What happens when Granny turns activist?

An examination into the New Zealand Herald campaign against the Electoral Finance Bill

By Hollie Hyndman

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honours

University of Otago, 2008
DECLARATION

I certify that this dissertation does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
Abstract

This dissertation examines the New Zealand Herald campaign against the Electoral Finance Bill (EFB), which ran from November through to December 2007. The EFB was an extremely controversial and contested legislation in the area of political finance reform. Describing the bill as anti-democratic, draconian and an impingement on citizen rights, the Herald became a quasi-leader in opposition to the bill. In a series of front-page editorials combined with extensive coverage, the paper embarked on an unusual intervention. This study does not concentrate on whether or not the Herald was right to run the campaign but instead seeks to explore its dynamics. In particular, the motivations that underpin the campaign are examined. This includes the notion of the Herald as watchdog, as a politically influential player and as a commercially profitable enterprise. More broadly, the paper’s stance against the EFB is used as a case study for exploring political communication in New Zealand. It provides invaluable insight into media power, the relationship between media and citizens, and the changing role of traditional media in the 21st century.
Acknowledgements

Thank-you to my family. It has been wonderful to spend the last months at university at home. The support has been very much appreciated.

To Mike, love always. Now I’m finally free to join you in Wellington!

And to my supervisor Bryce Edwards – you have been a fantastic help – I hope the experience hasn’t put you off supervising honours students!

Enjoy.
# Table of Contents

DECLARATION ........................................................................................................... 2  
Abstract .................................................................................................................. 3  
Acknowledgements ................................................................................................ 4  

## Introduction .......................................................................................................... 6  
Why study *The Herald* campaign?.......................................................................... 7  
The Electoral Finance Bill ......................................................................................... 10  
Research questions .................................................................................................. 12  
Methodology ............................................................................................................ 13  
Chapter outline ....................................................................................................... 14  

## Chapter One ......................................................................................................... 15  
Theorising political communication ....................................................................... 15  
Habermas and the public sphere ............................................................................... 15  
The liberal model: media as the Fourth Estate ....................................................... 17  
The liberal model: critiques and debates .................................................................. 21  
Political communication: a mixed system ............................................................... 25  

## Chapter Two ......................................................................................................... 27  
Democracy under Attack ......................................................................................... 27  
Campaign evolution ............................................................................................... 29  
Content ................................................................................................................... 35  
Sources .................................................................................................................... 38  
Story-telling frames ............................................................................................... 39  
Comparative analysis .............................................................................................. 40  

## Chapter Three .................................................................................................... 43  
A question of motives .............................................................................................. 43  
Watchdog journalism: an ideology in practice? ................................................... 44  
Political motivations: the Herald as an unelected legislator .................................. 47  
Herald: a commercial enterprise .......................................................................... 49  
Herald: negotiating conflicting interests .................................................................. 52  

## Chapter Four ....................................................................................................... 53  
Re-defining the public sphere .................................................................................. 53  
Media, politics and meaning .................................................................................... 53  
In the name of public interest .................................................................................. 56  
Newspapers and technological change .................................................................... 58
A final Word .......................................................... 61
What does happen when Granny gets activist? ...................................................... 61

Bibliography ........................................................................................................ 62

Appendix ............................................................................................................ 76
Introduction

*Why study the Herald Campaign?*

A curious phenomenon occurred in media politics in late 2007. It involved New Zealand’s largest newspaper, popular disquiet about new political finance reform, and a highly visible campaign lasting two months.

In November, the *New Zealand Herald* launched a crusade against the EFB, which continued even after the bill was eventually passed into law in mid December 2007. This anti-EBF campaign was run in both the print and electronic versions of the newspaper. Whilst other newspapers and media covered the bill and were generally opposed to it, the *Herald* ignored traditional journalistic values of objectivity, neutrality, non-bias and balance. Stridently taking a position against the bill, the campaign was justified on the basis of upholding the public interest.

A campaigning newspaper is not unusual. The *Herald’s* campaign was in line with the seventh principle of New Zealand Press Council (2003) which states that a publication is entitled to adopt a forthright stance and advocate a position on any issue. Whilst the Coalition for Open Government (COG) has had its complaint against the *Herald* for misleading readers during its campaign upheld by the Press Council, this pro-EBF coalition also maintains that a newspaper has a right (and a desirable one at that) to run a campaign against any government policy. Moreover, that a paper is willing to take an explicit position against government legislation should not necessarily be a matter of concern. In terms of freedom of the press, New Zealand is ranked among the highest in the world by the Freedom Forum Scale (2004).¹

Notwithstanding, the *Herald* campaign is worthy of scrutiny for at least two reasons. First, the campaign was directed through the paper’s editorial content and manifest in a series of front-page editorials that set forth the paper’s principled stand. This is

---

¹ The Freedom Forum, based in Washington, D.C., is a non-partisan foundation dedicated to free press, free speech and free spirit for all people. See http://www.freedomforum.org/about/default.asp
unique given that newspapers normally distinguish between factual reporting in the news section of the newspaper and opinions found on the editorial page. The editor notes that the paper’s opposition to the EFB is actually the second occasion in the past five years in which it has editorialised on its front page. The other was when the paper sought reconsideration of legislation axing the Privy Council. The editor declared this law was a matter of such fundamental legal and constitutional importance that a broad mandate was an essential precondition.

Second, the Herald’s campaign provides a useful case study in which to evaluate the quality of the media and political communication in New Zealand. Although opposition to the bill was evident in other forms of media, the Herald is distinctive as a campaign that has been extensively quoted by politicians and other journalists. The campaign became, to some extent, as controversial as the bill itself. It has stimulated extensive debate amongst media professionals, politicians and the general public, generating both critical acclaim and damning criticism. Those in favour contend the paper upheld its democratic function and the campaign ought to be applauded as an example of journalism that raises its voice on issues of public interest and provides a forum for public debate. From this perspective, the campaign reflects the extent to which the function of the ‘media as watchdog’ is alive and well in New Zealand. Examples of those commentators include Jim Tuly, head of political science and communication at the University of Canterbury, and Paul Norris, head of Christchurch polytechnic’s broadcasting school. On the other hand, critics of the campaign dismiss it as journalism of hype more than substance and suggest the motivations behind the campaign were suspect. From this perspective, the Herald failed to uphold the values expected of mainstream media. This varied response to the campaign is precisely what makes it so compelling.

The objective of this dissertation is not to arbitrarily assess whether the campaign was right or wrong, desirable or undesirable. Rather, it is to assess the insights the campaign potentially provides with regard to the nature of political communication in New Zealand. It is a communication that involves three sets of actors – media institutions, political institutions and citizen publics – in a bounded political territory, usually a liberal democracy (Negrine & Stayner, 2007, p.1). News media and politics have become so intertwined that a decade ago Judy McGregor (1996, p.8) coined the
term ‘news media politics’. According to Hayward and Rudd (2003, p.254) newspaper readership in New Zealand is one of the highest in the world, and newspapers are recognized both here and overseas as important sources of political news. In running the EFB campaign, the Herald made a statement about a piece of governmental policy. Thus, the campaign stimulates a question about the impact of media on public opinion and more broadly, an inquiry into the relationship between media and politics. This is an ambiguous relationship with discrepancy between the way in which the boundaries of the political communication field are defined in theory and the way they are defined in practice. In Western liberal democracies, such as New Zealand, the relationship between media, society and politics is far from straight-forward; rather it is increasingly becoming far-reaching, multi-form and multi-dimensional.

Despite the controversial and contentious nature of political communications, the assumption made in this essay is that for a student of politics, the process of continuously examining and reflecting on the relationship between media, politics and citizen is crucial in a democratic society. Cross & Henderson (2004, p.142) argue that New Zealand is a small country and the media have the potential to exercise disproportionate influence, especially under the conditions of MMP. This is a point Sir Geoffrey Palmer eloquently suggested in 1996 when MMP was first introduced – he noted that although MMP would move New Zealand towards a more participatory style of democracy, ‘if citizens are going to be able to participate effectively, they need an alert, competent and analytical media to assist’ (1996, p.28). He argued that:

The media carries out a constitutional function of importance to the health of New Zealand government and democracy’ [and therefore] high standards of journalism will improve the quality of government and the public’s ability to participate in it [but] media degradation, on the other hand, will have an adverse effect on the political system (2006, p.21).

Palmer concluded that ‘the challenges are there [for] the performance we will have to wait and see’ (p.28). The intention of this dissertation is not to make claims that are relevant to all forms of political communication in New Zealand. Rather, the Herald’s campaign is used as a case study to explore elements of political
communication and to stimulate debate. Before elaborating on the specific questions that structure this study, it is necessary to first place this study in context.

I. The Electoral Finance Bill

Political finance is a controversial issue. In recent years its reform has been subject to discussion and varied implementation throughout the western world. In New Zealand the debate over political finance has been particularly rife during the period 1999-2007. A number of concerns have been emphasized.

A significant issue relates to the regulation surrounding the spending of parliamentary funds in electioneering. A dispute arose after the 2005 election regarding the Labour Party’s spending of public money on its pledge card. This resulted in an investigation by the Auditor-General of the publicly funded advertising by all political parties, culminating in the release of a final report in October 2006. This concluded that a total of $1.17 million was improperly spent and must be paid back by all parties (see Brady, 2006). Following the release of this report, the Labour Party moved to pass the Appropriation (Continuation of Interim Meaning of Funding for Parliamentary Purposes) which validated much of its unlawful expenditure. This legislation has been subject to wide ranging criticism and disagreement across the political spectrum.

The issue of finance in elections was further highlighted by the release of investigative journalist Nicky Hager’s book *The Hollow men: A study in the art of deception* in 2006. This book has been important for stimulating questions such as equality and transparency in private political finance. Essentially, Hager exposed connections between the National Party and members of the Exclusive Brethren church and the undisclosed funding provided by this group to the National Party in the lead-up to the 2005 election. This expose has been credited, rather simplistically, as justifying the need for the EFB.

---

2 This is a relevant study given the interest in political communication in New Zealand, which has focused particularly on television coverage and election campaigns. A prominent and high-profile example is ‘Corngate’. Helen Clark complained to Broadcasting Standards Authority (BSA) that during the 2002 election she was ‘ambushed’ in an interview with TV3 John Campbell over GE corn. Subsequently the BSA found TV3 had violated standards of authority, balance, impartiality, objectivity and fairness.
The EFB was proposed by the then-Minister of Justice Mark Burton in July 2007, allegedly to address the role of private money in elections. Burton (2007) stated that ‘the package of reforms introduced to parliament will help promote participation in parliamentary democracy, and aims to clean up New Zealand’s electoral system and protect it from abuse’. The official purpose of the bill was stated thus:

To strengthen the law governing electoral financing and broadcasting, in order to (a) maintain public and political confidence in the administration of elections (b) promote participation by public in parliamentary democracy (c) prevent undue influence of wealth on electoral outcomes (d) provide greater transparency and accountability on the part of candidates, parties and other persons engaged in election activity in order to minimise the perception of corruption (e) ensure that the controls on the conduct of electoral campaigns are effective, are clear, and can be effectively administered, complied with and enforced. (Electoral Finance Bill, 2007, part 1, clause 3, pg.6)

Under section seven of New Zealand’s Bill of Rights Act 1990, the Attorney General must advise Parliament at the introduction of a bill if it is consistent with the Act. The Crown Law Office, which undertook the review, concluded the bill was consistent, a decision the National Business Review (2007) described as ‘one of the worst, most politically expedient calls on New Zealand human rights legislation in memory’.

The content of the EFB was criticised, as was the swift process by which it was made law in December 2007. The bill passed its first reading by 65 votes to 54, with Labour, the Greens, New Zealand First, United Future and the Progressive party voting in favour of the bill. Those voting against the bill included the National Party, the Maori Party and independents (Gordon Copeland and Taito Phillip Fields), whilst ACT didn’t vote. The bill was then sent to the Justice and Electoral Select Committee for consideration. Submissions were made against the bill by groups such as the New Zealand Law Society and the New Zealand Human Rights Commission. Nicky Hager submitted in favour of a need for changes to the New Zealand electoral law. Public submissions closed in September, and subsequent protests to ‘kill the bill’ were held in Auckland during November, organised by John Boscawen and which drew over 2,000 protesters. The Herald campaign started just before the select committee reported the bill back to the House of Representatives, recommending that the bill proceed. At this stage Annette King, who became Minister of Justice following Cabinet reshuffle in October, announced a number of changes to the bill which appeased some critics. The second reading was then passed, 65 votes to 54 with
ACT deciding to vote against the bill. More protests were held before the Committee of the Whole House stage began in December. Under heated debated the bill passed its third reading, 63 votes for and 57 votes against. This time United Future voted against the bill and Gordon Copeland didn’t vote. The Governor General signed the bill into law on the 19 December 2007, and the law took effect two weeks later on 1 January 2008.

The Electoral Finance Act amends numerous areas of New Zealand electoral law. Principally and most controversially is the proposed regulation of ‘third party’ election campaigns, which has stimulated questions regarding free speech and democracy. In critiquing the bill many have questioned broader issues such as: what does democracy mean in New Zealand? What do citizens expect from their political parties/politicians? Should politicians make changes to election law that benefit themselves? How and when do citizens see their rights to have a say in the political process curtailed? How open is the process by which legislation gets passed in New Zealand to public participation? More broadly, the controversy surrounding the EFB has exposed to extensive debate questions over state intervention and regulation of democracy.

In the liberal tradition, the media are a guardian of democracy. Given democracy is said to be threatened by the EFB, the media coverage of this bill and its passing into legislation is particularly relevant. It is this relationship between politics and media, as highlighted by the controversy surrounding the EFB, which constitutes the central focus of this dissertation.

II. Research questions

A number of crucial questions underpin this study:

1. How did the Herald cover the debate over the EFB?

2. Why did the Herald cover the EFB in this way?
3. What are the implications of this media coverage? More specifically, what does the coverage given to the bill suggest about the nature of political communication in New Zealand?

III. Methodology

The first task in approaching this study has been to read widely about media and political communication – both in New Zealand and elsewhere. This has been important for identifying key themes in the literature. The objective has not been to pick a theory and fit this to the Herald campaign – but to pinpoint a number of theories that offer a framework for helping to better make sense of and conceptualize the campaign.

The second task has been to survey all of the Herald’s coverage relating to the EFB, including basic report articles, images, cartoons, opinion pieces and editorials. The Herald’s website was particularly useful for accessing this coverage. Having read all of the coverage, the content of the coverage was analyzed and the location of the article in the newspaper noted. This enabled identification of salient themes. After examining all the Herald’s coverage it was imperative to put this in context by looking at the coverage provided in other newspapers and other media, such as television, radio and magazines.

Third, a number of interviews were conducted via email. Ethical approval was obtained before the interviews took place, and the interviewees briefed about the project before answering any questions. The first interview was with Nicky Hager, whom has been openly critical of the Herald campaign and outspoken about the quality of journalism in New Zealand. Questions asked included ‘what did you make of the Herald campaign against the EFB’ and ‘what is your view of the standard of journalism in New Zealand’’. The second interview was with Therese Arseneau, a political communications specialist at the University of Canterbury. Her perspective on the Herald campaign was invaluable for providing an academic view. The third interview was with Audrey Young, political editor at the Herald. Questions asked
included ‘why did the Herald run a campaign against the EFB?’, and ‘do you think the Herald provided high-quality coverage of the EFB?’

IV. Chapter outline

An exploration of the Herald campaign necessitates a critical review of the theoretical framework that is invoked when claims are made regarding the role of media in the political process. Chapter One explores possible frames for conceptualising the media-politics relationship in New Zealand, with a particular emphasis on the notion of a public sphere. Above all, this chapter reflects the process of unpacking the box called ‘political communication’ and exposing the assumptions contained inside to critical review.

In Chapter Two, an in-depth examination of the Herald campaign is presented. This examination is organised into four separate sections: the timeline of the campaign, content, use of sources, and story-telling frames. Additionally, the Herald’s coverage of the EFB is compared to three other New Zealand newspapers - the Dominion Post, the Press and the Otago Daily Times.

The following two chapters draw on the theoretical framework established in chapter one to make sense of the key findings from the above mentioned examination. Chapter Three explores the motivations underpinning the campaign. In Chapter Four, some conclusions are drawn and the Herald campaign is placed in the broader context of political communication. It is utilised as a case study for exploring media power, public citizens and the changing role of newspapers in the 21st century.
Chapter One

Theorising Political Communication

Those people indicating support or opposition to the Herald’s campaign against the Electoral Finance Bill (EFB) have tended to base these judgements on whether they approve of the actual legislation or not. However, one ought to be able to support the EFB and at the same time applaud the Herald for running a campaign against it (and vice versa). This requires assessing the campaign on the basis of political communication values. The objective of this chapter is to provide a theoretical foundation upon which to assess the Herald campaign. The relationship between media, politics and citizens is complex and contested, and there are numerous ways of conceptualising political communication. Whilst not attempting to consider every one of them, this chapter begins with the work of Jurgen Habermas and examines the liberal model of political communication before turning to more critical perspectives.

I. Habermas and the public sphere

A crucial theme in the work of Habermas, and which is utilized in this study, is the notion of a public sphere. Habermas first explored this in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962) and later elaborated on it in Between Facts and Norms (1992). Ultimately, Habermas is concerned with democracy and public participation - he puts emphasis on political participation as the core of a democratic society and as an essential element in individual self-development (Kellner, 1999, p.3).

According to Habermas, the phenomenon of the bourgeois public sphere emerged during the Enlightenment – around 1700. As Kellner discusses (1999, p.3-4), this

---

3 Habermas (1989, p.138) conceives of the public sphere ‘as a category that is typical of an epoch’, which is to say that it comes to exist, both as an institution and as a politically effective idea, for only a brief period - from the late-seventeenth to the eighteenth century.
public sphere mediated between the private concerns of individuals in their familial, economic and social life, and the concerns and demands of social and public life (the state).\textsuperscript{4} It consisted of organs of information and political debate (such as newspapers and journals) as well as institutions of political discussion (such as parliaments, political clubs, literary salons, public assemblies, pubs and coffee houses) where socio-political discussion took place. According to Habermas (1989), this physical sphere presented, for the first time in history, a space where individuals and groups could gather to discuss common public affairs and organize against arbitrary and oppressive forms of social and public power. It was a space to shape public opinion, giving direct expression to their needs and interests while influencing political practice (Calhoun, 1992).\textsuperscript{5} The principles underpinning the public sphere included open discussion to all issues of general concern in which discursive argumentation was employed to ascertain general interests and the public good (Butsch, 2007, p.3-5). The public sphere thus presupposed freedoms of speech and assembly, a free press, and the right to freely participate in political debate and decision-making (Kellner, 1999, p.4). It was truly, a \textit{liberal} public sphere.\textsuperscript{6} Habermas argues this public sphere was institutionalized, however imperfectly, in later developments of Western societies.\textsuperscript{7}

It is this notion of the public sphere, as conceptualized by Habermas, which is embedded within the liberal model of journalism (Street, 2001). This model has, for the past three and a half centuries, provided the dominant framework for conceptualizing political communication.

\textsuperscript{4} This is to say that the public sphere emerges within the complex interplay of the public realm of the state and the private realm of the family.

\textsuperscript{5} A public sphere comes into existence when citizens communicate, either face to face or through letters, journals and newspapers and other mass media, in order to express their opinions about matters of general interest, and to subject these opinions to rational discourse (Habermas, 1989, p.27). It is both an idea and an ideology.

\textsuperscript{6} According to Habermas, the ideals of the historical Enlightenment – liberty, solidarity, and equality – are implicit in the concept of the public sphere (Finlayson, 2005, p.9). These values as immanent in its critique – for in practice, the participation in public sphere that existed in coffee houses, salons and literary journals of the 18th century Europe was always restricted to a small group of educated men of means.

\textsuperscript{7} Where it took the form of a literacy public sphere and a political public sphere.
II. The liberal model: media as the Fourth Estate

The liberal model of journalism has evolved in response to changes in the political system. Liberalism was born out of a struggle by the middle class to free themselves from feudal ownership. In this context, print media became a revolutionary tool in hands of bourgeois to defend liberal democracy from feudalists and used to circulate information and ideas within the oligarchy (Boyce, Curran & Wingate, 1978). As liberal oligarchies became an established order, however, the liberal press lost some of its radical beginnings and increasingly took on the trappings of conservatism (Louw, 2005, p.39-41).

The transition from feudalism to early parliaments which served liberal oligarchs had significant consequences for political communication. Certainly, liberal oligarchs developed policy-making practices different from feudal ones: policy making was more open to public scrutiny, parliament was institutionalized as a form of pluralist decision making, and the phenomenon of institutionalized representatives was implemented (Louw, 2005, p.43). These changes stimulated a need to ensure that representatives were accountable to those electing them and prevented from becoming corrupt and abusing their power. John Stuart Mill (1859) argued that the liberty of press was the best guarantee against corruption and power abuse and from this grew the ‘media-as-watchdog’ notion. It was argued that the media was ideally positioned to fulfil the role of independent information brokers within system of representative government (Street, 2001, p.254-5). Thus, in the early 19th century journalists and media proprietors advocated the notion that the media be regarded as an integral part of liberal governance because the media improved the circulation of ideas and information in society, made government more transparent, and improved the level of debate (Louw, 2005, p.45).

The emergence of liberalism as a democratic form presented new challenges for media (Thompson, 1995). By the late 19th century, liberal oligarchs faced the threat of potential revolution from the proletariat created by industrialization. This pressure was a factor in liberal oligarchies reforming themselves into democracies. Gradually
mass liberal democracy was born through reforming the electoral systems of USA, Britain, and British colonies. This gradual widening of franchise produced universal adult suffrage within Western liberal democracies and subsequently, changed the political process. As the political process changed so too did the media reporting of that political process, providing the foundation for the emergence of 20th century mass media (Keane, 1991).

Today, liberal journalists adhere to their self-defined role as: to be necessarily critical of politicians; to champion citizen rights against abuses of state power; and to provide the platform for debate (Schultz, 1998, p.29). Liberal theorists discuss this relationship between media and the political process in two ways. First, the media is conceived as the Fourth Estate, providing a check and balance against the three other estates: the executive, the legislative and the judiciary. From this perspective, symbiosis between a free press and liberal democracy is necessary to prevent despotic government, for it is the media that check power abuses and corruption on the part of politicians and bureaucrats (Louw, 2001, p.167-9).

Second, media occupy an important role to ensure maximal flow of information within a society in order to create an informed citizenry. The participatory democracy model, of which Rousseau and Marx both advocate, is based on this idea of an active media. The underpinning assumption of the model is that in order to have democracy as government by, of, and for the people, citizens must be informed, must be capable of argumentation and participation, and must be active and organized to become a transformative democratic political force (See Held, 2006). In other words, the media provide the crucial function of enabling individuals to be informed, to seek information and to critically assess and appraise this information (Street, 2001, p.253). Taking these two points together, liberals argue that when the media are not assuming their democratic functions of vigilantly checking corrupt or excessive power, and adequately informing their audiences, that there can be said to be a crisis of democracy (Curran, 2000, p.121-129).

The Fourth Estate journalistic vision, first proposed in 1852 by The Times editor John Delane in 1852, has become largely naturalized within liberal democracies (as quoted in Schultz, 1998, p.25). Objectivity is the core feature of the professional ideology of
liberal journalism, with a clear dichotomy between objective reporting (quoting expert sources) and subjective editorializing (where the writer expresses their own views). Objective journalism promotes the idea of quoting sources and ideally countervailing quotes, so as to supposedly achieve balance, fairness and neutrality (Ward, 2004). Significantly, the media is not only said to have ‘autonomy’, which sets it apart from other estates, but also has ‘special rights’ over and above other players such as: the right to have its autonomy protected; the right to monitor other players; and the right to ‘free speech’ (in other words: to report on and say whatever it deems fit). This watchdog role dictates the form in which the media system should be organized - only by anchoring the media to the free market is it possible to ensure the media’s complete independence from government (Curran, 2000, p.121).

The New Zealand press system has characteristics of the liberal model of the media system – a model with a relative dominance of commercial media, high autonomy of journalism and a high level of freedom of the press (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). This is similar to the UK, USA, Ireland and Canada. However, unlike the USA or the UK, where competition dictates trends in the newspaper market, New Zealand’s market is divided. It has two big players who own 90% of print media, the press is regional, and in a country with only four million citizens there is ‘no push for a national daily’ (Norris, 2002, p.48). Currently there is only one newspaper, the Herald, which shows any ambition to become a nationally distributed daily. Whilst newspapers are the most accessible form of communication in New Zealand, the absence of a national daily helps to account for the dominance of television in political communication (Cross & Henderson, 2004, p.143).

The history of the three largest newspapers in New Zealand (the Press, the Dominion Post, and the New Zealand Herald) is interwoven with the political, social and economic history of the country. All three newspapers were fully owned by New Zealand companies until 1975 when the News Media Corporation Act was changed to remove all restrictions on foreign ownership of print media (and also to allow foreign

---

8 This is changing with the use of the world-wide-web. Newspapers are increasingly becoming more accessible via their websites.
9 Each of the newspapers has a distinctive feature that they market themselves on. The Herald has the largest circulation, the Dominion Post is the newspaper of the capital city, and the Press is the main newspaper for the South Island.
ownership of TV and radio). This and subsequent legislation, including the deregulation of media market in 1988, brought international companies to New Zealand: Fairfax and APN News and Media (APN). Together they now control over 90% of circulation in the metropolitan provincial and Sunday newspaper market in New Zealand (Rosenberg, 2008). With the exception of the *Otago Daily Times*, every major print media company in the media sector in New Zealand is foreign owned. The only domestically owned news outlets are the state-owned TVNZ, Maori TV and Radio New Zealand. Whilst there is a concern about the loss of New Zealand sovereignty vis-à-vis media ownership, market liberals suggest that unrestricted ownership is necessary to attract the investment which the country’s small size and isolation would otherwise discourage (Cross & Henderson, 2004).

The principles espoused by the New Zealand Press Council (NZPC) reflect the embedded nature of liberal model in New Zealand media. In spite of this, MacGregor and Comrie (2002) suggest a certain crisis of the liberal model. They argue that recent debate about political journalism has been one of ‘too much and too little’. Too much triviality, superficiality, spin, personality and horse race election campaign journalism; and too little analysis, reflection, deeper understanding of coalition politics, politically astute journalists and investment in the coverage of politics. They note:

> Politics is as much a spectator sport in New Zealand as rugby or netball. We know our politicians as other countries do not. The familiarity comes partly from our smallness and the accessibility of our political processes to the public. The quality of the spectacle, though, is highly dependant on the vigour and rigour of the news media. (p.173)

Certainly, the liberal values underpinning journalistic practice and the role journalists seek to play in the political process have been subject to widespread criticism. In order to explore the *Herald* campaign as a case study for political communication in New Zealand, it is important to examine these criticisms, especially with regard to the public sphere.

---

10 In July 2004 APN launched *Herald on Sunday* to challenge the Fairfax monopoly of New Zealand Sunday newspaper market (Ellis, 2007, p.38).

11 This is not just in New Zealand but a global trend. Blumler & Gurevitch (1995) discuss the crises of public communication and suggest four trends contributing to this crisis: (1) a thoroughgoing professionalization of political advocacy (2) journalistic fight back (3) uncertainty about ethical values of the new publicity game (4) widespread projection of an image of the ‘turned off citizen’ which encourages negative campaigning and superficial reporting.
III. The liberal model: critiques and debates

James Curran (1993, 1996) argues that the liberal model is too simplistic, where it explains media solely in terms of market theory and fails to take into account the wider relations of power in which the media are situated. He suggests a critical revision needs to think further not only about the functioning of the public sphere but also about the idealist premises of liberal theory. It is worth exploring these two points further.

In the first instance, it is significant to note that a critical revision of the functioning of the public sphere was contemplated by Habermas himself. Having proposed the notion of a public sphere, Habermas (1962) then turned to provide an account of the structural change of the public sphere in the contemporary era with the rise of state capitalism, the culture industries, and the increasingly powerful positions of economic corporations and big business in political life (Kellner, 1999, p.4). According to Habermas, by the late 19th century the liberal public sphere was transforming into a media-dominated public sphere. This transformation involved private interests assuming direct political functions, as powerful corporations came to control and manipulate the media and the state. The commercialisation of the press, and its concentration of ownership and control, has re-feudalised the public sphere and turned it into a private matter between the state and media corporations (Habermas, 1979, p.198). Simultaneously, the state began to play a more fundamental role in the private realm and everyday life, thus eroding the difference between state and civil society, between the public and private sphere (Calhoun, 1992).

As the public sphere declined, citizens became consumers, dedicating themselves to more passive consumption and private concerns than to issues of the common good and democratic participation (Calhoun, 1992). Therefore, whereas in the bourgeois public sphere public opinion was formed by political debate and consensus, in debased public spheres of welfare state capitalism, public opinion is administered by political, economic and media elites which managed public opinion as part of systems of management and social control (Garnham, 1986).
This transformation of the public sphere, as Habermas describes it, is grounded in Horkheimer and Adorno’s (1947) analysis of the culture industry. They argue that public opinion shifts from rational consensus emerging from debate, discussion and reflection to the manufactured opinion of polls or media experts. As Kellner (1999) notes, Habermas draws on this analysis to argue that the function of the media has been transformed from facilitating rational discourse and debate within the public sphere into shaping, constructing and limiting public discourse to those themes validated and approved by media corporations. Citizens become spectators of media presentations and discourse which mould public opinion, reducing consumer/citizens to objects of news, information and public affairs (Street, 2001, p.196-7). In describing the structural transformation of the public sphere Habermas is sketching the degeneration of media from print-based journalism to electronic media of the 20th Century.

An explicitly pessimistic outlook on contemporary media is evident in Habermas’s later writings. More recently, however, there have been advances in political communication that is suggestive of a revitalized public sphere. A new movement, called public journalism, has arisen in the American newspaper world explicitly acknowledging that newspapers must find ways to reconnect with their readers and help readers find ways to reconnect to public life (see Lambeth, Meyer & Thorson, 1998). The beginnings of this movement can be traced to the late 1980s, when several newspapers around the country began to search for ways of refocusing their coverage of politics and community affairs to make it more relevant to their readers.

Public journalism goal is to involve citizens more actively and meaningfully in the democratic process. Hass (2003) argues that it calls on the press to take seriously its commitment to democratic participation and public debate. Further, it asks journalists to help develop the means by which citizens can engage each other and thus create for themselves a sense of community defined by something stronger than a whole aggregation of personal preferences and private interests (Lambeth et al, 1998, p.15-16). Jay Rosen, a professor of journalism at New York University, has been important figure in articulating the philosophical rationale for this new approach to
journalism. He describes public journalism as an approach to the daily business of the craft that calls on journalists to:

(1) address people as citizens, potential participants in public affairs, rather than victims or spectators (2) help the political community act upon, rather than just learn about, its problems (3) improve climate of public discussion, rather than simply watch it deteriorate and (4) help make public life go well, so that it earns its claims on our attention. (1999, p.15)

Whilst the public journalism movement shares with traditional objective journalism a commitment to enabling citizens to participate more fully in democratic life, it also recognizes that the news media are not, and cannot be, neutral observers (Merritt, 1995). For this reason, the movement has caused considerable controversy within journalism with debates over the challenge public journalism poses and also, the challenges it faces. Of significance to this study is that since 2004 APN has been involved with a public journalism inspired initiative called ‘Readers First’. According to Haas (2003) the underlying objective of this project is to encourage newspapers to try and focus their reporting on topics of concern to citizens and to cover those topics from the perspective of citizens rather than politicians, experts and other elite actors. Ewart (2005) notes that the Herald, which is owned by APN, has been committed to this project and utilised its website as a mechanism for better communicating with readers.

The second point Curran makes regarding the challenges to the idealist premises of liberal theory is particularly enlightening to this study. Essentially, whilst liberal theorists utilised the work of John Stuart Mill to develop a watchdog function of the media in the political process, Mill also hinted at another role for the media in liberal democracy. This role is associated with countering a ‘tyranny of the majority’. In On Liberty, Mill captures the predicament that faced the middle-class liberal reformers of the 19th century. On the one hand, liberal oligarchs were caught between two fears: a fear that if the political system was not reformed the masses would seize power through revolution, and a fear that any electoral reform would see the middle class views swamped by the view of the masses (Louw, 2005, p.48-49). These fears where expressed as the ‘tyranny of majority’ and Mill argued that the best mechanism to check this potential tyranny was freedom of expression. In short, it was by protecting the diversity of opinions and allowing everyone to express their own views that it would be possible to prevent democratization from producing repression by the
majority. On the other hand, however, there was a concern that democratic representatives might abuse positions of power. Mill argued that the best blocking mechanism against the tyranny of politicians was a free press, which would expose any political abuse. Open communication, facilitated by a free press, was a means to tame some of the potential excesses of mass representative democracy (Curran & Gurevitch, 1996, p.56).

As Louw (2005) discusses, Mill states that within liberal democracy, the ‘will of the people’ is not necessarily equivalent to the ‘will of the majority’. Instead, it refers to the will of the most active part of the people, or the most educated and propertied middle classes. In practical terms, this meant the will of that part of the active minority who succeeded in getting themselves accepted by the majority. The idea here being that the middle classes could continue to dominate political process even after extending franchise because they would be skilled at using the machinery of liberal governance, including the media, to sway and lead the masses (p.49).

Consequently, what emerged was the development of two-tier press system: the elite ‘quality press’ and the mass press, which is associated with popular and tabloid journalism (McNair, 1999, p.54). This is evident today in the information-rich/information-poor dichotomy. The role of popular mass media – far from serving to create an informed citizenry – often serves as a vehicle for circulating hype required to deliver mass publics to mainstream political parties and thereby stabilizing liberal democratic political processes (Street, 2001). It is from this more critical perspective that the conception of the media in the 20th century as professional hype machinery is derived: an expanding mass media machine as a tool for manipulating public opinion (Lippman, 1997).

Adopting Mill’s writings as a critique of the Fourth Estate ideal presents a different view of the media-politics relationship. Critics have pointed out that the Fourth Estate model creates a comfortable, self-affirming myth for liberal journalists (Entman, 1989, p.31). In reality, however, it is argued journalism involves choosing sources and selectively deploying source-comments to construct stories. Source-driven journalism merely creates the potential for liberal journalists to disguise that they have biases
because all they need to do is to find sources confirming the views they wish to promote (Roshco, 1984, p. 19).  

IV. Political Communication: a mixed system

Having examined the liberal conception of media-politics and a more critical approach, the crucial question is whether these two roles for mass media (to create an informed citizenry or to circulate hype) are mutually incompatible. Purists adhering to the Fourth Estate/watchdog model of journalism would regard them as incompatible. This dissertation does not attempt to make a decisive case for either but instead proceeds from the perspective that whilst the liberal model is important, it needs to be tempered by a more critical orientation. The first step in rethinking liberal theory is to break-free from the assumption that the media are a single institution with a common democratic purpose. Instead, different media should be viewed as having different functions within the democratic system, calling for different kinds of structures and styles of journalism (Cunningham, 2003).

Certainly, Habermas has been critiqued for his too rigid categorical distinctions, where he distinguished between a lifeworld governed by norms of communication interaction, and a system governed by ‘steering’ imperatives of money and power (Kellner, 1999, p.10). Critics argue that in the 21st century the media play a vital role on both sides of the divide. To ensure that effective liberal governance is not undermined by pressure from below, the management of public opinion through spin-doctoring and impression management has been integrated into the very heart of the political process (Street, 2001, p.148-150). In this sense, the mass media have become fundamental tools of liberal democratic governance. Politicians are aware of the need to gain favourable conversation from media, and it is standard practice for both

---

12 The need to quote sources under the guise of objectivity and neutrality creates opportunity for PRs and for politicians to develop symbiotic relationships with a media industry hungry for sources. Certainly, using sources narrows the ‘window’ for a number of reasons (1) there is a tendency to favour quoting the elite (2) journalists stop calling their sources when the first one tell them what they want to hear (3) journalists relying on sources creates dependence on government, corporate spokespeople and politicians, whom have some vested interest in censoring what they say (Nimmo & Combs, 1990, p.171-82). In an attempt to lessen dependence on sources with clear vested interests, journalists often turn to other sources such as the ‘non-involved’ – the academic, expert-observer or commentator.
incumbent and aspiring politicians to employ media minders or spindoctors. A case can be argued for the routinization and institutionalization of the journalist-politician nexus where the mass mediated game of politics becomes formulaic, built on the symbiotic need journalists and politicians have for each other (Louw, 2005, p.87-89). On the other hand, however, investigative journalism disrupts and undermines the work of spin-doctors by refusing to accept the line they are spinning and by trying to unearth issues spin-doctors are attempting to bury (Newton, 2006). This said, it is questionable just how geared the media industry is towards investigative journalism, and this is a point discussed later in this dissertation.

Moreover, the technological revolution alters the environment in which Habermas was writing. It is suggested that new media technologies serve as the basis for a participatory democratic communication politics, and constitute an expansion and revitalization of new and more democratic public spheres (Meyer, 2004). Certainly, an interesting aspect explored in this dissertation is the use of the Herald’s website to complement print readership. Whilst the print newspaper is one of the oldest elements of the contemporary media landscape, changes in technology, such as the internet, stimulate a question about the role newspapers occupy in contemporary society (Boczkowski, 2004).

If this dissertation is to take any position in this regard, it is this: in contemporary liberal democracies it is appropriate to conceptualize media as a mixed system where some journalists fulfil a watchdog role, some sections of the media circulate information that produces informed citizens, and political spin-doctoring is a growth industry, which is geared towards taming mass publics and managing public opinion (Louw, 2005, p.52). In other words, media is multifaceted. From this position, the objective of this dissertation is to explore the space that the Herald, an advocating newspaper, occupies.

13 In Wellington there are more media advisers than there are journalists reporting the news.
Chapter Two

Democracy under Attack

The elements and structures of journalistic practice both determine a newspapers ability to address events and issues in a meaningful way and define a newspaper’s potential to create a space for public debate. Therefore, it is important to examine the relationship between journalistic norms and the discursive potential of news text to represent, interpret and construct reality. This chapter exposes to scrutiny the Herald campaign. A brief overview of the campaign is provided before examining more critically the content, sources and the language. In the final section of this chapter, the Herald campaign is briefly compared to the coverage of the Electoral Finance Bill (EFB) provided in other newspapers.

Specifically, this study examines the Herald’s coverage in the two month period of November and December 2007. In examining this coverage, particular focus is placed on the editorial column. This is relevant given the comments in the papers editorial on 27 December:

Market research tells us that between 15 and 20 per cent of our readers let their eyes pass over this column of the Herald each day [constituting] people who out of interest or duty feel the need to check the newspapers opinion on the big issues. Editorials, or leaders as they are known in the trade, are unsigned because they are the view of the paper and not an individual writer. The view expressed here can be and often is countered by views elsewhere in the paper, within the news columns or the variety of other commentary we carry.

The editorial continues and confirms that the paper aspires to a certain balance between support for political parties in its coverage of political issues, a point which is discussed in more depth in later chapters. It is also important to note here the verification that the paper was indeed campaigning against the EFB:

[Of the 300 or so editorials published this year] around one in five of our viewpoints were overtly ‘political’ in that it could be read as in favour or against the views of one party or another. Government receive more attention than others and this year we carried 20 editorials clearly critical of Labour, five that could be called neutral on some issue or other and 18 that were positive. Among the negative critiques were more than 10 on the Electoral Finance Bill, which the paper campaigned against.
Isolating the focus to a two month period is not to suggest that the coverage outside of this period was insignificant. Certainly, throughout 2005 and 2006 the Herald had also reported, in a piecemeal basis, the scandal over parliamentary funding which culminated in the 2006 Auditor-General’s report.\(^{14}\) In early 2007 the paper provided minimal coverage of issues relating to electoral finance and espoused a slightly critical orientation to the bill upon its introduction in July.\(^{15}\) This was in keeping with other newspapers around the country and in other forms of media. Generally however, early coverage of the bill wasn’t overly extensive, and this was noted by David Farrar on Kiwiblog where he expressed ‘disappointment at the coverage of the Election Finance Bill’ in his blogpost on the 11 August.\(^{16}\) Moreover, on 11 August John Armstrong, Herald political commentator, wrote in his weekly column that ‘so far public discussion with the iniquitous election finance bill is relatively isolated and uncoordinated’. As the editors of the Radio New Zealand programme Mediawatch (2007) point out, public opposition to the bill may have been relatively muted in August but less than three months later there was visible opposition to the bill. They concede this was perhaps partly to do with National Party’s campaign against it and partly to do with the Herald’s opposition to the bill.\(^{17}\)

\(^{14}\) This is a point Audrey Young (interview, 2008) strongly emphasized. She argues that the campaign ‘cannot be viewed in isolation from the quite aggressive approach we took to Parliament's response to the Auditor-General's report on unlawful election spending in 2005. It is the other side of the coin’.

\(^{15}\) For example, on the 13 August the editorial focussed on the proposed bill, claiming ‘advocacy and free speech threatened’. The following week another editorial titled ‘law on election spending is freedom of speech’ clearly set out the Herald’s response to the bill.

\(^{16}\) See Kiwiblog: http://www.kiwiblog.co.nz/

\(^{17}\) Furthermore, while not discussed in detail here, the coverage the Herald provided after the bill was passed into law is particularly interesting and warrants further attention. The paper’s strategy in 2008 appears to be a combination of either dropping the issue altogether or exposing the farcical nature of the Act. In relation to the latter, attention has been given to figures such as Andrew Moore (of www.dontvotelabour.org.nz) and Tim Shadbolt (Invercargill mayor who threatened to run anti-government billboards) in an attempt to highlight the unworkable nature of the bill and the petty attempts to prosecute those who oppose the law. To all extents and purposes, attention to the bill diminished after it was passed into law, implying that once legislation becomes entrenched in law, there is no interest in the media pursuing in further. It is particularly sententious to note that just as the Herald’s strident opposition to the bill dimmed, so too did the National Party’s. Distancing it from other parties wanting to break the law, by stating that people should respect and work within the law, National Party’s spokesman Bill English has perhaps adopted a rather conservative approach given his party’s previous strong opposition to the bill.
I. Campaign evolution

An examination of the Herald’s campaign necessitates a particular emphasis on dates. This is important because the way in which the campaign evolved potentially yields insights into the Herald’s motivations for running this campaign. It began abruptly and dramatically on the 12 November with the entire front page utilized to express abhorrence to the bill. Therese Arseneau (Interview, 2008) describes this as a bold move and one which stopped the government, determined to push on with the EFB despite serious criticism to the bill, in its tracks. As the campaign went on, however, Arseneau believes ‘it became somewhat one-eyed and overly fixated on freedom of speech’. This becomes clear when the campaigns evolution is documented.

![Figure 1](image)

The coverage on 12 November featured the blurred image of a woman being gagged and a red banner headline that read ‘Democracy under Attack’ (see figure 1), under which the newspaper claimed:

This week a far-reaching law re-appears in parliament – one that restricts public advocacy and campaigning in an election year. The Human Rights Commission says it’s a dramatic assault on human rights. Even some Government supporters have concerns. From today the Herald focuses on this bill, due to take effect in only seven weeks.

Alongside the image, a scathing front-page editorial began by stating ‘When is the Government going to get this message: democracy is not a device to keep the Labour Party in power’, and ending, ‘If these bills pass, they will be Labour’s epitaph’. Inside
the newspaper coverage continued with reports by political editor, Audrey Young and comments by political commentator, John Armstrong.

Given that the issue of political finance had appeared only twice in the weeks leading up to this front page attack on the EFB\(^{18}\), it could be argued that this coverage was excessively sensationalised.\(^ {19}\) Certainly, at this time the main domestic issue of newsworthy proportions were the anti-terrorist raids.\(^ {20}\) Critics have questioned the timing of this front page attack, arguing that the *Herald* should have waited for two days when the bill was due back before House after being reviewed by the Select Committee. Instead, the paper listed in anticipation ‘what we pick the committee will do’, and this reporting in anticipation became a recurrent trend throughout the campaign.

The following day the EFB was again front-page news and whilst a short article, quotes from the editorial inside and John Armstrong’s opinion piece were set out on the front page so as to entice readers to flick to pages 5-6 where a two-page spread under the red banner ‘New Law: Threat to Free Speech’ continued coverage. Alongside the day’s editorial a cartoon by Rod Emmerson featured Helen Clark resembling Lenin with the caption ‘Helengrad’ (see figure 2).

---

\(^{18}\) The first of which appeared on 8 November on page 6 of the newspaper, titled ‘MPs find a way to spend money on themselves’, and the other was John Armstrong’s brief mention of the bill in his ‘Beehive Diary’ on the 10 November.

\(^{19}\) The word ‘sensationalism’ is contested. To avoid sensationalism is difficult because sensationalism is built into the very concept of news. Prevailing concepts of newsworthy place a high value on the coverage of dramatic departures from the ordinary, and on presentation of events in an emotionally compelling way as possible. In the *Herald* campaign a degree of sensationalism was evident in the placing of a text box reading ‘tomorrow: read how the new law will gag community groups’ beside the day’s coverage.

\(^{20}\) Police use of terrorism laws to arrest a motley bunch of separatists, activists and protesters made world headlines. The debate about the link between protests and terror ran for weeks, as everyone wondered whether police had acted in the nick of time to halt sinister plotting or overreacted.
That the *Herald* endeavoured to provide a space for public debate on this issue was evident in a column devoted to a collection of ‘Reader’s Response’ to the newspaper’s campaign. These responses had been posted on the newspaper’s award-winning ‘Your Say’ website forum. It was perhaps not unpredictable that of the fifteen comments only one expressed disappointment with the *Herald*’s campaign:

Regardless of the merits or not of the EFB, I object to having your own opinions stuffed down my throat on the front page of the *Herald*. I buy a newspaper for news (of which there is usually little in the *Herald*), not your own propagandist opinions. Kindly confine this to where they belong: in the editorial column.

Certainly, while most of the comments praised and congratulated the *Herald* for taking a stance against the EFB, which suggested widespread opposition to the bill, that the paper had been subject to criticism for its coverage was implicitly implied in the editorial comment ‘No apologies for stand’:

Only rarely does a newspaper place its views on its front page, as the *Herald* did yesterday with its appeal to the Government to withdraw the EFB. Editorials, the vehicles for the newspapers comment and campaigning instinct, are normally placed alongside other opinion-based contributions. The front page is only used when it is desired to present an issue in the strongest possible way. The newspaper wants to ensure public debate on the topic is fostered, rather than allowed to wither and die. Yesterday’s front-page editorial will be sized on in some quarters as evidence of the *Herald* displaying biased journalism. If so, this paper is not about to resile – it is proudly biased – in favour of freedom of speech, and against the favouring of parliamentary incumbents, of any hue, with public finance, while denying a voice to those in the broader community. There is every reason for the *Herald* to do all it can to ensure its contents and implications are clear, and that it is widely debated.
This editorial clearly reflects the extent to which the Herald took seriously its role to inform citizens and provide a space for public debate. Whilst commendable and well received by readers, as indicated by the number of positive letters sent into the editor, a more negative sentiment was also evident. In Letters to the Editor many readers expressed their concern that the Herald was failing to look at the bigger picture, with some readers suggesting that the paper had a responsibility to properly inform readers as to why the Labour Government was introducing the bill rather than simply opposing it. Another correspondent argued that the paper ought to provide a ‘factual’ expose rather than a partisan expose, which suggested that the reader perceived the Herald to be treating the bill as an example of Labour-versus-National competition. It was further noted that the paper ought to put the bill into context and highlight the consequences of unchecked spending in politics as seen in the USA, of a magnitude many would consider to be undesirable in New Zealand. A significant issue to consider here is whether opinion pages actually provide a space for public debate, and thus uphold a public sphere, or whether readers merely contribute as private individuals.21

Two days after the campaign had begun; the bill was still front-page news. Coverage featured an editorial titled ‘Bill an insult to voter’s intelligence’ and a cartoon depicting Helen Clark ‘bending it like Beckham’ (see figure 3).

Figure 3

21 This is a similar point made by Putnam (2005) when he argues that television undermines social capital by dragging people from their communities and its association, and isolates and privatizes them in their living rooms.
Throughout the rest of November the campaign continued, combining basic reporting, editorials and opinion pieces. Cartoons were used regularly to reflect editorial content. Gradually, however, after attracting front-page coverage on 21 November, the campaign lost some of its initial sensationalism. Thus, it was quite dramatic when the EFB once again became head-line news with a bold front-page attack on the bill in early December (see figure 4). The caption ‘Speak now or hold your peace in 2008’ was superimposed against a bold red background, conveying a sense of urgency and panic. Under this was a subtitle ‘Our views versus their views’ with quotes from the *Herald’s* editorial condemning the bill on the one side, and quotes from other newspapers around the country which were in line with the *Herald’s* position.

![Figure 4](image)

The front-page coverage that appeared the following day is particularly noteworthy and relevant to the study of the *Herald’s* motivations and journalistic practices. The coverage of the bill itself was contained in a relatively small article, but what was significant was the strategic placement of this article against a particular image of Michael Cullen pointing his finger, under which a heading read: ‘Scumbag, scumbag, scumbag’. This image was in relation to Cullen calling John Key a ‘rich prick’ and then repeatedly a ‘scumbag’ in Parliament after Key referred to Otaki MP Darren Hughes as being ‘the son Helen never had’. This image is important because it reinforced the degree of bitterness between National and Labour politicians. The article was entitled ‘Foes unite to lift Election Cash Limit’, and the first paragraph read ‘Labour and National have been at war over the bill, but appear to be in accord

---

22 For example, on the 16 November the editorial titled ‘Democracy about more than voting’ was combined with a cartoon featuring a shark called the EFB saying to smaller fish ‘Trust me, I’m a vegetarian’ with the little fish replying back ‘I buy it’ and ‘Me too’.
on lifting the total amount a party can spend’. Taken together, the image reflects a state of war between the political parties but the article suggests that when it is in a party’s self interest they can cooperate. This has the effect of suggesting a political game in New Zealand where it is politicians versus public. The way in which the Herald placed two different issues together highlights the extent to which the EFB was used as a ‘trigger issue’ for a story about something else. Specifically, coverage of the bill became a mechanism for discussing political relations, the balance of power and the chances different political parties had of winning the 2008 election or forming a coalition.

Rejuvenated, the campaign continued but diminished discernibly throughout December and was generally left to be depicted in cartoons and commented on in the political column of the paper. The campaign briefly gained some momentum after Helen Clark was quoted as describing the media, and especially the Herald, as ‘shallow and error-prone’ at a journalism conference in Wellington. She noted that ‘we [politicians] put up with quite a lot, especially when a newspaper is in full campaign mode, like the Herald is at the moment, and it can run for weeks, if not months, with full-blooded attacks, front-page headline, opinion editorials, editorial, attack stories, cartoons, you name it’. Moreover, Helen Clark stated that there was little point in complaining to the print media’s self-regulatory watchdog, the Press Council, because ‘that just doesn’t get you anywhere’.23

On 18 December the bill was due before the House for its third reading, yet coverage of the bill in the Herald was surprisingly absent with only one article appearing on page six. After the bill had passed into law on the 19 December, however, it was once again back on the front-page with a bold heading ‘they’ve done it: election watchdog set to pounce’ against a red background. The cartoon depicted Helen Clark building a coffin for the Labour Government labelled ‘Electoral Finance Bill’ (see figure 5).

II. Content

Henderson & Cross (2004) note that the Herald (as well as the Press and the Dominion Post) provide a generous and highly sought after ‘opinion-editor’ space where current issues are debated in much greater depth than television coverage allows. The opinion section of the newspaper was an essential element of the campaign. It included articles by John Armstrong, Garth George, John Roughan, Bill Ralston, Jim Hopkins and Fran O’Sullivan. Nearly all of the opinion pieces published during the campaign expressed criticism of the bill. Also evident were opinion pieces by non-journalists, such as academics Therese Arseneau and Andrew Geddis and lawyers David Cochrane and Linda Clark. The Herald on Sunday opinion article by ex-Alliance politician Matt McCarten provided an interesting element to the campaign. Given that the Labour Party was pushing through this legislation and McCarten is aligned with the Left, his criticism of the bill lent credibility to the Herald’s campaign.

A criticism levelled against the campaign was that the paper didn’t seek balanced coverage, especially in the opinion section. It is debatable whether this lack of balance was purposeful (and designed to stimulate negative sentiment to the bill) or whether the majority of people really were against the EFB or whether those that did support the EFB hadn’t bothered to submit opinion pieces. Moreover, whilst the paper did include an article by Nicky Hager in the opinion section, a distinction wasn’t clearly made (or if it was, not emphasized) between views on the EFB and support for some type of political finance reform more generally.
The addition of cartoons and images were an important component of the Herald’s coverage, highlighting the extent which the media’s role is not merely to inform but also to entertain. Arguably, whilst political finance is an important issue it is not likely to be one that generates excitement or public interest. Therefore, cartoons are useful for disseminating the issues involved in an entertaining, perceptive and accessible manner. Images of politicians were particularly useful for ridicule. Further, the newspaper undertook regular public opinion polls, which had the effect of suggesting that National was ahead of Labour because of how the public felt about the EFB. The use of the paper’s website to assess public opinion and as a forum for public debate is particularly significant. APN’s company results for the year 2007 recorded the Herald’s website as a source of strong online organic revenue growth.

The first principle of the New Zealand Press Council (2003) is accuracy and states that ‘publications (newspapers and magazines) should be guided at all times by accuracy, fairness and balance, and should not deliberately mislead or misinform readers by commission, or omission’. However, a number of criticisms can be levelled against the Herald with regards to the accuracy of some of its editorial content. In late April 2008 the Coalition for Open Government (COG) had its complaint against the Herald upheld. The Press Council found that the newspapers front-page editorials on 12 November and 4 December contained a ‘mis-statement of fact’, which the paper should have promptly corrected. Specifically, it found that the newspaper misled its readers by telling them that under the EFB everyone who engaged in electioneering would need to register, without properly informing them that the registration threshold was in fact $1,000 for electorate campaigns and $12,000 for national campaigns, something that affects considerably fewer people. The Coalition’s spokesperson Stephen Price commented that ‘we strongly support the Herald’s right to comment on this particular law [but] it’s vital that the media doesn’t mislead the public about the basic facts. We think the Herald was exaggerating the problems with the bill in order to bolster the paper’s campaign against it’ (COG, 2008).

24 The COG was reformed for 2007 to lobby for fairer and more transparent electoral finance laws. It supported the thrust of the Electoral Finance Act, thought it was critical of some aspects of the law and the way it was passed.

25 See http://bsa.govt.nz/decisions/2007/2007-094.htm. Its complaint against the Herald campaign was the first time the Press Council had ruled that such a prominent, vigorous and sustained campaign by a newspaper contained a significant inaccuracy.
Furthermore, there have been concerns regarding the accuracy of basic reporting during the campaign. Political editor Audrey Young covered the bill from its introduction and eventual passing into legislation, with additional reporting by Mike Houlahan and Clare Trevett. Whilst reporting presupposed objectivity and a reporting of the facts, Audrey Young’s opposition to the bill was discernable. Two specific examples are worth noting. First, on 13 November Audrey Young published an article which suggested opposition to the bill was near-universal. Certainly, there was widespread opposition to the bill but that it was as rampant as Audrey Young suggests is questionable. In a blogpost later that week Kiwiblog pointed out that an examination of submissions to the bill reveals that whilst two thirds of submissions could be construed as being emphatically opposed to the bill, the Civil Union rate ran at more than 90%. Whilst a contentious point, they note that this comparison reveals the opposition to the EFB was not as unprecedented as is suggested in the article.26

Second, Young wrote a follow-up story to the ‘Democracy under Attack’ front-page editorial, which was published online. In this she declared that ‘public opinion has swung behind the Herald’s call for the EFB to be scrapped’. Further, using the Herald’s Your Say Forum as the yardstick she notes that ‘that the campaign has won the support today of National Leader John Key, who reiterated a pledge to scrap the law if his party leads the next Government, and New Zealand Broadcasting School lecturer Paul Norris’. However, the paper failed to make a distinction between Paul Norris calling for the EFB to be scrapped (as the title suggests) and Paul Norris welcoming a campaigning newspaper. It was quoted in the paper that ‘Mr Norris said it was common for overseas newspapers to run editorials on their front page and he believed the Herald was seeking to awaken the public on what it considers to be a very important issues’. There is no suggestion here that Norris was personally opposed to the bill. Also slightly misleading is the suggestion that Key had been influenced by the paper’s campaign, when in fact the National Party and in particular its leader, John Key, and deputy leader, Bill English, had opposed the bill from its introduction.

26 Many question how relevant the counting of submissions to select committees is.
III. Sources

National Party press releases constituted a major source of information in the campaign. This is perhaps predictable given that the National Party was stridently opposing the bill. The extent to which the language used in these press releases was then repeated in the *Herald* is extraordinary. For example, a press release from Bill English stated ‘when coupled with the Electoral Finance Bill, the Appropriation Bill is an anti-democratic double-whammy’. A few days later an editorial read ‘In sum, this double-whammy represents an assault on this country’s democratic well-being’ and another editorial in mid-November stated the ‘first of Labour’s odious double-whammy is in place’. Moreover, as well as the press release, speeches and oral debates from Parliament were often quoted. In particular John Key and Bill English were often cited and given space to advocate their views. Quoting from the National Party could be said to legitimate and reinforce the *Herald’s* position against the EFB.

Besides politicians and political parties, a number of interest groups were used as sources of information. The two most auspicious bodies to condemn the bill, the Law Society and the Human Rights Commission were extensively quoted. The views of right-wing Sensible Sentencing Trust were also given exposure. In terms of prominent individuals, John Boscawen, David Farrar and Tim Shadbolt were all used as information sources. Significantly however, David Farrar and John Boscawen appeared in the media as independent commentators. While it is mentioned Farrar is National-aligned, it is not stated that in 2005 he was also National Party’s Wellington Central Campaign manager. And while it is noted Boscawen is a former Act Party member it is not made clear he was an Act Party fundraiser and an associate member of the Business Roundtable.

---

27 In another example, a press release from Bill English on the 22 November used the phrase in the ‘11th hour’, which was used in several editorials and reports.
28 The relationship between the *Herald* and the National Party during the campaign against the EFB is an interesting issue, and is a point discussed at length in following chapters.
29 Indeed, press releases from this group noted that families of murder victims were uniting to fight against the bill and were prepared to go to prison if the bill went ahead in its current form. The group argued that third parties should be able to come out in support of, or against, government policy, and that the EFB was an attempt to silence public debate. Significantly, the spokesman and legal adviser for the group is Stephen Franks, whom has been publicly critical of the bill.
IV. Story-telling frames

The assumption underpinning research on agenda-setting is that the media may be able to tell the public what to think about but they cannot tell the public how to think about it. Recent research on framing argues the reverse and contends that the media do in fact tell a public how to think about issues. McCombs and Shaw (1972) claim that ‘journalist perspectives direct attention toward certain attributes of issues and away from others’ (p. 177). In this sense, a frame is best conceived as a metaphorical window on the world and one which provides a certain perspective (Goffman, 1974).

The Herald campaign against the EFB was organized around three particular days, which provide a frame that influences what and how readers thought about the bill. First, the coverage on 12 November and before the select committee reported back to the House. Second, coverage on 4 December, the day after the committee of the whole House met for the third reading of the bill. Third, coverage on 19 December which was the day after the bill passed into law. It is informative to look at the headlines that appeared in the papers coverage of the EFB on these three days:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12-Nov-07</td>
<td>Editorial: Democracy under attack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Democracy under attack from Government Bill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bill gives MPs big financial head-start on challengers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tightening up the rules on election spend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Most submissions to Electoral Finance Bill want changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-Dec-07</td>
<td>Editorial: speak now, or hold your peace in 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clark to tough it out on election cash bill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Government offers National 11th hour talks on Electoral Finance Bill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-Dec-07</td>
<td>Editorial: Self-interest offends democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Electoral Finance legislation: what it all means</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>They’ve done it: 63 of our 121 MPs pass the Electoral Finance Bill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Small parties most vocal about bill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Election watchdog set to pounce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Read blow by blow debate on the election bill</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These headlines suggest a number of salient points. The first is the extent to which the EFB is framed as a battle or a race between political parties, and in particular,
between National and Labour. The use of military discourse reinforces politics as a war with winners and losers. Second, the paper sets up fairly conventional dichotomies, such as: National-versus-Labour; MPs-versus-Public; Money-versus-Morality; Democracy-versus-Helengrad. Thus the frame readers view the bill through is one of conflict, competition and opposition.

Third, the use of the term Electoral Cash Bill and the ‘public purse’ is significant. Arguably the title Electoral Finance Bill was used as an attempt to downplay controversy, and its rather dull sounding name may be a reason why the EFB took so long to enter into public debate. The personalisation of social and political issues is a common way of engaging the reader interest. Thus utilizing more emotive and suggestive language such as ‘purse’ and ‘cash’ rather than finance, the Herald made the EFB more accessible and perhaps more meaningful. It is debatable whether this is perceived as a good or bad thing.

V. Comparative Analysis

A review of the coverage given to the EFB in other newspaper indicates that the Herald was not alone in voicing opposition to the bill. However, what distinguished the Herald from other newspapers was the decision to run an explicit campaign against the bill. It is worth briefly summarising the coverage of the EFB found in other newspapers.

At rival paper publishers, Fairfax, it was initially thought that the Herald’s response to the EFB was too extreme. In his political blog on the House, the Press newspapers political correspondent, Colin Espinar, reckoned that the Herald had got so uptight about the bill that now ‘its readers know they cannot turn to this organ for balanced unbiased coverage on this particular topic’ because ‘what comes back before the House is likely to be nowhere near the assault on democracy that is claimed by its political opponents’. Yet a month later, Colin Espinar joined the Herald in

---

30 The language used includes phrases such a ‘under attack’, ‘head-start on challengers’, ‘speak now, or hold your peace’, ‘to tough it out’, ‘set to pounce’ and ‘blow by blow’. The editorial content echoes this notion of a fight or challenge. For example, the editorial on 12 November notes ‘Helen Clark and her lieutenants’, and ‘Labour probably has the more committed and articulate foot soldiers’ and further, ‘Now in desperation it wants to screw the scum’. Likewise the 4 December editorial reads ‘there will be no winners’ and ‘it will be a pyrrhic victory’. To continue this same theme, on the 19 December the editorial reads ‘rebels with a cause’.

31 Indeed, at this stage it was not clear what shape the bill would be in after the Select Committee had reported back on it having considered dozens of heavily critical submissions. See “The Electoral
opposing the bill. A critical sentiment was also evident in the writings of columnists such as David Round. Moreover, by late November editorials were claiming ‘Flawed Legislation’ and opinion pieces which had appeared in the Herald by Therese Arseneau and Andrew Geddis were also published in the Press. There were some inconsistencies in the coverage of the EFB by the two newspapers. For example, at the same time as the Herald focused on protests against the EFB, simultaneously the Press columnist David Round (2007) questioned ‘where is the public anger over the Electoral Finance Bill?’

The Dominion Post ran a similar story to the Herald and expressed criticism to the EFB, most explicitly in the editorial content. In late December the editorial commented on ‘Labour’s Lust for Control’ and concluded Labour had indulged in ‘[A] Pigheaded way to make Law’. There were attempts to achieve some objectivity, for example, in late November Bill English was given space to voice his opinions on the Bill and the following week Annette King was too given this space. In his weekly column, Chris Trotter (2007a) challenged readers to reassess the motivations behind the Herald’s campaign. He disagreed with Nine-to-Noon presenter, Mr Tully, that the campaign was an example of crusading journalism and ‘a very, very, bold and welcome move’. Instead, Trotter argued that ‘far from being a welcome example of crusading journalism, it is a farcically retro attempt to entrench the National Party’s strategic advantages’.

If read in isolation to other newspapers and forms of media, the coverage of the EFB in the Otago Daily Times would suggest the bill was a minor political issue. A few articles on the bill appeared in a piecemeal basis throughout November and December, and the two editorials that mentioned the bill suggested the paper’s opposition to it. Tremain’s cartoons reflected editorial opposition and opinion pieces by Andrew

[32] He condemned the bill claiming that even autocratic Sir Robert Muldoon would have not endorsed the bill because he would have know that any attempt to do so would have lead to ‘blood on the streets’. Canterbury university law lecturer, Therese Arseneau, said that Helen Clark had ceased to resemble Muldoon, and now resembled Venezuelan Hugo Chivas.

[33] It is interesting to note that on 23 November the same article by Therese Arseneau appeared as been published in the Herald only a few days earlier but titled ‘Flawed Electoral Law’ rather than the Herald’s title ‘MPs need to regain trust of the People’. Further, the same article by Andrew Geddis appeared first in the Herald and later in the Press
Geddis, John Armstrong and Colin James were of similar content to the opinion pieces in the *Herald*. A number of articles by columnist Simon Cunliffe provided a more balanced view of the bill than could be found in other newspapers.
Chapter Three

A Question of Motives

Orchestrating a campaign against the Electoral Finance Bill (EFB), the Herald renounced a mere messenger role for media. Certainly, the EFB had implication for free speech and democracy and its discussion was of vital importance in a liberal democracy such as New Zealand. The role that the editor and senior journalists at the Herald saw the paper as playing and the rationale for such a role is the subject of this chapter. It is anticipated this is a contested study as there are complex and competing factors that potentially motivate a newspaper to take a strong stance against government policy. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this study, this discussion is organised around three broad categories: the ideology of watchdog journalism, the prospect of gaining political advantage, and commercial intent.

The study of motivating factors is particularly relevant given the controversial comments by Prime Minister Helen Clark about the campaign. Accusing the Herald of ‘formenting happy mischief’, Clark suggested the paper had a vested commercial and political interest in running the campaign. Further, she argued the Herald was ‘a Tory paper that had shown no charity to the Labour Party in its 91 years of existence’ (quoted in Young, 2008b). It is of questionable strategic judgement for the Prime Minister to speak out about her opinion on the quality and neutrality of the country’s news media, and her remarks presuppose a question about the nature and expectation

34 In response to the question ‘what did you think of Helen Clark’s comment’, Audrey Young (interview, 2008) replied ‘I have nothing to say’. Moreover, on the 9 December 2007 Mediawatch overviewed the Herald campaign, questioning whether all readers approved of the paper’s strident campaign. In opposing the bill did the Herald have a vested interest? Mediawatch tried to interview editor Tim Murphy but he declined to be interviewed, and they were told that all that needed to be known could be found in the Herald’s editorials. They say this is a shame given that the paper has taken the high-ground on principles such as free speech and openness of debate on this issue.
of the media-politics relationship in New Zealand.\textsuperscript{35} Notwithstanding, the way in which the \textit{Herald} reacted was conventional of media in New Zealand.\textsuperscript{36}

I. Watchdog Journalism: an ideology in practice?

According to Claire Robinson, political marketing specialist at Massey University, the EFB ‘strikes at the heart of what [the media] think their role is, which is to be the guardians of democracy and defenders of free speech’ (Mediawatch, 2007).\textsuperscript{37} The remarks of Audrey Young (interview, 2008) reflect this conception of \textit{The Herald} as watchdog/Fourth Estate:

\begin{quote}
We thought it was a draconian piece of legislation that would place new and unacceptable restrictions on free speech over far too long a regulated period. News organisations have long taken a close interest in freedom of expression issues, often related to restrictions on its own freedoms. In this instance it was more about new restrictions on public expression. The bill was a crude, rushed, unworkable response to what happened in 2005.
\end{quote}

Young further notes that ‘as regards the campaign itself, the idea came from the editor and was immediately supported by all staff in the gallery - we had all covered the Bill at select committee and were aware of how flawed it was’. Indeed \textit{Listener} features editor, Joanne Black (2007), notes ‘the legislation was so flawed that it would be negligent of the media not to oppose it’. The idea that the EFB related to the media’s perception of their role suggests the campaign represents a unique and intense case of political campaigning, rather than an indication the paper seeks a more active and activist role in politics and society.

\textsuperscript{35} The words of former New Zealand Prime Ministers’ speak volumes. Robert Muldoon (1992, p.80) ‘it is a wise politician who knows the value of the news media if dealt with intelligently’, and Mike Moore (1992, p.81) ‘for the smart politician there is also the realization that grudges against journalists are not worth harbouring because the reality is that the relationship is symbiotic, one of mutual need’.

\textsuperscript{36} Helen Clark has been ridiculed for double standards after her ‘attack’ on the \textit{Herald} followed her condemnation of the military regime in Fiji after it expelled an Australian reporter for accusing the country’s finance minister of tax evasion. At the time Clark commented that ‘its inconceivable that you can hold open, free and fair elections if you have media intimidation’ (‘Clark condemns Fiji Times expulsion’, \textit{New Zealand Herald}, 02 May 2008). Moreover, rather than taking seriously the Prime Ministers criticism of partisanship, her concerns were sidelined by an attack on her personal relationship with husband Peter Davis. After Davis spoke out and criticised the \textit{Herald} campaign, the media accused Davis of becoming Clark’s lapdog. See Cross & Henderson (2004) for a discussion of the personalisation of politics in the media.

\textsuperscript{37} The rationale here is that the \textit{Herald} perceived the EFB as a restriction on free speech – which potentially curtails power of the media. In opposing the EFB, the \textit{Herald} was defending their journalistic privileges to act as the Fourth Estate in a liberal democracy.
Equally however, it may also signal an attempt by the *Herald* to engage in public journalism. After all, since 2004 APN has been involved with the public journalism inspired initiative Readers First. This project requires newspapers to focus reporting on topics of concern to citizens and to cover those topics from the perspective of citizens rather than politicians, experts and other elite actors. The objective is to inform the public and provide a platform for inclusive public debate. Certainly, the general tenure of the campaign resonated with public opinion, which did seem to think the bill was flawed. Moreover, the campaign mobilized citizens to voice opposition to the Bill, primarily through the papers website and its ‘Your Say’ forum. To this extent, the campaign is eminent as journalism that revitalizes the public sphere. This role for media is fundamentally important, as Steve Maharey argues:

> I am incredibly sentimental when it comes to the news media. I believe that they should provide a free marketplace for ideas, ensure the activities of the powerful are scrutinized; and inform citizens so they can make their own well-founded decisions about public policy. I cannot see how we can have a democratic society if the media do not function in this way (1992, p.90).

Whilst the *Herald*’s 2007 intervention was a promising campaign, a number of more critical observations problematize the watchdog/Fourth Estate justification. First, the purported objective to stimulate public debate was generally supplanted throughout the campaign by a recurring trend to articulate the opinion of the editor. For example, the paper reported on ‘what *we* think the [select committee] will do’. This reflected the *Herald* adopting the position as expert on matters relating to the EFB, an issue Rudd and Hayward allude to:

> The emergence of the political journalist as a critical expert may seem to be a desirable development from a democratic point of view if it strengthens political accountability. But there are inherent dangers in political journalists playing such a role. The danger is that political journalists become cynics rather than critics, who aim to ‘expose and entertain rather than educate their audiences (2005, p.12)

Second, a former newspaper editor perceptively argues that ‘when a media organ become pro-active in any area, it automatically discards at least one element of

---

38 The campaign against the EFB is the second time the *Herald* has opposed government policy by way of a front-page editorial – the first was its campaign against the Privy Council. Are these unique cases or is The Herald becoming a campaigning newspaper? 39 Another example, on 15 November the *Herald* included an article titled ‘what should happen’ and which detailed a list of nine recommendations the paper proposed for improving the EFB.
objectivity – neutrality – but it does not have to discard others, such as fairness, balance and accuracy’ (Harvey, 1992, p.141).40 Essentially, for the paper to maintain credibility and legitimacy as the Fourth Estate/watchdog there is a responsibility to provide public citizens with quality information. This is essential if citizens are to choose their leaders and policies. As discussed in the previous chapter, there have been concerns about the accuracy of some of the content of the campaign. Nicky Hager (interview, 2008) believes the Herald failed to provide a balanced perspective and that many ordinary people were left assuming that the EFB was a bad thing, when it is a sensible measure following other similar countries. Certainly, the issue of political finance is not isolated to New Zealand and has been subject to debate worldwide. An account of the approaches other countries have adopted to political finance, such as Canada and Australia, may have generated a more informative and balanced campaign (see Geddis, 2006).

Third, the Herald may have overstated the threat to free speech and democracy. In an interview with Hager (2008) it was pointed out that the drafting errors of the bill prior to the Select Committee were ‘hugely and disingenuously blown out of proportion’. He further noted that the ‘interesting thing about the Herald’s campaign is that it actually increased in shrillness after bill was returned from the Select Committee and the faults had been substantially removed’. Furthermore, whilst other newspapers covered the bill and were generally in opposition to it, there was nothing comparable to the Herald’s stance against the EFB. It is debatable whether this suggests that the Herald’s stance ‘threat to democracy’ was exaggerated. Indeed, there was no coverage on televisions Close Up or Campbell Live.41 The coverage given to the bill in the Listener magazine was minimal, and generally restricted to editorial and comment rather than in-depth analysis42 However, this may not be indicative of an

40 Holli Semetko (1996) argue that objectivity and balance actually demand contradictory practices. To be objective is to let news values determine the coverage an event receives. News values are the working assumptions of journalists about the extent to which an event matters and what is significant about it. To be balanced, by contrast, is to give equal coverage to all the parties, irrespective of the news value of their contributions. See Street (2001, p.19).
41 It is worth noting here that several attempts have been made to contact both Close Up and Campbell Live, to investigate why the EFB wasn’t covered on these programmes. The difficulty in communication indicates some issues with public accountability of the media.
42 This is significant because the Listener is also owned by APN. A lack of coverage of the EFB in the Listener could be a reflection of the magazines diminishing role as an investigative magazine rather than reflecting the insignificance of the EFB. See Campbell (2008).
erroneous campaign but on the contrary, it perhaps suggests the *Herald* was fulfilling its watchdog role whilst other forms of media were lacking.

**II. Political motivations: The Herald as an unelected legislator**

According to Audrey Young the campaign against the EFB was not a success ‘if success is measured by whether the bill passes or was amended into a workable law’. However, the *Herald* campaign was successful if success is equated with political influence. For example, the campaign was a factor in the antipathy between the media and the politicians defending the EFB, which was most visible in Helen Clark’s attacks on the paper for promoting anti-Labour bias. For the National Party, the content of the campaign became a political resource and was liberally used in their speeches in Parliament (refer to appendix 1). The scope of its political influence potentially suggests the campaign represented the *Herald’s* attempt to cultivate an image as the newspaper politician’s watch.

In a well-read blog called Poneke, the relationship between media and politicians in New Zealand is discussed. The blog notes that ‘gone are the days when gallery journalists see their role as reporting to the public what government and members of parliament are doing - now see themselves as kingmakers in politics [and] entitled to lecture and hector politicians as well as tell them what to do’. This view is supplemented by that of journalist and media commentator Tom Frewen (2008), who argues the media increasingly see themselves as players and are abandoning their traditional role as reporters and commentators to go ‘into politics’. The implicit expression of this argument is found in the *Listener* magazine. In the 2006 edition of its annual ‘top 50 most influential New Zealanders’, *Herald* editor Tim Murphy was listed seventeenth. The justification for this positioning was that:

> Ironically for someone who’s the editor of the most influential newspaper in the country, the New Zealand Herald, Tim Murphy detests personal publicity. This, traditionalists would say, is

---


44 The Poneke blog is anonymously published, written by Wellington journalist David McLaughlin. This quote was accessed from the blog written 29 January 2007, accessible: http://poneke.wordpress.com/
entirely proper. The proof of an editor’s merit is in the printing, and the Herald, though slowly losing circulation in a tight market remains pre-eminent as a political and social agenda-setter. This year, says Jane Clifton, they’ve made big calls. When they take over a story they own and operate it.” Examples include the Kahui case, the Taito Phillip Field inquiry, the electoral spending controversy, and the Rugby World Cup stadium debate. When the Herald decides that something’s important, politicians tend to think it’s important. Under Murphy it has become a genuine campaigning paper. The Herald also has the best political, business and social issues writers, and this year it launched the Business, a classy weekly supplement (Welsh, 2006; emphasis added).

Furthermore, the extent to which the Herald and the National Party’s opinion on the EFB aligned has led many to suggest the paper essentially became a mouthpiece for the National Party and part of its distribution network. A perceived relationship between the National Party and the Herald does not necessarily negate the possibility the paper merely utilised the arguments made by the National Party to promote its own opposition to the bill. However, it does stimulate a question of whether a newspaper or media organization should align itself (explicitly or implicitly) to one major party’s policy on a particular piece of legislation. As a consequence of the perceived alliance the Herald may have lost credibility as a watchdog.

Additionally, the campaign is described as part of the Herald’s anti-Labour strategy. This is a view advocated by Helen Clark, where she perceives the campaign as an extension of the paper’s hostility to centre-left political parties. The possibility the paper is biased against Labour (or at the very least, its lack of balanced coverage of both National and Labour) was discussed on Nine-to-Noon with Kathryn Ryan (13 April 2008). It is argued that anti-Labour sentiment is evident in the Herald’s aggressive campaign against EFB and the tone of the columnists and editorials. Cited as being particularly anti-Labour are John Armstrong, Fran Sullivan and Garth George. More radically, it is suggested the campaign may be part of a broader campaign for a change in government. Certainly, Hager (interview, 2008) argues that ‘it seemed that the content of the bill was not the point - the people behind the campaign wanted to keep going with their anti-government campaigning’. This is an

---

45 This is a point discussed by Nicky Hager with regard to the Frontline programme ‘For the Public Good’ which aired in 1989. The documentary – also about political finance - was highly critical of the Fourth Labour Government’s links to big business and its funding. Like with the Herald’s campaign, the programme was heavily criticized for lack of balance and objectivity.

46 This is because many perceived the National Party as acting in self-interest. Hager (interview, 2008) argues that the ‘Nats didn’t like the restrictions on big money in elections, that was its obvious motivation [and therefore] the totally sound rationale for the bill got lost in the attack month after month from the National Party’
interesting argument and there are legitimate motivating factors to suggest that Herald staff might seek a change in government because this would produce a wealth of new stories to report. However, it is an overtly simplistic argument and requires clarification of at least two assumptions. First, there is a difference between favouring a change and actively conspiring for a change in government. Second, an anti-Labour sentiment does not necessarily conflate to anti-government sentiment. The Labour Party is the incumbent whereas National Party cannot introduce policy, which necessarily constrains the criticism levelled against it.

III. Herald: a commercial enterprise

To put political interests aside, a case could also be made for commercial interests as a motivating factor in the Herald campaign. McChesney (1997) argues that in the United States the notion of a public service – that there should be some motive for media other than profit – is in rapid retreat, if not decline.47 There are mixed views as to whether this argument applies to New Zealand. The media was deregulated in the 1980s, along with the financial markets and state industries. There are currently no rules governing the size of media companies or preventing cross-media or foreign ownership.48 In addition to its ownership of the Herald, APN owns nine other provincial daily newspapers in New Zealand and a large circulation of magazines such as New Zealand Listener and Woman’s Weekly. APN also owns 38.8% of the New Zealand Press Association Ltd and in 2007 commanded 42.8% of the daily newspaper circulation49, 28.1% of which was accounted for by the Herald. The paper has a daily circulation of around 200,000 copies, giving it more than twice the circulation of any other daily paper in New Zealand. The main competition to APN is John Fairfax Holdings Ltd, which owns the Dominion Post and the Press.

47 McChesney argues that the rise of neo-liberalism is the main factor that accounts for the corporate media boom and the collapse of democratic political life. He argues that under neo-liberal ideology, the public is regarded not as a democratic polity but as a mass of consumers.
48 In New Zealand there is no requirement for a license to print a newspaper. Broadcasting Tribunal, which had been responsible for the issuing of licenses and monitoring quality, was abolished in 1989. See Cross & Henderson (2004).
49 Its main newspaper competitor John Fairfax Holdings Ltd had 48.3%
According to Comrie, New Zealand’s deregulated media market reflects the global picture of growing ownership concentration, competition and drive for profits (2006, p.177). Competition with television dollars has resulted in newspapers increasingly adopting a tabloid style, restricting space for serious news comment (Cross & Henderson, 2004). The new style of television which emerged after the deregulation of 1980s favouring emotionalism, filmic values, editorializing and sensational headlines (Atkinson, 2004; Edwards, 1996) was followed by newspapers in the 1990s’s. This was evident in the use of colour, graphics and white space, and larger pictures and headlines. Populism sells news and, as former Dominion Post editor Richard Long argues, tabloid-style front-page coverage is important because over half a newspapers sales can be casual (Luxton, 2003, p.79). This perhaps accounts for The Herald’s front-page editorials and emotive headlines, such as ‘Democracy under Attack’.

Although political stories are still covered there is a tendency to sensationalize comment rather than provide a balanced approach (Cross & Henderson, 2004). Comrie (2006, p.178) argues that because political issues are rarely visual, emotive, conflictual or intense, political journalists have a problem. This is captured in a comment from former gallery journalist Oliver Riddell (2002, p.203) ‘news editors want political news that compete with wars, murders, rapes, traffic incidents, corruption, sporting triumphs and disasters, and other news items that are a long way from the traditional reports of what happened and who said what in Parliament’. Therefore, reporters meet demand by accentuating conflict, adding colour adjectives and becoming more opinionated and aggressive. These rudiments are clearly visible in the Herald campaign.

Certainly, elements of hype were evident throughout such as images, the use of colour, the timing of the campaign, and bold headlines using emotive language. Moreover, that the campaign was dropped (or at the very least, slowed) after the bill became law suggests a large component of the campaign was sustained on the hype generated by the newspaper.\textsuperscript{50} Critics claim the Herald prized hype over substance but there may be raison d’être for this strategy. Whilst the media market in New Zealand is not as

\textsuperscript{50} This is a point made by the Coalition for Open Government.
competitive as it is in UK and US, there is still a competition for sales and concerted efforts to attract more readers. Moreover, there has been speculation recently that the *Herald’s* circulation levels have dropped (despite Auckland’s population growth) whilst the *Dominion Post* and *Waikato Times* have held or grown their circulation. Thus the stance against the EFB potentially cultivated publicity for the paper, which is essential given the *Herald* has indicated it has some aspirations of becoming a national daily. Additionally, a strong stance against the EFB potentially creates publicity for the newspapers website. This is reflected in APN’s 2007 shareholder report where it is stated that ‘[the] *Herald Online*, New Zealand’s most popular news website, is already profitable and grew revenue by over 80% during the year. In December we completed the acquisition of Finda, New Zealand’s most popular online business directory, and we are looking forward to full year benefit of this fast growing business in 2008’ (pg.5).

Nonetheless, the association of commercial pressures with hype is one-dimensional. It obscures the capacity for changes to the political process to impel hype in the media. The passing of a bill under MMP is complex and while this cannot justify hype, it does indicate the propensity for hype to emerge as the dominant news strategy. According to Comrie (2006) MMP has changed the relationship between media and politicians. It is a more complicated political system for the general public to understand and consequently, has increased the importance of the media in reporting and analyzing the political process (p.182). Not only are there more parties and viewpoints to cover but complex negotiations between political parties emerge to develop policy and get measures through parliament. This means journalists have more to delve into and reporters have far more work to cover, which they often lack the resources to undertake (Palmer, 2002, p.175-7).

As a final point, the causal relationship between hype and public opinion is unclear. The idea that newspapers cultivate hype to make issues more appealing to the public is as viable as the idea that the public demand more sensationalism. Certainly, the EFB was proposed at the same time as the Anti-Smacking Bill and the terror laws were being debated in Parliament and in the public arena. These two issues are both socially controversial and more affecting than financial issues. Consequently, it may

---

51 It is difficult to get accurate circulation figures.
have been necessary for the Herald to make the EFB more emotive and identifiable in order to bring public attention to it.

**IV. Herald: negotiating conflicting interests**

The Herald campaign illustrates the complex and contradictory roles for media. There is indication the Herald attempted a watchdog role and at the same time, sought political influence and was guided by neo-liberal objectives. The assumption that the latter always undermine the former is dubious. McGregor (2007) reaches a similar conclusion, and is reluctant to conclude that great journalism is incompatible with good business in the context of the current media market place.

A study of motivating factors is manifest within a larger inquiry: is political campaigning, of the kind demonstrated by the Herald against the EFB, desirable in New Zealand? In a personal interview with Audrey Young she defends her part in the campaign:

> We provided comprehensive coverage on an important issue and raised awareness on the defects of the bill. Personally speaking, it is the best work I have done since my extensive coverage of the collapse of the Alliance. But in the end, however, that is a subjective judgment for others to make.

Certainly, it is true that judgements of the campaign involve an examination of the values inherent in political communication in New Zealand and the role citizens anticipate the media to play in the public sphere. It also necessitates an appreciation of how current values and expectations are changing and the factors that may account for this change.
Chapter Four

Re-defining the public sphere: some conclusions

The news media are dangerously under-debated in New Zealand society (Comrie and McGregor, 1992, p.9). The dissertation has attempted to address this lack of debate by using the Herald’s campaign against the Electoral Finance Bill (EFB) as a case study for exploring political communication in New Zealand. This study indicates three themes for robust debate. The first relates to dynamics of media power in the political process. The second relates to the complacent use of the phrase ‘in the public interest’ to justify the content and packaging of political communication. The third issue refers to the impact that technological change has on the traditional role of newspapers. This chapter discusses these three themes and in the context of the Herald campaign, re-examines the public sphere in New Zealand.

I. Media, politics and meaning

The Herald campaign highlights the capacity of the media to bring public attention to a particular issue. It is situated within a broader examination of media power. According to Swanson and Mancini (1996) there are two related developments associated with modernity. First, the weakening of political parties; and second, the proliferation of an increasingly independent mass media system that pursues an autonomous agenda. The suggestion there is media malaise in New Zealand is contested, as is the idea the media have become more powerful comparative to political parties.\(^\text{52}\) Rather, the Herald campaign is perhaps best envisaged as an

\(^{52}\) The term ‘media malaise’ is used as an umbrella term to cover the claim that mass media have a substantial and malign impact on politics and social life. It is interesting to consider the extent to which The Herald had more power as opposition to the Bill than parliamentary parties. Certainly, The Herald has access to resources and could show up politicians as incompetent, self-serving or corrupt. As the response following Helen Clark’s attack on The Herald highlight, politicians are not as able to criticize media.
example of ‘mediatization’ (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999) in New Zealand. This term describes the extent to which the media have assumed the character of necessity in the political domain. As Hayward and Rudd (2005) argue, it refers to ‘media politics’ rather than politics by the media.

The focus here is the discursive power of the media in the political process, where discourses construct and make real the objective of knowledge they represent. In other words, media power operates through the way it privileges particular discourses and constructs particular forms of reality. Drawing on cultural studies, Douglas Keller (1995) argues that rather than focusing on media bias (which assumes the possibility of an objective reality) focus should be on examining the quality of the story media tell. As Stuart Hall (1980, p.129) notes, the event must become a story before it can become a communicative event. The emphasis here is on the way news works as stories - the way they generate a narrative with protagonists, whose motives and actions assign causation and responsibility. According to Street:

The media not only selects particular events, it also has to make sense of them. It has to make them matter to the readers and viewers, and this entails setting them within a narrative, a story of social change (2001, p.37).

From this perspective, an examination of the Herald campaign involves focus on how the paper presented the EFB and the quality of the story told. There are three issues here - a prominence of game-based politics, media framing and a questionable level of quality journalism.

In the first instance, although adopting a strong stance against the EFB, the Herald generally discussed the bill around the logic of tactics, rules and scores. The discourse of game-based politics was further evident in the presentation of the issue of electoral finance as a race between National and Labour or as a battle between the Left and the

---

53 Mazzoleni & Schulz (1999, p. 250) ‘mediatized politics is politics that has lost its autonomy, has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by interactions with mass media. It is based on observations of how mass media product political content and interfere with political processes’. They note that excessive mediatization distorts the proper functioning of democracy.

54 Rudd and Hayward (2005, p.15-16) argue that New Zealand is far from becoming a ‘mediacracy’ as politicians and their parties still have primacy in the political system. They argue mediatisation has been going on in New Zealand since the introduction of television in the 1960s although it has increased in speed and intensity since the commercialization and deregulation of media systems in the 1980s and the growing partisan dealignment of the electorate from about the same period.”
Right of the political spectrum. Game-based politics is not always negative but recent studies suggest the relevance of the left-right dichotomy is diminishing as National and Labour merge in the centre-ground (Rudd, 2005, p.80; Rudd & Hayward, 2005, p.10-11). Thus, the extent to which the paper stimulated debate, rather than narrowed debate to a simple dichotomy, is worth considering. The danger is that game-based politics potentially diminishes if not supplants debate about ideas, ideals and issues. It effectively debases readers by treating them not as citizens but as passive consumers of mediated politics. According to Louw:

Because the strategic imperative frame is premised on the sports model, it encodes the assumption that winning the game is the only motivation driving politicians. This slides easily into the watchdog notion of journalism – providing journalists with a justification for mistrusting politicians; reaffirming their need to adopt adversarial postures towards politicians; and boosting journalist’s egos because they see themselves as the defenders of democracy against Machiavellian politicians. This causes the journalists to become patronizing towards their audiences because they believe they have special insight into the political process and the motivations of politicians (2005, p.69).

A second issue is the way in which the Herald framed its campaign, which perhaps influenced the robustness of the debate. Capella and Jamieson (1997) define framing as a way of inducing a particular kind of understanding about events in the news, an understanding which comes about through processes of activation, association and inference. The inferences people make when they read or watch news depends on what the news activates and what patterns of associations already exist in the audience’s mind. Frames highlight certain aspects of news and downplay others through selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration (p.58-60). According to Therese Arseneau (interview, 2008) the Herald campaign ‘required more balance – arguments for free speech needed to be balanced with discussion of political equality and popular control – a more robust debate was required’. Certainly, there was a tension underpinning the campaign because whilst the government promoted the EFB as a mechanism to ensure a level playing field by the equal distribution of political finance, the media (and the National Party) framed it as an issue of free speech.\(^{55}\)

Moreover, in framing the EFB as an issue of free speech, terms such as democracy and freedom were used liberally and without reference to what these terms actually

\(^{55}\) For example, during a debate in Parliament Winston Peters provocatively asked the Labour Party ‘what division of the Law covers free speech: the electoral law or the copyright, censorship and defamation law?’. Helen Clark responded ‘what the electoral law talks about is paid speech’
referred to in the context with which they were used. Headings such as ‘Democracy under Attack’ assumed democracy had common meaning (and thus similar conceptions of what an attack on democracy constituted) for both the editors and journalists of the paper and the citizens and politicians reading it. In reality, there are many competing notions of democracy in circulation, and this is made more complex by the rapidly changing context in which arguments take place (Street 2001, p.9). Consequently, there is the possibly that the campaign contributed to an oversimplified debate.

According to Nicky Hager the unthinking (or purposeful) adoption of framing and agenda setting is a characteristic of a low-level kind of journalism. Certainly, frames are problematic because as Birks (2008, p.6) discusses, politicians are judged not on what they do but on what they say in relation to that the newspaper has said. Thus, politicians are often portrayed as being either in agreement or opposition. This binary approach to contributions potentially closes down any complexity of response, both from politicians and publics. Arguably, the Herald campaign is a reflection of politics and culture in New Zealand where support and demand for standards of higher-quality journalism is lacking. Although the campaign is welcomed as journalism that challenges authority, the extent to which a campaigning newspaper taking a strong stance on government policy has a responsibility to provide investigative journalism to complement editorial content, is an issue that is relatively muted.

II. In the name of public interest

In the first edition of Investigate magazine, investigative journalist Ian Wishart wrote ‘the New Zealand news media are largely out of touch with their audience, which is why many of them sit, head in hands, lamenting drops in ratings or readership’ and further that ‘people aren’t watching or reading anymore because they think the quality

---

56 In the ‘Profile 2007: The Big New Zealand Journalism Survey’ most respondents indicated that the watchdog role could not be performed without more journalists on staff, more time allocated to pursue investigations, and more pay to attract and retain experienced journalists both to perform investigations and to mentor newer staff into the investigative role.
of the news they’re getting sucks’ (2000, p. 4). He concludes that there is a major weakness:

The problem with New Zealand media is their overall gullibility and unwillingness to challenge authority - it is one of the fundamental precepts of democracy that the media, the fourth estate, are a check and balance on the powers of parliament, cabinet and the judiciary. The acceptance of authority at face value appears to have been bred into our young journalists to the point of obsequiousness (2000, p. 4).

From this perspective, the Herald campaign was extraordinary – the editor and staff appeared to be in touch with readers and prepared to act in an advocacy role to reflect public interests. Certainly, newspaper campaigns identify and define problems that are experienced by a broad or sympathetic public. They often claim to articulate the demands from the public for specific objectives or solutions (Street, 2001, p.53-55). Thus, newspapers bring a public into being and in addressing its readers as citizens; it addresses them as party of a ‘we’ that shares common concerns and mutual obligations.

However, the notion of the ‘public interest’ to justify the campaign was used in an abstract manner. There was a lack of scrutiny as to who constitutes this public and what it actually means to uphold public interest. According to Donald Matheson (2007), New Zealand journalists discuss the ‘community’ and ‘public’ without a reflection of how they see and reflect on their relationship with the people at whom their work is aimed. He discusses four factors that account for this. First, the tabloid press has yet to become fully entrenched in New Zealand, and thus press journalists are used to talking in largely middle-class terms about the ‘public’. Second, New Zealand hasn’t any media barons and no traditions of owners claiming to be representative of readers in the same way as politicians represent their voters. Third, New Zealand hasn’t experienced a revolution where the legitimacy of popular power is asserted. Therefore, the public are not used to fighting for their democratic rights. Fourth, the dominant claim in New Zealand is that since the 19th century the country is egalitarian, a claim which is not easily reconciled with the idea of a public representing the interests of the people against those in power. Taken together, these

---

57 Similarly, Nicky Hager argues that the point of journalism is to investigate the abuses of power and secretive decisions which seriously harm groups of citizens. He argues that the late 1980s and the free market reforms which lead to commercialisation of TV news, represented a low point in New Zealand investigative journalism. See Quinnell (2007)
factors suggest that political campaigns appealing to the ‘public interest’ need to be challenged and critically questioned. This is because, as Matheson concludes, the tendency to justify campaigns on the public interest obscures the extent to which the language of the public takes on a defensive tone. He argues ‘the language of the public interest signals both the public’s right to know as much as it buttresses the journalist’s right to publish’ (p. 39)

The broader issue here is that if newspapers (or any media) aspire to an advocacy role, how can citizens ensure they are being adequately represented? It is assumed that mass media contribute in some way to the political life of citizens, furnishing them with the means of representing themselves and their interests, and allowing them the space—a public sphere—within which they can reflect on the conditions of their lives and how these might be changed for the better (Calhoun, 1992). However, Matheson argues that the dominant discourse in New Zealand media is a commercialized one; regarding people as little more than ratings (p. 29). As Street (2001, p. 9) questions, can such the ideal of the media as a public sphere coexist with commercialized media directed at consumers rather than citizens?

III. Newspapers and technological change

In at least two ways the Herald campaign represented novel journalism. First, the placement of the editorials on the front-page of the newspaper challenged the traditional distinction in newspapers between the editorial section where opinions are found and the objective news reporting section. Second, the perceived alliance between National party and the Herald challenged common perceptions that New Zealand newspapers aspire to standards of objectivity and balance in the coverage of political parties.

Certainly, newspaper editorials are the part of the newspaper most likely to reflect any partisanship by editors or newspaper proprietors (Hayward & Rudd, 2003). Up until the 1980s it was an undisputed fact that daily newspaper editorials offered almost unanimous support to the National Party. This is reflected in the nickname ‘Granny Herald’, which only changed with the acquisition of the paper by APN in 1996. Since
the 1980s there has been a shift and by the 1990s editorial viewpoints had become much more diverse in terms of partisan support. In many cases, editors had become dealigned, and they were as likely to be as critical of all parties as they were supportive of any one of them (Hayward & Rudd, 2003, p.260). To suggest the Herald campaign disrupts this trend, even momentarily, renders Nicky Hager’s description of the campaign as ‘the most alarming example of political campaigning by a news organisation for a long time’ (interview, 2008), a truism. There is good reason for balanced political reporting in New Zealand. In large democracies with entrenched newspaper cultures there are many competing daily newspapers offering political views on the world, and it is accepted that individual newspaper are politically partisan. In New Zealand however, the lack of market competition and consumer choice suggests partisan views are not as appropriate.\(^{58}\) Certainly, the Herald is the only daily newspaper produced in the Auckland region and thus, potentially has a greater responsibility to provide balanced coverage.

In a very important way, the Herald campaign challenges the fact/fiction divide and partisanship in newspapers. It is a campaign that reflects and subtly hints at the changing mass media market in the 21\(^{st}\) century. In the first instance, technological advancements undermine the relevance of distinguishing between factual reporting and opinion. The Herald’s website provides a space for political editor, Audrey Young, to publish her own blog where she combines political reports and opinionated viewpoints. The blog also provides an outlet for Audrey Young and readers to communicate directly. An issue here is that if there is no responsibility to sort out fact from fiction, the role of the audience is subtly altered. According to Judy McGregor the development of newspaper’s with websites represents an ethical dilemma and requires more discussion in the New Zealand context.\(^{59}\)

Moreover, to suggest the Herald has a responsibility to be balanced isolates media to its traditional forms and obscures the widespread availability of information in the age of the internet. Newspapers are not a monolithic block and citizens are media savvy. The Herald competes for readers (both within the Auckland and nation-wide) through

\(^{58}\) Trotter argues that ‘the New Zealand Herald is right wing but if you challenge them on it, they will argue they are objective and balanced’. He credits his left-wing column in Fairfax-owned newspapers as providing a balance to the dominance of right-wing views. See Trotter (2007c)

\(^{59}\) Do blogs constitute a Fifth Estate? See Cornfield et al (2005)
the use of the company’s website, which counteracts the neat geographical division of newspaper coverage in New Zealand. The use of the company’s website represents an attempt to innovate on the web while still exploiting the print business, enabling an extension of their delivery vehicle beyond ink on paper. A common tactic was to release news stories on the EFB to the website at 5pm, and these stories were not always available in the print copy of the newspaper the following morning. This enabled the Herald to provide a continual flow of communication and to present the paper as being at the cutting edge of news events.

Increasingly, citizens use a variety of sources of political communication and thereby expose themselves to competing views and messages. Thus, the impact of one message may be off-set, counter-balanced or neutralized by others – especially the quickly growing use of political blogs. This is a point Brian Easton, an independent New Zealand scholar, touches on in an interview with Laurence Simons:

> Over the twenty years there has been a dumbing down [of media]….there’s clearly less and less public debate going on in the print media….they’ve actually become less committed to open debate. Blog discussion groups and the like on the web have become increasingly important. During the 2005 election, some were much more lively and more interesting that the formal media, which tended to provide facts laced with stodgy, self-important non-comment (quoted in Simons, 2007, p.109).

Essentially, as long as the Herald made its position clear, a campaign containing partisan content is not a threat to democratic order in New Zealand. The broader question is a matter of how newspapers are attempting to compete with other forms of media in order to remain prominent. As Sampson (2004, p.231) argues, newspapers which have helped to undermine other institutions are themselves under threat. Certainly, technological change potentially leads to a change in the role newspapers occupy in contemporary society (Boczkowski, 2004; Meyer, 2004). If newspaper roles are changing, events such as the Herald campaign provide indispensable insight and must not be taken-for-granted; but rather discussed and debated in the context of continuity and change.

---

60 For a more critical view see Margolis, M. & Resnick, D. (2000)
61 Tim Montogmerie, writing in The Spectator, argued that the next British election will be won and lost on the internet, with the prediction that most print newspapers will have closed by 2025.
The Last Word

*What does happen when Granny gets activist?*

Campaigns by the media to oppose government policy have an important place within liberal democracy. The *New Zealand Herald* campaign challenged authority and advocated the public’s right to free speech and democracy. Whether it is perceived as a positive or a negative development, it is vital to critically reflect on it. This involves questions such as what factors motivate the campaign, why should these motivations matter, and on behalf of whom is the media speaking when ‘in the public interest’ is claimed as justification.

This study places the *Herald* campaign within a broader study of political communications in New Zealand. It stimulates a re-evaluation of the standards expected of media, such as objectivity, partisanship, balance and accuracy. Moreover, a question of media power and subsequently, questions about whom the media are accountable to are central to debate. Further, the way in which technological changes impact on political communication is an important study, of which the *Herald* campaign hints at. It involved the debunking of traditional ways of understanding the role of newspapers in New Zealand, and at the same time, represented the use of new technologies to remain prominent in the public sphere.

Essentially, the objective of this dissertation has been to use the *Herald* campaign to explore the larger field of political communication. Rather than to put forward absolute conclusions, it is hoped that questions linger and the debate continues.
Bibliography

PRIMARY SOURCES

Interviews

Arseneau, T. (2008) Email interview received 1 April
Hager, N. (2008) Email interview received 5 April
Young, A. (2008) Email interview received 15 April

Herald Newspaper Articles


‘Editorial: Bill an insult to voters intelligence’, *New Zealand Herald*, 14 November

‘Editorial: We dare not await MPs fix’, *New Zealand Herald*, 15 November.

‘Editorial: Democracy about more than voting’, *New Zealand Herald*, 16 November

‘Editorial: Electoral bill still an outrage’, *New Zealand Herald*, 20 November


‘Editorial: Speak now, or hold your peace in 2008’, *New Zealand Herald*, 4 December.

‘Editorial: Labour’s spiteful attacks are signs of party feeling the heat’, *Herald on Sunday*, 9 December.

‘Editorial: National missing its big chance’, *New Zealand Herald*, 13 December

‘Editorial: Self-interest offends democracy’, *New Zealand Herald*, 19 December

‘Editorial: Year of campaign journalism gives the lie to media’s critics’, *Herald on Sunday*, 23 December.

‘Editorial: How we saw things in 2007’, *New Zealand Herald*, 27 December


Ralston, B. (2007) ‘Speaking with one voice, New Zealand Herald, 18 November

Ralston, B. (2007) ‘Utu Over, the real work begins’, Herald on Sunday, 16 December


65


Young, A. (2007) ‘Key: This will be the first thing to go’, *New Zealand Herald*, 5 December.


Other newspapers/magazines


‘Editorial: A Pigheaded way to make Law’, The Dominion, 6 December 2007

‘Editorial: Labour’s Lust for Control’, The Dominion, 20 December 2007


Speeches

**Radio Programmes**


**Other**


Journalism Education Association Conference (2008), Massey University Wellington, 10 December, Retrieved from: http://www.jeanz.org.nz


SECONDARY SOURCES

Books


**Chapters in edited collections**


**Journal Articles**


Conference Papers


**Other**


Appendix

Appendix 1:
New Zealand Parliament, Debates (Hansard), 11 December 2007

John Key to Prime Minister
Does she stand by her statement that in relation to the New Zealand Herald’s coverage of the EFB that “there have been weeks, if not months, of full blooded attacks, front page headlines, editorials, attack stories, cartoons, you name it…” and that “complaining to the Press Council doesn’t get you anywhere”. If so, why?

[Prime Minister absent, Michael Cullen speaking on her behalf]

John Key to Prime Minister
What does it say about the Governments confidence in its own Bill that in the face of criticism the Prime Minister cannot argue about the specific points journalists are raising but can only smear those journalists as being ‘shallow, error-prone, and making major gaffs in their knowledge’

Cullen to John Key
Prime Minister was speaking to a group of journalists and journalism students in relation to the nature of parliamentary reporting – and on that occasion she wasn’t talking specifically about the debate around the details of the EFB, she was talking about the fact that we have a robust media in this country and sometimes not always accurate

John Key to Prime Minister
Is it not the case that the EFB has been widely criticized by almost every other newspaper in the country, by the Law Society, by the Human Rights Commission, and by a Bill of Rights specialists – and does the Prime Minister consider that these people and organizations are wrong in their analysis as well as the NZ Herald

Cullen to John Key
There was a great deal of criticism of the Bill as it originally entered into the Select Committee. There have been a very large number of changes in the Select Committee and indeed a large number of changes during the Committee stage of the House – that of course means that there is a different bill that went into the Select Committee

John Key to Prime Minister
Does the Prime Minister by mentioning a possible complaint to the Press Council meant that in her opinion the Herald has not been fair and balanced in its coverage of
the EFB and in fact, has deliberately misled or misinformed its readers? And if not, under what other grounds does she have for even considering a complaint to the Press Council?

Cullen to John Key
Clearly the Prime Minister wasn’t considering a complaint to the Press Council, because she says “there was little point in complaining to the print media’s self-regulatory watchdog the Press Council” – she was pointing out that the Herald was running a campaign – clearly, they have. A front page editorial which says ‘Our views and Their view’ and under that that was simply other newspapers saying the same thing as the Herald is scarcely a balanced coverage.

John Key to Prime Minister
Does the Prime Minister agree with the key principles of the Press Council that “a publication is entitled to adopt a forthright stance and advocate a position on any issue” – and hasn’t the Herald simply been doing this?

Cullen to John Key
Media are certainly entitled to take a forthright stance. Sometimes some of them have difficulty in understanding that politicians are entitled on both sides of the House to take a forthright stance in response – that’s called a democracy.

John Key to Prime Minister
Isn’t it becoming a hallmark of this Government that they just simply attack the motives of people and organizations that dare to disagree or challenge the Government – just like the Government did when it didn’t like what the Auditor General had to say – just like it did when the Finance Minister tried to say that the only reason journalists reported on tax cuts were for their own benefit – just like they have now with the Herald when its been running a fair and balanced campaign against the EFB – and don’t we all know on this side of the House that it’s the beginning of the end when you start shooting the messenger because you can’t win the argument.

Cullen to John Key
That obvious, robust defense of the Herald suggests the member might well be disguised as a Herald page-boy from now on.

I recall the Herald launching a very similar campaign against the abolition of the Repeal to the Judiciary Committee to the Privy Council, which would be the end of our legal system. But one must be fair – one also recollects the Herald editorial stating that ‘National Party was doing very well – until Mr Keys started to announce policy’.

John Key to Prime Minister
Has it dawned on the Prime Minister that its not necessarily the New Zealand Herald that’s wrong or the millions of New Zealanders that are opposed to this Bill that are wrong or every organization around this country that is wrong – but for once, they are wrong and they should scrap the Bill as we suggested six months ago.
ETHICAL APPROVAL AT DEPARTMENTAL LEVEL OF A PROPOSAL INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS (CATEGORY B)

NAME OF DEPARTMENT: Politics

TITLE OF PROJECT: What Happens when Granny Turns Activist? An examination into the New Zealand Herald’s campaign against the Electoral Finance Bill

PROJECTED START DATE OF PROJECT: 01 August 2007

STAFF MEMBER RESPONSIBLE FOR PROJECT: Bryce Edwards (Supervising Lecturer)

NAMES OF OTHER INVESTIGATORS OR INSTRUCTORS: Hollie Hyndman (Student) BA (Hons)

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT:

In November 2007 the New Zealand Herald launched a campaign called ‘Democracy under attack’, which stridently opposed the Electoral Finance Bill introduced by the Labour Government earlier that year. Explicitly ignoring traditional journalistic values of objectivity, neutrality, non-bias and balance, the Herald took a strong stance against the bill justified on the basis of upholding democracy and the public’s right to free speech.

The campaign is remarkable and worthy of attention in at least two regards. First, the Herald ran the campaign through its editorial content and specifically, utilized the front-page to display editorial opposition to the bill. This was only the second
occasion in five years that the editor had editorialized on the front page. Second, there has been extensive debate amongst media elite, politicians and general public as to whether a newspaper should run such a campaign. In this sense, the Herald campaign has become as controversial as the bill itself.

My dissertation uses the Herald campaign as a case study for exploring the nature of political communication in New Zealand. A number of key questions underpin this research. First, how did the Herald cover the issues raised by the bill? Second, why has the Herald covered the bill in this way? Third, what are the implications of this media coverage and what does the coverage given to this bill suggest about the nature of political communication in New Zealand? Exploratory in nature, I do not offer any conclusive finding or overarching conclusions. Rather, my objective is to explore a number of themes as they relate to political communication – such as the power of the media, journalistic practices and the public sphere.

DETAILS OF ETHICAL ISSUES INVOLVED:

The research involves interviews with television presenter and journalist John Campbell, investigative journalist Nicky Hager and Herald political editor Audrey Young. It is desirable to identify them by name and position. The interviews are to be conducted initially by email and will then be followed up by telephone at a later date if necessary. John Campbell, Nicky Hager and Audrey Young have consented to being interviewed in their capacity via these means.

Applicant:

……………………………………….. Date:
INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate we thank you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you of any kind and we thank you for considering our request.

What is the Aim of the Project?

The aim of this project is to examine the *New Zealand Herald’s* campaign against the Electoral Finance Bill, which ran from November to December 2007. I seek to use this campaign as a case study for exploring political communication in New Zealand. As part of this I will look at why and how the *Herald* ran the campaign and the implications of this. An exploratory study, I aim to explore notions of media power, journalistic practice and the public sphere.

What Type of Participants are being sought?

This project involves interviews with television presenter and journalist John Campbell, investigative journalist Nicky Hager and *Herald* political editor Audrey Young.

What will Participants be Asked to Do?

Should you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to answer a number of questions expressing your assessments and views.

Please be aware that you may decide not to take part in the project without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

Can Participants Change their Mind and Withdraw from the Project?

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?

The interview will involve general questions being asked on the nature of political communication in New Zealand and the *Herald’s* campaign against the Electoral Finance Bill. As the participants have substantial experience in this field, the interviews will be styled as to allow the participants to get as much information as they deem relevant across, so questions will be open ended and general in nature. As a consequence, although the Department of Political Studies, the University of Otago, is aware of the general areas to be explored in the interviews, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions.

In the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable, you are reminded of your right to decline to answer any particular question(s) and also that you may withdraw from the project at any stage without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.
The information obtained in these interviews will be used in the writing of the interviewer's Politics dissertation, a requirement of the Otago University Political Studies Honours degree. You will be identified by your name and position, unless anonymity for all or portions of the interview is requested. If that is the case then only the researcher and possibly her supervisor will be aware of your identity.

You are most welcome to request a copy of the results of the project should you wish.

The data collected will be securely stored in such a way that only those mentioned above will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information will be destroyed immediately except that, as required by the University's research policy, any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed.

What if Participants have any Questions?

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:

Hollie Hyndman or Bryce Edwards
124 Cannington Road Department of Political Studies, University of Otago
Dunedin, New Zealand Dunedin, New Zealand
Phone: (03) 464 0911 or 027 551 8971 (03) 479 5091 or 021 225 2295

This proposal has been reviewed and approved by the Department of Political Studies, University of Otago.
CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. Any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed;
4. This project involves a semi-structured questioning technique where the precise nature of some of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops and that in the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that I feel hesitant or uncomfortable I may decline to answer any particular question(s) and/or may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind;
5. I will be identified by my name and position if needed, unless I ask anonymity for all or portions of the interview. If the latter is the case, only the researcher, and possibly their supervisor, will be privy to my identity regarding the concerned information;
6. The results of the project may be published and available in the library.

I agree to take part in this project.

............................................................................................................  .............................................
(Signature of participant)  (Date)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Department of Political Studies, University of Otago.