Environmental Campaign Awareness, Participation, and Media Visibility
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Abstract: Environmental campaign awareness is a precursor to partaking in environmentally sustainable actions promoted by formal organizations. Although it is presumed relevant media visibility will lead to greater awareness, little research has investigated how media presence relates to individuals’ awareness of, or participation in, the national and international environmental campaigns available in Australia. This study presents key findings from secondary analysis of newspaper and Internet mentions of eight environmental organizations and compares this with an online survey of 412 higher education employees and students at an Australian university seeking to improve its organizational environmental sustainability literacy and activity levels. Findings reveal differential trends between media presence and specific campaigns as well as varied levels of awareness and participation among the campaigns. Contextualized in critical theory, key recommendations make conceptual and practical suggestions for augmenting communication and engagement strategies with environmental issues and groups in light of existing research.

Keywords: Environmental Campaigns, Sustainability, Communication, Organizations, Public Engagement, Media, Individual Behavior

Introduction

Despite growing global environmental awareness and organizational efforts to consider environmental sustainability (ES), public awareness of, and participation in, established environmental campaigns remains poorly understood. Environmental communication, while central to furthering environmental action and social change, remains largely driven and limited by communication campaigns informed by social-psychological theory, which is ineffective for the systemic-level change necessary to fundamentally alter social systems supporting environmental destruction (Brulle 2010). Social psychological approaches often rely on individuals identifying with environmental campaign messages to achieve short-term actions that are ineffective for the legislative and institutional changes required to counter political and economic norms. Classic social theory well articulates why actions obstructing sociopolitical hegemony and/or economic growth are discredited or discarded by governance structures perpetuating the status quo (Locke 1952; Foucault 1969, 1991a, 1991b; Weber 1978). For example, as Foucault (1991b) explains, the systemic power exerted through governmentality manifests not only through the state, but moreover through discursive realities and procedures created by institutions and the host of individuals that interact with them to produce knowledge that reflects the power relationships characterizing its production. Knowledge produced about environmental degradation, therefore, reflects power relationships inherent in, and fluidly (re)created by, the interests of those creating such discourses. Expanding knowledge about environmental issues requires a systemic focus that concurrently examines the implicit production and reproduction of normative behaviors, codes of practice, and “truths” society may actively be fostering through institutionalized governmentality, even if unrecognized.

Critical sociology offers scope to utilize insights garnered from communication and psychological research to deepen understanding of why environmental degradation continues, to consider its anthropogenic nature, and to identify implicit power relations inhibiting mitigation of

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environmental damage. The United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP 2005, iv) states: “Environmental degradation combined with human activities are at the origin of numerous catastrophes such as flooding, desertification, fires, as well as technological disasters and transport accidents. Around the world, a growing share of the devastation triggered by ‘natural’ disasters stems from ecologically destructive practices . . . Many ecosystems have been frayed to the point where they are no longer able to withstand natural disturbance.” Commencing widespread, concerted action required to attenuate environmental degradation demands environmental campaigns and ES practices that meaningfully address decision-making processes governing environmental action at individual and systemic levels. If, however, governmentality not only shapes, but may preclude, individuals’ awareness of environmental issues, then creating communication campaigns using psychology to persuade self-identification with ideas or beliefs may waste organizations’ economic resources and effort. To date, much academic research has focused on benefits and limitations of using emotive or rationally based appeals, particularly fear as detailed in literature reviews (Brulle 2010), or benefit/loss outcomes (Bosone, Martinez, and Kalampalikis 2015; Gallagher and Updegraff 2012; O’Keefe and Jensen 2008; Rothman et al. 2006; Rothman and Salvoy 1997) to frame issues and create campaigns seeking to change behavior. Given the multitude of factors affecting environmental behavior, however, researchers note isolating single factors stymies efforts and the pendulum swings between “environmental emotions” and “cognition” being argued as greater determinants for environmental action (Carmi, Arnon, and Orion 2015).

Psychology drives much research and theory about why individuals take environmental action, collectively or individually. Much environmental action research is dedicated to investigating why some act on issues such as climate change while others choose not to act. Gifford’s (2014) review demonstrates a litany of factors affect pro-environmental behavior, including childhood experiences, education and knowledge, personality, norms, values, attitudes, and a range of demographic characteristics. Environmental psychology is a recent, albeit increasingly vast, area of specialization offering two insights of particular relevance to the present study. First are research findings that environmental knowledge predicts not only “pro-environment” behavior (Fielding and Head 2012; Mobley et al. 2010 cited in Gifford 2014), but also positively influences “correct” behavior such as reducing wood smoke from heaters (Hine et al. 2011 cited in Gifford 2014). Second is the finding of variability in environmental knowledge among Americans identified from a meta-analysis of fifteen surveys (Robelia and Murphy 2012 cited in Gifford 2014). Combined with the predictive capacity of environmental/scientific knowledge to positively affect pro-environmental behavior, this research suggests there is merit to identifying what environmental knowledge is put forth in Australian mass media and how this compares with Australians’ environmental literacy/issue awareness. Given issue awareness affects the likelihood individuals will transfer their knowledge into action (Jasanoff and Wynne 1998), critical exploration of public and individual environmental awareness is likely to assist organizations’ decision-making processes regarding what role they play in providing environmental education and how best this may be achieved.

Communication theory suggests the presence of social and environmental issues in mass media affects their associated campaigns (Day 2000). A critical limiting factor for improving ES is public understanding of science and technology beyond that learned through sensationalized science news reporting (Bucchi and Trench 2014). In an age characterized by information overload and time poverty, ES competes with a plethora of issues, demands, and interests, not only for newsworthiness, but, further, for compatibility with advertisers’ preferences (Singleton et al. 2006). Communication theory and research also have long described the limitations of social-psychological attitudinal and opinion-based approaches to understanding communication processes and reinforce that media control discourse, set priorities, affect public opinion and serve to legitimate the status quo (Halloran 1998). Environmental campaigns, as key organizations promoting ES, are thus reliant on mass media who ensure compliance with
corporatized norms, particularly not offending corporate sponsors, as well as journalists’ and the public’s overall low science literacy. Indeed, research reveals individuals’ capacity to critically evaluate the quality of popularly presented scientific information is variable even among highly educated populations (Crampton and Ragusa 2016). Nevertheless, mass media have been found to play a major role in “revitalizing” public participation in environmental actions by “educating” and informing the public (Howarth 2012).

Although potential exists for media to serve the democratic function of public education, practically, critical sociology notes the hegemonic power of this social institution thwarts its educational and civic potential as a communication vehicle supporting public debate and social change in Australia (Singleton et al. 2006). How media choose to educate the public about environmental issues depends upon institutional and political agendas, which research demonstrates may change public opinion about environmental issues and organizations (Ragusa and Holden 2006). Given the importance of print and online media as contemporary sources of environmental information (Ragusa and Crampton 2016), the absence of research investigating the quantity and quality of ES media reporting in Australia is a notable knowledge gap of central relevance for environmental campaigns and other organizations striving to improve ES.

Environmental campaigns are one of many organization types striving to improve ES as part of the broader global environmental social movement. In Australia, campaigns have become highly mobilized to counter hegemonic discourse and corporatism underscoring environmental issues, notably climate change, mining, and coal seam gas (The Wilderness Society 2017). Academic analyses of energy campaigns in Australia’s Hunter Region illustrate the deeply systemic power of the coal industry, with multi-million dollar public relation campaigns promoting jobs and economic benefits, influencing national policy, political lobbying, and swaying public opinion so much a national survey found Australians believed mining accounted for 35% of the national economy and 16% of its workforce when Australian Bureau of Statistics revealed figures are 9.2% and 1.9% accordingly (Evans and Phelan 2016). Such findings underscore the centrality of campaigns to affecting knowledge production and garnering support for/against environmental issues. Environmental campaigns, in contrast with other sociopolitical campaigns, play a vital role in effecting ES action, particularly if designed to promote civic engagement in environment-related decision making to allay the criticism some have received for using persuasive psychologically influential communication tactics to generate compliance and influence behavior through “one-way communication” (Brulle 2010, 89), rather than promoting sustained dialogue or issue debate.

Noting environmental campaigns’ relevance for countering hegemonic discourse, promoting ES action, and contributing to public education, the present study addresses the dearth of Australian research by focusing on environmental campaign awareness and participation. Whereas much research psychologically explores motivation factors, hoping to predict who will and will not participate, in taking a critical sociological conceptual lens, we understand individual motivation to be influenced by governmentality, or the hegemonic systems of knowledge production with which individuals interact to understand their social world. Hence, by documenting what environmental campaigns our sample knew existed in comparison with the campaigns’ national media presence, we explore trends between systemic representation and individual awareness. Next, we compare participation rates across environmental campaigns and compare these findings with media visibility levels across environmental campaigns. If greater media publicity of environmental campaigns manifests in greater awareness of campaign existence and/or participation, this may assist future analyses exploring how environmental campaigns and issues are popularly presented/framed, why specific environmental issues appear in mass media, and subsequently, implications for ES action.
Methods

Methodologically informed by critical sociology, communication studies, and psychology, the research design used mixed-methods (Matthews and Ross 2010) to explore the following research question: “Which environmental campaigns are Australian university affiliates aware exist and/or participate in, and how does individual environmental campaign awareness/participation compare with each campaign’s national media presence?” The study’s research design enabled comparison of results from an online survey of individuals’ environmental campaign awareness and participation with mass media presence of the same environmental campaigns. The research was completed in three stages: 1) a media analysis, 2) an online social survey, and 3) independent analyses of media and survey findings and comparison of both.

First, environmental campaigns available for our sample to participate in locally, given their location in rural and regional Australia, were identified. Campaign selection criteria included having existed for at least two years prior to the research, being national or international in scope (programs part of local government and/or institutions, such as eWaste Recycling, rather than stand-alone campaigns, were excluded), offering an annual public event period (day/week) where the majority could participate without special skills or experience, and environmental issues being a core campaign focus. Additionally, care was taken to avoid including multiple campaigns covering the same environmental topic. This process yielded eight environmental campaigns, two with international affiliations (Earth Hour and World Environment Day) and six national campaigns (Sustainable House Day, Clean Up Australia Day, Walk to Work Day, National Recycling Week, Meat Free Week, and Walk against Warming).

Every campaign included operates annually throughout Australia and varies in environmental focus. Earth Hour prioritizes climate change (World Wildlife Fund 2016), Clean Up Australia Day focuses on issues related to land and water pollution (Clean Up Australia 2016), Walk to Work Day seeks to improve air quality by reducing emissions (Merom, Miller and Bauman 2003), National Recycling Week by PlanetARK aims to normalize recycling as something everyone can do (Klymenko 2013), World Environment Day is a core component of the United Nations offering a different theme each year to raise issue-specific awareness and promote political engagement (UNAA 2012), Meat Free Week (www.meatfreeweek.org) promotes the environmental benefits of moving to a plant-based diet and its potential health benefits, and Sustainable House Day focuses on renewable energy and everyday household practices that have lower environmental impact (Van Deventer 2010) while Walk against Warming highlights climate change issues.

After environmental campaign selection, a descriptive quantitative content analysis of news media was conducted (Babbie 2010). To identify national media presence of the eight environmental campaigns, two online databases, Factiva (national print newspapers), and Google Trends (all categories) were searched. Each campaign was entered as a keyword search term to reveal its total number of “mentions” in Australian print newspapers and the Internet between April 1, 2013, and June 1, 2014. This timeframe was chosen in light of the second method employed, a social survey, and included the year preceding the survey until the survey closed. All data was collected and entered into Excel and SPSS and descriptive statistics generated to answer the question: “What media presence existed for each environmental campaign in the year preceding our sample’s survey completion?”

Second, a quantitative, online social survey suitable for collecting descriptive data from geographically disbursed individuals affiliated with a large regional Australian university renowned as a distance education provider was constructed in 2013. Human Ethics Committee approval (406/203/17), including approval to advertise survey participation incentives (opportunity to win an iPad or iTunes gift certificates) made possible by a university sustainability grant, was sought and obtained prior to all data collection and no adverse
consequences resulted. Hosted in Adobe Forms, the survey was made available to all university staff and students from April 1, 2014, through June 1, 2014. As completion was entirely voluntary, the sample collected is not representative of the university’s total population (Neuman 2011). Hence, survey results are illustrative of the sample and consistent with the broader research aim of providing insights into individuals’ awareness of, and participation in, national/international environmental campaigns. Survey data analyzed in this article seeks to answer the question: “Which of the environmental campaigns examined do Australian university affiliates know exist and/or participate in?”

Finally, to answer the third component of the overarching research question—“How does individual environmental campaign awareness/participation compare with each campaign’s national media presence?”—findings from the content and survey analyses were collectively examined. Discussed in light of existing theory and research, findings are informative for those seeking to further develop ES initiatives, identify environmental issue awareness and campaign participation, and improve environmental literacy/knowledge to increase pro-environmental action.

Results

Media Analysis of Environmental Campaigns

Descriptive analysis of environmental campaign presence evidenced by Google Trends and all nationally printed news media in Australia listed in the Factiva database revealed great disparity in news reporting/media visibility among the environmental campaigns between April 1, 2013, and June 1, 2014. Chart 1 illustrates the number of keyword mentions in Australian newspapers and trackable Internet mentions by Google Trends.

Overall, notable disparity existed between Internet and newspaper visibility. For example, as illustrated in Chart 1, Walk to Work Day achieved the highest level of Internet visibility yet moderate newspaper coverage. Conversely, the national campaign Clean Up Australia Day was widely represented in newspaper coverage, receiving the greatest newspaper publicity with 891
mentions, which far exceeded the newspaper mentions received by all other environmental campaigns. This campaign, however, had approximately a third of the Internet coverage of Walk to Work Day. Following Clean Up Australia Day, the next two campaigns to receive the most media publicity were the two international campaigns World Environment Day (487 mentions) and Earth Hour (435 mentions). Further scrutiny of Chart 1 reveals the media visibility for each of the eight campaigns, noting every campaign varies in its level of media visibility when compared with other campaigns and its own visibility by media type (Internet versus newspapers). Only one newspaper mention was found for Walk against Warming, making it comparatively invisible to the other campaigns. Similarly, insufficient search volume was found to produce Google Trends graphs for all of the national environmental campaigns except Walk to Work Day and Clean Up Australia Day, the former of which outpaced all media mentions with 934 newspaper mentions.

Online Survey of Environmental Campaign Awareness and Participation

Four hundred and twelve individuals completed the online survey by June 1, 2014. Demographically, the sample ranged in age from 18–79 (mean 42) years old and, typical of survey research (Curtin, Presser, and Singer 2000), contained more women (67%) than men (31%). The vast majority ethnically identified as Australian (90%), most were employed full-time (65%), and 70% were university employees, not students. University employee-type was divided between academic (24%) and administrative (46%) staff. The 30% of the sample who were students were divided between undergraduate (22%) and graduate (8%) students. Participants predominantly (96%) resided in the state of New South Wales. Survey completion rates reflected the university’s varying campus sizes traversing seven rural/regional towns. Most participants (68%) were drawn from the two largest campuses (located in the two largest towns), followed by the next largest (17%) campus/town, and the remaining participants hailed from five smaller campuses.

Earth Hour attracted the highest participation rate (69%) of all environmental campaigns examined, followed by Clean Up Australia Day (51%), as Chart 2 reveals. Walk to Work Day (29%), National Recycling Week (23%), and World Environment Day (22%) had similar participation rates. These findings show variation between international campaign participation (Earth Hour and World Environment Day) as well as variation in national campaigns among survey respondents. Meat Free Week (8%), Sustainable House Day (7%), and Walk against Warming (6%) attracted considerably lower participation rates.
Correspondingly, more than half the sample had never heard of the campaigns that exhibited the lowest participation rates: Meat Free Week (61%), Sustainable House Day (59%), and Walk against Warming (51%). In contrast, there were two campaigns the majority knew existed, yet never participated in, Walk to Work Day (65%) and World Environmental Day (65%). These campaigns varied from the others, which exhibited awareness rates between 33–47%, yet similarly failed to attract participation: Clean Up Australia Day (47%) and National Recycling Week (33%).

**Qualitative Comparative Analysis of Media and Survey Findings**

When a critical sociological lens is applied to concurrent consideration of the quantitative findings, four observations emerge. First, findings suggest a link between media presence and environmental campaign participation; both Clean Up Australia Day and Earth Hour had high participation rates and moderate to high newspaper visibility. Environmental campaigns with the lowest levels of media publicity also demonstrated the highest levels of unawareness in the sample. The majority of participants were unaware of Meat Free Week (60%), Sustainable House Day (59%), and Walk against Warming (51%). Unsurprisingly, these percentages corresponded with the sample’s low participation rates for these campaigns (Meat Free Week 8%, Sustainable House Day 7%, Walk against Warming 6%). Had only a survey been conducted, then the concurrent finding that Meat Free Week, Sustainable House Day, and Walk against Warming also had comparatively low levels of media visibility during this research period might have led to the perhaps erroneous deduction that these environmental issues are perceived by individuals as less or unimportant. In contrast, findings suggest there may be a relationship between media visibility and issue awareness and campaign participation.

Second, comparative analysis challenges assumptions that high media visibility may automatically confer public awareness or participation. The two campaigns with the greatest online presence measured by Google Trends—World Environment Day (364 mentions) and Walk to Work Day (934 mentions)—exhibited levels of participants’ campaign unawareness (13% and 51%) seemingly incommensurate with online presence. Conversely, moderate newspaper and lower Internet visibility did not seem to correspond with the high participation rate (69%) in Earth Hour. When compared with the national average participation rate of approximately 33% (Earth Hour 2015)—and considered alongside World Environmental Day’s
low participation rate (22%) observed in our sample, similar newspaper mentions, and campaign awareness—Earth Hour illustrates an anomaly. Comparison of environmental campaign media visibility and campaign awareness/participation rates using survey research highlights the non-linear relationship that seemingly exists between awareness and participation. For example, Walk to Work Day (65%) and World Environmental Day (65%) are two campaigns the majority knew existed, yet avoided participating. Hence, media visibility’s relevance to environmental campaign participation may be arbitrary, although its relevance for awareness appears crucial. Furthermore, media mode (printed newspapers versus the Internet) may be irrelevant to environmental campaign participation.

Third, while the present study did not explore reasons for campaign participation, and causality cannot be determined due to the descriptive nature of our exploratory study and nonprobability sampling (Howitt and Cramer 2005), findings highlight media are one outlet for mass communication and hence their impact ought to be assessed in light of other social institutions affecting public thought (Halloran 1998). Despite similar newspaper publicity, differences were observed in the two international campaigns’ awareness and participation rates. With 891 mentions, Clean Up Australia Day’s newspaper presence far outpaced all other campaigns and only 2% of the sample was unaware it existed. As the campaign with the second highest participation rate (51%), it remains unknown if this campaign’s popularity is attributable to mass communication efforts, particularly its strong advertising campaign and support by local government councils (Clean Up Australia 2016), due to individuals’ deeper connection with its environmental issue(s), or otherwise. Clean Up Australia Day addresses environmental pollution, specifically waste disposal, two issues that Blunsdon’s (2013) analysis of the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2013 found were of great importance. Not only was pollution rated the second most urgent issue, 78.7% of respondents thought waste disposal was an “urgent” or “very urgent” environmental issue.

Likewise, the low participation rate (22%) observed for the international campaign, World Environment Day, despite its having the second highest online presence, and comparable newspaper visibility, could be due to the limited participation opportunities varying greatly by location and year. For instance, those with school-age children may be involved through school-based activities, while others may take advantage of its associated local council activities such as free bulk garbage disposal days and free native plants, perhaps without even realizing they are associated with World Environment Day. Critically considered, however, although World Environment Day is held annually on June 5 and has been in operation since 1972 as the United Nation’s key environment program for raising environmental awareness and political attention (UNEP 2013), the low participation observed, despite high awareness of campaign existence, may be due to poor understanding or alignment of its focus (which changes annually) with local environmental issues/concerns. The finding of low participation suggests clearer articulation of how local initiatives enact key globally relevant recommendations from its two leading non-governmental organizations, the World Health Organization and the United Nations, is necessary, particularly since its mainstream scope is on par with Earth Hour, which attracted the highest participation.

Originating in Australia in 2007, Earth Hour is now a global campaign with more than 162 countries and 2.2 million participants in 2014 (Earth Hour 2015). Much like Clean Up Australia Day, it is widely supported by local councils and schools, asks for minimal time commitment (sixty minutes), and promotes life-enhancing actions such as socializing, family games, and candlelight activities, rather than focusing on actions that may be seen as lifestyle restricting (World Wildlife Fund 2016). Earth Hour’s exceptionally high-level participation may be unique to our sample because of its media visibility, national origins, practical ease, social benefits, and/or environmental focus on climate change, the highest rating topic of concern for Australians (Blunsdon 2013). Critically considered, however, Earth Hour, irrespective of its popularity, may have little effect on reducing environmental degradation or commencing the sociopolitical and
economic change required for meaningful ES. Earth Hour’s greater contribution appears to be increasing environmental awareness, leading to the fourth key observation.

Critical examination of Australia’s environmental campaigns suggests those most popular, as measured by sample participation, support activities consistent with existing sociocultural, political, and economic practices and individual proclivities. Neither Earth Hour nor Clean Up Australia Day threaten the social order. Conversely, campaigns whose ideology resists the status quo all achieved ≤8% participation rates, high (51–61%) unawareness, and moderate disinterest; a third of the sample knew each campaign existed, yet did not participate. Meat Free Week challenges the animal industrial complex (Noske 1989), Sustainable House Day encourages alternative technologies to create more environmentally sustainable houses and communities (Sustainable House Day 2017), and Walk against Warming aims to achieve governmental global warming awareness and action (Barnes 2006). Given regional and rural Australia’s historical conservatism and support of agricultural practices contributing to environmental degradation and species extinction (Letnic 2000), the lack of counter-normative discourse evidenced by the comparatively low visibility of these campaigns in national Australian news media and Internet absence suggests the role these environmental campaigns could play in offering alternative discourse is great, albeit challenging.

Discussion and Conclusions

The present study used mixed-methods to conduct a quantitative content analysis for documenting media (national newspapers and Internet) visibility of eight environmental campaigns in Australia and an online social survey to identify the 412 participants’ awareness of, and participation in, these campaigns. Conceptually informed by critical sociology, which notes the systemic, hegemonic nature of knowledge production (Ragusa and Holden 2006), the study diverged from the social-psychological focus driving much environmental action and communication research to identify and compare mass media and Internet publicity and campaign participation. Campaign marketing activities seemingly assume high media visibility translates into public awareness of environmental issues, despite media research noting media visibility is insufficient for ensuring environmental campaign participation (Ostman 2014). Quantitative findings revealed high variability in environmental campaigns’ media visibility and our sample’s awareness of environmental campaigns’ existence and participation rates in them.

Drawing on insights from critical media studies (Singleton et al. 2006; Ragusa and Crampton 2016; Crampton and Ragusa 2016) and communication studies positing media presence may influence socioenvironmental campaigns (Day 2000), we questioned the coexistence of high media visibility and high awareness of environmental campaigns and low media visibility and unawareness, using the Internet and national newspapers as two popular mass communication modes. Findings showed high participation rates for Earth Hour and Clean Up Australia Day; moderate participation in Walk to Work Day, National Recycling Week, and World Environment Day; and low participation in Meat Free Week, Sustainable House Day, and Walk against Warming. While reasons for participating were not sought, unawareness may explain lack of participation for Meat Free Week, Sustainable House Day, and Walk against Warming. Awareness of World Environment Day, National Recycling Week, and Walk to Work Day combined with the decision not to participate, reveals factors other than awareness may explain non-participation. Three campaigns, Earth Hour, World Environment Day, and Clean Up Australia had moderate to high newspaper visibility and only Walk to Work Day had a very high Internet presence. When compared with participation, media visibility rates corresponded with participation rates for all campaigns except World Environment Day. These findings have practical and theoretical implications.

Prior research argues entities with well-established online “brands” enjoy greater site attraction and deeper engagement with relevant content (Newell and Dale 2015). Although we
found online and newspaper presence differed among campaigns, online visibility appeared unrelated to campaign awareness; more online mentions (934) were noted for Walk to Work Day than World Environment Day (364), yet only 13% of survey respondents were unaware of World Environment Day in contrast with 51% unaware of Walk to Work Day. Hence, the “branding” of environmental campaigns (Brulle 2010), and their potential to affect engagement with online content, are not only under-researched areas (Koteyko, Nerlich, and Hellsten 2015), but may be more complex and relevant than anticipated. Furthermore, the majority knew both campaigns existed yet avoided participating in Walk to Work Day (65%) and World Environmental Day (65%). Although it has received little academic investigation, Walk to Work Day had the highest online presence and is supported and promoted by government and other organizations. Designed as a campaign to improve physical activity (Merom et al. 2005), and also promoted to mediate climate change by reducing car travel, future studies may wish to compare Walk to Work Day with Walk against Warming, also linked to climate change (Merom et al. 2003), to see if the low participation observed in this sample is reproducible elsewhere and critically consider the ES benefit of consolidating/linking multiple campaigns’ activities around climate change. Finally, as neither Sustainable House Day nor Meat Free Week was associated with a high-profile environmental organization, greater prominence in mainstream discourse, affiliation with higher-profile organizations, and/or public education of related environmental issues may improve their awareness and participation rates thereby improving their ES outcomes.

Establishing a connection between environmental degradation and individual concerns is an important aspect for campaigns’ public engagement success. One study found as much as “26% of the variance in people’s engagement in community climate-relevant behaviours” could be attributed to how worried individuals were about the issue and how personally relevant they perceived an issue to be (Leviston, Greenhill, and Walker 2015, x). World Environment Day exhibited less participation than any other campaign among those who were aware of the campaign’s existence. These findings suggest other discourses are informing individuals’ concerns, or lack thereof, about environmental issues. Despite suggestions for new campaigns to link with an established brand and utilize the cross exposure of platforms afforded by contemporary convergent media environments (Hutchins and Lester 2015), campaign association with well-known organizations such as the United Nations appeared insufficient to prompt participation in the present study. Thus, clearer linkages between global/local priority issues, and/or association of how local activities contribute to global campaigns, in World Environment Day’s instance United Nations’ environmental programs (UNAA 2012) may prove beneficial.

Conceptually, campaigns affiliated with well-known environmental organizations may be understood as performing the role of “boundary organizations” (Guston 2001; Cash et al. 2003), namely informing public knowledge, supporting science, and advocating/refuting policy. If campaigns affiliated with well-known, established organizations enjoy greater awareness, due to the perceived saliency and legitimacy of issues their boundary status provides, then Walk against Warming’s heightened awareness (49% of sample), despite its having the lowest level of media coverage, may be related to its support and promotion by Greenpeace, the Wilderness Society, Australian Government, and various city and regional councils. Nevertheless, with a 6% participation rate, the lowest of all environmental campaigns examined, this conceptualization requires further research. The non-linear relationship between news media visibility and campaign participation, as the World Environment Day findings reflect, suggests critically informed research is needed to examine the influence of mediating organizations on ES awareness and participation. The legitimacy and status affiliation with nonprofit organizations, government bodies, and/or private industry confers may affect campaigns’ ES initiatives in ways presently unknown. Additionally, as prior survey research reveals the Internet, radio, and television, specifically government channels, are Australians’ key sources of environmental information (Ragusa and Crampton 2016), future research may also wish to explore the “trustworthiness” of the communication mode as other survey research found more respondents
Variability in environmental literacy, interest, and broader social environments created by media and others present additional challenges for achieving specific organizational and national/global ES aspirations. In 2013, Australia had the highest greenhouse gas emission levels per capita in the world and climate change was noted as “one of the most significant sustainability challenges facing Australia” (National Sustainability Council 2013, 73). The Australian Government’s suggested response to this challenge was to improve the capacity of businesses and society to adapt to the change, rather than suggest immediate actions for changing behaviors that created/contribute to the problem. The major concession granted was admission that Australia had inadequately considered the long-term impact of environmental degradation as a result of “the failure of our economic systems to value the natural environment has encouraged short-term economic growth based on depletion of natural capital” (National Sustainability Council 2013, 83). Thus, individuals’ role, responsibility, and actions were afforded little consideration. According to government research, Australians’ consider environmental problems and solutions the domain of “big polluting countries, multinational corporations and wealthy countries” (Leviston, Greenhill, and Walker 2015, viii), rather than a responsibility to which all individuals have some accountability/societal requirement to address. Furthermore, the Australian higher education sector, with its first and only carbon neutral university accredited in 2016 (CSU 2016), has been slower to adopt/implement ES practices than its American counterparts (Williams 2013), a scenario reflecting Australia’s poorer/weaker adoption of global climate/energy and other ES initiatives (Flannery, Hueston, and Stock 2014). Environmental scientific knowledge was insufficient to prompt ES actions such as strengthening environmental campaigns and practices. Although the present study is unable to make any predictive assertions regarding environmental campaigns’ capacity to address these challenges, conceptually, it recommends other organizations, such as universities, seeking to meaningfully effect ES in rural-regional Australia improve their collaborative efforts with nonprofit organizations to broaden the impact of academic research and use their sociopolitical capital to create public discourse that challenges the status quo perpetuating environmental degradation.

Reducing environmental degradation is a global priority (UNEP 2005). Much environmental action research and theory endeavors to explain what communication and/or psychological strategies are most effective for changing behavior. Critical social theory notes the limitations of psychological foci given the systemic nature of governmentality shaping public discourse, knowledge, and perception (Foucault 1991a, 1991b). Environmental campaigns have also been critiqued for prioritizing short-term campaign goals over systemic changes required for long-term solutions needed to reconfigure the sociopolitical and economic reasons underpinning environmental degradation (Brulle 2010). Nevertheless, environmental organizations mediate and influence public environmental knowledge and offer concrete outlets for ES action and engagement. Hence, the relevance of environmental campaign participation to social change ought not to be underestimated. Well-designed campaigns, however, must not only provide information about current and probable risks but also options for responding and developing solutions to issues presented (Spoel et al. 2009).

For greater effectiveness and democratic operation, environmental campaigns and organizations seeking to enhance ES efforts may benefit from prioritizing collective, not simply individual, action (Putnam 2000). Likewise, reframing investigation of environmental issue awareness away from micro-level concerns (such as achieving social identity with environmental campaigns) or macro-level concerns (ignoring individuals’ agency/capacity for change when overhauling social systems and institutions) toward meso-level analyses acknowledging the fluid, interactive nature of power-laden processes (re)producing environmental degradation would offer conceptual space to transcend shifting blame between individuals and systems.
Foucault’s (1991a, 1991b) concept of governmentality, and classic sociological theories of power with capacity to articulate the value of taking a meso-level approach (Weber 1978), may empower further examination of environmental problems as hegemonic, yet not fatalistic. In light of the extensive socioeconomic and political power exerted by governments, industry, media, and other institutions with vested interests in supporting the status quo (anthropogenic environmental degradation), findings evidence the majority of ES-related activity undertaken by our sample occurred in conjunction with the most socioeconomically and culturally normative environmental campaigns. The majority only participated in Earth Hour (69%) and Clean Up Australia Day (51%), two brief, highly sociable and socially approved campaigns that do not challenge economic or political activities contributing to environmental degradation. Likewise, these campaigns achieved ≥98% awareness levels. In contrast, campaigns the most ideologically distant from Australian cultural and economic values, Meat Free Week, Sustainable House Day, and Walk Against Warming, which counter the stronghold of agriculture, mining, and other traditional rural Australian industries, achieved low participation and mass visibility.

Identification of leading hegemonic discourses and evaluating public environmental literacy are two items urgently required to improve long-term ES and actions. Without knowledge of what discourses are being put forth, by whom, and with what consequence, efforts of marginal groups to attract support are unlikely to be successful. Changing public opinion requires re-education by a united environmental movement that works together to construct and disseminate alternative discourses that promote environmental solutions legislatively, politically, economically, and socially supported. Learning from the Hunter Region’s experiences, ES demands social, economic, and ecological sector collaboration because of the systemic embeddedness of non-ES interests across sectors that work collaboratively to maintain their hegemony and power (Evans and Phelan 2016). Such deep social change will not be achieved by environmental campaigns or organizations focused solely on identity-based communication strategies.

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