation," *Progress in Human Geography* 39 no. 3 (2015), 318, emphasis in original.

¹⁸ Anders Lund Hansen and René Karpantschov, "Last Stand or Renewed Activism? The Copenhagen Youth House Uprising, 2007," in *Urban Uprisings: Challenging Neoliberal Urbanism in Europe*, eds. Margit Mayer, Catharina Thörn and Håkan Thörn (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016), 178.

Sydney presents a rich space for contention, as Australia's commercial capital and largest city. The structure of governance in Australia also supports actions focused on the city, as Sydney serves as the location of the NSW State government and associated administrative bodies. Examining climate policy, Steele et al¹⁹ argue that the different levels of government have shaped behaviour, meaning that the patchy response of the Federal government has allowed 'state governments... to decide what to do, and then tell local governments how to do it'. The fragmented nature of governance in Sydney when combined with its global status and outsized influence on the country adds further complexity. Kübler²⁰ notes that 'the geopolitical fragmentation of Sydney metropolitan area is high, but quite typical for Australia'. Drawing the distinction between levels of government, Kübler²¹ notes that State government is 'responsible for a number of policies and services crucial to urban governance, including area-wide planning'. In contrast, local councils 'provide services important to the local community on the basis of their own funds raised through property rates',²² meaning that 'local elected governments answer to their own well organised constituencies'.²³ The actions of different levels of government are also 'constrained by the highly prescriptive legislative frameworks in which they operate'²⁴ but there remain tensions between state and local governments over issues such as planning, given they serve different constituencies.²⁵

¹⁹ Wendy Steele, Jean Hillier, Diana MacCallum, Jason Byrne and Donna Houston, *Quiet Activism: Climate Action at the Local Scale* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2021), 44-45.

²⁰ Daniel Kübler, "Metropolitan Governance in Sydney: A Case of 'Joint Decision-Making'," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 42 no. 4 (2007), 633.

²¹ Kübler, "Metropolitan governance in Sydney", 633.

²² Kübler, "Metropolitan governance in Sydney", 633.

²³ Heather MacDonald, "'Fantasies of Consensus:' Planning Reform in Sydney, 2005-2013," *Planning Practice and Research* 30 no. 2 (2015), 120.

²⁴ Steele et al, *Quiet Activism*, 44

²⁵ MacDonald, "Fantasies of Consensus".

Geography also plays an important role in shaping Sydney's governance, with 'areas north of the harbour and closer to the coast... more affluent than areas south of the harbour and further west'.²⁶ Further to this, the central local government area (LGA) represented by Sydney City Council (SCC) has a greater degree of influence relative to the other LGAs in its dealings with the State government. McGuirk²⁷ suggests that this results from the fact that 'SCC's jurisdiction... is the epicenter of the city's claim to global city status'. This status also makes it an important space for contention, as the concentration of state level administrative bodies and corporate headquarters in the central city facilitates the concentration of resources by claim-makers when taking actions. McNeill et al²⁸ point to the significance of the interaction between politics and geography when they argue:

what characterises Sydney politics is an inability for one politician to speak for, or to, an identifiable citizenry. This is why certain landmarks, events, and places take on synecdochal status in attempts to provide coherence to the enormous narrative complexity of the contemporary metropolis.

Together, these features demonstrate the varied space presented by metropolitan Sydney, particularly the significance of the urban core as a hub of political, economic, and cultural power. In doing so, it creates a clear hierarchy that potentially shapes patterns of contentious actions.

²⁶ Ben Spies-Butcher and Ariadne Vromen, "Suburban Affairs: Groups and Political Communities Across Sydney," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 45 no. 3 (2010), 444.

²⁷ Pauline M. McGuirk, "Producing the Capacity to Govern in Global Sydney: A Multiscaled Account," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 25 no. 2 (2003), 208.

²⁸ Donald McNeill, Robyn Dowling and Bob Fagan, "Sydney/Global/City: An Exploration," 29 no. 4 (2005), 942.

Public contention has been important in Sydney, as actors have attempted to capitalise on the opportunities presented by the city's status. Reflecting on representations of contentious behaviour in this context, Shaw²⁹ notes that Sydney appears as 'a riotous place' in the media and that these 'events reflect some underlying tensions and manifestations of wider historical geographies of a city, and a society'.³⁰ These tensions can be seen in the governance of the city, which Acuto³¹ argues 'is not an open ground for political contention, but often an exclusionary space of engagement targeted towards the creation of a market-driven space of dependence.' This is connected to Goodman's³² point that the city's global status is grounded in 'Iconic public places... mobilized as the backdrop to the Sydney Olympics [that are] proffered as desirable settings for summiteers'. The economic value of these places leads to increased attempts to control and restrict access to the urban space. Examining the 2007 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in the city, Epstein and Iveson³³ argue that security arrangements aimed to 'reinforce, a binary distinction between the "virtuous" citizen (in need of protection) and the "unruly" protester (from whom the virtuous citizens need protection).' The sense that dissent is not welcomed in these spaces is captured in Lee's³⁴ observation that 'the public order and riot squad are routinely deployed at protests when there is no or low risk of civil disorder'.

²⁹ Wendy S. Shaw, "Riotous Sydney: Redfern, Macquarie Fields, and (My) Cronulla," *Environment and Planning D* 27 no. 3 (2009), 425.

³⁰ Shaw, "Riotous Sydney", 429.

³¹ Acuto, "Ain't About Politics?", 395.

³² James Goodman, "Provoking 'Globalist Sydney': Neoliberal Summits and Spatial Reappropriation," *Globalizations* 7 no. 3 (2010), 350.

³³ Kate Epstein and Kurt Iveson, "Locking Down the City (Well Not Quite): APEC 2007 and Urban Citizenship in Sydney," *Australian Geographer* 40 no. 3 (2009), 273.

³⁴ Murray Lee, "Policing the Pedal Rebels: A Case Study of Environmental Activism Under COVID-19," *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 10 no. 2 (2021), 158.

Attempts to control the urban space in this way can be seen as limiting and restricting the alternatives available, something which protest actions can be seen as challenging.

Environmental issues have long been an important feature of contentious politics in Sydney, ranging from claims targeting state and corporate actors through to more localised actions. One of the most historically significant environmentally focused series of actions were the Green Bans of the early 1970s. These saw trade unions imposing stop work orders on construction that was seen as environmentally harmful or threatening the integrity of the urban environment. Examining the union motivations, Burgmann³⁵ notes that terms such as ‘holding operation’, ‘thinking time’, and ‘breathing space’ were used to justify the actions. The aim was to create space for consultation and consideration of the value of construction in an atmosphere of rapid development. The Green Bans were not solely a union action, as Iveson³⁶ notes, they constituted a movement ‘involving an unlikely alliance of unionists, resident action groups, feminists, gay liberationists, Aboriginal black power, and progressive professionals and academics’. Together, these actors presented a powerful claim to the nature of the urban space and how it should be protected and managed. Although the Green Bans were effectively broken by 1974,³⁷ their legacy continued to shape urban contention in Sydney and further afield. Central to this was the demonstration that communities were able to challenge official actions where these were deemed harmful to those affected.

³⁵ Verity Burgmann, “The Social Responsibility of Labour Versus the Environmental Impact of Property Capital: The Australian Green Bans Movement,” *Environmental Politics* 9 no. 2 (2000), 92.

³⁶ Iveson, “Building a City”, 993-4.

³⁷ Iveson, “Building a City”, 996.

An important component of the Green Ban movement that still sits at the core of local contention in Sydney are the resident action groups (RAG). Costello and Dunn³⁸ argue that RAGs 'can be loosely defined as community activism responding to localised collective goals or threats'. The ability of RAGs to access and pressure local government decisions in a relatively 'open and participatory political culture'³⁹ has been important as 'local political structures provide political opportunities for groups to mobilise'.⁴⁰ The local character of these groups has led to claims of NIMBYism, resting on self-serving interests.⁴¹ Examining the development of RAGs in the wealthier Ku-ring-gai LGA, Ruming et al⁴² note that there are groups operating at both the local level and also LGA wide. The perceived threat of being labelled privileged NIMBYs meant that 'many of the groups [studied] actively developed linkages with groups and campaigns away from Ku-ring-gai'.⁴³ This can be seen as a presentational issue but also points to an effort to challenge practices on a wider scale. McAuliffe and Rogers⁴⁴ also note that 'recognition of the limitations of the formal processes of community engagement led many to take politics outside of the formal political processes'. The formation of RAGs provided a foundation for networks at the local level that could be mobilised to engage in more direct forms of claim making, potentially mobilising across LGA boundaries to target larger issues.

³⁸ Lauren N. Costello and Kevin M. Dunn, "Resident Action Groups in Sydney: People Power or Rat-Bags?," *Australian Geographer* 25 no. 1 (1994), 62.

³⁹ McGuirk, "Capacity to Govern", 218.

⁴⁰ Spies-Butcher and Vromen, "Suburban Affairs", 441.

⁴¹ Costello and Dunn, "Resident Action Groups".

⁴² Kristian Ruming, Donna Houston and Marco Amati, "Multiple Suburban Publics: Rethinking Community Opposition to Consolidation in Sydney," *Geographical Research* 50 no. 4 (2012), 421-35.

⁴³ Ruming et al, "Multiple Suburban Publics", 433.

⁴⁴ Cameron McAuliffe and Dallas Rogers, "Tracing Resident Antagonisms in Urban Development: Agonistic Pluralism and Participatory Planning", *Geographical Research* 56 no. 2 (2018), 227-8.

The structures and actors point to the complex character of urban governance and contestation in Sydney. The fragmented character of governance structures leads to the proliferation of groups. The outsized influence of the City of Sydney (CoS) LGA and the powerlessness of local councils in relation to the State government point to an imbalance that has become more pronounced over time.⁴⁵ Large events such as the Olympics and APEC meetings have seen increased levels of contention, while RAGs have flourished at the local level.⁴⁶ What is less clear is the distribution of actions across the urban space and how this has been used to target particular actors and issues. This article attempts to address this by considering how environmentally focused protest events have manifested across the Sydney metropolitan area.

Methodology

The transient character of protest events means that they are often difficult to capture in real time. An valuable tool that can help identify and document such events is the protest event analysis (PEA), which involves drawing on sources such as newspaper stories, police reports, and other contemporaneous materials to reconstruct events. Describing the approach, Koopmans and Rucht⁴⁷ argue that it:

has been developed to systematically map, analyze, and interpret the occurrence and properties of large number of protests... [providing] solid empirical ground for observing protest activities in large geographical areas over considerable periods of time

⁴⁵ Heather MacDonald, "Has Planning Been De-Democratised in Sydney," *Geographical Research* 56 no. 2 (2018), 230-40.

⁴⁶ Spies-Butcher and Vromen, "Suburban Affairs".

⁴⁷ Ruud Koopmans and Dieter Rucht, "Protest Event Analysis," in *Methods of Social Movement Research*, eds. Bert Klandermans and Suzanne Staggenborg (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 231.

The adaptability of PEA means that it is able to capture protest events at multiple scales, depending on the source of the data and the depth to which these sources are explored. As a result, it is useful when considering the nature of protest events in a particular geographical area, such as a city, identifying patterns of targets, claims and actions, as well as how these change over time.

The events considered in this article are derived from a dataset of protest events in Australia between 1 January 1997 and 31 December 2018.⁴⁸ The events were identified through an examination of all stories reported in the main regional and national Australian newspapers as well as the Australian Associated Press (AAP) (see Appendix for detail). Newspaper stories are an imperfect source, as they are shaped by the editorial priorities of the particular outlet. However, these stories are intended to inform the readership of events taking place, so they provide an opportunity to reconstruct a representation of what protest events were recognized at the time, as well as a level of detail on what happened. The media has a role in constructing a “reality” by selectively providing comment and information about the lives, landscapes and cultures of different social groups⁴⁹ but this reality is also required to reflect that of the society in which it exists, meaning that newspaper stories continue to serve as a viable source of events. The sources used to construct the catalogue were selected to ensure broad coverage of potential events. Protest events are newsworthy where they are disruptive, meaning that the

⁴⁸ Full dataset of Australia protest events available at [\[link to follow\]](#)

⁴⁹ Gordon Waitt, “Media Representation of Forestry and Soil Issues in the Australian Urban Press, 1990–1991,” *Geographical Research* 33 no. 2 (1995), 299.

events captured are likely to be those that are more visible and recognisable to the communities impacted.

In order to construct the catalogue and capture as many events as possible, the search parameters were deliberately broad. For this reason, the search terms '*environment**' and '*protest**' were used in the Factiva news database, with '*' capturing variable endings to the key words. The search returned 18554 stories. These stories were then manually examined to identify unique protest events, resulting in 1194 events across Australia over the 1997-2018 period. Each event was then coded to record detail on location, issue, level of focus, participants, and actions (up to four per event). For the purposes of this article, events in the Sydney metropolitan area were extracted to create a smaller dataset of 213 events.⁵⁰ The news stories concerning this subset of events were then re-examined to add fields such as local government area (LGA), specific locations for events in the City of Sydney LGA, and additional detail on the target of each event.

Environmental Protest in Sydney (1997-2018)⁵¹

This section examines patterns of environmentally focused protest events in Sydney over the 1997-2018 period. As noted above, the urban space presents considerable opportunities for social movement actors to mobilise. As capital of the state of New South Wales and the commercial hub of the nation, Sydney possesses both public and private sector institutions that serve as targets for environmental claims. The concentration of these actors within the CoS LGA

⁵⁰ Dataset of Sydney protest events available at [\[link to follow\]](#).

⁵¹ Events reported in this section are derived from various sources as listed in the Appendix.

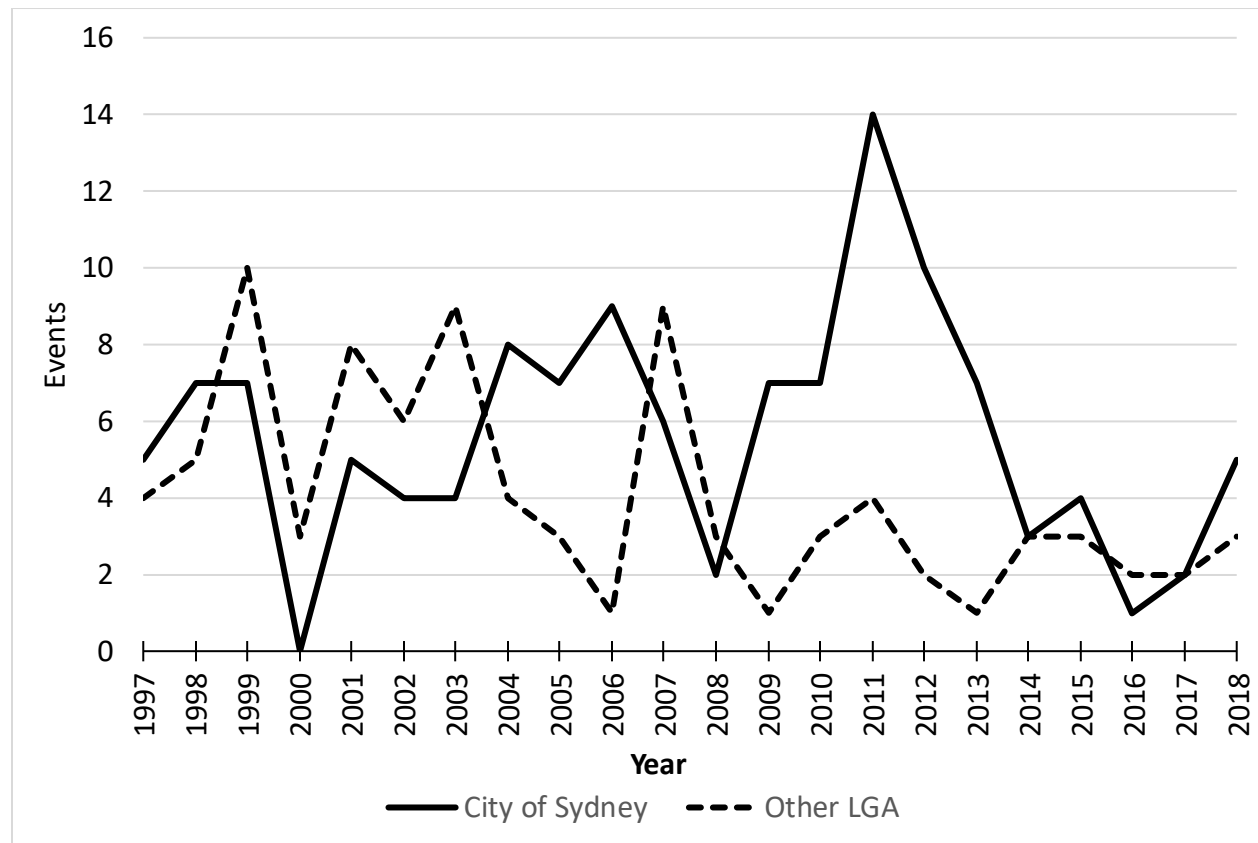
enables a comparison of the number, form, target, and setting of events taking place there with events in the other 29 LGAs in the Metropolitan Sydney region. Focusing on Sydney also allows consideration of how activists operate within a relatively defined space, far removed from the mines, forests, and other sites that the claims sought to raise awareness about.

The 1997-2018 period saw 213 protest events in the Metropolitan Sydney region over a range of environmental issues (Figure 1). These events varied considerably in scale, target, and claim being presented. At the larger end was a school strike for the climate on 30 November 2018 that saw 2000 children gather at Martin Place in CoS to challenge the Federal Government over its climate policies and lack of meaningful action.⁵² In contrast, a July 2003 event saw two activists chain themselves to earthmoving equipment in Hurstville in Southern Sydney to challenge local government plans to erect a cell tower.⁵³ Turning to Figure 1, it is clear that the number of events in the CoS LGA (124) and other LGAs (89) covaried for much of the period. The exception being 2009-2013 when there was a larger number events in CoS, resulting from an intensification of campaigns around forestry and mining. The intensification coincided with an increase in contention over resource issues at the national level, enabling Sydney to highlight and amplify the claims being made.

Figure 1 – Events in City of Sydney and Other Sydney LGAs

⁵² Josh Dye, “‘Change Makers’: Students Skip School to Challenge Climate Policies,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 1, 2018.

⁵³ “Protesters Chain Themselves at Construction Site”, *Australian Associated Press*, 26 March, 2003.



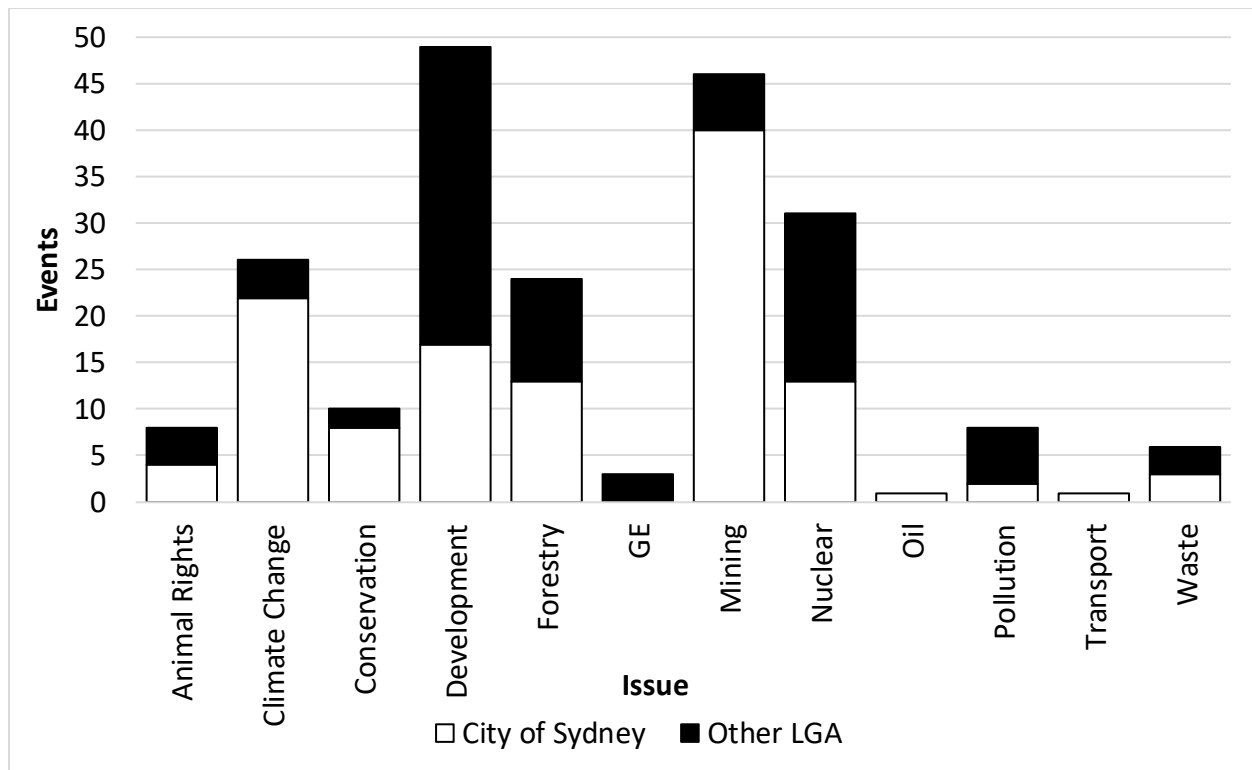
Turning to the issues that generated protest events can further an understanding of the pattern across Sydney. Figure 2 shows the number of events by issue area in the CoS and other LGAs. The figure shows that broader issues of mining (including CSG), climate change and forestry were more prevalent in the CoS LGA. The prevalence of resource claims saw a greater number of events in the CoS, as actions targeted the State government and sites associated with major corporations (headquarters, Annual General Meetings (AGM), and conferences). These actions were important in generating attention, such as in November 2012 when protesters staged a brief sit-in and handed out leaflets at a central city hotel where the mining company Whitehaven was hosting its AGM.⁵⁴ These actions were also intended to highlight the role of

⁵⁴ "Protesters Escorted from Whitehaven AGM," *Australian Associated Press*, November 1, 2012.

the State and Federal governments in enabling what was identified as harmful resource extraction. In the other LGAs, a large portion of events were focused on development, which was more closely connected to particular sites. Development based claims addressed a wide range of targets from siting of a new airport, to road construction, and the destruction of locally significant sites, often giving them a more defined place to target when presenting the claim. This was reflected in March 2003 when a rally was held to oppose planned housing development at the site of a former Australian Defence Industries munitions factory in St Mary's and resulted in protesters breaching a barricade protecting the site.⁵⁵ This also explains the number of forestry and nuclear events in the other LGAs, as these capture actions to protect neighbourhood trees and protests at the Lucas Heights nuclear facility respectively.

Figure 2 – Events by Issue

⁵⁵ Geesche Jacobsen, "Housing Site May End Up as Parkland," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 17, 2003.



Examining the targets of the claims provides an opportunity to consider the broader pattern of action and give an indication of where energies were focused. Table 1 shows the aggregate categories of named targets in the event catalogue taking place in the CoS LGA and Other LGAs respectively. Reflecting the point above about the location of resource firms, these actors featured much more in the CoS LGA than outside. The equal divide in other firms between the CoS LGA and Other LGAs captures actions against local development, as well as branches of banks involved in financing mining and retailers selling GE products, which were not as tied to particular places. State government featured as the most common public sector target across Metropolitan Sydney, with local government being largely absent, reflecting its relative restricted decision-making power. Differences in the level of government targeted were also linked to geographical considerations, as 24 of the CoS events took place at the State

Parliament. Similarly, the number of events outside the CoS LGA targeting the Federal government were boosted by actions (11) at Lucas Heights over nuclear safety targeting agencies such as the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO).

Table 1 – Target of Claims

	City of Sydney	Other LGA	TOTAL
Federal Government	21 ^a (16.9) ^b	33 (37.1)	54 (25.4)
State Government	49 (39.5)	33 (37.1)	82 (38.5)
Local Government	2 (1.6)	4 (4.5)	6 (2.8)
Other State Government	2 (1.6)	1 (1.1)	3 (1.4)
Political Party	8 (6.5)	2 (2.2)	10 (4.7)
Resource Firm	22 (17.7)	2 (2.2)	24 (11.3)
Other Firm	13 (10.5)	13 (14.6)	26 (12.2)
Other	7 (5.6)	1 (1.1)	8 (3.8)
TOTAL	124	89	213

^a Number of events focused on target.

^b Percentage of events focused on target.

Moving from targets, it is important to consider how protest events manifested and what actions were adopted. Table 2 presents the frequency of a range of actions recorded in the events identified in the CoS and other LGAs. Up to four distinct actions were recorded for each event. Appeal captures events where an individual is recorded as speaking to a crowd or actors involved present something (i.e. petition) to a target. An example was an April 1997 protest at the Opera House where Jack Munday addressed the crowd as part of a campaign to save East

Circular Quay.⁵⁶ Demonstrational actions featured most commonly in both cases, with the main difference being the slightly higher frequency of a variety of actions in the CoS. This may point to the greater potential to draw attention, capitalising on the greater concentration of people to demonstrate WUNC (worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment).⁵⁷ By contrast, there was a more mixed picture in relation to confrontational actions. CoS events saw a slightly higher proportion of events involving chants and disruption, while the other LGAs saw a greater number of obstructing actions. This selection of action type can be linked to the opportunities afforded by the physical setting, such as building sites and industrial facilities. At a protest against Eastern Star Gas in October 2011, the Wilderness Society gathered outside a company meeting at a city hotel dressed as mice and koala, carrying placards and chanting.⁵⁸ This contrasts with repeated actions to obstruct the road to the Lucas Heights reactor, where the focus was very much on the specific place and its symbolic power in presenting claims.

Table 2 – Frequency of Action Type

	City of Sydney	Other LGA	TOTAL
Appeal	29.0^a (36)^b	23.6 (21)	26.8 (57)
Address	24.2 (30)	22.5 (20)	23.5 (50)
Present	6.5 (8)	1.1 (1)	4.2 (9)
Demonstrational	94.4 (117)	89.9 (80)	92.5 (197)
Gather	86.3 (107)	79.8 (71)	83.6 (178)
Display	26.6 (33)	16.9 (15)	22.5 (48)
March	16.1 (20)	4.5 (4)	11.3 (24)

⁵⁶ "Mundey Back on Quay," *The Australian*, April 7, 1997.

⁵⁷ See Charles Tilly and Lesley Wood, *Social Movements, 1768-2008*. 2nd ed (Boulder: Paradigm Press, 2009).

⁵⁸ "CSG Protesters Stake Out Meeting," *Australian Associated Press*, October 28, 2011.

	Perform	22.6 (28)	15.7 (14)	19.7 (42)
	Costume	10.5 (13)	9.0 (8)	9.9 (21)
	Rally	8.9 (11)	6.7 (6)	8.0 (17)
	Meet	0.8 (1)	2.2 (2)	1.4 (3)
Confrontational		38.7 (48)	34.8 (31)	37.1 (79)
	Obstruct	8.1 (10)	16.9 (15)	11.7 (25)
	Chant	20.2 (25)	10.1 (9)	16.0 (34)
	Occupy	4.0 (5)	6.7 (6)	5.2 (11)
	Enter	12.9 (16)	11.2 (10)	12.2 (26)
	Disrupt	4.0 (5)	0.0 (0)	2.3 (5)
Violent		0.0 (0)	1.1 (1)	0.5 (1)
	Damage	0.0 (0)	1.1 (1)	0.5 (1)
Actions (total)		312	182	494
Events (total)		124	89	213

^a Percentage of events including particular action.

^b Number of actions recorded, up to four per event.

The events described thus far demonstrate the importance of setting in determining the claims being presented, the target, and the range of actions available to participants. The range of settings observed in the data is outlined in Table 3, focusing on those that saw at least four events in the CoS or other LGA. The first point to note is the prominence of city and suburb settings in the CoS and other LGAs respectively. This would seem to reinforce the point made earlier about the opportunities presented by the urban environment. Gatherings in the city in CoS can be seen as demonstrating considerable numbers, as in the 2018 climate strike at the iconic Martin Place, whereas in the other LGAs the more geographically specific nature of the issues meant events were more able to take place in the affected communities, involving issues

such as cell towers, housing developments, and road expansion. More broadly, and in line with the range of targets, official buildings and offices featured more prominently in the CoS, making up almost half of all events when Parliament is included. By contrast, whereas industrial, coast, and official building were prominent in the other LGAs, as can be seen in in the campaign against the expansion of the Lucas Heights nuclear reactor in the southwestern Sutherland LGA in the early 2000s⁵⁹ or events targeting the Prime Minister's official residence at Kirribilli in the North Sydney LGA.⁶⁰ In each case, place played a key role in drawing attention to and amplifying the claims being presented.

Table 3 – Protest Event Setting

	City of Sydney	Other LGA	Total
City	52 (41.9)	13 (14.6)	65 (30.5)
Suburb	7 (5.6)	30 (33.7)	37 (17.4)
Official Building	18 (14.5)	11 (12.4)	29 (13.6)
Parliament	24 (19.4)	0 (0.0)	24 (11.3)
Office	16 (12.9)	3 (3.4)	19 (8.9)
Industrial	1 (0.8)	13 (14.6)	14 (6.6)
Coast	2 (1.6)	11 (12.4)	13 (6.1)
Port	2 (1.6)	4 (4.5)	6 (2.8)
Other	2 (2.2)	4 (4.5)	6 (2.8)
TOTAL	124	89	213

Discussion

⁵⁹ "Nuclear Waste Carried through Sydney Despite Protests," *Australian Associated Press*, January 23, 2001.

⁶⁰ Rhian Deutrom, "Anti-Adani Crowd Beaches Itself at Turnbull's House," *The Australian*, May 28, 2018.

The urban environment serves as an important space in which activism can be developed and targeted against those in positions of power. Cities are able to play this role as their form means they can ‘incubate the unfolding of social movements.’⁶¹ Examining the mechanisms behind this incubation, Miller and Nicholls⁶² argue that ‘geographical proximity among diverse actors reduces the transaction costs... [and that] repeated interactions over time provides actors with collective know-how.’ The ways in which this learning takes place differs across the urban space. Events in the wider metropolitan region tended to involve more RAGs, drawing on local community support around a particular issue that was likely to have a direct impact, as exemplified by groups like Communities Against an Airport in Western Sydney or Wolli Creek Preservation Society. The smaller scale and temporally limited nature of these groups means they are less likely to attract the attention and involvement of established environmental organisations or political parties. By contrast, events in the CoS tended to involve larger, more widely visible actions, thereby bringing more diverse collections of people together, requiring coordination by groups such as Friends of the Earth, the Green Party, or the Wilderness Society.

The data presented show how these differences manifested in the pattern of environmentally focused protest events across the Sydney metropolitan region. The connection between the location of the events identified, whether in the CoS or other LGA, was shaped by the availability of targets, issues, and actions adopted to present claims to observers and targets. The slightly higher proportion of events in the CoS (58.2%) points to the importance of the

⁶¹ Miller and Nicholls, “Social Movements in Urban Society”, 453.

⁶² Miller and Nicholls, “Social Movements in Urban Society”, 459-60.

urban settings in providing opportunities for concentration of actors and targets. As Sewell⁶³ has argued ‘strategies of movements and those attempting to suppress or dampen movements very frequently revolve around the question of enhancing or preventing the physical and/or mediated copresence of insurgents’. As a result, social movement actors attempt to highlight and amplify their claims by occupying spaces and attempting to challenge the normal flow of activities, requiring observers to pay attention. Symbolic sites are important in this regard, as they have a greater resonance among observers, as reflected in actions targeting the State Parliament, as well as those representing tourism and business that are part of Sydney’s presentation as a global city.⁶⁴ Events recorded in the LGAs outside the CoS offered a more diverse range of targets, involving actions that connected more directly to the sites that would be impacted. This can be seen in events challenging construction of a sea wall, cutting down neighbourhood trees, or extending road infrastructure, taking place at the affected beach, park, and road respectively.⁶⁵

Differences in the forms of events in the CoS and the other LGAs also points to their respective approaches to visibility, shaped by priorities and access to resources. Events in the CoS attempted to address a broader audience, making use of symbolic places such as Parliament, George St, and Circular Quay to create spectacle and generate attention. Events in the other

⁶³ William H. Sewell Jr, “Space in Contentious Politics,” in *Silence and Voice in the Study of Contentious Politics*, eds. Ronald R. Aminzade, Jack A. Goldstone, Doug McAdam, Elizabeth J. Perry, William H. Sewell, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 58.

⁶⁴ Acuto, “Ain’t About Politics?”, 384.

⁶⁵ Deborah Smith and Claire O’Rourke “Wall of Humanity Lines Up Against Councils”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, November 18, 2002; “Outrage Over Felling Heritage Sydney Trees”, *Australian Associated Press*, December 28, 2015; Peter Hannam “Murder, Bloody Murder: A Cry for Ironbark”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 8, 2016.

LGAs appeared to strive for different forms of visibility, tying their actions more closely to particular places that were at risk and that could be recognised by and involve members of the local community. This is clearly seen in July 2007 protests over plans for a desalination plant in Sutherland, where participants obstructed access to the site while calling on the State government to stop the development.⁶⁶ In targeting the site, a key part of the aim is likely to have been to generate attention locally to mobilise support amongst those who may be impacted, maintaining a tighter focus on the particular site. This contrasts with events involving established movement organisations when they targeted specific places outside the CoS. For example, in December 2010 when Greenpeace activists entered an industrial site in Randwick to chain containers together and spray skull and cross bones, they were presenting a wider claim.⁶⁷ Rather than just focusing on the export of waste to Denmark from the site, they can be seen as attempting to challenge and highlight issues with the policies and practices underpinning the handling of toxic waste generally.

Conclusion

Sydney has a long history of environmental contention, with issues of local concern like the Green Ban movement existing alongside claims targeting State and Federal actors. The fragmented nature of governance in Australia has resulted in a proliferation of actors, presenting a wide array of claims. As a global city, Sydney provided opportunities to target iconic sites that are highly visible and recognisable, making the central City of Sydney LGA a space of concentration. At the same time, the wider metropolitan region provided targets that

⁶⁶ "Desalination Plant Protest Musters Residents, Blocks Road", *Australian Associated Press*, July 3, 2007.

⁶⁷ "Aussie Toxic Waste Halted", *Australian Associated Press*, December 3, 2010.

were more closely connected to the issues that animated the claims. This is captured in the higher number of resource-based claims that took place in the central city, as these tended to target sites associated with State government and resource firms. It also highlights the way actions in the City of Sydney can be seen to tie into wider campaigns around resource extraction. By contrast, events in the wider metropolitan region also targeted State and Federal government bodies but did so by linking claims to sites of contestation, such as roads, proposed airport sites, and a nuclear facility. Such actions can be traced to resident action groups, mobilising local community members to defend interests. This contrast captures the way contentious actors are able to work across the urban space to target claims at the level where they may be most effective.

This paper adds to understandings of patterns of protest in global cities by examining the unfolding of such events across metropolitan Sydney. The uneven nature of the city is reflected in Baker and Ruming's⁶⁸ observation that Sydney's 'global city status... [serves to] direct attention to certain locations and establish hierarchical relationships between those locations and the metropolitan area beyond.' In doing so, it shapes the forms of protest that develop across the city, creating a divide between spectacular and broad-based claims in the centre and more locally rooted events in the wider urban space. This does not preclude local actions attempting to present more general claims, such as the idea that it could be 'your suburb tomorrow', but it serves to make them less likely. Local events tend to stay local, reinforcing the idea that the global city is centralised and largely disconnected from the other metropolitan

⁶⁸ Tom Baker and Kristian Ruming, "Making 'Global Sydney': Spatial Imaginaries, Worlding and Strategic Plans," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 39 no. 1 (2015), 70.

spaces. This notion is further reinforced by actions outside the centre undertaken by established groups, as these use particular sites to speak to wider issues rather than local priorities. When approaching activism in the global city it is therefore important to recognize the hierarchical relations and how these influence the events that emerge.

Appendix

Table A1 – News Source, Availability, and Circulation

Source	Start*	Circulation (2017) †
The Advertiser	1998	297000
The Age	1991	458000
The Australian	1996	339000
Australian Associated Press	1998	n/a
Courier-Mail	1998	370000
The Mercury	1999	52000
The Sydney Morning Herald	1986	444000

Notes: * First availability of electronic archive

† <http://www.roymorgan.com/industries/media/readership/newspaper-readership> [accessed 19 August 2018]