

## Diversity in Reporting? A Study of the News coverage of the 2016 New Zealand Local Body Elections <sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

This study offers an analysis of print news media coverage of the 2016 New Zealand Local Body elections, focusing on reportage around issues of diversity. This study builds upon a prior project by the Media Observatory group at Auckland University of Technology of the 2014 New Zealand General election that also examined issues of diversity. The function of news media in democratic societies is crucial. For a nation-state that is as cosmopolitan and diverse as New Zealand, issues of inclusivity and representation are critical considerations for news media. This study employs content analysis and examined news coverage of local body elections and analysed 198 Local Elections newspaper articles from the eight weeks prior to 8 October 2016 in one nationwide newspaper and four Auckland community newspapers. It focuses on *The New Zealand Herald*, *East & Bays Courier*, *Manukau Courier*, *North Shore Times*, *Central Leader* and *the Western Leader*. The analysis of the 2016 Local Election news coverage demonstrates a predominant focus on the mayoral candidates to the detriment of other aspects of local election voting, and a focus on campaign strategy over social issues impacting the electorate. The Local Election coverage placed particularly strong focus on “youth” as a social group in contrast to other classified groups such as Māori, Asians, Pacific Islanders, the elderly, and dependents. The Local Election coverage also represented a diversity of social issues, from housing, transport, to business and economy, environment, and law and order. The coverage provided ample space for words and perspectives from the electoral front-runners, local government representatives, and for public voices but it also paid minimal attention to non-mayoral voting categories, non-front runner candidates, and non-Auckland geographical locations, although this latter point was perhaps unsurprising, given the newspapers sampled in the study.

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## Introduction

The idea of mediated politics is often used to describe a situation in which the media constitute the main channel for political information for the majority of people. As most people depend upon the media for information, political parties and candidates who want to connect with their audiences in turn depend upon the media. The media mediate between the electorate, the institutions involved in government, and election processes. It does not necessarily matter which medium dominates the media landscape but whether the media are independent of government or political actors (Strömbäck and Kaid 2008). However, journalists' task of providing the information citizens need to engage in public and political participation has been challenged by the contingency of social relations. Engaging readers in more structural societal developments proves to be challenging in the context of the elections.

This study continues the research by the Auckland University of Technology (AUT) Media Observatory that previously examined media diversity in the 2014 election coverage (Rupar, Owen and Baker 2015), and is part of an ongoing examination of journalism, media and democracy in Aotearoa New Zealand (JMAD 2017). The 2014 study focused on the New Zealand General Election, while the current research focuses on the news coverage of the 2016 New Zealand Local Body Elections. Where the 2014 General Election study focused on nationwide broadcast and print media, this research examines newspaper coverage from one nationwide outlet, and four local Auckland-based community newspapers. The study continues to explore diversity in the media, and considers diversity within the definitions of the idea of the inclusive society. The research approaches diversity as a set of multilayered discourses that underpin stratifying societies along the lines of power. Journalism's role in this process is significant, both for the health of democracy and for informed citizenship. The complex logic of journalists' judgments becomes the centre of attention during the elections, demonstrating its power to expend the boundaries of civic discourse and affect social life (Alexander 2016). The research employs the United Nations' (2009) declaration that an inclusive society is one based on equality of opportunities and the equal capacity of all members regardless of differences in race, ethnicity, faith, religion, language, gender, social status, (dis)abilities, or sexual orientation. Lastly, this study investigates the media's duty to provide information and alert the public to issues around election time – a period of intense political activity.

Using content analysis of 198 local elections newspaper articles from the eight weeks prior to 8 October 2016 in one nationwide newspaper (*New Zealand Herald*) and four Auckland community newspapers, this study asks four main questions:

1. What topics dominate public debate at election time?
2. Which voices are heard?
3. Who are the people and groups represented in the media?

4. How do media engage with key issues such as equality/inequality, inclusivity/marginalisation and representation of diversity?

The study's content analysis finds that the mayoral elections dominated local elections coverage, with other voting categories – in particular local boards, District Health Boards (DHBs), and licensing trusts – receiving limited attention. This tendency was particularly strong in *The New Zealand Herald*, where 64.4% of local elections articles primarily focused on the mayoral elections, with 7.9% focused on either local boards, DHBs, or licensing trusts. 30.9% of community newspaper articles, on the other hand, focused primarily on the mayoral elections, with 32% focused on local boards, DHBs, and licensing trusts. A second major finding was the disproportionate emphasis on Auckland to the detriment of other New Zealand centres, with 91.9% of articles focused primarily on Auckland. This finding is unsurprising in the case of the four Auckland-based community newspapers. However, *The New Zealand Herald's* 86.1% dominant Auckland focus challenges its identity as a national newspaper.<sup>1</sup> In terms of social groups, the study finds an imbalance in gender equality of sources, with 55.6% male and 36.6% female – a slightly more balanced ratio than that found in the 2014 General Election study (71% male and 22.7% female sources). 'Youth' was the most referred-to social category (in 31.8% of all articles), followed by 'Māori' and 'Asian' (7.1% each), while 'local government' was the most focused-on local election news topic (in 78.8% of all articles), followed by 'polls' (45%) and 'housing' (21.8%). The study thus concludes that while local elections coverage provided a diversity of topics and much relevant information for citizens to base voting decisions upon, it was limited by a dominant Auckland-centrism and mayoral focus, effectively 'presidentialising' the local elections, and reducing the complexity of local politics and governance.

The importance of election news coverage and democracy starts from the point that people rely upon both national and local news media for information that may help them to decide how to vote and that news media can exert considerable power regarding which issues, attributes and frames people consider important (Strömbäck and Kaid 2008). For elective democracy to function, it is vital that news coverage provides individuals with the information they need to make informed voting decisions. Couldry (2012) suggests that the normative demand that media communications save democracy is at its most salient during election time. Similarly, in a review and assessment of the place of normative ideas in journalism, Blumler and Cushion (2014) argue that scholars broadly agree, to different degrees, that journalism plays a normative role in shaping people's understanding of politics, most prominently during elections. They further argue that civic values – not just utilitarian or financial ones – are at stake in how well journalistic institutions perform (Blumler and Cushion 2014). It is claimed that long-established journalistic routines have been impacted by the influence of entertainment practices while a more public service-oriented ethos is traditionally associated with promoting audience understanding and democratic

participation (Cushion and Lewis 2009). These factors all impact on the quality of diversity of media during election time. Academics warn that society depends upon the quality of radio and television bulletins, print, and online news for the efficiency of its democratic institutions (Carey 1997). Elections thus provide a fertile context for looking closely at media and its provision of a diverse market of ideas.

Following this initial overview, the paper continues with a brief background to the 2016 New Zealand local body elections, and an outline of this study's research design, coding procedure, and sample. It then outlines the major findings of the content analysis, before ending with a discussion and conclusion of what these findings mean for diversity, media, and civic engagement in contemporary New Zealand.

### **2016 Local Body Elections**

Local elections are held in New Zealand once every three years, giving citizens the opportunity to vote for mayors, city and district councils, regional councils, and District Health Boards. In some parts of New Zealand, elections are also held for local and community boards, licensing trusts, and some other organisations. The national government makes decisions on issues relevant to New Zealand as a nation. In contrast, local government enables democratic decision-making by and for local communities, about local issues and services with regard to local needs and priorities. These activities may include issues relating to drinking water, applying for building permits, parks and recreational activities, rubbish collection, animal management, and civil defence planning and emergency preparedness, as well as writing and managing development plans (for natural and urban environments), making and enforcing bylaws (for instance, dog control, liquor licensing), and participating in community partnerships (such as crime reduction initiatives). Numerically, 78 local authorities represent all geographic areas of New Zealand, constituted by 11 Regional Councils, 12 City Councils, 54 District Councils, and one Auckland Council (amalgamated from eight former councils in 2010). Altogether, New Zealand has 109 regional councilors, 11 regional chairs, 708 territorial authorities, 146 Auckland local board members, and 67 mayors.

The 2016 New Zealand local elections voting period began on 13 September and closed on Election Day, 8 October. The national voter turnout was 42%, up 0.7% on 2013, but down 7% on 2010 (Final Voter Turnout 2016, 2016). Former Leader of the Labour Party and long-standing Member of Parliament, Phil Goff, won the Auckland mayoralty, with 74,000 more votes than his closest rival, Vic Crone. Labour-endorsed Justin Lester won the Wellington mayoralty, while Lianne Dalziel won Christchurch, and Dave Cull won Dunedin. Invercargill Mayor, Tim Shadbolt, was re-elected for an eighth term.

In New Zealand there has traditionally been a strong political culture against the involvement of parliamentary political parties in local government. In the 2016 local

elections, however, this involvement was visible, and contested. In particular, Auckland mayoral candidate, and eventual winner, Phil Goff, has a high profile public history as former Leader of the Labour Party, while the two most successful candidates in the Wellington mayoral elections, Justin Lester and Nick Leggett, were both publicly supported by Labour. Then-Deputy Prime Minister and National Party MP, Bill English, broke with National Party tradition to publicly endorse his sister-in-law in the Wellington mayoral elections, while then-Prime Minister, John Key, hinted support towards Auckland centre-right party, Auckland Future (Satherly 2016). Billboards erected in Wellington protested political party involvement in local elections, while academic commentators in *The New Zealand Herald* advocated candidates avoiding the misleading ‘independent’ label and acknowledge their party allegiances (Asquith and Cardow 2016).

Other issues to arise during the 2016 local elections included concerns over how democratic the voting process is. For instance, 40% voter turnout was cited by *The Dominion Post* as ‘so low it raises troubling questions about the whole enterprise’ (2016), while low candidate turnout was similarly identified as a concern, with several Auckland council seats going uncontested due to lack of candidates. Finally, another key issue in the 2016 local elections was engagement with youth, a theme particularly emphasised through the candidacy of 22-year old Chlöe Swarbrick in the Auckland mayoral elections. Swarbrick ultimately came third in the Auckland mayoral elections. A frequent point cited during her campaign was the lack of mainstream media attention she received – for instance, a single sentence mention in *The New Zealand Herald’s* 23-page election guide, where considerable space was dedicated to other candidates polling below her (Rose 2016).

### **Research Design**

This study uses a content analysis of news stories that appeared in one national newspaper (*The New Zealand Herald*) and four local community newspapers (*Manukau Courier*, *North Shore Times*, *Central Leader*, *Western Leader*). The period of coverage includes the eight weeks before the final day of local body election voting on 8 October 2016. These news outlets were selected for their prominence in the New Zealand media landscape and are a combination of national media and local community newspapers. The decision to focus on newspapers follows the work of Cushion et al., who argue in their analysis of media coverage of the 2015 UK General Election campaign that ‘newspapers continue to play an important agenda-setting role in raising debate about the stories they select and editorially frame’ (2016, 2).

Only stories that explicitly mentioned the local elections were coded. Stories were included if there was a mention in the headline, in the first three sentences and/or the first paragraph, in a minimum three sentences overall, or if more than half of the story was taken up with discussing the elections. The unit of analysis was the full article. If an article continued on

another page, the continuation was coded as one story. Articles that only consisted of a headline, a short bullet-point list without further concrete reference, or were announced only in an index or table of contents, were not coded.

This research project utilises content analysis: one of the most well-known methods of analysis in media communication (Krippendorff 2004). Content analysis involves drawing representative samples of content, using the category rules developed to measure or reflect differences in content, and measuring reliability (agreement or stability) over time. The data collected are analysed to identify typical patterns or characteristics or to identify important relationships among the content qualities examined. If the categories and rules are conceptually and theoretically sound and are reliably applied, the researcher increases the chance that the study results will be valid (for instance, that the observed patterns are meaningful). A team of coders was employed to conduct the content analysis, with intercoder reliability calculated using Holsti's formula,<sup>2</sup> and an agreement reached of 96.8%.

### **Sample**

The sample contained a variety of stories from each outlet with a total 198 news stories collected over eight weeks. The sample included 101 stories from *The New Zealand Herald* online edition (51.01% of the sample), and 97 from the range of community papers (48.99%).<sup>3</sup> *The New Zealand Herald* was chosen for the sample as it is New Zealand's largest daily newspaper. It is a privately-owned newspaper, though its ownership has changed numerous times throughout its history (it is one of the oldest newspapers in New Zealand). It is currently part of NZME's (New Zealand Media Entertainment; originally part of APN News and Media) stable of media outlets. It is published Monday through Friday, and there is a *Weekend Herald* on Saturday and the *Herald on Sunday*. *The New Zealand Herald* also incorporates the website nzherald.co.nz.

### **Community Newspapers**

The community newspapers in this research are owned by Fairfax New Zealand Ltd. Local news from Southland to Northland is comprehensively covered on news website *Stuff.co.nz*'s regional pages. Each of Fairfax's daily newspapers has a website that can be accessed via the newspaper's drop-down menu or their website address. In this research Auckland local community newspapers were examined - *The Western Leader* (local community paper for West Auckland), *North Shore Times* (community paper for Auckland's North Shore), *Central Leader* (community paper for central Auckland) and *Manukau Courier* (community paper for South Auckland) to compare its coverage of the local body elections with the national newspaper reports. All community paper articles were retrieved from Fairfax's *Neighbourly* website.

Local news historically has been a comparatively neglected area of study, and research on local news media coverage of local elections is shaded by a much greater focus on news media coverage of national elections (Nielsen 2015). More recent research has provided evidence of the decline of local news media. In the United States, the formation of ‘news deserts’ has been observed with the decline of local newspapers, television and radio services (Abernathy 2016, 61-2). In the United Kingdom, it has been noted in a recent report that the majority of the UK (57.9%) is not served by a local daily newspaper and that local daily newspapers are predominantly found in major urban areas (Ramsay 2017). In Canada, a crowd-sourced national media map shows 304 entries since 2008, ‘more than half of them (169) documenting the loss of local news outlets in 131 communities, versus 53 new ones, surprisingly few of which are digital-only’ and ‘the remaining map entries mostly document downgrades in service’ (Public Policy Forum 2017, 45). There has been research interest in the potential of ‘hyper-local’ news media (Baines 2012; Ewart 2014) although it has also been noted that in the United States these are outnumbered by the start-up of non-profit news organisations that focus more at the state, national and global level (Abernathy 2016, 62). Certainly, campaigns have the potential to have positive news stories placed in local news outlets, and recent research from the United States reveals the troubling finding that this occurs primarily in ‘resource-poor newspapers’ (Darr 2016, 504). While the appeal of local news media has always been its provision of information most immediate to ‘where people live’ it is also the case that earlier research on local election coverage in Australia indicated that almost one-third of study respondents bypassed local media coverage, instead relying on campaign information and ‘informal social networks’ (Jones and Feldman 2006, 52).

Research into the content of local news, furthermore, has revealed both journalistic limitations and fourth estate contributions to local democracy. For instance, several studies note that local journalism is: often based on single sources, typically reactive in its reporting and routinely privileges a small number of sources in local politics and business (Franklin and Richardson 2002; Nielsen 2015; Örebro 2002; O’Neill and O’Connor 2008). On the other hand, studies have also found that local journalism meaningfully contributes to local democracy – informing the community of what local authorities are doing (Ekström et al. 2006), and providing a space for critical debate and scrutiny (Tichenor et al. 1980). A recent USA study also noted that local news consumption is positively correlated to greater voting and civic participation (Barthel et al. 2017), while past research has specifically shown local news has a positive effect on local election turnout (Baekgaard et al. 2014). As Nielsen (2015, 2) concluded on community news in general, ‘Local journalism does not always play its roles well, but the roles it plays are important’.

### General Points

Of all the news stories examined (as shown in Figure 1), the vast majority were identified as a ‘news piece’ (a total of 147 items of 198). There were only 24 opinion pieces overall, while there were 27 interviews. Interviews, in particular, are relevant in community papers (25 of 97). The length of articles and pieces was also quantified. Overall, of a total of 198 news items, 27.78% (55) were under 300 words; 61.11% (121) were between 300 and 800 words; and 11.11% (22) were over 800 words.

### Genre

The majority of the items (74.24%) were news pieces, while only 12.12% were opinion pieces, and 13.64% interviews. Broken down further, the majority of news pieces were carried out by *The New Zealand Herald*, and then community newspapers. *The New Zealand Herald* also had the highest sample of opinion pieces in their data, while community newspapers had the most interviews.

		Community papers	New Zealand Herald	Total	Percentage
Genre	News piece	65	82	147	74.2%
	Opinion piece	7	17	24	12.1%
	Interview	25	2	27	13.6%
Total		97	101	198	99.9%

Figure 1: Genre-media code cross-tabulation

### What Topics Dominate the Public Debate at Election Time?

In this part of the study, we examined the primary election focus and asked if the stories were focused on regional/district council, mayoral, city council, local board, district health board, or licensing trusts. The aim of this was to see how diverse, or not, the primary election focus was. The results are shown in Figure 2.

	Community papers	New Zealand Herald	Overall Frequency	Overall Percent
None	26	0	26	13.1%
Regional/District	0	2	2	1.0%
Mayoral	30	65	95	48.0%
City Council	10	26	36	18.2%
Local board	27	7	34	17.2%
District Health Board	2	1	3	1.5%
Licensing trust	2	0	2	1.0%
Total	97	101	198	100%

Figure 2: Primary Election Focus<sup>4</sup>

The primary election focus is ‘mayoral elections’ in 48% of the news items. In 18.2% of the cases, the primary election focus is ‘city council elections’, while in 17.2% of the cases, it is ‘local board elections’. 68.7% of the news items have no secondary election focus. 16.2% have as a secondary focus the ‘city council elections.’ 89.9% of the items have no tertiary focus. The most common tertiary focus is ‘local board elections’ with 6.6% of the items. Overall, ‘mayoral’, ‘city council’ and ‘local board’ are, in this order, the most common election focuses. In this case, there was a substantial focus on the mayoralty race while city council was the next most important.

However, when comparing the community newspaper and *New Zealand Herald* (NZH) data, several differences in primary election focus appear. For community papers, 30.9% of articles primarily focused on the mayoral race, compared with 64.4% for the NZH; 10.3% focused on city councils, compared with 25.7% for the NZH; 27.8% focused on local boards, compared with the NZH’s 6.9%. In addition, the community papers together produced two articles primarily focused on District Health Boards (DHBs) and two articles on licensing trusts, while the NZH produced only one article primarily focused on DHBs, and none on the licensing trusts. Overall, these statistics demonstrate that while both community newspapers and the NZH were primarily focused on the mayoral elections, for the NZH, this focus was much more prominent. Two-thirds of NZH articles primarily focused on the mayoral elections, with a quarter focused on the city council, and minimal coverage of local boards, DHBs, and licensing trusts. Community newspapers, on the other hand, dedicated over a quarter of all articles to the local boards.

**Geographical Focus**

Another important area of focus when discussing who is engaged in debate in local elections concerns the geographical focus of the news media (depicted in Figure 3). 91.9% of all the items were focused on Auckland, while only 8.1% have any other city as a geographical focus. The difference between community newspapers and the *NZH* is considerable here, with only 2.1% of community newspapers primarily focused on any city other than Auckland, with 13.9% of *NZH* articles doing so. For community newspapers, this low non-Auckland focus is unsurprising, given their explicit orientation towards an Auckland local community. However, in the case of the *NZH*, such Auckland-centrism challenges the newspaper’s stated identity as a national newspaper (see NZME 2017).

	Community papers	New Zealand Herald	Overall Frequency	Overall Percent
Auckland	95	87	182	91.9%
Other city	2	14	16	8.1%
Total	97	101	198	100.0%

Figure 3: Geographical focus

**Frame**

The frame is the central organising idea of the studied texts. This research distinguished between three possible frames: strategic; issue; and mixed. The *strategic frame* includes coverage of political gains and losses, the power struggle between political actors, their performance, and public perception of their performance, electoral strategies of parties, speculations about coalitions, and attacks/support for other political actors. The *issue frame* focuses on relevant aspects of the larger social issues an article deals with (education, employment, crime, health, inequality). A *mixed frame* contains both the strategic and issue frames, which means the story focused on political gains or losses and a larger social issue. Almost half of the items (45.5%) have a mixed frame, 37.4% have a strategic frame (where the focus is on political gains and losses without a social issue attached), while only 17.2% have an issue frame. In this respect, it is clear that stories that just focus on social issues, without reference to strategy, are the least reported stories.

**Topics**

The topics of each news story were also coded (Figure 4) to ascertain which topics dominated the news focus. Up to three topics were coded for each article, but were not coded in terms of priority (so the frequency of topics in Table 4 adds up to 451, from the total of 198 articles). The three most prominent topics are ‘local government’, appearing in 78.8%

of all items, 'polls', in 45%, and 'housing' in 21.8% - perhaps not surprising given the focus on Auckland and housing as a major issue facing the city. A focus on housing, however, was not consistent between the community newspapers and the *NZH*, with 31 and 12 articles including this focus, respectively. This means that while almost a third (32%) of community newspaper articles featured housing as one of the top three topics, only around a tenth (11.9%) of *NZH* articles did. An even starker difference pertains to the topic of 'polls', where three quarters (76.3%) of community newspaper articles focused on them, while only 14.9% of *NZH* articles did. The dominant focus on 'local government' was also skewed towards the community newspapers, with 89.7% of articles focused on it, compared to 68.3% for the *NZH*. Alternatively, the *NZH* was more likely to focus on transport, with one fifth (21.8%) of *NZH* articles including a transport focus, and only a tenth (9.3%) of community newspaper articles doing so. Taken together, these comparative statistics suggest that community newspapers were proportionately more oriented towards the leading topics of polls, housing, and local government than the *NZH* was, where the *NZH* included additional diverse topics not covered in community newspapers, such as inequality/poverty, scandal, and rates.

	Community papers	New Zealand Herald	Overall Frequency	Overall Percent
Arts and cultural affairs	2	1	3	1.5
Business and economy	14	10	24	12.1
Celebrity news/Entertainment	1	1	2	1.0
Law and order	9	2	11	5.6
Education	2	1	3	1.5
Employment	0	1	1	0.5
Environmental issue	7	7	14	7.1
Health	4	1	5	2.5
Housing	31	12	43	21.8
Immigration	1	1	2	1.0
Inequality/Poverty	0	4	4	2
Intelligence/Security	1	0	1	0.5
Local government	87	69	156	78.8
Māori affairs	1	4	5	2.5
Pacifica	0	1	1	0.5
Other ethnicity	5	5	10	5.0
Personal profile	2	4	6	3.0
Polls	74	15	89	45.0
Rates	1	6	7	3.5
Scandal	0	6	6	3.0
Science and technology	0	4	4	2.0
Sport	1	1	2	1.0
Transport	9	22	31	16.6
Other	0	21	21	10.6

Figure 4: Topics

## Who is Engaged in Debate: Which Voices are Heard?

### Reference to Government

This question set out to examine which part of government featured most prominently in the stories (Figure 5). Articles were coded into one of the four mutually exclusive categories: 'national government'; 'local government'; 'both' types of government; and 'no reference' to government. 58.6% of the items refer only to 'local government', while 22.7% referred to 'both' local and national government. Only 5.1% referred solely to 'national government', and 13.1% had no explicit reference to government at all, local or national – despite an overall focus on the local elections.

Reference to government	Frequency	Percent
National	10	5.1
Local	116	58.6
Both	45	22.7
No reference	26	13.1
Total	262	100

Figure 5: Reference to government<sup>5</sup>

Articles were also coded for their reference to specific political parties. Only three parties were mentioned in more than 4% of all 198 news stories: the Labour Party (in 19.2% of all articles); the National Party (10.6%); and the Green Party (4.5%). These findings indicate that political parties were only sporadically mentioned in the local elections news coverage.

### Sources in News

All articles were coded for any explicit citing of a news source, with up to four sources coded (categorised as first, second, third, or fourth source, in terms of the sequential order in which they appeared in the article). The top four sources were then further coded in terms of which organisational category they belonged to (e.g. election candidate, member of specific political party, academia, business and economy, etc. – see Figure 6), the mode of speech they were represented as (direct quote or reported speech), and the source gender (male, female, transgender, unidentified).

The findings of this study indicate that election candidates dominated other sources cited in news stories (as depicted in Figure 6). In terms of the first source cited, in 32.3% of the cases, the first source is an election candidate, in 16.2% it is a member of the public, while in 18.7% it is a representative of local government. In terms of the combined statistics for all sources (first, second, third, and fourth), election candidates also dominated (151 citations), followed by members of the public (91), local government representatives (61), and media/other journalist (27) (see Figure 7).

The major differences here between community newspapers and the *NZH* pertain to ‘election candidates’ and ‘members of the public’ as first sources. While in the *NZH* 40.6% of all first sources were election candidates, only 23.7% of community newspapers’ were. For community newspapers, election candidates were used as first sources exactly as often as

members of the public, while for the *NZH* members of the public were only used as first source in 8.9% of articles. Both *NZH* and community newspapers used local government representatives as first sources in around one fifth to one sixth of all articles (19.8% and 17.5% respectively).

	Community papers	New Zealand Herald	Frequency	Percent
None	16	4	20	10.1
Election candidate	23	41	64	32.3
National Party	1	0	1	.5
Labour Party	0	1	1	.5
The Greens	1	0	1	.5
Academia	5	3	8	4.0
Business and economy	0	1	1	.5
Central government	0	3	3	1.5
Local government	17	20	37	18.7
Media/Other journalist	1	6	7	3.5
Members of Public	23	9	32	16.2
NGO/C.S.O.	5	0	5	2.5
Professional association	0	1	1	.5
Pollsters	0	5	5	2.5
Public services	4	0	4	2.0
Other	1	7	8	4.0
Total	97	101	198	100.0

Figure 6: First Source

Election candidate	151
Member of the public	91
Local government	61
Media/Other journalist	27

Figure 7: Total frequencies of dominant sources

In terms of mode of speech for the first source, in 72.22% of the items the first source is quoted directly, while in 17.17% of the items it is a reported speech. 10.1% of the items have no sources quoted (as seen in Figure 8). 54% of the items cite a male as the first source, against 26.8% of items that quote a female (as seen in Figure 9). The proportion of identified males compared to females as first source is very similar between the community newspapers and the *NZH*, with 52.6% male and 23.7% female in community newspapers, and 55.4% male and 29.7% female in the *NZH*.

Type of source	Community papers	New Zealand Herald	Frequency	Percent
Absent	16	4	20	10.10
Direct quote	74	69	143	72.22
Reported speech	7	28	35	17.17
Total	97	101	198	100

Figure 8: First source by mode of speech

	Community papers	New Zealand Herald	Frequency	Percent
Absent	16	4	20	10.1
Male	51	56	107	54.0
Female	23	30	53	26.8
Not identifiable	7	11	18	9.1
Transgender	0	0	0	0.0
Total	97	101	198	100

Figure 9: First source by gender

38.4% of all articles did not have more than one source – meaning that under two-thirds of all stories (61.6%) explicitly cited only one source, or none at all. In terms of second sources, the preference for source types is similar to the first source – in 20.2% of the items the second source is an election candidate, in 11.6% a member of the public, and in 6.1% of the cases a member of local government. 45.5% of the items quote the second source directly, against 16.2% of cases with reported speech. Furthermore, men still dominate as second sources with 32.8% of the items quoting a male as a second source while 22.7% quote a female.

Over half of the items (54%) do not quote a third source. 13.6% of all articles quote the third source as an election candidate, and 10.6% quote a member of the public. 32.3% of the items quote a third source directly and only 13.6% with a reported speech. While 21.7% of the items quote a male as the third source, 20.7% of the items quote a woman.

The majority of the items (69.7%) do not have a fourth source, while 10.1% have an election candidate as the fourth source, 7.6% have a member of the public, and 2.5% have a member of the local government. The direct quote is present in 19.2% of the items, reported speech in only 11.1%. 17.2% of the items quote a male as the fourth source, against 12.6% of the items that quote a female.

## **People and Groups Represented in the Coverage**

### **Gender Across all Sources**

In the 2014 General Election study (Rupar, Owen and Baker, 2015), more than two-thirds of the people talking in the election news coverage were men, with a total figure of 71% and a frequency of 962; women sources were 22.73%, with a frequency of 308. The residual percentage represented sources of unidentifiable gender. The 2014 research thus demonstrated a clear gender bias in sources covered. In this present study of 2016 local elections coverage, male voices were still the majority of sources (55.58%), while women represented 36.6% of the sources (combined first, second, third, and fourth sources – see Figure 10). In this case, too, the residual percentage represented source of unidentifiable gender. This shows that bias is still present – though less marked than observed in the 2014 General Election coverage. The proportion of identified male versus female sources is remarkably similar between the community newspapers and the *NZH* (see Figure 9).

The difference in the gap can have several explanations. One hypothesis could be that national elections have a stronger bias in favour of males than local elections. This could be explained by an actual preponderance of men in national politics, by a bias in the media coverage, or by a combination of the two. In these specific cases, another explanation could be the absence of a major female candidate in the national elections of 2014, while in the 2016 high profile Auckland mayoral elections candidate Vic Crone was the main opponent of Phil Goff, with Chlöe Swarbrick ultimately coming third in the mayoral race. The data, however, is a good starting point for further research into the area of gender bias in election media coverage.

Male	249 (55.58%)
Female	164 (36.60%)
Transgender	0 (0%)
Not identifiable	35 (7.81%)
TOTAL	448

Figure 10: Sources by gender

### Auckland Mayoral Candidates

The local election coverage was also coded for who articles mentioned – not just as a source, but also as a key subject to be discussed. In this sense, while Auckland mayoral candidates Phil Goff and Vic Crone were both mentioned – as a source or otherwise – in one-third to one-fourth of the stories (32.8% Goff, 23.7% Crone), other candidates were less mentioned (see Figure 11). John Palino and Mark Thomas were mentioned respectively in 17.2% and 16.7% of the stories, followed by Chlöe Swarbrick (14.6% of the stories). Other candidates mentioned were Penny Bright (7.1%) and David Hay (7.6%). All other candidates were mentioned sporadically or not mentioned, and over half of the sample (58.1%) made no mention of any candidate. Unsurprisingly, those candidates in the Auckland mayoralty seen as the front-runners or most likely to win were the most favoured in media coverage. Chlöe Swarbrick received a sound proportion of coverage, and sits within the second band with Thomas and Palino, who are seasoned campaigners.

For most candidates, there were considerably more mentions in the *NZH* compared to the community newspapers. For instance, Phil Goff was mentioned in 46.5% of all *NZH* local election news articles, compared to 18.6% of all community newspaper ones; Vic Crone was mentioned in 33.7% of *NZH* articles, compared to 13.4% of community ones; and Penny Bright was mentioned in 12.9% of *NZH* articles compared to only 1% of community ones. However, for Chlöe Swarbrick, this difference was much narrower, where she was mentioned in 16.8% of *NZH* articles and 12.4% of community newspaper ones. This means that Chlöe Swarbrick was the only Auckland mayoral candidate to receive almost as much representation per local election news article in the community newspapers as in the *NZH*. While Phil Goff was 2.5 times more likely to be mentioned in a *NZH* local elections news article than in a community newspaper’s one, Chlöe Swarbrick was 1.4 times more likely to (for Penny Bright this was 12.9 times, and for John Palino it was 4.5 times). Swarbrick ultimately came third in the Auckland mayoral election. She received the third highest proportion of mentions per news article in the community newspapers’ election coverage, and the fifth highest in the *NZH*, behind John Palino, Mark Thomas, Vic Crone, and Phil Goff.

CANDIDATE	COMMUNITY PAPERS		NZH		TOTAL	
	MENTIONS	% OF ITEMS	MENTIONS	% OF ITEMS	MENTIONS	% OF ITEMS
Penny Bright	1	1%	13	12.90%	14	7.1%
John Palino	6	6.20%	28	27.70%	34	17.2%
Chlöe Swarbrick	12	12.40%	17	16.80%	29	14.6%
Mark Thomas	6	6.20%	27	26.70%	33	16.7%
David Hay	3	3.10%	12	11.90%	15	7.6%
Phil Goff	18	18.60%	47	46.50%	65	32.8%
Vic Crone	13	13.4%	34	33.7%	47	23.7%

Figure 11: Mayoral candidates mentioned<sup>6</sup>

### Reference to Social Groups

In addition to specific people, the content analysis also coded references to specific social groups, such as ‘women’, ‘Māori’, ‘Young’, and so on (see Figure 12 below). Only groups mentioned in at least 4% of the items (our established threshold) are reported here. In the 2014 election research, the reference to social groups present in the media was established by following categories recognised as possible grounds for discrimination by the Human Rights Act 1993. These are gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, nationality, political orientation, religion, physical ability, and marital status. We have used the same criteria for the 2016 local election coverage, as we wanted to find out how often the news text makes reference to voters in these categories. In the 2014 research one in five references to a particular group was to ‘New Zealanders’, the second most frequent group was ‘young people’, the third was ‘low income’ earners, and the fourth was ‘Māori’ (Rupar, Owen and Baker 2015). Both the 2014 study and the 2016 study for the present local elections coded explicit reference to the specific social group, as well as synonyms clearly citing the group (e.g. references to ‘poor’ or ‘deprived’ would also be coded in the ‘low income’ category). This research yielded some different results (depicted in Figure 12).

In the 2016 local elections sample, the reference to social groups demonstrated that ‘young people’ were the most referred to social group in the sample, with references in just under one-third of the stories (31.8%). This focus may be because of Chlöe Swarbrick running for the mayoralty, which may have engaged younger voters and generated media attention.

Other social groups represented in at least 4% of the items were ‘women’ (6.6%), ‘Māori’ (7.1%), ‘Asians’ (7.1%), ‘Pacific Islanders’ (5.6%), ‘foreigners’ (6.1%), ‘elderly’ (5.1%) and ‘dependents’ (4%). The ‘conservatives/right-wing’ political identity was mentioned slightly less than ‘liberal/left wing’ (5.1% and 6.1% respectively). Other social groups were mentioned more sporadically or not mentioned. Over one-third of the stories (39.9%) made no mention of any social group. For ‘young people’, ‘Māori’, and ‘Pacific’, there was little difference in proportionate representation between the community newspapers and the *NZH*. However, the *NZH* made three times as much reference to ‘women’, almost twice as much reference to ‘Asian’, more than twice as much reference to ‘elderly’, four times as much reference to ‘conservative/right wing’, and twice as much reference to ‘liberal/left wing’ as the community newspapers. Alternatively, the community newspapers made three times more reference to ‘foreigners’ and to ‘dependents’ than the *NZH*.

SOCIAL GROUP	MENTIONS IN COMM. PAPERS	MENTIONS IN NZH	TOTAL NUMBER OF MENTIONS	% OF THE ITEMS
Women	3	10	13	6.6%
Māori	7	7	14	7.1%
Asian	5	9	14	7.1%
Pacific	5	6	11	5.6%
Foreigner	9	3	12	6.1%
Young	31	32	63	31.8%
Elderly	3	7	10	5.1%
Conservative/right wing	2	8	10	5.1%
Liberal/left wing	4	8	12	6.1%
Dependents	6	2	8	4.0%

Figure 12: Social group and number of mentions<sup>7</sup>

### Discussion and Conclusions

In a world that is characterised by diversity and, often, inequality, the goal of democracy and the media is to generate a space where multiple voices are heard and where prevailing relations of power are questioned (Dobson 2014). For media to fulfil its responsibility for providing a ‘public sphere’, in accordance with Habermas (1989), it must provide a forum

that allows for public opinion to be formed and where access is guaranteed to all citizens. This is because media have the capacity to bring a diversity of voices to the public arena (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). It is around election time, either national or local, that this can be seen.

The analysis of the 2016 local election news coverage demonstrates that national and local community media have provided political candidates and groups with the opportunity to access a wide audience on an extensive range of topics from business and economy, education and employment, to name a few. The balance between male sources and female sources – while still imbalanced (55.6% male to 36.6% female) – was more equal than that of the 2014 General Election news coverage’s 71% male to 22.7% female (Rupar, Owen and Baker 2015), while the local election coverage placed particularly strong focus on ‘youth’ as a social group. Indeed, ‘young people’ was the most referred to social group coded (31.8% of all articles making reference to this group), compared to the next most referenced groups, ‘Māori’ and ‘Asian’, mentioned each in 7.1% of all stories. The local election coverage also represented a diversity of social issues, from housing (a topic in 21.8% of all articles) and transport (in 16.6%), to business and economy (12.1%), environment (7.1%), and law and order (5.6%). The coverage provided ample space for words and perspectives from the electoral front-runners, local government representatives, and for public voices (often in the form of vox pops), as well as academics and media commentators.

However, the content analysis statistics gathered here also reveal certain tendencies in the 2016 reporting that narrow the overall scope of the coverage. In particular, the predominant focus in New Zealand local elections articles was on Auckland (91.9% of all articles focused primarily on Auckland, with only 8.1% focusing primarily on any of the other 77 local elections occurring nationwide on 8 October). This is perhaps unsurprising, given the sample of *New Zealand Herald* and four Auckland-based community newspapers. However, while the community newspapers have a specifically local focus, the *New Zealand Herald* is nominally a national newspaper, not just an Auckland one. Indeed, on the NZME’s website about the newspaper, it cites the *NZH* as ‘part of the fabric of New Zealand’, ‘the country’s number one daily newspaper’, and a publication that has ‘connected Kiwis to the nation, the world, and to what matters to them’ – without any specific reference to Auckland (NZME 2017). Nevertheless, 87 of the *NZH*’s 101 local elections articles focus primarily on Auckland, with only 14 focused primarily on a non-Auckland location (see Figure 3).

Just as significantly, the coverage of local elections also exhibited a predominant focus on the mayoral candidates to the detriment of other aspects of local election voting. 48% of articles featured the mayoral race as their primary election focus, while only 18.2% focused primarily on city council, 17.2% on local boards, 1.5% on district health boards, and 1% each on regional/district councils and licensing trusts (13.1% had no specific primary election

focus). These statistics suggest the more widely observed tendency to ‘presidentialise’ election coverage, where reporting focuses disproportionately on party leaders over the wider political parties, policies, and issues (van Aelst, Sheafer and Stanyer 2012). As Strömbäck and Esser (2015) note, such ‘presidentialisation’ is symptomatic of a broader tendency towards ‘personalisation’ in elections and political coverage, where a media logic dominates, focusing on individual actors over abstract issues (Takens et al. 2013). While personalisation has been observed in political media coverage for several decades, the tendency towards presidentialisation has been growing in recent years (Kriesi 2012,; Takens et al. 2013). Furthermore, the mayoral focus was particularly high for the *NZH*, where 64.4% of articles primarily focused on it (compared to 30.9% for the community newspapers), while only 7.9% of *NZH* articles were focused primarily on local boards, DHBs, or licensing trusts (compared to 32% for community newspapers – see Figure 2).

Such mayoral-centric ‘presidentialisation’ in the 2016 local elections coverage – in particular for the *NZH* – has ramifications for the issues concerning us here around inclusivity and diversity in political reporting. That is, while a leadership and personal focus arguably equips news audiences with relevant material upon which to base mayoral voting decisions, the parallel paucity in coverage of other voting categories disempowers audience knowledge in these areas. Indeed, this aspect was noted in media criticism of the election news coverage at the time of the elections, for instance on Radio New Zealand’s *Media Watch*, that argued:

In the case of Auckland the whole country had the opportunity to see the front runners – or at least the perceived front-runners – debate on numerous occasions. But when it came to detailed coverage of District Health Boards (DHBs), or community boards, typically there wasn't much on offer. Some of the most innovative and lively coverage was to be found on non-mainstream sites like *The Spinoff* and *Wellington Scoop* (Rose 2016).

Indeed, *The Spinoff* coverage itself noted of the DHB elections: ‘No-one knows any of the candidates. The candidates barely know themselves. The media would rather douse themselves in the bubonic plague than cover the contests’ (Donnell and Hanna 2016). The criticism that news media paid little attention to DHBs is supported in our content analysis, with only three of 198 local elections stories focusing primarily on them.

Furthermore, while the content analysis presented here reveals a predominant focus on individual candidates over political parties, policies, and ideologies, it also exhibits a focus on campaign strategy over social issues impacting the electorate. As with personalisation, this finding is typical of contemporary election coverage where the ‘horserace’ between candidates is perceived to carry more news value than simply the respective positions on social issues (Patterson 2016). This is suggested in the findings through the predominance of the ‘strategy’ and ‘mixed’ frames (which includes strategy) over the ‘issue’ frame (37.4%,

45.5%, and 17.2%, respectively – meaning that 82.9% of all stories featured some reference to campaign strategy, while only 17.2% did not). In short, local election news stories were four times more likely to reference strategy than not – a tendency also evident in the fact that 45% of all stories also featured ‘polls’ as one of their top three topics of focus. Further findings worth commenting on here are: the predominance of the ‘news’ genre (74.2% of all stories) over ‘interview’ (13.6%) and ‘opinion’ (12.1%) genres; the predominance of stories with only one primary focus (60.7% of all stories), without secondary or tertiary focus; and the relative separation of local election coverage from issues of central government (only 27.8% of all stories referred to central government in any capacity).

This project examined only newspapers, primarily focused in the Auckland region. However, even with such a narrow sample the study does allow some measure of comparison to the 2014 AUT Media Observatory General Election news analysis, that examined nationwide newspapers, television, and radio coverage (Rupar, Owen and Baker 2015). When comparing these two data sets, the starkest differences in coverage pertain to the representations of social groups and to social issues. In terms of source gender, 71% of counted sources in the 2014 General Election were male, compared to 55.6% in the 2016 Local Elections. In 2014, the main social group referred to was the generic label ‘New Zealander’ (20% of all references to any social group were to ‘New Zealanders’, followed by the next most referred to group, ‘young people’, at 11.4%). In the 2016 local election analysis, ‘young people’ were instead the most referred to group, in 31.8% of all references/all articles.<sup>7</sup> In terms of social issues focused upon, in 2014, ‘political process’ was the most referred to topic (appearing as either first, second, or third main topic in 74.8% of all articles), with ‘business and economy’ (21%), ‘polls’ (17.4%), and ‘intelligence’ (10.1%) the next most represented topics. In the 2016 sample, ‘local government’ was the most referred to topic (as either first, second, or third main topic in 78.8% of all articles), with ‘polls’ (45%), ‘housing’ (21.8%), and ‘transport’ (16.6%) the next most represented. While the shared focus on ‘polls’ re-emphasises the predominance of the strategic frame discussed above, the other categories suggest a relatively self-evident distinction between the 2014 national issues of business and intelligence (for instance, Edward Snowden and the Kim Dot Com saga), and 2016 Auckland-specific issues of housing and transport.

In conclusion, this study of 2016 local elections coverage in the *NZH* and the four Auckland-based community newspapers contributes new data to the ongoing analysis of diversity reporting in New Zealand political news. While the coverage analysed here must be duly acknowledged for its wide scope of election topics and considerable space dedicated to voices of mayoral candidates and public commentators, it must also be recognised as limited in scope – in particular paying disproportionately minimal attention to non-mayoral voting categories, non-front runner candidates, and non-Auckland geographical locations. Media are central to our understanding of social worlds and the examination of media

representation of politics provide a solid ground for the discussion about power and disparity, accuracy, fairness, social integration and identity, politics and social change. Media play a significant role in the democratic process by presenting various points of view and different voices. This process involves a constant conflict between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic processes that shift the lines between included and excluded. Who is inside and who is outside changes under the external pressures, but also because identities are neither single (Calhoun 1995) nor fixed (Bhabha 1994). During election time – whether local or national – the media’s task is vital, namely by providing access to the news, informing the public, and, ultimately, influencing their voting behaviour (Randall 1998). Our analysis of the 2016 New Zealand local elections, suggests that election news was deemed worthy of reporting, but not necessarily of in-depth analysis; that regular, narrowly focused, stories were preferred over longer multi-faceted ones; and that local election issues and processes were not typically contextualised within broader national governance structures. While further qualitative analysis of the articles is required to substantiate these suggestions, the statistics indicate that, at face value, election coverage tended towards routine reporting over more in-depth, and integrated, social and political analysis.

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### Notes

1. In the section ‘About Us’ the *New Zealand Herald* editorial team highlights this national role by describing paper as a 150 years-old newspaper that ‘has connected Kiwis to the nation, the world, and to what matters to them’ (<http://advertising.nzme.co.nz/news/the-new-zealand-herald/>)
2.  $2(C1,2)$   
 $R = \frac{C1+C2}{C1+C2}$
3. Online copies of articles through the *Neighbourly* website.
4. A coding mistake caused one item to be eliminated from the count. Therefore, the final cumulative percent equals 99.5%.
5. Only candidates mentioned in at least 4% of the items are represented.
6. Only those social groups that are mentioned in over 4% of the items are represented.
7. However, the 2014 study only calculates the % of all references to social group, not the % of all news articles (‘items’).

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