

# Feeding frenzy—public accuse the media of deliberately fuelling shark fear

June 22 2018, by Peter Simmons And Michael Mehmet

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Are you scared of sharks? If you never read or watched the news, would you still be?

Last year's [Senate inquiry on shark mitigation and deterrent measures](#) heard evidence that [media coverage](#) has contributed to

"disproportionately high fear of sharks among the public compared to the actual degree of risk involved."

That report highlighted the misrepresentation of sharks by sensationalised media coverage, even in cases where shark encounters did not result in injury. The inquiry also heard that media outlets routinely use stock photos of [great white sharks](#) even in coverage of stories involving other shark species, and that news media often use emotive language such as "killer," "invasion," "deadly," "savage," "horror," "vicious," and "monster."

At the same time as the inquiry was gathering its testimony, we ran a separate series of focus groups in coastal communities in New South Wales. The 67 people in our focus groups included surfers, flag swimmers, tourism and small business operators, surf lifesavers, anglers, and conservationists.

We were mainly interested in canvassing opinions on the NSW government's shark strategies such as the use of drones, clever buoys and shark barriers, and attitudes to sharks in general.

We didn't set out to study the role of the media. But in each group we heard passionate discussions about media in various forms: traditional news media, [social media](#), and other popular media such as movies and documentaries.

Many participants blamed the media for stoking fear of sharks, in ways that are disproportionate to the actual risk. They said that traditional media sensationalise danger and harm, because they profit from shark hysteria. And online media heighten our exposure to these stories and images, further feeding community fear.

We also gathered and coded more than 6,000 shark-related Facebook

comments over a 13-month period from December 2015 to the end of 2016. Although there were some positive comments in which people perceived "balance" in the media's presentation of shark issues – from outlets including [CoastalWatch](#) and [The Guardian](#) – these comments were few and isolated. Of the 259 comments that referred to the media, we categorised 8% of them as "positive," 18% as "dissatisfied," 42% as "hostile" to the media, and 15% of them judged the media as "untruthful or unreliable."

## Bites and clicks

Our study revealed a widespread view that media routinely exaggerate, distort and "beat up" shark stories as way to generate extra clicks, views, sales, and ultimately profits. One of our focus group participants put it like this: "When there is an interaction with humans, the media do blow it out of all proportion because perhaps it looks more gory, or it's such a rarity. So the media do play on it and sell a lot of papers through it."

Many of the social media posts we analysed were critical of news media coverage for being overly simplistic or deliberately divisive. A case in point is this ABC news story about shark nets, with an accompanying Facebook post that framed the issue as one in which human lives are necessarily at stake.

ABC News's Facebook post was met with disparaging reactions on social media, including: "ABC worded this wrong... I think you meant 'what's more important—protecting marine life or people being able to go for a swim/surf?'"

and:

"Disappointed in this sensationalist headline ABC. Why does it have to be one or the other? There are less damaging strategies that have been

shown to reduce both shark attacks and shark deaths. What a ridiculous question! Fast food journalism. Shame."

Many compare the high profile of sharks with the lower profile of more significant dangers, such as domestic violence. Shark stories play to the community's deepest fears, and news media are always ready to turn a shark encounter into a story. One focus group participant put it this way:

"Sharks seem to grab that media attention because nobody wants to be chewed on by a shark... [the media] just play on that emotion."

Another said: "...if there's the slightest whisper of a shark, that's the number-one story... So our perception is very much controlled by the media."

## **Phones and fear**

The advent of drones and mobile cameras makes it easier than ever for the [news media](#) to capture footage of sharks. And the ubiquity of news via smartphones and social media means we are exposed to them more frequently too.

One focus group participant likened sharks to celebrities, constantly snapped by a growing crowd of professional and citizen reporters: "...every time a shark is out there – and they're always out there – they're being photographed by a drone or a helicopter or something, and everyone thinks that there are just so many more sharks than there ever has been. But in fact there have been sharks here all the time but we've never had the technology to record them like we do."

Sharks are the focus of a special and horrifying fear, even among people who know they are at miniscule statistical risk of being harmed by one. Many in the community feel that the [media](#) we consume, especially since

the movie [Jaws](#), continually feed community fear of sharks.

Some respondents suggested that we need education and responsible information to allay fear and establish proportion. But many told us that raising awareness – every mention and image—just risks feeding community fear of sharks even more.

Perhaps the best advice came from a Newcastle surfer in his twenties, who described his typical reaction whenever [sharks](#) are in the news: "...you see it on the [news](#) and then you start thinking about it and you just get scared for a bit... [But] you slowly just get used to it again and go back to the water and get back to normal."

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