

Identifying the Topic Areas Presented in Feature Stories on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's *Landline*

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Introduction/Need for Research

In 1991, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) launched *Landline*, the “only national agricultural television program covering stories from Australia's rural and regional heartland” (*Landline*, 2022, para. 1). *Landline*'s focus is to provide news about rural current affairs. *Landline* currently airs each Sunday at 12:30 p.m. with a running time just under one hour and no commercial breaks. Each broadcast has a host and includes several pre-recorded segments: feature stories, market/finance report, news, and weather. According to the ABC's 2022 Annual Report, *Landline* consistently receives high scores for both quality and distinctiveness (ABC, 2022, p. 30). While scholars have examined other ABC programming such as *The Country Hour* radio program (Mesikämmen et al., 2021; Waller et al., 2020) and *Four Corners*, a current affairs program (Cordell, 2009; Cullen-Knox, 2019), no studies were identified that explored *Landline*'s content. The purpose of this study was to describe the feature story content on ABC's *Landline* television program during a 6-month period in 2022 (February-July). The research question was: What are the topic areas of feature stories aired on *Landline*?

Theoretical Framework

Agenda setting theory posits the media can influence what topics or issues people view as important. According to McCombs and Shaw (1972), mass media do not tell people what to think, but rather what to think about. First-level agenda setting addresses the amount of coverage an issue receives with the assumption that the media determine what issues the audience know about. Second-level agenda setting assesses the characteristics or salience of those issues as they are presented in the media (Wu & Coleman, 2009).

Methods

This qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2019) was a first-level agenda setting study of the topic areas presented on *Landline*. Using Informit, a database of Australian free-to-air television news programs, I conducted a search for *Landline* as the source title. The program's season begins in February so that was selected as the beginning month and all segments available through six months (ending in July) were included for analysis (24 episodes). Transcripts are not included in the database, but I was able to manually access 173 segments to record the length and segment descriptions. This process allowed me to determine if the segment was a feature story or other regular segment (i.e., weather, markets, news, or farm fact). I identified 89 feature story segments that varied in length from approximately 6 to 20 minutes. Following Schreier's (2019) recommendations for qualitative content analysis, I reviewed each segment's title and description and grouped the segments into thematic categories using a structuring approach. As I read the first feature story description, I created a subcategory and category to describe the topic area presented. Then as I continued to read each segment description, I determined if it could be assigned to an existing category and subcategory or if new ones were needed. I continued to evaluate each segment based on this process and re-reviewed the assigned codes to constantly reassess the similarity or dissimilarity of the content (Schreier, 2019).

Results

Each of the 24 episodes had either 3 ($n = 7$) or 4 ($n = 17$) feature stories. A thematic analysis of the 89 individual feature stories identified 13 categories (Table 1).

Table 1
Frequency of Categories Identified in Landline's Feature Stories

Category	Subcategories	<i>f</i>	%
Rural Issues	agrotourism, water use, healthcare, mining, rural internet, mental health	12	13.5
Natural Resources	kangaroos, wild fish, trees, reef, coastal waters, endangered species	11	12.4
Farm Life/Labor	on-farm workers, highlight of specific farm, transport, sheep shearing, using mules, working dogs	10	11.2
Crisis	floods, varroa mite, bushfire, costs, supply chain strain	8	9.0
History	refrigeration, garment patterns, Utes, ghost town, Land Girls, Gold Mill towns	8	9.0
Farm/Farmer Profile	sheep breeder, winery, orchard, cattle and sheep stations	8	9.0
Innovation	big data, social media, new crop varieties, new practices or applications	7	7.9
Produce	potatoes, garlic, macadamias, tomato, local food	7	7.9
Red Meat Industry	live export, market demand, goat meat, cattle hides	4	4.5
Dairy Industry	Family dairies, modern dairies, milk demand, health	4	4.5
Non-farm Profile	artist, sawmill operator, abattoir choir	3	3.4
Seafood	oysters, rock lobster, other oceanic fish	3	3.4
Carbon	sequestration, economy	2	2.2
Ag Ed/Training	Royal Agricultural Society, prison farms	2	2.2

Conclusions/Discussion/Recommendations

ABC's *Landline* has been a mainstay in reporting Australian agriculture for more than 30 years (ABC, 2022). This study was an initial foray into exploring this rich source of information about Australian agriculture and rural life. During this six-month timeframe, *Landline* aired 89 feature stories about a variety of topics. First-level agenda setting posits the media can influence what people view as important issues (Wu & Coleman, 2009). The categories with the most segments were about more comprehensive issues that might interest a broad audience. "Rural Issues" and "Natural Resources" are not limited to a specific farm or commodity while "Farm Life/Labor" may be similar for many in *Landline's* audience. The feature stories also reflected current events such as natural disasters and highlighted innovations in agriculture. Few stories were dedicated to a commodity-specific topic, but these stories did address diverse industries from garlic to goat meat. These findings suggest that coverage about general interest topics or current events were prioritized over novel or unique stories. The current study was limited to what topics were presented in the feature stories and not the other segments. Additional research of *Landline's* coverage will provide a more thorough understanding of what topics are reported, which may influence the public agenda. Agenda setting research also requires asking the audience what they view as important issues to compare to the media coverage, which presents another recommendation for research. For practical recommendations, this program would be an ideal example to show in agricultural communications courses to discuss storytelling and video composition as well as international agricultural issues.

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