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**A LOT of hot air is going into tomorrow's Earth Hour, and I don't just mean the hot-air balloon sent up last Saturday to promote this hour-long switch-off.**

But, good God, why did the organisers choose that way to promote a campaign to make us cut our gases? Sending up the 32-metre light globe-shaped billboard burned so much gas - and emitted so much carbon dioxide - that we'll have to switch off 10,000 lights tomorrow just to make it up.

Perfect, then, that it landed in the Peanut Farm Reserve, and equally symbolic that *The Age* gave this wildly inappropriate stunt fawning coverage. Why? Because Earth Hour proves that what threatens us is not so much global warming, but lousy journalism.

Asking us to turn off lights between 8pm and 9pm is a crusade by *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. And already one light is staying on and flashing alarm. You see, it's always a danger when newspapers take up campaigns. Suddenly they get tempted to report only stuff that pushes their agenda, and to ignore facts that don't.

*The Age* and *SMH* - already giddy with global warming evangelism - perfectly illustrate this danger.

Earth Hour started last year in Sydney, where the *SMH* campaigned furiously to get everyone in the CBD to turn off their lights for an hour after dusk to "raise awareness" that our gases from electricity use were allegedly warming the world to hell.

But it was a flop - lights blazed on - yet you won't read that in *The Age* or *SMH*. On the contrary, the *SMH*'s Sunday paper, *The Sun-Herald*, instead ran "before and after" pictures purporting to show Sydney plunge from a blaze of light into a great gloom. But the dark "after" picture turned out to have been badly under-exposed compared with the "before" picture.

And the "before" picture turned out to have been taken not just before Earth Hour but two days earlier, when, as *Media Watch* reported, "weather conditions helped make the whole scene look much lighter".

Nothing dishonest was done, of course. It's just that these two "mistakes" suited the paper's agenda.

It didn't stop there. Check how *The Age* now routinely reports last year's "success":

"Last year's first Earth Hour had as many as 2.2 million Sydneysiders and 2000 businesses turn off their lights, causing a 10 per cent drop in the city's energy use."

Really?

First, it's mad to think half of Sydney's population switched off for a stunt centred on the CBD. This figure is actually a huge extrapolation from a poll of fewer than 800 guilty people who claimed they'd maybe switched off something or other during the hour.

Second, the claimed dip in power was just for the CBD, not all Sydney. Third, the 10 per cent cut claimed for the CBD is itself a gross exaggeration. A cut so tiny is trivial - equal to taking six cars off the road for a year.

But David Solomon, a finance PhD student at the Chicago University's graduate school of business, crunched Sydney's power figures to exclude seasonal and daily fluctuations, and concluded there was actually close to no power saving at all.

"When a fixed effect is included for the whole day, the drop in electricity use during Earth Hour is statistically indistinguishable from zero."

So why does *The Age* exaggerate? Because it's on a campaign to persuade, not inform, which is why it also won't report other awkward facts. Here's one: global temperatures have fallen since 1998.

Indeed, all four big global temperature tracking outlets, including Britain's Hadley Centre, now say global temperatures over the past year have dropped sharply.

NASA adds that the oceans have also cooled for the past few years. Why doesn't *The Age* tell its readers this, instead of scaring them with reports, and balloons, that are just hot air?

That's crusading, not reporting.