Making politics go well down under: Public journalism in New Zealand daily newspapers

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David Venables

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Abstract

The literature on the use of public journalism suggests that it can lead to different news coverage than is traditionally provided by the news media. Specifically, these differences have been identified in story content, use of different sources and use of mobilising information. This thesis asks whether such differences can be identified in newspapers' coverage of the 2001 Local Body Elections in New Zealand. The research involved content analysis of New Zealand's six largest daily newspapers, three of them with experience of using public journalism and three with no such experience. Interviews were also conducted with two or three senior journalists involved in organising each paper's election campaign in order to explore their goals for the election coverage and evaluation of it.

The results mirror those of previous research by showing significant differences in the coverage of the newspapers with public journalism experience in relation to some factors, but not others. The papers with a public journalism background consistently used more non-elite sources than the traditional papers, but did not consistently use more female sources. They also included mobilising information in stories more frequently and made greater use of story features, or "elements", associated with public journalism. However, one of the papers with no experience of public journalism also ranked highly in relation to these two factors.

The interviews revealed some differences in goals among the journalists, but this was not a simple split between the journalists on papers with public journalism experience and the other journalists. For example, not all interviewees working for the papers experienced in using public journalism agreed that their goal should be to boost voter turnout. Nor was an overt commitment to supporting the democratic process expressed only by staff on the papers with public journalism experience. The interviews did, however, identify that only the three newspapers with a public journalism background used polling to identify the issues that were important to the public and proceeded to cover these issues during their election campaign.

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Chapter One
Introduction

> Journalists should try to make politics 'go well', so that it actually becomes a discussion in which the polity learns more about itself, its current problems, its real divisions, its place in time, its prospects for the future. By their commitment to such a discussion, journalists might reclaim some of their lost authority in the American public sphere (Rosen, 1992a, p. 34).

> The definition of 'public journalism' is problematic, quite simply because many reporters assumed they were already practising public journalism, even if they did not subscribe to the gospel of 'public journalism'…Argument about whether it is a set of journalistic techniques, a new model of reportage, or whether it is a philosophy which informs news values remains to be resolved (McGregor, Comrie & Campbell, 1998, p. 2).

These passages highlight the issues at the heart of this thesis. Rosen sees public journalism as a hope for the future, as a solution to two problems: a decline of participatory public life and a decline of the authority and status of the media. McGregor et al. home in on a key area of contention regarding public journalism – what actually is it? The "gospel" of public journalism (Shepard, 1994), the good news that Rosen offers to journalists, is difficult to critique until a working definition is pinned down. Another point that McGregor addresses is how public journalism fits in with traditional journalistic practice. Critics are concerned at the seeming inability of proponents to explain how exactly public journalism is different from other journalism. It is hard to analyse a particular media outlet's use of public journalism if one cannot identify public journalism as opposed to other types of journalism.

The research in this thesis will focus on these two questions – what is public journalism and, more specifically, how does it differ from mainstream practice. Much research into public journalism addresses these questions, with scholars trying to pin down the exact nature of the differences. The framing of stories, the choice and use of sources, the use of mobilising or participatory information – many different measures have been used to try and establish whether public journalism produces different media coverage. Research has tended to divide media into two types: those practising public journalism and those not using it. There is a danger that by dividing media dichotomously, research can produce an overly simplistic analysis. As

McGregor et al. allude to above, some mainstream media have felt, when presented with a description of public journalism, that that is what they have been doing all along. Is public journalism a genuinely new philosophical approach to the relationship between media and public or is it primarily a set of techniques as described above, techniques which might perhaps be put to use in pursuit of very traditional news media goals, for example to sell more newspapers?

This thesis seeks to make a contribution to the research on public journalism by trying to describe how public journalism has affected newspaper coverage of the 2001 Local Body Elections in New Zealand. It uses a multifaceted analysis of a case study of election coverage by six daily newspapers in New Zealand – three with a history of public journalism involvement and three without any knowledge of public journalism. The focus on election coverage is warranted because a large number of public journalism campaigns in the United States, the birthplace of public journalism theory and practice, have been carried out during elections. The same is true of the use of public journalism in New Zealand, which was initially based around elections. Furthermore, the election scenario fits well with the democratic political values espoused by supporters of public journalism, that is one would expect a media publication that says it is using public journalism to make a bit of a fuss about participation in the electoral process. The focus on newspapers is justified by the fact that public journalism campaigns both in New Zealand and overseas have tended to be run by the daily print media.

The scope of this research is limited to six New Zealand daily newspapers: five metropolitan dailies and one large provincial daily. The *New Zealand Herald* in Auckland is the country's largest circulation paper by a large margin. *The Evening Post* and *The Dominion* (now amalgamated into *The Dominion Post*) were, at the time, the evening and morning newspapers in the capital, Wellington. *The Press* in Christchurch and the *Otago Daily Times* in Dunedin make up the remainder of the metro dailies. The *Waikato Times* in Hamilton is easily the country's largest provincial daily. The analysis is of the six papers' coverage of the 2001 Local Body Elections, the elections for territorial authorities, held every three years. They are to be contrasted with General Elections, which are elections for the national Parliament.

Three of the six newspapers had had some involvement with public journalism; three had had no experience at all. *The Press* had used public journalism techniques in its election coverage since 1996, though the interviews conducted for this research suggest that senior staff had become a bit disillusioned with public journalism. The *Waikato Times* had a similar history of public journalism use, with the editor remaining committed to it in 2001. *The Evening Post*'s involvement in public journalism was driven by its editor, who had experience from his time at

The Press and the *Waikato Times*. Its 2001 election coverage displayed many of the hallmarks of a classic United States-style public journalism election campaign.

In contrast, the *New Zealand Herald*, *The Dominion* and the *Otago Daily Times* had no experience of public journalism. The *New Zealand Herald* has a strong national flavour while also covering the country's largest metropolitan area, Auckland. *The Dominion*, though Wellington-based, was effectively a national paper focusing on politics and national issues. The *Otago Daily Times*, based in Dunedin in the far south of the country, is a strongly local paper, focusing on issues in that city and the surrounding districts.

As stated above, some public journalism research compares the content of stories and approach to coverage; some discusses differences in selection and use of sources; some compares the use of mobilising information. This research does all three, working on the premise that a paper using public journalism should display the whole range of differences identified in previous research. If it doesn't, or if papers that are ignorant of public journalism show significant features associated with public journalism, then a more complex picture emerges of exactly how public journalism differs from that which its champions criticise – the traditional media approach.

This research will survey studies of public journalism to date, seeking to identify how the New Zealand experience fits in. Public journalism is by and large an American story, but it quickly made its way to New Zealand via the country's then-largest newspaper chain – Independent Newspapers Ltd (INL). It also penetrated the Australian newspaper industry. The Australian use of public journalism will be discussed as a comparison with the New Zealand experience because of the geographical and cultural closeness of the two countries.

The research methodology is a combination of content analysis of Local Body Elections coverage from August 1, 2001 to October 12, 2001 and interviews with the journalists responsible for leading the election coverage. The content analysis will consider the three research aspects mentioned above: the content stories, use of sources and use of mobilising information. Interviews have been conducted with those responsible for the 2001 election coverage at the six newspapers involved in order to discern what they were trying to achieve and what they thought about their coverage. The aim of the interviews is to identify goals against which the content analysis of the election coverage can be measured. Interviews have also been conducted with the early leaders in New Zealand public journalism, providing an insight into what these journalists were trying to achieve by bringing public journalism to New Zealand.

It is the researcher's expectation that the interviews with senior staff at newspapers with a background in public journalism will echo the goals and visions articulated by the key American promoters of public journalism. Content analysis should show that the actual 2001 election coverage reflects the intentions of the journalists interviewed, given that the interviewees were the key participants in determining election coverage. Differences should be apparent between the coverage of papers with a history of public journalism and the coverage of other papers. These differences should reflect those found in previous research comparing public journalism papers and traditional papers: differences in approach to election coverage and in content, differences in source selection and use, and differences in use of mobilising information.

If newspapers claiming to practice public journalism are not uniformly different from other papers in terms of goals and visions stated and in terms of the actual content of their coverage, a challenging situation will present itself. What if newspapers that have never heard of public journalism rate more highly in terms of some aspects of coverage that have been associated with public journalism? Should such a result emerge, it might be possible to start constructing a more complex story of public journalism, one that moreover helps answer the question – just what is different about public journalism? By reflecting back on the American experience it might also be possible to ask whether the thing that some New Zealand newspapers call public journalism is really public journalism at all.

The development of public journalism has followed a widely touted trend in democratic theory – that western democracy is in decline as evidenced by decreased participation in public affairs – and three beliefs about the news media: a) the media are important to democratic life, b) the media are in decline along with other public institutions, and c) reviving the media involves "reconnecting" with the public and reclaiming the democratic role of journalism.

This thesis will attempt to identify what public journalism is and will examine the extent to which the American phenomenon has been adopted by New Zealand daily newspapers. It will explore public journalism both in terms of its intellectual basis and in terms of the practical experiments carried out by the news media.

Some background is needed about democratic conceptions of media in the United States, since public journalism developed, initially at least, solely in the American context. Likewise, a detailed examination of the development of public journalism in the United States is required. Ideas of public journalism were already well developed in the United States when New Zealand

and Australian media picked up the concept. A feature of this thesis is considering how public journalism as practised in New Zealand differs from the American experience.

The democratic context of public journalism needs to be emphasised because its strongest advocates, such as Rosen and Merritt, argue that public journalism can help the media perform their proper role in the democratic process. Perhaps the most important challenge for proponents of public journalism is for them to explain how news media experiments in public journalism are helping achieve the goal of making politics "go well".

Furthermore, since theorists seem to be agreed that there are aspects of journalism that undermine democracy either by focusing the attention of the public on trivial matters or by offering slanted or misleading coverage of issues, what guarantee is there that public journalism initiatives will counter these effects? Will public journalism result in a net gain for democracy, or will it merely mollify, perhaps only in a small way, the negative effects of the news media on public discourse?

Another question is that once we look at those theorists who constitute "the intellectual antecedents of public journalism" (Coleman, 1997) and analyse their theories, will the principles they have espoused bear any relation to public journalism as it is practised by the news media? Does public journalism mean that a given newspaper commits itself as a matter of principle to boosting the public's involvement in all aspects of democratic life, or does it mean the paper simply turns to readers every three years (the New Zealand electoral cycle) and asks: what do you think are the most important issues in this election campaign? One might refer to the former as having a philosophical public journalism focus, with the latter indicating a focus on public journalism as a set of techniques.

The focus of this thesis is best explained by the following three research questions.

1.1 Research questions

1. What did the editorial decision makers on the *New Zealand Herald*, *Otago Daily Times*, *The Dominion*, the *Waikato Times*, *The Press* and *The Evening Post* say they were trying to achieve through their 2001 Local Body Elections coverage and what was their assessment of the final coverage?

2. Did the editorial decision makers on the papers with experience of conducting public journalism experiments differ from other editorial leaders in their assessment of the type of coverage they were aiming for and achieved during the 2001 Local Body Elections?

3. In what way, if any, did the coverage of the 2001 Local Body Elections by papers with experience of conducting public journalism experiments differ from papers with no experience of using public journalism?

1.2 Structure of thesis by chapter

The thesis is structured as follows. After this introductory chapter (Chapter One) the rest are divided into three groups: The first section (Chapters Two to Four) constitutes the literature review. It discusses the development of public journalism amid a climate of concern about the media's role in public life, explores what is meant by a traditional journalistic approach to news coverage and discusses the results of public journalism research; the second section (Chapter Five) discusses the methodologies used in public journalism research and the rationale for using the particular methodologies chosen; the third section (Chapters Six and Seven) details the results of the interviews and content analysis. Chapter Eight presents the findings of this research and draws conclusions in relation to the research questions presented in Chapter One.

1.2.1 Chapter One: Introduction

This presents the rationale for the thesis and how it fits into previous work done on public journalism. It lays out the research questions and briefly outlines the structure of the thesis and the methodology. It also details the context in which the research was done – the 2001 Local Body Elections in New Zealand.

1.2.2 Chapter Two: Public journalism, theory and practice

This will discuss the theoretical background to public journalism, outlining the strands of social science and media theory that have been identified as influencing public journalism. Included in the discussion will be public sphere theory (Habermas), conceptions of the public (Dewey, Lippmann, Yankelovich), media social responsibility theory (the 1947 Hutchins Commission), the decline of civic life and public participation in the West (Putnam), and the perceived role of the media in this decline and in reversing the trend (Rosen). Chapter Two will also explore what is meant by the traditional (or pre-public journalism) way of doing journalism.

1.2.3 Chapter Three: Public journalism practice in the United States

This chapter will endeavour to build a picture of what, in the view of its proponents, public journalism is meant to be and what it is meant to achieve. The chapter details the development of public journalism in the United States, the forms it has taken and the debates surrounding it – arguments for and against. It will also discuss the findings of research into public journalism

and evaluations of its effectiveness, all within the US context. Special attention will be paid to the main critiques that have been made of public journalism.

1.2.4 Chapter Four: Public journalism practice in New Zealand and Australia

This chapter will deal with the importation of public journalism into Australia and New Zealand. It will cover the findings of research into public journalism experiments in these countries.

1.2.5 Chapter Five: Methodology

This will detail the methodologies used in this research, establishing a rationale for their use. The methodologies will be discussed both in terms of the literature on research methods and in terms of the methodologies used in other public journalism research in New Zealand. This research seeks to apply multiple methodologies to the case study in an effort to produce a full picture of the use of public journalism in New Zealand daily newspapers.

1.2.6 Chapter Six: Interviews with newsroom decision makers

This chapter will present the results of interviews conducted with the editorial decision makers who led the coverage of the 2001 elections. The interviews will delve into the decision making processes used in the six newspapers covered in this research and how the papers actually went about deciding what to cover during the election period. External factors affecting news selection will also be discussed. The results of this set of interviews will be informed by a set of other research interviews conducted with two of the participants who had previous experience of public journalism and with two other media managers involved in the introduction of public journalism into New Zealand. This will allow a profile to be created for each newspaper, showing how they intended to cover the elections and what their senior journalists thought of their coverage.

1.2.7 Chapter Seven: Results of content analysis

This chapter will summarise the results of the content analysis, comparing the six newspapers across a range of criteria, including volume and geographical extent of coverage, presence in stories of features associated with public journalism, types of sources used and use of mobilising information. As with the interviews, the results will be analysed and a profile created of each newspaper's coverage.

1.2.8 Chapter Eight: Discussion

This chapter will discuss the results of the research in terms of the research questions in Chapter One and the previous research into public journalism described in Chapters Two to Four.

1.2.9 Chapter Nine: Conclusion

An assessment will be made about the nature of public journalism as practised in New Zealand. An effort will also be made to use the results of the research to offer insights into some of the larger questions about public journalism. Key issues include public journalism as a philosophy versus public journalism as a set of techniques, the role of the public in public journalism and the future of public journalism. Suggestions will be made for future research.

1.3 The context of the research: the 2001 New Zealand Local Body Elections

Before proceeding to discuss coverage of the 2001 elections it is probably worthwhile to provide some background information about them. New Zealand's electoral cycle is three years. This applies to both general, or national, elections and local body elections, with local body elections occurring in the year before each general election. Eligible voters in all cases are those aged 18 or over. Local body elections cover the governing authorities for cities and small towns/rural areas as well as larger regional areas.

Local bodies governing cities (city councils) and small towns/rural areas (district councils) raise their own funds locally from residents based on property values, and are not funded by national taxation. Larger regional authorities (regional councils, whose areas typically encompass those of a number of city and/or district councils) are funded on a similar basis. The issues they deal with are, predictably, more regional in nature. City and district councils typically deal with issues such as roading, street maintenance, building codes, zoning of areas for different functions (for example industrial, commercial, residential), sewerage and refuse disposal, parking, and provision of amenities such as housing, libraries and swimming pools. Regional councils deal with larger scale issues such as pollution control, public transport and water.

City and district councils are headed by a mayor, elected by all voters in the relevant area. The remainder of the council representatives are elected on a ward basis, that is, each council is divided into a small number of sub-areas, or wards, with voters in each ward choosing a number of candidates from the list provided. The top two, three or four polling candidates in each ward are then elected as councillors.

Voter turnout in New Zealand has been traditionally high for general elections, but has been much lower for local body elections. However, numbers voting in both the 2001 Local Body Elections and 2002 General Election were significantly lower than in previous elections, suggesting that New Zealand may be suffering from the malaise often cited by United States public journalism theorists – declining public participation in political life. Department of Internal Affairs figures show that voter turnout was 72.5% in the 2002 General Election. Participation in general elections declined sharply from 89% in 1984 to 78% in 1990, increased slightly to 81% in 1996, then declined again to a new low of 76.9% in 2002. The 2005 turnout rose to 80.9% amid accurate poll predictions of a very close race between the two largest parties.

Local body voter turnout in 2001 was the lowest since 1989. City council turnout in 1989 was 52%, dropped slightly before rising to 51% in 1998 and plummeting to 45% in 2001. District councils followed a similar trend, starting at 67% over the same period, falling and recovering to 61% in 1998, and then falling to 57% in 2001. For regional councils, the figures were 56% in 1989, falling and recovering to 53% in 1998, then dropping to 49% in 2001. Local election turnout is traditionally higher in rural areas, smaller city councils and the South Island. In 2001, turnout ranged from a high of 65% for district councils in the South Island to a low of 43% for North Island city councils. It should be noted that a key question put to the senior journalists interviewed for this research was what emphasis they put on trying to get people out to vote. Turnout in 2004 fell even further to 45% for regional councils, 51% for district councils and 43% for city councils.

Looking at the sample of six newspapers used in this research, voter turnout in 2001 in the main region served by each paper was as follows (listed from north to south):

- Auckland (*New Zealand Herald*) 43%
- Waikato (*Waikato Times*) 49%
- Wellington (*The Evening Post* and *The Dominion*) 50%
- Canterbury (*The Press*) 52%
- Otago (*Otago Daily Times*) 61%

Having outlined the structure of the thesis and discussed important background information, this thesis will now consider how it is that public journalism came about.

Chapter Two
Public journalism, theory and practice

This thesis is about the use by New Zealand newspapers of techniques associated with what is known as public journalism. Specifically, it is about the use of such techniques in covering elections. This chapter will survey the literature in order to describe the intellectual context in which public journalism theory developed in the United States. This will involve discussing what scholars have to say about the role of the news media and how what we call "news" comes into being. The next two chapters will discuss how public journalism has manifested itself as media practice, first, in the United States (Chapter Three) and, second, in New Zealand and Australia (Chapter Four).

The development of public journalism is the result of the coming together of two things, one external to the journalism profession, the other internal. Externally, theorists have identified a decline in public life in Western democracies, as evidenced by reduced voter turnout and declining membership of political parties. This decline extends to a loss of trust in major institutions, with the media being one of these institutions. As public life has declined so has the public's attachment to traditional media, specifically the daily newspaper, subsided. The evidence for this is falling circulation. Not surprisingly, journalists have sought to do something to reverse this trend.

The internal factor influencing the development of public journalism is journalists' views of what their role is in society. Public journalists, if one might use the expression as some authors do, see the futures of journalism and democratic life as being intertwined – they have declined together and their recovery is also seen as interconnected (see Merritt & Rosen, 1998; Rosen, 1995). Proponents argue that democratic life is in decline and it is the job of the media to help revive it. Indeed, the media have no choice given the symbiotic relationship between the two. Public journalists tend to emphasis the involvement of the media in society and contrast their efforts with "traditional" media which try and stand apart from society as detached observers of events.

This chapter will explore the background to the development of public journalism with these dual influences in mind, discussing the idea that democratic life was in decline and the role that the media were claimed to have in both causing the problem and aiding the solution. The theorists discussed in this chapter – primarily Putnam, Habermas, Yankelovich, Rosen and Dewey – are typically cited in studies of the development of public journalism. The chapter will

begin by discussing the ideas of democratic decline and the media's role as both part of the cause and part of the solution in the American context. It will then discuss the extent to which the American theoretical discussion is mirrored in other countries, specifically New Zealand.

The questions that emerge from the discussions in this chapter are crucial ones for western politics: what actually is democracy, and what is the public's role in it? Is democracy a system of institutions, with the public's role consisting of simply voting every three, four or five years and then stepping back from the process to fulfil one's economic duties? Or is democracy an on-going process that requires the public to be engaged on a continual basis? The question is a serious one for students of public journalism. How can the media help democracy unless they know what it is and have a clear idea of the public's, not to mention their own, role?

This discussion is important in terms of the research questions for this thesis. Research Question Three asks:

- In what way, if any, did the coverage of the 2001 Local Body Elections by papers with experience of conducting public journalism experiments differ from papers with no experience of using public journalism?

Later in this chapter, sections 2.5 and 2.6 will deal with the literature on how news is created, including the processes used to find stories and the attendant values involved, plus the sources used for news. These sections are important background to discussion of the first two research questions of this thesis:

- What did the editorial decision makers on the *New Zealand Herald*, *Otago Daily Times*, *The Dominion*, the *Waikato Times*, *The Press* and *The Evening Post* say they were trying to achieve through their 2001 Local Body Elections coverage and what was their assessment of the final coverage?

- Did the editorial decision makers on the papers with experience of conducting public journalism experiments differ from other editorial leaders in their assessment of the type of coverage they were aiming for and achieved during the 2001 Local Body Elections?

2.1 Democratic decline: the United States experience

When scholars recount the decline of democracy in the 20th Century, what they are really speaking of is a decline in aspects of public participation and a perceived decline in the quality of public discourse. Democratic electoral systems persist, but public interest in voting has fallen. Theorists also point to a breakdown in public participation in civic life generally, that is everything from involvement in election campaigns to local clubs and societies.

Writers on public journalism typically cite the importance of the work of sociologist and linguistic philosopher Jurgen Habermas and American sociologist Robert Putnam (for Habermas, see Blumler & Gurevitch, 2000; Bybee, 1999; Coleman, 1997, 2000a; Gade, Scott, Antecol, Hsueh, Hume et al. 1998; Glasser & Craft, 1996; Haas, 1999a, 2000; Lambeth, 1998a; Meyer, 1998; Perry, 2003; Schroll, 1999; for Putnam, see Friedland, Sotirovic & Daily, 1998; Gade et al. 1998; Mancini, 1997; Merritt, 1996a, 1998; Perry, 2003). Habermas and Putnam have homed in on the massive social changes that took place in the 19th and 20th centuries – urbanisation, technological innovation, the growth of consumer society and mass media. They ask what effect these changes have had on democratic society and the media. They both emphasise the importance of social interaction and participation to the health of the human polity. However, the picture they paint of the state of democratic society is very negative.

In order to explain communication on a political scale Habermas (1989) developed the idea of "the public sphere", which can be defined as the area between the private realm of family/civil society, and the realm of public authority (the state, courts and so on). In feudal and monarchical states, the public sphere was simply a place where royal views were made known to the populace. However, from the 18th Century, says Habermas, the public sphere began to develop as a political arena, aided by the rise of bourgeois liberalism and the early press and literary journals. This liberal "bourgeois public sphere" (1989, p. 27) evolved into a democratic model based on respect for, and legal protection of, individual property rights. It was also characterised as the venue for vibrant political discussion and participation.

For Habermas, the rise of strong states and powerful corporate businesses in the 19th and 20th Centuries, with the parallel growth of government publicity machines and advertising, has led to "the downfall of the public sphere" (1989, p. 142). Contemporary western society has become focused on consumption rather than political discourse. The public has changed from being "culture-debating" to being "culture-consuming" (pp. 159-175). Habermas notes that while many (albeit fewer) people vote, relatively few are "active citizens" involved in "day-to-day political controversies" (p. 214).

The consumption model has permeated all levels of society, according to Habermas. Political parties based on participation have been replaced with publicity machines advertising candidates. The parliamentary debating chamber has been replaced with a sham "staged display" where politicians let the public see what they want them to see – consensus, not debate (1989, p. 206). Governments now have to use a consumer-focused approach in order to get their messages across:

> Because private enterprises evoke in their customers the idea that in their consumption decisions they act in their capacity as citizens, the state has to 'address' its citizens like consumers. As a result, public authority too competes for publicity (p. 195).

The scenario painted by Habermas produces a sort of parody of the old participatory public sphere, "a public sphere in appearance only" (p. 171). The public sphere is now merely a platform from which advertisers sell their products, be it a soft drink, or a political party. Habermas says public opinion itself is merely another commodity for sale by firms manufacturing it via scientific polling techniques.

American sociologists and commentators have written at length about the impact of Habermas' mass-mediated consumer society on democracy and the media, lamenting the perceived effects they have had on public participation in politics and other areas of society. Perhaps one of the best summations of these effects is to be found in the work of Robert Putnam, who has tracked the rise of civic involvement in the United States through the first six decades of the 20th century and its subsequent decline through to the 1990s. Putnam's work also serves as a detailed statement of the sort of problem public journalism sets out to tackle.

Putnam (2000) identifies an illness that has spread across the breadth of American associational activity, from the political sphere to local, non-political activities and even to simple interpersonal interaction. In what Putnam (p. 32) describes as "the most common act of democratic citizenship", voting, the United States went from a 62.8% turnout for the Kennedy-Nixon fight in 1960 to 48.9% in the three-way 1996 Clinton-Dole-Perot contest. Identification with parties fell from over 75% to under 65% between the 1960s and 90s. Average US investment in non-religious organisations fell from 3.7 hours a month in 1965 to 2.3 hours in 1995. Religious attendance and involvement have also dropped by 25-50% since the 1960s. Union membership plummeted from 32.5% in the 1950s to 14.1% in the 1990s.

The decline extends to social trust, says Putnam. In 1964, 77% of people agreed that most people could be trusted while in 1996 a survey showed that 50% of people thought the

population was becoming less trustworthy. As further evidence of the decline of trust and social "reciprocity" Putnam even cites the "virtual disappearance of hitchhiking" (p. 143).

The overall picture for Putnam is a massive decline in what he calls America's social capital. Strong social capital, says Putnam, leads to better schools, less violent crime, less tax evasion and greater economic prosperity, with citizens engaging in "real conversations" rather than inferior talk show exchanges (p. 341). Social capital has become a key concept in public journalism, with proponents often referring to the media's role in creating more of it (Charity, 1996a; Friedland et al. 1998; Merritt, 1995a, 1996a, 1996b; Meyer, 1998; Perry, 2003; Rosen, 1999a).

Putnam lays the blame for the decline in America's social capital primarily at the door of those born after World War II. This "generational disengagement" (p. 255) is exacerbated by a number of other factors: lack of time and money, suburbanisation and the growth of television. Television watching comes in for particular criticism from Putnam as it takes up valuable time and is a passive activity that "provides a kind of pseudo-personal connection to others" (p. 242). For Putnam, television constitutes "the single most consistent predictor" of civic disengagement (pp. 230-231).

Putnam's analysis crops up time and again in discussions about the decline of democratic involvement and trust, as well as about the merits or otherwise of public journalism (see Friedland et al. 1998; Gade et al. 1998; Kern, 1997; Kramer, 1999; Merritt, 1996a; Mancini, 1997; Rosen, 1999a; Scheufele & Shah, 2000; Wilkins, 2000).

Another contemporary theorist whose work is often referred to by those who write about public journalism is Daniel Yankelovich, the famed pollster (see Charity, 1996b; Gade et al. 1998; Haas, 1999b; Lambeth, 1998b; McGregor, Comrie & Fountaine, 1999; Merritt, 1998; Meyer, 1998; Perry, 2003; Rosen, 1996b, 1999a; Rosen & Taylor, 1992). His work reflects the common themes of public journalism: that the public has become mistrustful of political institutions; and the way to reinvigorate the system is to reconnect with the public and promote public participation. Yankelovich, in outlining what he sees as the growing disillusionment with elections in the early 1990s, paints a bleak picture:

> The American public is in a foul mood. People are frustrated and angry, anxious and off balance, pessimistic about the future, and cynical about all forms of leadership in government (1994, p. 389).

He attributes the public's attitude to economic marginalisation, a weakening of common values, and a widening disconnect between citizens and government, which was perceived as being tied up in an elitist arrangement with academics and media.

Yankelovich (2000) feels politicians, by focusing their attention on opinion polls, have come to a point where they concentrate on getting the public onside while they pursue their own agenda. He believes the country's leaders fail to provide the kind of leadership that voters need – a situation where politicians help voters work out what they really want. Yankelovich believes there is a serious mismatch between how pollsters and the media do things and how ordinary people operate:

> The public, I have learned over the years, forms its judgments mainly through interactions with other people, through dialogue and discussion. People weigh what they hear from others against their own convictions. They compare notes with one another, they assess the views of others in terms of what makes sense to them, and, above all, they consult their feelings and their values. The public doesn't distinguish sharply between facts and values, as journalists and social scientists do. Indeed, dialogue draws heavily on feelings and values. Of course, information is important. But information stripped of feelings is not the royal road to public judgment; dialogue, rich in feelings and values, is (1999, p. 25).

Yankelovich is generally scathing about public opinion polling in so far as it purports to tell us what the public actually think. The reality of working out the public's views is much more complex. In his classic work *Coming to Public Judgment* (1991) he describes a multi-stage process whereby the public as a whole develop a view on something. First, people have to engage with an issue, then they consider it from all sides, come to an appreciation of the choices available, and finally come to a judgment, having accepted the consequences of the choices they make. This process, on a complex issue, can take many years.

The way to bring about a considered public judgment, says Yankelovich, is not to swamp the people with information, but rather to facilitate dialogue among the populace (1999). Dialogue is the very antithesis of the kind of "he said, she said" debate common in the news media. While not being a panacea, dialogue would bring to democracy exactly what proponents of public journalism desire:

> …long-standing stereotypes dissolved, mistrust overcome, mutual understanding achieved, visions shaped and grounded in shared purpose, people previously at odds with one another aligned on objectives and strategies, new common ground

> discovered, new perspectives and insights gained, new levels of creativity stimulated, and bonds of community strengthened… (1999, p. 16).

The ideas discussed above have been echoed by numerous commentators and scholars. Carey (1993) notes how by the second half of the 20th Century the political process had become something of a closed shop, with the media, interest groups and government running the show with little reference to the mass of the public – a game of "insider baseball", to quote Joan Didion (as cited in Carey, 1993, p. 15). The people had become "an increasingly alienated and cynical spectator" (p. 16).

Durant describes America as having a "democratic deficit" (1995, p. 25). This has come about through a series of factors: a disgruntled public that has spawned pressure groups seeking to advance their own aims; a media motivated by commercial gain; risk-averse politicians; and a proliferation of chronically-understaffed bureaucracies. Writing before the 2000 presidential election, Andrew Kohut, of public journalism advocacy group the Pew Charitable Trusts, said its research showed that nearly a third of voters felt it did not matter who won, suggesting they would not bother voting (2000a, 2000c).

Academics cite surveys showing that confidence in the United States federal government fell dramatically between and 1960s and 90s, while the proportion of people who see government as being run by big interests looking after themselves rose equally dramatically (Nye, 1997a, 1997b; Orren, 1997). Public mistrust of the US government is seen to stem from the 1970s via the Vietnam War and Watergate (Lawrence, 1997; Neustadt, 1997; Nye, 1997b; Schudson, 1978). Nye (1997a) notes that surveys over the last 30 years point to a decline in confidence in institutions across the board – universities, major companies, medicine, journalism. King (1997) argues that mistrust of politics and politicians is related to a growing gap between the interests of political elites and the preferences of average Americans.

A large number of researchers have joined Putnam in investigating the decline in trust and confidence in American society and government in the latter half of the 20th century. Variously described as distrust, political cynicism and negativism, the consensus is that confidence in democratic institutions has been eroding since the 1960s (Moy, Pfau & Kahlor, 1999). Trust is seen as one of the building blocks of democracy:

> Without political trust, which includes the belief that the system works for the *citizenry*, any actions taken may be perceived as futile. Similarly, the absence of social trust may lead individuals to perceive others as driven purely by self-interest;

> it also precludes the possibility of citizens perceiving that others will work toward a common goal or that such a common goal exists (Moy & Scheufele, 2000, p. 750).

Researchers have found a link between falling trust and a decline in civic engagement (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Moy & Scheufele, 2000; Scheufele & Shah, 2000; Wilkins, 2000). Berman (1997) found that citizens in many towns were cynical about their local administrations, seeing them as dishonest or untrustworthy, and not listening to citizen's needs.

It should be noted that other researchers have challenged the overwhelmingly negative assessment of political participation. For instance, while researchers tend to accept Putnam's general theory of the decline in social capital, the underlying reasons are a matter of continuing discussion. Dahlgren (2000) has argued that the picture of decline in trust and participation is a simplistic one, with some evidence pointing to a redirection of public energies towards salient issues. Scheufele and Shah (2000) found that social capital was more heavily influenced by individuals with strong personalities rather than by information supplied to the mass of the population.

Closer analysis of just what constitutes "trust" has led some scholars to query just how disillusioned the public really are and just what it is that they are disillusioned with. Nye (1997a) argued that Americans were still overwhelmingly committed to democracy as a system though their faith in existing democratic institutions had been shaken. Faith in local institutions, such as schools and local government had also not been shaken to the same degree as that in federal institutions (Blendon, Benson, Morin, Altman, Brodie et al. 1997; Nye, 1997b). Norris (1999), in her international study of political mistrust, agreed, pointing to results showing that 98% of Americans identified as being either proud or very proud of their country. She argued, first, that political and social trust are different things. On taking a closer look at just what constitutes political trust, she distinguished five types, suggesting that while mistrust might have risen in relation to political actors and related institutions, this had not happened in relation to views on the performance of democratic regimes, political community in general and the principles underpinning Western democracy.

Even the wealth of information about falling voter turnout in the 1990s has been challenged. Inglehart (1997) argued that the drop in voter turnout was due to the decline of political parties and not to voters being apathetic. The decline had been only in "elite-directed participation" such as voting and party membership, with younger people in particular turning their attention to more active and autonomous forms of action (p. 233). Inglehart pointed to "dramatic

evidence of rising mass political activism" in western democracies, citing as evidence significant increases in numbers of people signing petitions on specific issues (p. 233).

Schudson (2000a) argues that interpreting poor voter turnout as negative might have been a simplistic response. He suggests that Americans might just have been suffering from voter fatigue. Decline in turnout might have signified disengagement from public life, but it might also have indicated that the people felt that electoral politics had actually disengaged from the issues that concerned them. Franklin and de Mino (1998) argue that the very separation of powers that forms one of the cornerstones of American democracy, could itself have contributed to reduced voter turnout by diminishing the stakes involved in an election, and hence the motivation to take part. McDonald and Popkin (2001) suggest the fall in American voter turnout since 1972 is an illusion created by census figures, with the alleged drop due largely to increasing numbers of ineligible people being included in voting age population figures.

The above discussion has established a picture of apparent democratic decline in the United States prior to the emergence of public journalism. A belief in this is one of the first articles of faith recited by public journalists. There are certainly many statistics that support the claim that American democratic society was in trouble. The theorists who are typically cited in public journalism research define this trouble more closely as being about a decline in public participation. The next question is whether the American picture of democratic decline and falling public participation was mirrored internationally.

2.2 Democratic decline: the world experience

There is strong evidence to suggest that the American experience of declining trust towards politicians, parties and governments has been repeated all over the world, though not always to as great an extent. Increasing levels of distrust of politicians have been identified in advanced industrial democracies as far apart as Australia, Britain, Japan and Sweden (Dalton, 1999; Holmberg, 1999). Rose, Shin and Munro (1999) found that while 88% of South Koreans wanted more democracy, there was a high level of distrust of political parties and democratic institutions. More than three-quarters of Koreans thought most people could be trusted somewhat or a lot, but only 20% trusted parties and 22% trusted Parliament.

Hall's (1999) study of social capital in Britain, however, found no decline to match Putnam's description of the American experience. Indeed, British membership of voluntary groups had risen except for traditional women's organisations and unions. Electoral turnout had remained stable since 1950, while there was no evidence of Britain's post-war generation dropping out of public life. Hall attributes the strength of British social capital to increasing numbers of better

educated people, the growth of the middle class which has transformed Britain's class structure, and government policies which have seen local authorities put more money into voluntary agencies. However, Hall says this continuity in social capital is not matched by an equal robustness in social and political trust. He suggests urbanisation, economic insecurity and the move towards a more individualistic society are behind the overall decline in social trust. Hall says that his research suggests the connection between social and political trust is tenuous at best. The implication is that democracy in Britain might be in good heart. The one worrying sign, says Hall, is that reduced levels of trust and civic involvement are most evident among those aged under 30 and the working class.

Pharr and Putnam (2000), who have conducted research on the health of democracies around the world, have concluded that while fears of democracy itself being in crisis are unfounded, public confidence in the institutions of democracy is at an all-time low. Considering the Trilateral nations of North America, East Asia and Europe, the authors found that over the past three decades: confidence in politicians had dropped in 12 out of the 13 countries for which systematic data was available (The Netherlands being the only exception); in 17 of the 19 countries for which data was available, the percentage of the public who identified with a particular party had fallen significantly; in 11 out of 14 countries that could be measured on this question, confidence in the legislature had declined, with especially severe drops in Britain, Canada, Germany, Sweden and the United States. Pharr and Putnam say recurrent corruption scandals in Italy and Japan have almost certainly helped erode public confidence in those states.

Pharr (1997a, 1997b) says the Japanese disaffection with politics is an endemic post-war phenomenon, with citizens expressing serious reservations about politicians' ethical standards. Inoguchi (2000) has found that while there has been a dramatic rise in the number of civic organizations in Japan in recent decades and while traditional neighbourhood activities have also remained strong, trust in politicians and politics has not kept pace. The number of people engaged in civic activities rose from 1981-96, but the percentage remained fairly static at about one-quarter. Social trust rose from 26% to 38% from 1978-93, while support for democracy jumped from 38% in 1963 to 59% in 1993.

The literature on New Zealand tells a similar tale of democratic decline. The fall in voter turnout at elections has been well documented in recent years. A recent newspaper report shows that voting in New Zealand's triennial Parliamentary elections reached a peak of 96.1% in 1938 and maintained a level of between 88 and 94% until the Labour landslide in 1984 (Hunt, 2002). The six elections since 1984 have seen a significant falling away from that year's turnout of 91.4%. The second most recent election, in 2002, saw just 75.8% of voters turn out on election day, the

worst result since 1893. However, Vowles (2002a, 2002b) says that if the nearly 9% of eligible voters who failed to enrol in 1999 are counted, the turnout for that year drops from 82.3% to 75%. On this basis, the 2002 figure would come perilously close to dipping below 70%. Vowles notes that younger voters in particular are missing from the polls (2002a). He puts the reduced turnout down to a combination of economic and democratic dissatisfaction, declining party identification and lack of contact with party workers during election campaigns. Electoral Commission figures show that party membership fell from 153,000 in 1996 to 132,890 three years later (Vowles, 2002a). Miller argues that parties fragmented in the 1980s amid "a mood of growing public cynicism and distrust" (2001, p. xviii). Voter turnout did, however, recover in 2005 to 80.92%, possibly because polls showed the two main parties running very close.

Hayward (1997) noted that while nearly half of New Zealanders belonged to sports clubs and one third volunteered for civic duties, only 3% volunteered for parties and political groups. In 1989, only 4% of people expressed "full trust and confidence" in politicians as against 33% in 1975, while a 1991 survey showed "widespread feelings of cynicism and powerlessness in the electorate" (p. 409). Hayward's conclusion was grim:

> It will take extraordinary efforts to reverse current feelings of cynicism and powerlessness in the electorate (p. 416).

Gustafson argues that New Zealand now has "an impoverished vision of citizenship", with a common vision of community having been replaced by a more individualistic culture (2001, p. 27).

Nagel (1998) says increased political disillusionment – as demonstrated by declines in three key indicators of political health: the sense of political efficacy, confidence in politicians and voter turnout – is due to politicians' violation of the country's manifesto tradition whereby candidates promise to do certain things if elected. Sir Geoffrey Palmer, a former Prime Minister of New Zealand, (1992) argues that the island nation's malaise is due to more than politicians breaking a few promises. Other factors include politicians' behaviour in Parliament, where time is spent on personal attacks, the behaviour of the media, and the country's history of strong executive government. Palmer also contends that one of the causes of the country's democratic ill-health is economic:

> Much of the alienation and the deep political disaffection in New Zealand stems from the failure of the New Zealand economy to produce wealth in the quantities that New Zealanders think they require (1992, pp. 178-179).

A number of writers attribute the on-going ill health of the country's democratic life to economic, fiscal and state sector reforms begun by the 1984 Labour government led by David Lange. The economy was opened up to international competition and investment, the dollar was floated, monopolistic regulations and subsidies were removed from virtually every sector, a consumption tax was introduced, and many state business activities were corporatised with some eventually being sold (Boston, 1995; Boston, Martin, Pallot & Walsh, 1996; James, 1997; Nagel, 1998). The immediate effects of the reforms included heavy social costs with thousands of jobs lost in state corporations and manufacturing industries. Public service staffing dropped from 66,102 permanent staff in 1983 to 34,505 equivalent full-timers in 1994 (Boston et al. 1996).

From a left-wing perspective, the reforms, known as Rogernomics after Labour's Minister of Finance Roger Douglas, were a disaster, even a betrayal given that they were advanced by an apparently left-wing Labour administration. Jane Kelsey says the "intrinsically anti-democratic nature of the liberal revival" created a democratic crisis due to the way the reforms were driven by a cabal in Cabinet rather than through popular demand (1993, p. 130). The result was "a deep-seated scepticism about electoral politics and parliamentary democracy" (Kelsey, 1997, p. 297).

Other researchers also level charges against the reforms of the 1980s, chiefly on the grounds that they undermined public life by asserting the virtues of the market and by promoting the supremacy of the individual: what Boston et al. call the "marketisation of the state", or "government by the market" (1996, pp. 356-357). Hope says the treatment of voters as "consumers of product, rather than as citizens of democracy" extends to the electoral process where parties hire professional mediators to sell them to the public (2001, p. 317). Atkinson (1997) says these mediators "retail" private opinions rather than encourage public scrutiny and debate (p. 239). Gustafson says the reforms saw people become "more individualistic, self-centred and cynical, and less altruistic and mutually trusting" (2001, p. 27).

However, critics of this view, most notably the members of the right-wing think tank the New Zealand Business Roundtable, argue that the changes were needed to rescue the country from economic disaster and inefficiency. They suggest the reforms were backed by sound democratic principle. Douglas Myers (1997), a liquor industry baron and one of the Roundtable's leading lights in the mid-1990s, asserts that the public is cynical because the government has failed to deliver on public expectations regarding wealth, prosperity and standard of living. Myers says the solution is to give people back control over their lives, protecting the right of individuals to choose.

A number of writers note that the New Zealand reforms of the 1980s were only possible because of the nature of the country's political structures, specifically the fact that in the absence of a written constitution Parliament is sovereign (Mulgan, 1997; Palmer & Palmer, 1997). New Zealand, says Nagel, was almost an "elective dictatorship" (1998, p. 246). Two constitutional lawyers describe New Zealand's then system of government as "the most streamlined executive decision-making machine in the democratic world" (Palmer & Palmer, 1997, p. 3).

A key plank of this machine was the country's First Past the Post (FPP) voting system used to elect the members of the unicameral legislature. The country was divided into a number of electorates in which the candidate with the highest number of votes won each electorate. Elections could hinge on one or two marginal seats, with a few thousand people deciding the result. Palmer (1987, 1992; Palmer & Palmer, 1997) argued that the Mixed Member Proportional system, which had half the MPs coming from FPP electorates and the rest coming from party lists, was the most realistic option for improving democracy:

Scholars are agreed that the economic reforms of the 1980s gave proportional representation the impetus it needed to move from a fringe interest to the political mainstream in New Zealand (Atkinson, 1997; Boston et al. 1996; Dalton, 1999; Kelsey, 1997; Miller, 1997; Nagel, 1998). Boston et al. (1996) see MMP as the electorate's response to New Zealand's dictatorial style of government. Atkinson sees MMP as a reaction to the "blitzkrieg" policy-making of the 1980s (1997, p. 234). Nagel (1998) says MMP was an attempt by the public to regain control over government.

The question for New Zealand political theorists now is whether or not MMP has produced meaningful democratic change. It is still early days, with the first MMP election only coming in 1996, but evidence to date has some scholars worried. Voter turnout, which jumped from 85.2% in 1993 to 88.3% in 1996's first MMP election, fell to 84.8% in 1999 and then, as we have seen, dropped below 80% in 2002 (Hunt, 2002) before recovering to 80.92% in 2005. Hunt, a strident critic of MMP, says the 2002 result amounted to a vote of no confidence in the new electoral system. Karp (2002) says MMP has delivered on its promise of greater diversity in Parliament and greater choice, but it is unclear as to whether the new system has led to greater satisfaction with the democratic process. Hayward (1997) suggests that while MMP might produce more responsive government, MMP governments will not necessarily be more consultative, nor will democracy necessarily be more participatory. Wilson (1997) says nothing about MMP guarantees more representation for women. Hope (2001) says MMP has failed to create a broad debate over macroeconomic policy or to turn parties into fora for popular participation.

The jury, then, is perhaps still out in terms of whether MMP means New Zealand, in changing its electoral system, has succeeded in turning back the tide of democratic decline evident in western democracies. The advent of MMP in New Zealand has special significance for the use of public journalism, since the arrival of public journalism practices in New Zealand coincided with the first use of the new electoral system in 1996.

The above discussion has sketched the theory of democratic decline as it applies outside the United States. We have seen that similar evidence has emerged, though with significant local variations. In New Zealand, for example, public disillusionment led to a change in the electoral system. This democratic decline, oft-mentioned by public journalism advocates, is real and widespread. So, the problem that public journalists want to solve is certainly there to be solved. Yet, the existence of the problem is not of itself enough to provoke a journalistic response. What is also needed is a conception of the role of the media that leads journalists to take responsibility for tackling the democratic deficit.

2.3 Media role: the United States experience

Those discussing the theoretical background to public journalism often highlight a brief early 20th Century debate about democratic theory – the 1920s encounter between the cynical newspaper columnist Walter Lippmann and the educationist-philosopher John Dewey. This debate, which existed only in writing, is used to demonstrate starkly, although perhaps simplistically, the differences between traditional journalism and public journalism. It does this by highlighting a central issue in the debate over public journalism – differing conceptions of the media's role in the democratic process.

The literature on public journalism suggests that in one corner was Dewey, who felt that the public, aided by the media and a decent general education system, could run democracy in a productive way. In the other was Lippmann, who became progressively more disillusioned with what he saw as idealistic democratic theory and looked to knowledgeable experts to guide the public's deliberations. For Lippmann, the people were not up to running democracy. While Dewey suggested the public still had a lot to offer the democratic process, Lippmann focused on the public's limitations and on limiting the amount of damage the public could do. The Lippmann-Dewey debate focuses our attention fairly and squarely on questions about the nature of democracy and the public's, and media's, roles in it.

The interbellum period following the trauma of the First World War was a time of great debate about democracy. The rise of National Socialism, Fascism and Communism in Europe raised questions about the extent to which human beings were fit for democracy. Journalist and

democratic theorist Walter Lippmann felt democracy was superior to collectivist totalitarian systems because it was more in tune with human nature. However, Lippmann was a cynic and came into conflict with theorists who had a more sanguine view of the public's democratic abilities. In 1922, he published perhaps his key work, *Public Opinion*, in which he argued that democrats, who regularly appealed to the will of the people, failed to address a number of issues, including how the people could be informed about all issues.

He attacked the idealistic view that seemed to afford some degree of supremacy to the thoughts of citizens without acknowledging simple human psychological limitations. For Lippmann, public opinion was a thing that was created and the human beings who formed this mass creation were constantly being misled by "pictures in our heads" (1929, pp. 3-190). These pictures resulted from limited access to facts through, for example, time and vocabulary limitations, censorship, distortion through compression of information, pure self-interest and cultural factors. For Lippmann, the existence of something called "public opinion", which could be appealed to as part of the democratic process, was a dangerous fiction, something which could be created using modern techniques – what Lippmann called "the manufacture of consent".

What was needed was a body that could consider the "unseen facts" (1929, p. 31) that the public needed to know about and assemble them in such a way that people could understand their significance. After considering and discarding the media as being able to fulfil this role, Lippmann came to the conclusion that democracy required the people to be assisted by panels of subject experts:

> I argue that representative government, either in what is ordinarily called politics, or in industry, cannot be worked successfully, no matter what the basis of election, unless there is an independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make the decisions (1929, p. 31).

Lippmann felt that, in group life, decisions were never made by each member spontaneously arriving at the same decision, but instead involved some participants taking lead roles – the concept of an "Oversoul" (pp. 228-229). Lippmann had a strong faith in science as the basis for democratic practice, fearing the irrationality of the mass of the people (Bybee, 1999). Bybee says Lippmann judged democracy by its results rather than by the extent to which citizens were involved.

Lippmann's denial of the possibility of democracy through the involvement of citizens in decision-making brought him into direct conflict with Progressives, such as educationalist and

philosopher John Dewey, who championed the people's capacity to make their own decisions (Bybee, 1999; Coleman, 1997; Dewey 1922, 1925, 1926).

Dewey saw the younger man's cynical view of the capabilities of the public as a direct attack on the basic principles of democracy: "perhaps the most effective indictment of democracy as currently conceived ever penned" (1922, p. 337). On the one hand this was useful as it removed the romantic glaze from people's eyes, but it also denied what Dewey saw to be the core of the democratic process – government by the people.

Seemingly anticipating the feelings of public journalism theorists 60 years later, Dewey lamented the fact that the public seemed to have fallen out of the process of government in the 20th Century, with only around half of the eligible population even bothering to exercise their "majestic right" to vote (1926, p. 308). While Lippmann looked at the public's inability to fully grasp events and issues and concluded that they were just not equipped to run a democracy, Dewey focused on considering how they could become better informed.

What drove Dewey's faith in the public was not any kind of idealism. Rather it was an acceptance of what he saw as the realities of human nature. He makes the same argument as Lippmann, but using a very different conception of human nature. For Dewey, humans are in essence social beings:

> Persons are joined together, not because they have voluntarily chosen to be united in these forms, but because vast currents are running which bring men together.(1926, p. 301).

Dewey held that democracy, rather than being a type of government, was really about the proper functioning of human social life (Dewey 1926, 1966; Coleman, 1997). He believed the building blocks of a healthy democracy are the multitudinous forms of associational life to be found in society – family, industrial, scientific and artistic groupings. For democracy to revive itself at its roots, local communities, damaged by urbanisation and the decline of family and neighbourhood ties, have to be restored. For Dewey, the traditional liberal view of the autonomous individual is a complete fiction that denies human nature.

Dewey saw democracy as human society in action, "a mode of associated living" (1966, p. 87), not as a form of government under which individuals asserted their own ideas. He argued democracy was not an ideal to be attained. Imperfection was part of the process because human beings were part of the process. The cure for the problems of democracy therefore becomes more democracy.

While Dewey rejected the faith that Lippmann seemed to have in experts and enlightened individuals and asserted the primacy of the people, he was not blind to the failings and ignorance of the public and the challenge this posed for democracy. However, Dewey felt Lippmann had contradicted himself when he suggested balancing the weaknesses of human nature by setting up expert panels made up of relatively small numbers of human beings. For Dewey, the only fix for a weakened democracy is to bolster the people at the roots. Rather than write the masses off, Dewey asks how they might be made wiser and be endowed with better judgment. The answer, he thought, lay in improving the education system. Under Dewey's democratic education system knowledge is only true knowledge if it leads to action, or, democratically speaking, participation. Knowledge cannot come from being "an unconcerned spectator" (1966, pp. 338).

Dewey and Lippmann also parted company when it came to considering the role of the media in helping democracy. Dewey saw communication in society, along with better education, as the answer to the problems of American democracy, with the media being a key part of the equation (Coleman, 1997). Lippmann (1929), on the other hand, felt the media simply were not up to the job and saw progressives like Dewey as unrealistic in the demands they proposed to put on the Fourth Estate.

Discussions about public journalism habitually cite the importance of the Dewey-Lippmann debate and the ideas that stem from it. Merritt describes it as a "watershed" in journalism (1998, p. 14). Bybee calls the debate "a unique moment in United States media history" (1999, p. 30). Coleman (2000a) says Dewey laid the groundwork for the social responsibility theory of the press, which emerged in the 1940s and is often seen as a forerunner to public journalism. Elsewhere, she categorises public journalism as "an attempt to follow Dewey's philosophy" (1997, p. 63). Eksterowicz, Roberts and Clark (1998) credit Dewey with first articulating one of the key assumptions of public journalism: the existence of a disconnected public.

Dewey's contributions to public journalism theory include his focus on the importance of the public taking action and not sitting by as spectators. Lippmann's legacy is the public relations industry, the objectivity monolith and the cult of the journalist as a disinterested, even scientific observer who transmits the views of experts to the people. David Perry (2003) highlights the importance for public journalism of this philosophical difference between the pair. He says Dewey, whom he calls "the philosopher of civic journalism", was part of a trend moving away from the Platonic and Cartesian view of the world in which mind and body were separate entities (pp. 35-63). Perry says Dewey tried to apply Darwin's theories of biological development to social science and became concerned about the dualistic split between science

and life. In journalistic terms, Dewey was a fan of what is now known as interpretative reporting where the line between fact and opinion is often blurred. Perry says Lippmann, on the other hand, tended towards the "mind as mirror" school, which, in philosophical terms, leads to the mind being "a spectator of nature" (pp. 27-28). In journalistic terms, this leads to separation of fact from value and detachment of journalists from events they are observing.

The role played by the news media in the decline of participatory democracy, and related suggestions as to how journalists might contribute to a democratic revival, are central themes in discussions about public journalism. Proponents accept as givens that the news media are important to democratic society, and that they are both part of the problem and an important component of the solution. The Dewey-Lippmann debate is consistently identified as a seminal development in this regard (Altschull, 1990; Bybee, 1999; Carey, 1989; Coleman, 1997; Merritt, 1998).

Dewey's philosophy, while baulking at Lippmann's call for expert-led decision-making, nevertheless had to answer the question of how the public would actually go about swapping experiences and accumulating knowledge. He turned to the media as a central agency in terms of the community solving its problems (Coleman, 1997; Dewey 1922, 1925, 1926). Dewey, the non-journalist, saw citizens talking to each other as the heart of the democratic process, with the media as a key player in facilitating the public's discussion with itself. Lippmann, the journalist, had a much more cynical assessment of his colleagues' ability to fulfil this role, preferring to leave it to the experts. This debate about what the media can and cannot do to help citizens' deliberation and participation recurs wherever public journalism is discussed.

Dewey was not naive regarding the state of the news media of his day. Drawing a distinction between communication that told people about "events" (that is happenings placed in context) and "mere occurrences" (that is disembodied happenings without contextual explanation), he concluded that the press all too often served up the latter. He scathingly referred to:

> …the triviality and 'sensational' quality of so much of what passes as news. The catastrophic, namely, crime, accident, family rows, personal clashes and conflicts, are the most obvious forms of breaches of continuity; they supply the element of shock which is the strictest meaning of sensation; they are the *new* par excellence, even though only the date of the newspaper could inform us whether they happened last year or this, so completely are they isolated from their connections (1926, p. 347).

Dewey was, however, at heart a pragmatist. Realistically, the media were the only agents in society that could act as the organ of political communication and transmission of knowledge to the public. He rejected as undemocratic Lippmann's suggestion of experts feeding information to the public and media. He was also convinced that information provided in a scientific, top-down manner would simply not be listened to, or possibly even be understood by the public (1922). Anticipating the views of latter 20th Century theorists, Dewey saw that the choice of medium was a crucial part of the process of communicating messages. In order to be effective, public communication could not be served up in the sorts of periodicals assembled by academics. Instead it had to be "contemporary and quotidian" and offered up in a literary format that was accessible to the general reader (1926, p. 348). He further argued:

> Presentation is fundamentally important, and presentation is a question of art. A newspaper which was only a daily edition of a quarterly journal of sociology or political science would undoubtedly possess a limited circulation and a narrow influence…The freeing of the artist in literary presentation…is as much a precondition of the desirable creation of adequate opinion on public matters as is the freeing of social inquiry (pp. 349-350).

What Dewey really wanted was some sort of union between social science and journalism.

Lippmann, who had started out as a "legman" for the great muckraker Lincoln Steffens (Altschull, 1990), and more latterly served as a widely-syndicated columnist, could see no useful role for the contemporary media in the democratic process, other than as an agent for transmitting correct representations of events and issues from expert sources or as a reporter of hard facts (Carey, 1989). He saw two fatal flaws in newspapers (the media of the time). These were the fact that journalists had to 'make a buck' to pay for their presses and salaries; and the limited nature of news as an information source (1929). He criticised democrats for grasping at the media as a solution to their communication problem without looking closely at how the media work. The media, he argued, could even hinder the democratic process. Looking at the fruits of journalism, Lippmann concludes that they are at best an inadequate source of the kinds of information the public needs:

> The hypothesis, which seems to me the most fertile, is that news and truth are not the same thing, and must be clearly distinguished. The function of news is to signalize an event, the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act (p. 358).

Lippmann points to the sheer impossibility of journalists covering everything of importance that happens. News as objective information is also undermined because of the way it is generated, depending on events to occur or for someone worthy to make an issue of something. Objectivity is further damaged by the fact that some journalist, somewhere, chooses a story to become part of the news, or simply picks up the selection made by a publicity agent. The best the media can do is give the public snippets of reality. The only way to improve this is to ensure that the information fed to the media comes from better sources, or results from a better deliberative process:

> It (the press) is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision. Men cannot do the work of the world by this light alone. They cannot govern society by episodes, incidents, and eruptions. It is only when they work by a steady light of their own, that the press, when it is turned upon them, reveals a situation intelligible enough for a popular decision (p. 364).

Concerns like Lippmann's were behind the formation of the Commission on Freedom of the Press in 1942, sometimes called the Hutchins Commission. *Time* magazine editor-in-chief Henry R Luce, one of the two initiators of the project, was concerned that the whole idea of freedom of the press was under threat (Bates, 1995; Carey, 1998). A number of issues lay behind the commission: concerns about totalitarianism, the increasing complexity of issues, a rise in scientifically-based public relations, and concerns about the power of the press as evidenced by the success of a newly-emerged gaggle of political commentators, including Lippmann (Bates, 1995).

Bates (1995) says statistics and reports of the day suggested there was much to indicate the media were in trouble, democratically speaking: falling competition with newspapers disappearing, a proliferation of sensationalist tabloids, newspapers taking sides on issues, owners seeming not to acknowledge any obligation to the public, newspapers promoting myths about Black Americans, and a cosiness with officialdom, especially with the police.

The commission reported that, indeed, freedom of the press was under threat, largely from the media themselves due to the behaviour of newspaper owners and lack of what has come to be known as "social responsibility". The commission found that the press had become more important to the people due to its mass communication function (Nieman, 1999/2000). At the same time, it found that the proportion of people who were able to speak through the press had decreased. It accused the media of not performing their proper social role of providing a means for the different parts of society to talk to each other (Blevins, 1997). The media's reaction was

generally one of open hostility, often highlighting the fact that the commission's members were members of the academic elite (Bates, 1995; Blevins, 1997; Nieman, 1999/2000).

Coleman says the commission's report was effectively a "forerunner of public journalism" (1997, p. 45). It represented a salient step in the evolution of social responsibility theory – the idea that the media's job was to help society communicate with itself in a constructive manner. However, Coleman notes that journalism after the commission's report, while taking on board some of its comments, essentially carried on as usual, "oriented toward objectivity" (p. 65). She sees this as further evidence that, through the 20th Century, Lippmann's more cynical observations about the media's ability to perform a strong democratic role have tended to win out over Dewey's idea of a free press helping build a proper democratic community. Coleman does, however, feel that intellectual conditions prevailing in the latter part of the 20th Century are more conducive to giving Dewey's ideas a fair hearing (2000a).

The cynicism of Lippmann and the Hutchins Commission regarding the media's ability to perform democratic functions while still making money has resonated with media theorists throughout the 20th Century.

For example, Habermas (1989) sees a parallel between the collapse of the public sphere into a world of imagery and public relations, and the decline of the media. The public sphere has lost its political, participatory character and is now an arena for product advertising and consumption. Everything is affected by the publicity-consumption ethic, even the conduct of political campaigns (which focus on turning candidates into celebrities) and the news media. From being a vehicle for political discussions, the press has descended to the role of being a commercial actor:

> The disintegration of the electorate as a public becomes manifest with the realization that press and radio, 'deployed in the usual manner', have practically no effect; within the framework of the manufactured public sphere the mass media are useful only as vehicles of advertising (1989, p. 217).

In the Habermasian view of contemporary western society, public opinion is not something that exists and is then expressed through the media. Rather, it is now a product like any other, to be manufactured by those with the resources and expertise. The media are merely the means by which manufactured public opinion is disseminated. The public are no longer actors in the political process, but have become passive consumers of what ever the media dish out.

Altschull, who has traced the roots of journalism from the early modern period, identifies the existence of the news media within businesses whose priority is profit as the profession's "mighty paradox" (1990, p. 360). This state of affairs, described as "the 'central tension' in a capitalist press system" was recognised early on in press history by Benjamin Franklin (in Altschull, 1995, p. 8). Franklin knew that to stay in business he had to be careful whom he offended. This pragmatic view modified the more idealistic vision of those like John Milton, who expressed in excited tones in 1644:

> Let her [truth] and falsehood grapple: who ever knew truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter (Areopagitica, as cited in Altschull, 1995, p. xxii).

In its purest and most idealistic form, this vision of journalism has democratic freedom being protected by a free flow of diverse sources of information in an open marketplace of ideas. Modern corporate ownership of media, however, impacts on this vision most cruelly. Altschull contends that the media are, quite simply, controlled by those who hold the purse strings. Journalists are "agents of power" for the owners of the news media, who seek to shape public opinion for their own purposes (Altschull, 1995, pp. xiii-xiv, 144 & 155). The media's ability to critique society, government and other institutions of power is heavily curtailed, with journalists "sitting ducks" for media managers who would manipulate them (1995, p. xiv).

Altschull calls on journalists to abandon the "arrogant" assumption that they do not play a role in society (p. 189). If the media persist in denying their role as a social actor, he says, they will be doomed to continue propping up the status quo:

> There is no way the press can be above politics…To take no side is also to be political, for if we do not oppose the status quo, we are giving it our tacit support…To the extent the press endorses the idea that it is above politics, it is serving the needs of power (pp. 424-425).

Left-wing media commentator Robert W McChesney, a staunch critic of the growth of corporate media, says they pose a real risk to democracy:

> American democracy is in deep trouble. Cynicism and mistrust of the political system, fuelled at least in part by imposed ignorance, have grown steadily in recent years. There are several reasons for this, but few as important as the condition of our media…the American media are dominated by less than twenty firms – and that a half-dozen or so corporate giants hold the commanding positions. These firms use their market power to advance their own and other companies' corporate agendas. And they increasingly commercialise every aspect of our culture. By any known

> theory of political democracy, this tightly-held media system, accountable only to Wall Street and Madison Avenue, is a poisonous proposition (1999, p. 32).

To be fair, some commentators see virtue in corporate ownership of newspapers. Pauly (1988) argues, for example, that Rupert Murdoch's attack on "quality" newspapers as elitist can be seen as democratic on the basis that his papers appeal to the "economically undesirable segments of the audience" ignored by other publications (p. 257). Pauly says monopoly owners may actually be able to give editors more leeway since the local market is secure.

However, media scholars tend to reject the idea that the market improves journalism and creates a greater diversity of voices in the media, arguing that the evidence points to the opposite effect occurring. John Keane (1991), in his study of the rise of the freedom of the press, says competition ends up eroding competition, and market liberalism condemns censorship by the state while overlooking "market censorship" (p. 90). Hall (1986) says it is ironic that market freedom has been identified with greater diversity of media since reality proves the exact opposite. McQuail (1992) says while the market liberates, it also leads to concentrated ownership, reduced diversity and commercial failure.

Curran and Seaton (1997) argue that the market approach to media has succeeded in gaining control of the media in a way that authoritarian governments must envy:

> The period around the middle of the nineteenth century…did not inaugurate a new era of press freedom and liberty: it introduced a new system of press censorship more effective than anything that had gone before. Market forces succeeded where legal repression had failed in conscripting the press to the social order (p. 9).

The result of the media failing to do their democratic job is reduced levels of participation in the political process. The number of media outlets has blossomed, but public knowledge has not. Entman sees the media as thwarting movement towards more knowledgeable participation by churning out "easily digestible, elite-dominated news" (1989, p. 29). He identifies a "vicious circle of interdependence" that has developed between the media, the public and the socio-political elites that dominate the news (p. 17). This interdependence locks all three groups into roles that none can break out of. The media provide what they believe people want, the people accept and even demand the same product, and the elites play along because those are the rules of the game.

In debates about the decline of western democracy and the role of the media, scholars often cite television as a central factor in the development of a passive, consumption-focused, non-

participant public. They parallel the rise of television with a decline in newspaper readership, associating the latter with more active political participation. Before discussing views on the rise of television we need to establish just how bad the fall-off in newspaper readership has been. Figures from the Newspaper Association of America show that as of 1999 just 56.9% of those aged over 18 read a daily paper during any given week, down from 77.6% in 1970 (Fitzgerald, 2000). Newspapers in 1999 were selling three million fewer copies each day compared with the 1960s despite the American population having risen by 95 million (Fitzgerald, 2000).

Putnam (2000) says from 1948-1998 newspaper readership fell 57%. The decline is generational, with baby boomers' readership being under 50% and that of those born after 1960 falling below 30%:

> …newspaper readership remains a mark of substantial civic engagement. Newspaper readers are older, more educated, and more rooted in their communities than is the average American...those who *read* the news are more engaged and knowledgeable about the world than those who only *watch* the news (p. 218).

Putnam does note, however, that the relationship between newspapers and civic and political participation is unclear, with scholars not knowing whether newspapers actually create involvement or whether they simply attract participatory individuals.

Putnam says television news watching is less related to civic engagement than newspaper reading, but even that is in decline, with nightly network news viewing falling from 60% to 38% over just one five-year period, 1993-98. The problem, then, is not simply with television, but with general entertainment television. Putnam says serious levels of television watching are simply incompatible with any significant commitment to community life. Television reduces civic engagement by using up time, encouraging lethargy and passive behaviour, tricking us into believing that we are actually communicating with others, overloading us with worries about the world's problems, promoting a materialistic lifestyle, and filling our senses with inconsequential matter, such as soap operas.

Neil Postman (1985), in his discussion about the place of television in world history, argues that the medium does tremendous damage to the body politic by reducing public discourse to "dangerous nonsense" (p. 16). Television, says Postman, can even be seen as helping bring about Aldous Huxley's Brave New World by filling the people's lives with triviality and irrelevance. In terms of participation, the culture of television reduces public participation to merely voting, which Postman describes as "the last refuge of the politically impotent" (p. 69).

Television news is packaged as entertainment, with smiling newsreaders exchanging a happy banter, the use of exciting music and vivid pictures. Even sad or tragic items are consistently undermined by the medium.

Subsequent scholars reported a more complicated picture than the one painted by Putnam and Postman. Neumann, Just and Crigler (1992), for example, have found that for some issues and for some audiences, television, with its ability to arouse interest, is a better communication tool than magazines and newspapers. Yankelovich (1999), in his discussion about the importance of promoting dialogue among the public as a way of rejuvenating democratic involvement, sees television as perhaps the most realistic way of bringing this about.

Media scholars have considered the value of the internet as a medium for encouraging the revival of mass democracy, though many are sceptical as to whether it will succumb to the same economic imperatives that have captured other media (see Graham, 1998; Keane, 1991; Putnam, 2000; Van Benschoten, 2000).

Theorists who discuss the role of the media in democracy almost invariably offer suggestions for changing the mediascape to improve the situation. Perhaps because their critiques of the media are often extremely damning scholars feel a small obligation to offer some hope to readers and journalists.

Keane looks to "a radically new public service model (of media) which would facilitate a genuine commonwealth of forms of life, tastes and opinions" (1991, p. xi). This "revised public service model of communication" would avoid the extremes of both the free market and excessive government regulation (p. 152). Under this model, monopolistic media structures would be broken up and the media diversified, with its functions including promoting citizens' involvement in civil society. Other theorists also look to the importance of setting up new media organs that allow for a greater range of voices to be heard (Curran, 2000; Entman, 1989; Gans, 1979). Altschull (1995, 1996) feels that the control exercised by media owners can be undermined by altering news selection systems so that the public can become part of the process.

Using Dewey as an inspiration, David Perry (2003) argues for more publicly owned media in the American context as a way of advancing the goals of public journalism. He says journalists need to be tenured like academics because, in Deweyan democratic terms, they are effectively "professional educators" of the community (p. 69). They need to be allowed to depart from their

usual detached, objective role and even venture opinions under the protection of notions of academic freedom.

James W Carey, who has looked closely at what he sees as the media's dysfunctional relationship with the public, focuses on the public's alienation from the political process and asks what the media should do to repair the damage. His views are often referred to by public journalism writers (see Boylan, 1991; Coleman, 1997; Glasser & Craft, 1996; Haas, 1999b, 2000, 2001; Rosen, 1999a). Carey (1993) says the history of American journalism shows how the media went from their early beginnings in public houses where they were part of an on-going public conversation, to become the fourth estate. This change was not for the better in so far as democracy was concerned. As the media became more middle class and professionalised so they detached themselves from political life, preferring to stand above the fray as objective observers of events. Their loyalty was now to objectivity rather than the public, who were increasingly left out of the political process. The views of conflicting experts replaced the voice of the public, who had now become spectators, merely ratifying decisions of others. The practical result of this state of affairs was that the public themselves eventually began to drop out of the political process, leading to reduced voter turnout and party involvement. Carey argues that through talk shows, email and call-in phone opportunities the public are trying to revive democracy in their own way without waiting for media input.

The above discussion has surveyed views of the nature of democracy and its problems as expressed by theorists who are listed prominently among the intellectual antecedents of public journalism. Specifically, it has canvassed the wider debate on democratic decline and its relationship to civic engagement and participation. It has considered the views of democratic theorists as to how the media fit into the picture – what they see as the media's role in a democratic society, the extent to which the media have been part of the problem, and the extent to which the media might help improve matters. It seems clear that the key feature of the proceeding discussion relates to public participation. Theorists argue that democracy was in decline by the 1990s because the public had fallen out of the political process. The media had contributed to this decline in three ways: by ignoring the problem, and even making it worse; by focusing on economic and business rather than social and democratic goals; and by refusing to see that they were even part of the problem and seeking to hold themselves above the fray. The question now is the extent to which the media were aware of their role and whether or not they were prepared to do anything to revive the democratic process. This is where we turn our attention to consider the rise of public, or civic journalism, which was a direct media-academic response to the problems identified above.

Before doing that, however, it is necessary to consider the extent to which the American debate about the role of the media is mirrored in other countries.

2.4 Media role: the world experience

This thesis will now look at the British understanding of the media's role and responsibilities before moving on to look at how New Zealand theorists see the media's place in democratic society. New Zealand is a Westminster-style democracy with a prominent British heritage and only tenuous links with the United States. Any detailed discussion about the adoption of public journalism in New Zealand should take into account the fact that Britain has not picked up the public journalism banner.

British research often analyses the role of the media in terms of social control, that is, the degree to which the news media reinforce existing power structures. Hall, Chritcher, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts (1981)say the media identify for the general population which events are significant among the myriad that happen each day and suggest whose views of events are significant. Research into television coverage of industrial actions, for example, has found that the media tend to communicate the "dominant definitions", though they do also critique the dominant perspective (Morley, 1981). Other research into industrial coverage suggests that middle class views tend to be derived from the media, with working class people less likely to find their views presented in the news (Hartmann, 1981). Negrine (1994) says research shows that major newspapers favoured the government's view during the 1985-86 miners' strike. A study of newspaper coverage of an anti-Vietnam War demonstration in London in October 1968 showed that the media reinforced the pro-war establishment view (Murdock, 1981). McQuail says evidence points to media access being given predominantly to "the voice of institutional authority" (1992, pp. 174-175). He says the media overall tend to have "a reinforcing or conserving tendency" in society (1969, p. 96).

Herbert Marcuse, who offers one of the most famous arguments along the Marxist line, argues that mass media maintain totalitarianism in advanced industrial societies by creating "false needs" for entertainment, relaxation, information and personal consumption (McQuail, 1969). Human beings possess a "false consciousness" in that they wrongly believe they are rational beings who can exercise free choice (Marcuse, 1964, p. 11). They are "mutilated individuals" (p. 250) who believe they are free, but are never able to actually behave freely, always being constrained by the choices made available to them by a commercialised, production-based society. Herbert Blumer, writing in 1933, argued that the media detach individuals from their communities and pave the way for totalitarian rule (as cited in McQuail, 1969).

Sparks (1986) says the media and state are both undemocratic in organisational terms, with those running the media and those in charge of the state tending to have similar backgrounds (for example education) and similarly large salaries, even sending their children to the same schools. Seaton postulates the existence of an "implicit deal" whereby the media give politicians a voice in return for immunities not available to other industries (1998, p. 120). Seymour-Ure argues that political leadership and mass media are "utterly entwined" (1987, p. 3).

The British media come in for heavy criticism from scholars for not stepping outside this cosy arrangement. The media were accused of failing to reflect the diversity of British society and of being driven by commercial rather than social-democratic goals. Key developments that have brought critics to the fore include deregulation of public broadcasting and media ownership rules, the growth of enormous media conglomerates, and the growth of television.

Scholars argue that television has developed apace in Britain at the expense of the print media and cinema-going. Newspaper circulation has declined overall with only the "quality" national end of the market expanding (Murdock & Golding, 1974; Seymour-Ure, 1991). Evening papers reached 90% of households in the early 1960s, but this had fallen to 60% in 1980 (Seymour-Ure, 1991). In contrast, television has boomed to the point where it seems to be inescapable.

The influence of television has also been dramatic in terms of the political process, with some commentators concluding that this bodes ill for traditional democratic institutions. Negrine (1994) said a 1985 survey showed television was by that stage the top source of political information for most people – 63% versus 29% for newspapers. Among newspaper readers, those who followed the "quality" papers (*The Guardian*, *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Financial Times*) tended to get news from papers rather than television (57% versus 32%) whereas readers of the *Express*, *Mail*, *Sun*, *Mirror* and *Star* got theirs from television (62-65% versus 24-28% for newspapers). Negrine said television was "probably the single most important medium for the communication of political information" (1994, p. 100). Harrop (1987) argued the electoral influence of national newspapers was declining while that of television was increasing.

Some argue that the ascendancy of television is bad news for democracy because of the close connection between political parties and newspapers. The emancipation of the press in the mid-19th Century led the media into the arms of politicians and a "natural affinity" grew up between the press and parties (Negrine, 1994, p. 43; Seymour-Ure, 1991, p. 193). Seymour-Ure says newspapers are instrumental to political parties in different ways in different systems, and researchers generally fail to take account of the press when looking at parties (1974). These

historical ties are in "startling contrast" to the isolation of political parties from broadcasting (Seymour-Ure, 1991, p. 193). Seymour-Ure argues that television has had a significant effect on the election process, promoting events like press conferences, focusing on party leaders and giving a "presidential character" to campaigns (1974, p. 218). By 1990, he argues that press and parties had become firmly detached (1991).

Perhaps the most common theme among British critics is the way the media have become big business, motivated by the commercial goals of profit and expansion rather than democratic principle. The conglomeration of British media parallels that in the United States. By the end of World War Two, Lord Northcliffe controlled 39% of morning circulation and 31.3% of evening readers, with the top three media groups having a total of 66.9% of morning and 82.6% of evening circulation (Negrine, 1994). In the 1920s some 500 British towns had competing newspaper firms (International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, 1980). By 1973 this figure fell to 37. As of 1992, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation controlled 37.3% of popular daily circulation and 15.4% of quality daily circulation as well as 34.7% of popular and 44.1% of quality Sunday circulation (Negrine, 1994).

One thing which scholars say has helped lead to greater concentration of media ownership is deregulation of the media, specifically broadcasting, in Britain in the 20th Century (see Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 1990). Iosifides (1999) says a key difference between the United States and Britain is that in the former market forces has been a key ingredient in the development of the communications sector, while in Europe getting a diversity of opinions in the media has traditionally been achieved through government regulation. Deregulation began in the 1950s with the creation of an independent television channel – ITV. This introduced the state broadcaster, the BBC, to commercial models that put emphasis on financial gain and competition (Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 1990). The monetarist, free market policies that took hold in western democracies from the 1980s led to a lifting of restrictions on overseas ownership of news media and cross-media ownership. Proponents of deregulation argue that diversity can be better achieved under market mechanisms. Critics, however, argue that market forces have led to unprecedented levels of concentration in the media field, resulting in less diversity of access and of choice (Iosifides, 1999; McQuail, 1992; Negrine, 1994; Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 1990; Seymour-Ure, 1991).

Concerns about a lack of diversity in the news media and concentrated ownership have prompted a series of state-sponsored investigations in Britain paralleling the American Hutchins Commission. The 1947 Royal Commission on the Press was driven by concerns about ownership and diversity, the influence of advertising on news coverage, and fears that corporate

owners' views were being reflected in their papers (Seymour-Ure, 1991; Negrine, 1994; McQuail, 1992). Seymour-Ure (1991) says the 1947 Commission erroneously supported market accountability, believing that the existing range of newspapers was adequate. The commission's error was in believing that the successful relationship between political parties and the press would continue. In 1977, a second Royal Commission on the Press was set up, which was concerned about people's choice of newspapers, diversity, editorial standards and ownership (McQuail, 1992). The Canadian Kent Commission (Royal Commission on Newspapers), which sat in 1980, considered issues of diversity, the media's contribution to the democratic process, the dangers of editorial concentration, sensationalism, the need for an international perspective, and also the dangers of "market-survey" journalism. In Britain, the 1985 Peacock Commission considered the topic of BBC funding, concluding that commercialism could lead to less diversity and consumer choice.

Numerous criticisms have been levelled against the commercial market model of media in Britain: competition for a mass audience may lead to marginalisation of political programmes (Hallin, 2000; Herman, 1993; Negrine, 1994); public broadcasters are forced to join in the same competitive game in order to secure audience share (Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 1990); competition leads to less current affairs or cuts in budgets, affecting quality (Curran & Seaton, 1997); the so-called free market undermines public participation and the freedom to publish (Curran, 2000); and falling numbers of daily newspapers leads to narrowed choices for readers, a reduced range of opinions available, and promotes conformity (International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, 1980).

Perhaps the most common criticism of commercialisation is the charge that it changes the media's conception of the public from active democratic citizen to passive consumer of a product (Chaney, 1987; Gandy, 2000; Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 1990). Smith (1987) says information is now treated simply as another commodity. Seaton argues that commercial television merely produces audiences for advertisers, not programmes (Curran & Seaton, 1997). Franklin (1994) is highly critical of what he calls the "packaging" of politics by both politicians and the media. While on the one hand this makes information on politics and politicians more digestible, the process also manipulates the public, trivialising and oversimplifying political communications.

Looking further at some of the work referred to in the earlier discussion about the state of global democratic participation, scholars offer mixed views of media responsibility. Pharr (1997a) says economic problems are not behind political disaffection in Japan, and furthermore the political reforms of the 1990s have made no difference. For an answer, she looks to the media saturation

of Japan where people typically watch more television than in the United States (Pharr, 1997a, 1997b). While some research suggests the media have helped open up politics to the public, Pharr says other work points to a cartelization of information and a focus on the bizarre. She concludes that the media are an important part of the puzzle as to why confidence in Japanese government and officials has been so low for so long. While television pre-dates the start of declining political trust in Japan, Pharr says its omnipresence may help explain why mistrust remains so high.

On the other hand, Hall, in his study of British social capital, says while he cannot be sure, it would appear that television, often cited as a culprit in weakening civic participation, has not significantly affected public involvement in that country (1999). Newton (1999) argues that figures from Britain find against the media having a negative effect on democracy. On the contrary, reading broadsheet newspapers has been found to help with political mobilisation while tabloid newspapers and general television are not associated with negative political effects.

A complicating factor in considering the role and performance of the media in democratic systems around the world is that what we know as democracy manifests itself differently every time a new system emerges. This is because each new democracy is born of different circumstances and hardships.

In parts of Asia and Africa many governments are highly interventionist in terms of the media, seeking to co-opt the fourth estate in the interests of national advancement and maintenance of public order, not to mention party or presidential power (see Lee, 2000 on Taiwan; Nain, 2000 on Malaysia; Park, Kim & Sohn, 2000 on Korea; Ronning & Kupe, 2000 on Zimbabwe). In some southeast Asian countries journalism tends to be of what Romano calls the "developmentalist" variety (2001, p. 47). Government and media co-operate in an attempt to achieve a higher goal – the creation of a stable, prosperous nation. Some argue that the issues facing Asian journalism are not really any different from those in western countries because Asia is confronting essentially the same international economic and political challenges (Inoguchi, 1998; Ma, 2000; Stockwin, 1998).

Some argue that the world has entered a stage of internationalisation that in many ways makes traditional notions of the role of the media nearly redundant. Keane (1998) says the traditional understanding of the Habermasian public sphere advanced by public journalists is flawed because it does not appreciate the international dimension of political life:

> The old hegemony of state-structured territorially bound public life mediated by radio, television, newspapers, and books is rapidly eroding. In its place we see the development of a multiplicity of networked spaces of communication that are not tied immediately to territory and which irreversibly fragment anything resembling a single, spatially integrated public sphere (1998, p. 240).

Rather than Habermas' single public sphere, Keane says there is "a developing and complex mosaic of differently sized, overlapping, and networked public spheres" (p. 240). To believe that a single public sphere exists, says Keane, is to look towards "a nostalgic, unrealisable utopia" (p. 242). What the world needs now is an international civic society to deal with both the international nature of the media and supranational political organisations (Keane, 1991). Following the sociologist George H Mead, David Perry (2003) calls on journalists to take into account the international community when carrying out public journalism experiments rather than just considering what is good for local communities.

Sreberny (2000) argues that globalisation, with its unequal access to media, growth of corporate conglomerates and complex picture of domestic and global media, is producing a world in which national cultures and media models simply do not work any more. Negrine (1994) says existing media theories do not consider the impact of a competitive, international media system. Altschull (1995) says those who own the media want a peaceful international order, all the better for maintaining the status quo and doing business.

Writers looking at the media outside the United States often express the fear that internationalisation means global domination by western, and especially American, media. Hamelink (1988) says cultural autonomy is threatened by the American media through media like books and advertising as well as through news media, with technological developments only increasing the world's dependence on American media. He identifies a process of "cultural synchronization" (pp. 650-651). Negrine and Papathanassopoulos are concerned about the extent to which the internationalisation of television will result in the creation of a transnational "common stock of audio-visual output" (1990, p. 79).

This view of internationalised media displays a belief in a certain inevitability in the process. Some contemporary theorists share this view. For example, Negrine and Papathanassopoulos (1990) suggest that the internationalisation of television is an inevitable result of western countries' policies of deregulating media ownership rules and other restrictions. The process has been encouraged further by system changes aimed at promoting competition and opening up national economic borders, which have aided the creation of ever larger media conglomerates.

The international spread of media was inevitable because once broadcasters were freed up, they began to look for audiences – "the key priority" (p. 126). With borders open and rules on ownership relaxed, the way was open for media companies to combine in search of economies of scale and expand overseas. What is now needed is an international regulatory regime to match the structure of the media conglomerates.

Discussion of deregulation and the impact on the media of market conditions is a very common theme in British media scholarship. This is because these two developments in recent decades have signalled a profound – and, according to critics, largely disturbing – change in the conditions under which the British media operated. The former also points us to a salient difference between the previously regulated British approach to media and the freedom-oriented First Amendment approach of the United States. The two developments together also introduce a political-economic-ideological trend common among western democracies, none more so than New Zealand.

The above discussion has asked how British theorists have characterised the role of the media in their society, and more specifically the extent to which the media were responsible for the state of democracy. Numerous parallels with American discussions have been found. It is also clear, though, that Britain's democratic tradition is very different from that of the United States. The questions to be asked next are: how has the media responded to their critics; and to what extent has public journalism formed part of that response. However, before discussing these matters, we need to consider New Zealand's conception of the democratic role of the news media. Does it mirror Britain's and/or the United States' experience? We have already seen that New Zealand's democratic decline has echoed that of other nations. Do New Zealand theorists' views of their country's media match those of their overseas colleagues?

The first point to note about New Zealand political writers is while they all generally have something to say about the media, very few of them analyse the role of the press and broadcasting to the same extent as their British or American counterparts. It has been noted by one observer that "the role of journalism in New Zealand's political processes remains obscure" (McGregor, 1996, p. 8). When New Zealand scholars do address the media, however, they see them as having a pivotal role in democratic life in terms of connecting the public to politics and power. Former Prime Minister Sir Geoffrey Palmer acknowledges the integral nature of the media in New Zealand democratic life:

> …the media carries out a constitutional function of importance to the health of New Zealand government and democracy. If that thesis is correct, then high standards of journalism will improve the quality of government and the public's ability to

> participate in it. Media degradation, on the other hand, will have an adverse effect on the political system (1992, p. 225, 1996, p. 21).

Elsewhere he describes the media as "a key vehicle for public opinion acting as a check upon Government" (1987, p. 15). The capacity of the public to probe and question decisions of government depends on the media doing their job properly. Palmer sees the media as "a centre of power" in the system, representing the ways in which the people are connected to power" (Palmer & Palmer, 1997, p. 194). Atkinson says the media "must be a major participant in any quest to stem democracy's retreat" (1997, p. 234). Gustafson (2001) says in a healthy civil society the people need to trust and respect the media. The media's role is, if anything, seen as even more important under the country's new MMP electoral system (Morrison, 1996; Palmer & Palmer, 1997).

New Zealand writers offer more thoughts when it comes to commenting on the quality of the media's performance. In a number of writings, constitutional lawyer and former Prime Minister Geoffrey Palmer says while the media are important in democracy, their performance to date is poor (1987, 1992, 1996). This under-performance harms democracy. Overall, Palmer argues, "it cannot be asserted in New Zealand that the activities of the press and the electronic media have reached the stage where they can be regarded as the fourth estate of Government" (1987, p. 16). Palmer believes that, on the one hand, there is an absence of quality analysis and commentary in New Zealand journalism, while on the other New Zealand journalists often mix fact and opinion when writing political stories (1987, 1992, 1996). The media focus on trivial issues, while television is particularly poor for its ever shorter sound bites and tendency to focus on a politician's image rather than analysing what they are saying (1992). Sometimes, the media also err in simply getting things wrong, which carries a democratic price.

Echoing the concerns of public journalists in the United States, Palmer attacks the media and politicians together for treating politics as if it were some kind of game to be won (1987). In Palmer's view, the political press does not appear to see itself as having a special role in the democratic process (1992). Like many other political theorists worldwide, Palmer points to commercialisation as a key reason for the media's poor showing in New Zealand. The corporate owners of the media, motivated by a drive for higher profits, have also scaled back the size of newsrooms, placing "impossible demands" on the remaining journalists in terms of producing quality reportage to deadline (1992, p. 216). Palmer says news has become a commodity and is in danger of turning into "info-tainment" (pp. 207-208).

Other media commentators echo Palmer's concerns, for example the media's focus on horse race-style polling rather than issues during election campaigns:

> …coverage of party strategy and who is ahead displaces important coverage of issues and party issue positions. Therefore, voters are presented with little information on which to base electoral decisions. Even when the messages are being discussed, journalists tend to frame their coverage around matters of style, delivery and effectiveness, rather than the content of the messages (Banducci & Vowles, 2002, p. 37).

James (2001) says while the New Zealand media still features policy, the American idea of politics as a game is becoming more prominent, with poll results regularly appearing on the front page. Hope (2001) argues that depiction of the horse race has serious negative democratic effects:

> By routinely deploying horse-race or game schemas instead of addressing issues, the mass media positions voters as spectators of the action rather than as participants in the political process (p. 318).

Other New Zealand authorities, however, suggest that the evidence for polls shaping rather than reflecting public opinion is sparse (Hoek & Gendall, 1996). Of greater concern, say Hoek and Gendall, is the media's tendency to misunderstand how polls work and to misreport their findings. They argue that failure by journalists to present the results of polls professionally leaves the results open to manipulation.

James (2001) says another American trend to hit the New Zealand media in recent years is a presidential-style focus on election campaigns whereby coverage centres on the party leaders. McGregor, Fountaine and Comrie (2000; see also McGregor, 1996b) suggest that New Zealand political journalism is obsessed with personalities and the physical characteristics of politicians. McGregor (1996a) also asks what the effect will be of a third American trend in New Zealand – the prospect of politicians bypassing the news media and going straight to the public through so-called "new" media such as radio talkback. This "electronic sidestep" could undermine the media's traditional role of making political leaders accountable (McGregor, 1996, p. 91). Hope (2001) says the New Zealand media's ability to do a better job on politics has also been harmed by yet a fourth American import – a new pattern of television news coverage. In the early 1990s, Hope identifies a change in content from politics, industrial relations and economics to crime, human interest and natural disasters. At the same time, news anchors have changed their image from one of authority to friendliness:

> …the changing culture of 'newswork' depoliticised the mass mediated public sphere. In the case of television, a team of American news consultants transformed issues-based current affairs into infotainment packages (p. 315).

Veteran radio and television host Brian Edwards describes the new he-and-she television news presentation format as "the Cootchie Coo News" (2002, p. 16). Atkinson identifies a movement towards "tabloid democracy" in New Zealand in recent years and asks whether this helps or hinders people's ability to learn about and participate in their collective affairs (2001, pp. 284-285).

The advent of MMP, while re-emphasising the importance of the news media in democratic life, also gives scholars reason to pause as they contemplate the media's fitness for covering politics under the news electoral system. Atkinson argues that under MMP, the degree of exposure the public gets to policy negotiation depends on "the willingness of the media marketplace to tolerate serious political journalism" (1997, p. 235). However, in doing this the media are hampered by three things: an anti-intellectual strain in New Zealand, a competitive media market, and the flight of journalists to Parliamentary public relations jobs. Hope (2001) notes that between 1993 and 1997, while the number of party press secretaries rose from 32 to 42, the size of the press gallery fell from 59 to 45. Experienced Parliamentary gallery reporters, and even the odd politician, have become concerned that vital institutional experience is being lost as younger journalists replace veterans who move into public relations (Browne, 1996; Palmer, 2002). Concern has also arisen from the mid-1990s about the increasing tendency and capacity for politicians to "spin", or manage, news events using their highly-paid, ex-media employees (McGregor, 1996b, 1996c; O'Leary, 2002). This carries a possible cost for the functioning of elective democracy. As McGregor puts it:

> Spin doctoring begs the question of whether, in the theatre of political news, the choreographers are more important than the actors (1996c, p. 148).

In terms of non-political spin, Comrie (2002) argues that while journalists are generally dismissive of blatant attempts to influence their news judgment, many media releases end up in print, sometimes verbatim. The machinations of so-called spin doctors are also becoming increasingly evident in sports journalism, which now has to confront an increasingly professionalised arena (Harvey, 2002). Steve Maharey, himself a politician, says he does not have faith in journalists' ability to cope with what he calls "the increasingly sophisticated strategies politicians are developing to deal with the media" (1996, p. 108). He says it would be a democratic "disaster" if the media ended up simply reproducing politicians' views unchanged (p. 110).

When MMP was introduced Palmer was pessimistic about the media's abilities to fulfil their proper democratic role and feared that unless journalists were able to "lift their game" the media would be responsible for MMP not working as well as it should (1996, p. 18).

More recently, Palmer (2002) has said that while journalists are now better educated and have tried hard to tackle the MMP environment, what is missing is that media proprietors are not putting in the resources necessary to retain senior staff and do not appear to recognise the importance of the media's democratic responsibilities.

Morrison (1996) also said MMP required more resources to be put into political coverage. The new regime means journalists need to report the process of policy formation rather than just report parties' decisions. Moreover, if the media are unable to respond to the challenge, the democratic price could be high:

> It is not inherent that under MMP journalists will move away from a superficial approach. Failure to adjust, either deliberately or by default, would likely mean that the news media's role is increasingly controlled by the media manipulators.(Morrison, 1996, p. 40).

Perhaps the biggest causal factor overall in terms of the media's alleged under-performance is commercialisation and marketisation of the media. New Zealand has had the same kind of conglomerate growth in the news media as has been experienced in the United States and Britain. It has also had to cope with the effects of Thatcher-style monetarist economic theories, as has been discussed above. New Zealand journalists, with the exception of those at National Radio, work almost exclusively for large, foreign-owned multinational companies, which are trying to generate ever-increasing shareholder returns in the international marketplace. Journalists who do not work for such firms are still at the mercy of the commercial realities of the marketplace, including those at state-owned Television New Zealand. Such commercial concerns create the same challenges for the media in New Zealand as elsewhere when they try to pursue their democratic responsibilities. As James (2001) puts it, there is a tension between the voters' need for information to help elect their representatives and the media's need to make a profit out of the news. McGregor and Comrie (2002) argue that while journalism has always had a commercial focus, the impact of commercial thinking has become greater in recent times.

Atkinson (2001), echoing British writers, says competition has failed to create diversity of content in television. He says commercial media pander to popular prejudices, with "populist journalism" being cheap and "serious journalism" costly and risky (1997, p. 238). Morrison (1996) fears that the ability of the New Zealand media to properly cover MMP governments

will be limited by the profit motive of corporate owners. Tucker refers to "the commodification of news" in New Zealand in recent times, with competing media increasingly using chequebook journalism and hidden cameras (2002, p. 132). Norris (2002) says Television New Zealand, which has been given a charter by the Government to guarantee levels of news and local coverage, now finds itself having to pursue both public good and commercial objectives. Norris fears that "it may prove impossible to meet both these objectives adequately" (2002, p. 50).

As in Britain and the United States, media trends in New Zealand and its trans-Tasman neighbour Australia show a move away from newspaper reading towards television viewing over the past few decades (Atkinson, 1997; Roberts & Levine, 1996; Western & Hughes, 1983; Windschuttle, 1984). New Zealand's daily newspapers are essentially provincial publications serving local communities large and small, with circulations varying from 213,334 (the *New Zealand Herald* in Auckland) to 2167 (*The Westport News* – figures from Newspaper Publishers Association, March 31, 2000). None of New Zealand's daily papers can rightly claim to be a national publication, though *The Dominion Post* and the *New Zealand Herald* come closest. Daily newspapers in New Zealand struggle to retain their readers. Figures from the Newspaper Publishers Association show that circulations for all but one of its member dailies fell between March 31, 1998 and March 31, 2000. The only rise was at *The Marlborough Express*, based in Blenheim, which increased sales by just 25 copies over the period – to 10,317. Weekly readership of daily newspapers over the same period fell from just under 80% of those aged 10 and over to 77%.

Another British and American trend mirrored in the South Pacific is the move towards media conglomeration. New Zealand has deregulated its broadcasting industry, allowing both private players into the market and overseas ownership of both radio and television. The country retains in state control only the National Radio news service and the Television New Zealand network, the latter often being the subject of sale speculation. New Zealand newspapers have always been privately owned, but law changes have allowed overseas owners to step in, with the result that Australian Rupert Murdoch and Irishman Tony O'Reilly controlled the great majority of the country's daily newspaper circulation in 2001, with the former cornering the Sunday newspaper market (Kelsey, 1993, 1997; Norris, 2002). INL, Murdoch's New Zealand arm, controlled 64% of combined daily-Sunday newspaper circulation in 2001, while O'Reilly's operation, Wilson and Horton, owned 29% (Norris, 2002). Only one major daily newspaper remained in independent hands, the *Otago Daily Times* in Dunedin, while the eight remaining independent provincial dailies all had circulations under 10,000 (Norris, 2002). O'Reilly also owned a dozen radio stations through The Radio Network, while Murdoch controlled the country's largest pay television provider, Sky TV. The New Zealand picture was not helped by the closure in 2002 of

The Evening Post, Wellington's afternoon daily newspaper, thereby ending the capital's status as the only city to still have two daily papers. Norris (2002) fears that New Zealand's lack of controls over cross-media ownership could undermine democratic life by leading to a reduced diversity of opinion in the media.

Media ownership in Australia has followed a similar pattern, with Murdoch's News Corporation now controlling over 70% of the daily newspaper market (Cunningham & Flew, 2000). One writer has described the concentration of media ownership in Australia as being "unrivalled in the western world", with large corporates controlling the bulk of all media through multimedia conglomerates (Windschuttle, 1984, p. 86). Cunningham and Flew (2000) describe Australia as having an "intersection" of British and American media industry structures.

This description could very well be applied to the New Zealand media, which have at the same time a strong public broadcasting tradition in both radio and television, and a commercial environment in which competition, media conglomeration and cross-media ownership are central features of the mediascape.

The next two sections will further background the forthcoming discussion about public journalism in Chapters Three and Four by considering what scholars have to say about the conventional process of making what we call "news". This involves looking at two features of the news-making process – how journalists decide what should be in the news and who gets into the news. This discussion is important for considering whether public journalism offers a different way of doing journalism.

2.5 The making of the news

As Walter Lippmann once put it, "news and truth are not the same thing, and must be clearly distinguished" (1929, p. 358). This comment expresses a central reality about journalism – what is in the news can be true, more or less, or can be an accurate rendition of someone's opinion, but it can never be the complete truth. Lippmann recognised that something is always missing. The idea that journalists simply hold a mirror up to society has been almost universally rejected (Altschull, 1990; Gans, 1979; Lippmann, 1929; Manoff & Schudson, 1986; Tuchman, 1978). Some writers contend that news is simply a reality constructed by reporters as they go about gathering information and writing stories (Altschull, 1990; Manoff & Schudson, 1986; Tuchman, 1978). Postman argues that news exists only when there is "a medium to create its form" (1985, pp. 7-8). Another scholar says news organisations, rather than passing on facts, simply mediate "portrayals of reality" provided by sources (Sigal, 1986, pp. 27-28).

News is generally described by scholars in bureaucratic terms, as the result of the operation of organisational structures in the newsroom (for example, see Tuchman, 1978). The daily cycle of most news media requires news organisations to set up systems that are able to regularly and efficiently (both in terms of time and cost) deliver information and comment (Carey, 1986; Tuchman, 1978). Rounds, or beats, are set up in order to target specific areas for news. The media favoured events rather than issues as the former offer an easy peg on which to hang a story (Schudson, 1986; Tuchman, 1978). The news media tended to use sources that delivered required information or comment quickly and reliably, which led to a preference for official sources (Entman, 1989; Gans, 1979; Schudson, 1986).

It is tempting to be simplistic about how the news selection process works. However, anyone who has ever worked in a newsroom knows the process takes place in a highly pressured environment. Morrison, writing in the New Zealand context, describes how news stories are chosen in the following way:

> Editors and chief reporters make judgements about which, of the potential assignments that day, are the most important or newsworthy. They make priority calls as they juggle the number of journalists available at the time, deadline pressures and assignments. The number of abandoned assignments typically far exceeds those eventually covered… (2002, p. 57).

News is, then, as Lippmann described it over 70 years ago, "the result of a whole series of selections as to what items shall be printed" (1929, p. 354). Lippmann saw news selection as very much a hit-and-miss affair, "like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision" (p. 364).

Within the newsroom, strong forces are at work to socialise new recruits into the almost mystical art of being a journalist, a process described as being "initiated into the mysteries of the craft" (McGregor & Comrie, 2002, p. 7). Part of this socialisation is the inculcation of accepted news values into new recruits. Gans (1979) found the news was dominated by government actions and events (35% of television stories in 1967, 48% of magazine stories in 1975) and protests/crimes/disasters (52% of television stories in 1967, 38% of magazine stories in 1975). McQuail (1992) says journalists look primarily at the number of people affected by events, the immediate impact of events, geographical closeness, and the size of events. Timed or regular events are often cited as attractive to journalistic routines (Schudson, 1986). Galtung and Ruge (1965), considering international news, identified a long list of factors important for getting a story in the news: negativity, relevance to elite nations, involvement of elite persons, connection to existing stories, whether it fits in with news schedules, lack of ambiguity in

meaning, size, cultural meaningfulness to the audience, whether it fits the media's expectations and whether the story can be personalised.

From the New Zealand perspective, Hope (2001) lists the following factors that might make something newsworthy: recency, clarity, geographical or cultural proximity, unexpectedness, conflict, personalisation, concerning elite people or nations, and events chosen through the bureaucratic system of pre-existing arrangements with sources.

Some news values are more prominent than others. Simply put, violence, death and conflict are the factors that are most likely to get something into the news. Hall refers to "the special status of *violence* as a news value" (1981, p. 353). McGregor argues that television has had a huge impact on newspapers' news values, forcing them to make dramatic layout changes, including the introduction of full colour. "Visualness", she suggests, has become the new "elite news value" (2002b, p. 123).

Scholars point to the importance of objectivity as a way of gaining public acceptance for journalism. Entman (1989) says objectivity helps the media secure the public's trust. Adhering to the concept of objectivity allows the news media to deflect criticism by claiming the work they do is simply an account of what happened in which they have no personal interest (Morrison, 2002; Altschull, 1990, 1995; McQuail, 1992). Journalists claim that when they gather information for stories and when they write them, they behave objectively. As indicated above, objectivity is generally seen as a set of journalistic processes designed to reassure the public that what they are reading is either true or is at least a true rendition of an appropriate source's opinion. Reeves (1997) sees objectivity as "both a cloak and a goal for journalists", an ideal to be strived for and a protective covering against those who are unhappy with news stories (pp. 40-41). Tuchman (1978) speaks of the journalistic process as creating a "web of facticity" that legitimises the news as well as the status quo.

Some scholars argue that the media have never used a pure objectivity-based model of news coverage. Schudson (1978) says objectivity has always been countered by some other form of journalism, for example the Muckrakers, who acted as watchdogs on the rich and powerful in the early 20th Century, and more recently investigative reporting. Tuchman (1978) says while in the 1920s the press opted for neutrality and objectivity, it also recognised the validity of reporters offering informed opinions through the era's great columnists, such as Lippmann. Ettema and Glasser (1998) argue that while investigative reporters outwardly defer to objectivity, inwardly their work has a profoundly moral dimension. This leads researchers to question whether public journalism is, therefore, a genuine change in approach to news values

and news selection, or whether it is merely the latest incarnation of a long-standing media tendency to mix objective reportage with subjective focusing on specific issues?

The examination of news values that lie behind story selection and other journalistic practices are, then, a regular focus of media research. Researchers looking at public journalism have asked whether such an approach results in differences in core newsroom practices (for example, see Bare, 1998; Haas, 2001). This thesis seeks to continue this work by examining such practices in the newsrooms of six New Zealand daily newspapers, three with experience of public journalism and three with no such experience.

The next section considers the literature on the second feature of the news-making process – who actually provides the information that gets into the news.

2.6 The sources of news

Gans (1979), in his work on newsroom practices, found that the news was dominated by "Knowns", comprising presidents, candidates, federal officials, state and local officials, with ordinary people only being represented by major criminals. He also found that those able to get their views into the newspaper were people who made themselves available to journalists, those with power, those with the ability to supply suitable information, and those who had geographic and social proximity to reporters. Gans longed for the media to broaden their range of sources and produce what he called "multiperspectival" coverage.

Tuchman (1978) argues that the news process legitimates some sources and ultimately the status quo. There are accepted ways in which news work is carried out, with received methods of fact verification and use of regular sources at the heart of the process. A journalist's status is also tied up with that of his or her sources – the higher the status of the source, the greater the status conferred on the reporter. Molotch and Lester suggest that news is dominated by those with "habitual access" to the news media, those whose own event needs coincide with the media's (1974, p. 111). Others get into the media only by either disrupting the process (for example via mass protest) or through accidents and scandals.

Journalism has been described as resembling "stenography for the powerful" (Solomon, 2001, p. 4). Elsewhere, the product of journalism, news, is described as "a representation of authority" and "an authoritative vision of social order" (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989, pp. 3-4). Ericson et al., however, argue that the view of powerful sources as the primary definers of news, with reporters being the secondary definers, is simplistic because it does not properly reflect the relationship between journalist and source. Nor is newsroom socialisation the answer. News is

really, according to Ericson et al., the result of a process of negotiation between journalists and sources through the "network of microcultures that arise on different newsbeats" (p. 34).

Use of official sources is seen as giving news stories credibility, making them worthy of public attention (Lacy & Coulson, 2000; Lee, 2001). Just as commentators and experts boost the credibility of journalists' work, so do they themselves benefit through being used as sources. The process enables them to wield influence in debates (Jordan, 1993). Soloski (1989) argues that reliance on official sources leads to a process of "reification" regarding the existing power structure in society, that is, that which is essentially a product of human creation is perceived as being a fact of life, something that cannot be changed. Meadows and Ewart (2001) argue that the source relationship, along with newsroom socialisation, ultimately shapes the way journalists see the world.

Empirical research done into the content of stories tends to support the view that the news media opted to use powerful and official sources more often than other sources. This appears to be the case even where publications have access to sufficient money and reporters to be able to be expected to cover a wider range of sources (Ramsey, 1999). Brown, Bybee, Wearden and Straughan (1987), in a study of 846 front page stories in six daily newspapers, found that 55.4% of sources used were affiliated with the United States federal, state or local government, with 24.4% being affiliated with non-government agencies, and only 4.3% being non-affiliated American citizens. Brown et al. also found that local daily newspapers tended to have a greater diversity of news sources, which the researchers put down to their more frequent use of non-routine channels for gathering news. This connection of proximity to increase diversity has also been found by other researchers (Berkowitz & Beach, 1993; Martin, 1988).

Numerous authors point to the dominance of male sources over female (Cann, 2001; Ewart, 2000, 2002; Liebler & Smith, 1997; Luebke, 1992; Massey, 1999; Ramsey, 1999). This is seen to be true even in cases where reporters are themselves female (Cann, 2001; Liebler & Smith, 1997), though a longitudinal study of 10 years of coverage by three southern United States daily newspapers suggests that this might be changing (Zoch & Van Slyke Turk, 1998). However, Zoch and Van Slyke Turk still found that male official sources continued to dominate. Some 68% of sources used in the 1126 stories examined were men, with 63% of sources being identified as working for the government, 19.6% for business, 11.3% for not-for-profits and 6.1% for various associations.

Researchers have also found that minority ethnic sources tend to be eclipsed by those from dominant, usually white European, communities (Ewart, 2002; Hindman, Littlefield, Preston &

Neumann, 1999; Meadows & Ewart, 2001; Perkins & Starosta, 2001; Ramsey, 1999). For example, Perkins and Starosta, in their survey of coverage of customary fishing issues affecting Native American tribes in Wisconsin, found that the six daily newspapers involved often used only official state government sources. Furthermore, while the state governor or his spokesperson was quoted directly 35 times in 19 stories, Native Americans were directly quoted only 11 times. Also, stories often undermined the tribes' arguments by questioning their motives. Meadows and Ewart (2001) argue that this bias can be traced back to news gathering routines that work against indigenous groups, which often cannot be contacted easily by telephone, do not have websites, and cannot provide quick comment before deadline.

In science stories, the spokespeople for organisations tend to rate a mention ahead of scientists (Ramsey, 1999), while in environmental stories government and business sources feature more often and more prominently than activists and ordinary citizens (Lacy & Coulson, 2000; Taylor, Lee & Davie, 2000). For example, Smith (1993) found that in newspaper coverage following the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, power elites (government and the oil industry) made up 60.7% of sources used and 73.3% of source citations. Smith had hypothesised that, faced with a sudden crisis, the power elites involved might have been caught off guard and lost their ability to dominate the news. He concluded that the hypothesis was not supported. Taylor et al. (2000) argue that the dominance of elite sources tends to legitimate industry viewpoints and marginalise those of environmental activists.

A study of daily newspaper coverage of business crises in which consumers were physically hurt found that larger dailies that were more distant from the events tended to use only 2-5% consumer sources (Powell & Self, 2003). Even the local daily newspaper used consumers as only 14% of its sources in stories about the crises.

The advent of new technology, such as access to electronic databases, has been seen by some as a way of breaking out of this reliance on official sources. However, it appears that journalists are not using this technology to diversify their source base. One 1992 study of 10 United States daily newspapers found that reporters tended to use material off the fax or from their papers' own electronic backfiles when covering breaking news stories (Hansen, Ward, Connors & Neuzil, 1994). Reporters were able to save time when doing stories and tended to use more sources in stories, but they also ended up relying on the same official sources each time a similar story broke.

Public journalism is defined in terms of breaking traditional journalism's hold on media practice, of doing the news in a different way. Researchers looking for changes in media

practice in the wake of public journalism experiments have analysed the content of media publications looking for differences in the type or style of coverage, or in the way stories are written. Alternatively, they have looked to changes in sourcing policies as evidence that the news is being done differently. Specifically, they are looking for a greater representation of sources that are often defined as "non-elite" or non-expert. Does the ordinary citizen stand a greater chance of being mentioned or quoted in a newspaper using public journalism than in one run on a conventional basis? Alternatively, do voices from under-represented groups like women get a greater hearing under a public journalism regime?

2.7 Conclusion

From the above discussion, two things emerge. First, American concerns about the decline of democratic life and participation are mirrored in democracies around the world, including in Britain and New Zealand. In the New Zealand context, this decline is most commonly expressed in terms of falling turnout at elections, both national and local. Second, American concerns about the role of the media in this decline are also reflected to some extent in the views of scholars writing about other democracies. Consistent themes include media conglomeration, commercialisation and homogenisation. Similar patterns of what American scholars see as the features of media decline have also been identified: a fall-off in newspaper reading, increased television watching, a failure to provide the public with political information, and a tendency to treat politics as a game or a contest.

Differences have emerged, however. British writers often distinguish between the "quality" press and tabloid newspapers. Equally, some consider the complicating factor of class in their analysis of media, that is, the degree to which audiences are fragmented along socio-economic-educational lines. New Zealand scholars, while they often make reference to the role of the media in democratic life, tend to do so only in a passing fashion. British and New Zealand media commentary tends to see the media as important for the proper functioning of democratic life, but it also tends to take a consistently negative line. Having done this, scholars in these two countries tend not to share their American counterparts' willingness to offer comprehensive suggestions for how the media can improve their contribution to democracy. Where suggestions are offered, they tend to advocate more secure public broadcasting while offering few suggestions for print media beyond desiring a greater diversity of voices in the press.

The discussion in this chapter has also explored more deeply what the media's product – "news" – actually is. The literature suggests news is the result of a combination of newsroom processes and selection of sources. The proponents of public journalism claim it is a different way of doing journalism. If so, it should produce differences in media processes and coverage. Chapter

Three will discuss how public journalism emerged in the United States as a response to the perceived state of democratic decline and related media malaise described in this chapter. Chapter Four will discuss how the United States public journalism model was adopted by some newspapers in Australia and New Zealand.

Chapter Three
Public journalism practice in the United States

The previous chapter discussed the dual malaise afflicting political life and the news media. As can be seen from what follows, public journalism is perhaps best viewed as a response by journalists to this problem. This chapter details the forms public journalism has taken and the debates that have arisen about it. Special attention will be paid to the main critiques that have been made of public journalism and to evaluations that have been done of the use of public journalism-style techniques of media coverage. A common complaint from critics of public journalism has been to challenge proponents to explain exactly how public journalism differs from traditional journalistic practice. Proponents' understanding of the definition of public journalism will round off this chapter. The next chapter will discuss how public journalism has been adopted outside the United States, specifically in New Zealand and Australia.

3.1 The beginnings of public journalism

The first developments of public journalism can be traced back to a combination of media and scholarly initiatives in the very early 1990s, though individual American newspapers had begun changing the way they reported a few years before then. Jay Rosen, perhaps academia's greatest supporter of public journalism, looks to a campaign begun by the Columbus (Georgia) *Ledger-Enquirer* in 1987 as the first demonstration of the approach that later became typical of the new school of journalistic practice (Arant & Meyer, 1998; Rosen, 1992b; Rosen, 1999a; Rosen & Taylor, 1992).

The paper, headed by editor Jack Swift, who was fed up with the lack of leadership in the city and concerned about its future, ran a series of articles in 1988 detailing the city's problems, including a lack of confidence in schools, a low wage economy, a lack of nightlife, and a dominance of elites in local politics. Silence followed the articles, but rather than leave it at that Swift became even more involved in trying to promote discussion about what was to happen in Columbus. He organised a public meeting, and later helped set up an action group at a barbecue at his own house, heading the committee himself. Swift met with the city's manager and organised retreats that led to the production of a strategic plan. Rosen is full of praise for Swift's decision to identify the paper's interests with those of local citizens rather than sitting on the sidelines as an unbiased observer (Rosen, 1992b).

According to Rosen (1999a), the *Ledger-Enquirer*'s campaign struck a chord with James K Batten, president of the newspaper's parent company, Knight-Ridder. The company made Swift

its editor of the year and promoted the *Ledger-Enquirer* experiment to its other publications as a model of community involvement. Rosen notes that at the time Batten was concerned about falling newspaper circulation. The proportion of adults reading a newspaper each day had fallen from 73% in 1967 to 51% in 1988 (McMillan, Guppy, Kunz & Reis, 1998; Rosen, 1999a). Batten also wanted his papers to be more customer-focused and to have more human content, and for journalists to become active in engaging people in public life. In a speech in Lawrence, Kansas in the early 1990s, Batten made clear the connection between what was good for his company's newspapers both journalistically and commercially:

> People who say they feel a real sense of connection to the places they live are almost twice as likely to be regular readers of our newspapers as those who say they lack such ties…If we can find ways to enhance these feelings of community connectedness, that may help produce at least part of the readership and circulation growth American newspapers are pushing for (as cited in Hoyt, 1992, pp. 43-44).

Jack Swift's response to what he saw as a community's need can be seen as representing one strain of public journalism – helping the community to solve its problems. Another strain developed among journalists frustrated with the way election campaigns had come to be dominated by candidates. Rosen identifies the columns of *Washington Post* political writer David Broder in 1990 as one of the key events in the development of election-based public journalism campaigns. Broder called for an end to letting political consultants dictate media coverage of the political process through staged photographic opportunities, suggesting that the media's job was rather to get the public involved in democracy (Merritt & Rosen, 1998; Rosen, 1992a, 1996c, 1999a; Rosen & Taylor, 1992). Broder's ideas were encapsulated in a five-point agenda for journalists: take the campaign away from the consultants; demand evidence for claims made in advertisements; campaign against negative advertising; question candidates about their ideas; and denounce anyone subverting the election process through demagoguery (Rosen & Taylor, 1992).

Rosen began touring with Swift in 1990 as part of a Kettering Foundation joint academic-journalist discussion panel (Hoyt, 1992; Merritt & Rosen, 1998; Rosen, 1993a, 1999a). After Swift's death that November, Rosen was joined by David Broder and Davis "Buzz" Merritt, editor of a Knight-Ridder paper, the Wichita *Eagle*, who had been driving his own public journalism-style election campaigns in Kansas. The Kettering Foundation's support for public journalism continued in 1993 when it set up the Project on Public Life and the Press, with Rosen as director and funded by Batten's company through the Knight Foundation (Rosen, 1999a; Shepard, 1996a). The Pew Charitable Trusts also became involved in supporting public journalism after an approach from James Batten in 1993, setting up the Pew Center for Civic

Journalism with a grant of $4.5 million (Rosen, 1999a; Shepard, 1996a). The Pew organisation has since supported numerous public journalism projects worth many millions of dollars.

Scholars like Rosen and journalists like Broder and Merritt did not arrive at their decision to call for change in how the media covered elections in a vacuum. The 1988 US presidential election campaign is often cited by scholars as a "catalyst" for change in journalism (Eksterowicz et al. 1998). This contest between George Bush and Michael Dukakis seemed to symbolise the depths to which elections had plunged. Merritt, the second of Shepherd's "fathers of the public journalism movement" (Shepard, 1994), considered the 1988 election campaign to be a "tragic" event, illustrating how politicians, with their "armies of handlers, consultants and theorists", had turned the democratic process into a series of "empty contests" (Merritt & Rosen, 1998, p. 37). The candidates' behaviour, ranging from attacks on Senator Gary Hart's personal life and presidential hopefuls visiting flag factories, seemed to disgust journalists and the public alike (Grimes, 1997). Rosen called 1988 a "symbolic low point" in democracy, for him summed up in the absurd picture of Democratic hopeful Dukakis riding in a tank to show he was not 'soft' on defence (Merritt & Rosen, 1998, p. 52).

Rosen felt journalists tended to see politics as a game or sport, a horse race or contest to be won or lost rather than a sphere for public discussion and debate (1993b, 1996a, 1996d; Rosen & Taylor, 1992). Alternatively, the media saw politics as a macho encounter between politician and interviewer (Rosen 1992a, 1992b, 1996a; Rosen & Taylor, 1992). Rosen feared that journalism, which had an honourable democratic role, was turning into "media", which merely delivered audiences for owners (1996a, 1996b). A few years later, Andrew Kohut, of the Pew Charitable Trusts, pointed to readers being turned off coverage of the 2000 presidential campaign as part of a backlash against the media's focus on the Monica Lewinsky affair (Kohut, 1999). Pew research on distrust of the media has showed increasing numbers of voters feel the media had too much influence on the electoral process, discouraging good candidates (Kohut, 1999). Many people also feel the media were too often influenced by the interests of corporate owners, business and advertisers (Kohut, 2000b). Kohut (2000c) suggests the media should emphasise the importance of elections, encourage younger voters, be careful about unnecessarily prying into candidates' private lives, and focus on the issues.

Polls showing a lack of public regard for the media have also helped push some towards public journalism. Yankelovich polls for 1988 showed that those confessing to having "great confidence" in news were 55% for television and 50% for newspapers; these figures dropped to 25% and 20% respectively over just the next five years (Rosen, 1996b). An often-quoted Times-

Mirror poll in 1994 showed that 71% of people felt the media were getting in the way of society solving its problems (Lambeth, 1998a; Merritt 1995a, 1998; Rosen, 1996b).

Rosen points to developments within academia that had scholars already thinking about the state of democratic society, while Merritt's writings give an indication of the sorts of concerns that led him and other editors to be receptive to discussions about the media's democratic role. Rosen (1999a) says the 1980s saw Putnam's work on civic decline make an impact, while 1989 saw the appearance of an English translation of Habermas' work on the public sphere and its problems. Furthermore, James W Carey had revived the ideas of John Dewey, bringing into public view the issues encapsulated in his famous debate with Walter Lippmann (Carey, 1989; Rosen, 1999a). Scholars were asking what responsibility the media had for America's political malaise and whether they could help reverse the trend. Rosen summarises his strategy of combining scholarly research and media practice in the early 1990s in the following terms:

> It was to mix Batten and Broder with Dewey and Carey, add Merritt's reflections to my own, find a language that isn't airy or obscure, fashion with it a story, or a sequence of arguments for change, add illustrations from the field, and take the whole thing public, bring it out into the open in as many forums as you can find.(1999a, p. 71).

For Rosen, himself a former journalist, public journalism represents as much an activism for academics as it does for editors – what he calls "public scholarship" (Merritt & Rosen 1998, p. 55; Rosen, 1995).

Merritt's own "long, twisting intellectual journey" towards public journalism began with frustration with both the electoral process and newspapering itself (Dykers, 1998, p. 82). Following the 1988 Bush-Dukakis campaign, Merritt's newspaper, the Wichita *Eagle*, decided to run a Voter Project during the 1990 gubernatorial elections focusing on voters' main issues. However, the paper's failure to pick the winner, plus the candidates' refusal to co-operate in telling voters what their policies were only added to Merritt's frustration (Hoyt, 1992). At issue was the value to readers of offering a standard, two-sided discourse of extremes, which left 70% of the population out of the debate (Dykers, 1998; Merritt, 1998). Merritt persisted in running voter issues-focused campaign coverage during the 1991 local elections and the 1992 presidential primaries, running blank spaces where candidates refused to state their policies (Rosen, 1999a; Hoyt, 1992). These campaigns surveyed people to identify important local issues, including education, taxes and economic development, and then asked candidates to state their policies. Voting was also promoted by the newspaper through advertisements and delivery of a voting guide.

Also in 1992, the *Eagle* went further, launching an initiative dubbed The People Project: Solving it Ourselves (Dykers, 1998; Merritt, 1996a, 1998). The People Project involved conducting 192 two-hour interviews, leading to a series of articles aimed at helping people do something about important local concerns such as crime, education, government gridlock and the disintegration of family life. Analysing the paper's efforts and Merritt's rationale for them, Rosen (1999a) says a key motivator was Merritt's desire to counter a sense of hopelessness, a belief that nothing could be done about society's really big problems. He wanted to show people that possible solutions did exist and there were ways in which people could become involved in being part of those solutions.

Merritt took a year off in 1993 in order to read and think about journalism before returning to the *Eagle*'s pages in October 1994 (Dykers, 1998; Merritt & Rosen, 1998). In his own fairly extensive written discussions about public journalism Merritt refers to the work of Dewey and Lippmann (1998), Putnam (1996a, 1998), Postman (1995a) and Yankelovich (1998). The *Eagle* continued to pursue public journalism with projects such as the mayoral election initiative in 1995, which used focus groups, and a Neighborhood Conversations project (Willey, 1998).

Rosen says public journalism was officially launched in 1994 with a pamphlet sponsored by the Kettering Foundation and written by himself and Davis Merritt, though the term itself had been in use since the previous year (Rosen, 1999a). In a co-authored introduction to the pamphlet, Rosen and Merritt laid out the rationale behind public journalism:

> Journalists in the United States are at a critical point in the history of their craft. Threatened on one side by declining readership and new economic pressures in the media industry, they face a different kind of threat from the fraying of community ties, the rising disgust with politics, and a spreading sense of impotence and hopelessness among Americans frustrated by the failures of their democratic system. If this second threat isn't noticed and taken seriously, American journalism may lose control of its future, which is bound up with the strength of public life in all of its forms (Rosen, 1999a, p. 73).

The aim of public journalism, according to the pamphlet introduction, was "to fortify the public trust that comes with the special privileges granted by the First Amendment" (Rosen, 1999a, p. 74). Here was a clear statement that two separate, yet connected, trends were behind public journalism – on the one hand, commercial concerns and media fears that the public just were not that interested in journalism any more; on the other hand, a desire to re-invigorate the democratic process.

For Rosen, the futures of journalism and democratic life are intertwined – if one falters, the other also suffers (Merritt & Rosen, 1998; Rosen, 1995). The media, moreover, cannot afford to let the public get cynical about the democratic role of journalism because the ultimate effect of this could be the demise of the very freedom that the press holds dear.

3.2 Rosen and Merritt – public journalism as changed media practice

Rosen sees public journalism as being about three things: a discussion about the role of the media; a set of practices/"experiments" in American journalism; and "a movement of people and institutions", that is journalists' personal commitment and the support of organisations like the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Kettering Foundation (Merritt & Rosen, 1998, pp. 46-49; Rosen, 1995). Public journalism, therefore, has a theoretical rationale, but also looks to affect the media's day-to-day behaviour. The people have become disconnected from both the media and the political process, says Rosen. In response, the media must act in order to help re-engage the public in political life, to get ordinary folk involved in making the decisions that affect their lives and in solving society's problems (Merritt & Rosen, 1998; Rosen, 1992a, 1993a, 1993c, 1995, 1996c, 1996d, 1999a; Rosen & Taylor, 1992). Considering Yankelovich's theory of public decision-making, Rosen argues that journalists could aim to help citizens get to the stage of public judgment (Rosen & Taylor, 1992). He suggests that the benefits of public journalism include a new-found sense of purpose for journalists who have become disillusioned about their work (1999a).

At the heart of the media-political malaise, says Rosen, lies journalists' erroneous belief in the value of remaining detached from social and political events (1992b, 1993c, 1995, 1996e, 1997, 1999a; Rosen & Taylor, 1992). This so-called objectivity allows journalists to stand above the fray and argue that their role is merely to report what happens below them:

> Almost all the key notions in the journalist's ethical code reflect an emphasis on detachment: the maligned but still influential doctrine of 'objectivity', the related emphasis on 'fairness' and 'balance', the separation between the news columns and the editorial page, the 'watchdog' role, the 'adversarial' stance, the principle of ignoring consequences in deciding what's newsworthy (Rosen & Taylor 1992, p. 8).

Rosen views this detachment as nonsensical because it is logically impossible, and because it undermines journalism's credibility with the public. Journalists need to recognise, first, that they are actors in the political process whether they like it or not, and, second, that they have a vested interest in the outcome of the people's political deliberations, and specifically in the continued health of the democratic process. Rosen suggests that journalism as a whole has come to be

dominated by liberal views of individual rights (1992b, 1993a, 1996a). Journalists need to rediscover the virtues of collective human effort.

Davis Merritt's writings about public journalism share almost all of Rosen's concerns, though he pays a bit more attention to how public journalism might affect the mechanics of how journalists go about their daily routines. Merritt sums up "the elements of my public journalism philosophy" as follows (Merritt & Rosen, 1998, p. 44):

- The viability of public life and the value of journalism "are inextricably bound together"
- Journalism is of limited use in democratic terms if it continues to focus on providing information in a detached way
- Journalism must re-engage citizens in public life by adding to its job description the objective of "helping public life go well"

Merritt revisits these points regularly in his writings (1995a, 1995b, 1996b, 1998). Perhaps not surprisingly for a journalist he is convinced that journalism is perhaps best placed among all American institutions to help get a public conversation started again:

> …only journalism has the combination of complete freedom and potential power to define its role, to set its own goals, to act – within reason – as it wishes (1998, p. 143).

Merritt does not want journalists to do this simply for altruistic reasons. The stakes are high for journalism if it does not act re-engage with public life:

> Our profession's very existence depends on the viability of public life. A public that does not attend to public affairs, that retreats deeply into private life and concerns, has no need of journalists and journalism… (1998, p. 13).

Merritt sees the media's role as specifically to ensure that information is shared among interested parties and to assist in the boosting of the nation's stocks of Putnam's social, or civic, capital (1995a, 1996a, 1998). Merritt is also, however, keenly aware that public journalism poses a serious threat to traditional media news reporting practices. These include the prevalence of conflict as a news value, concentration on experts as sources, the desire to be first with a story, seeing the public as spectators rather than individuals capable of action, and a naïve belief that stories frame themselves (Merritt, 1995a, 1998; Merritt & Rosen, 1998). Ultimately, the challenge is to incorporate public journalism into daily news processes. Merritt sees public journalism as requiring journalists to make five "mental shifts": from telling the

news to helping public life go well; from detachment to being "a fair-minded participant" in events; from concern about proper separation to proper connection; from describing what is wrong to imagining what having things go right could be like; and from seeing people as consumers to seeing people as a public, as "potential actors" (1998, p. 140).

Merritt (1998) echoes Rosen in criticising the media on a number of grounds. He chides journalists for their "toughness" in tackling and even trying to bring down public figures rather than focusing on the needs of public life. He targets elitist "journalistic gentry" for allowing the symbiotic relationship between journalists and politicians to become unhealthy, with the media forgetting that the public should be the beneficiaries of the relationship. Public journalism, he says, threatens:

> …the cozy, incestuous relationship between the political journalists and the politicians they cover, a relationship that has allowed political campaigning to degenerate into a meaningless minuet of tactics, superficiality, and insider trading in ego gratification (p. 116).

Corporatisation of the media has also turned many journalists into "careerist transients", who think more about their own futures than about the effect their work has (Merritt, 1998, p. 47). He adds that the media have helped disconnect citizens from public life by failing to understand how the public make decisions and their need for "true deliberation" on matters of importance (p. 73). Part of the media's problem is "the shortcomings of episodic reporting of news" (p. 73). Public journalism, Merritt concludes, would help the public relate choices to consequences and would target the "real" problems raised by stories (pp. 122-124).

Merritt is, however, not as scathing as some academic writers about traditional journalistic notions of objectivity. As an editor he remains committed to the principle that the media have a responsibility to offer a generally unbiased view of events. However, like Rosen, he has deep misgivings about the idea that journalists should try to detach themselves from society's ups and downs. The media have a vested interest in public life "going well" and journalism will prosper or not depending on the nation's democratic health. Indeed, it is imperative for journalism to do what it can to help the people deliberate. He is particularly enamoured of Yankelovich's model of how the public comes to a judgment on a problem (1998). Merritt resolves this apparent contradiction between the media getting involved and keeping their hands off by distinguishing between objectivity and detachment (1995a, 1995b). Detachment he describes as "a dangerous arrogance, a self-granted immunity that smacks of a priesthood" that allows journalists to ignore the consequences of stories (Merritt & Rosen, 1998, p. 42). Public journalism does not undermine the traditional commitment to accurate and unbiased reporting, but rather adds to the

media's agenda the goal of engaging the public (Merritt 1996b, 1998). What Merritt is seeking is a middle ground between activism and disinterest:

> It is not yet clear how deeply traditional practices will be affected, thus many critics wrongly assume that public journalism seeks to replace every journalistic tradition. It does not; it is additive, contending that much of the traditional practice is not wrong so much as it is insufficient in today's environment… (1998, pp. 113).

3.3 The spread of public journalism in the United States

Since the start of the last decade of the 20th Century, some hundreds of newspaper editors have joined Merritt in experimenting with public journalism. During the 1990s, more than 500 media publications in total (print and broadcast) are estimated to have tried to cover either election campaigns or salient local issues differently (Grimes, 1997; McGregor et al. 1998). Arant and Meyer (1998) found that 61% of a sample of 375 newspapers had used public journalism techniques. The figure rose to 68% for papers having circulations of 40,000-200,000, and fell to 55% for papers selling more than 200,000 copies per issue. Elections have often been the main focus in the United States (and also in New Zealand), but major local issues have also formed the basis of some substantial campaigns.

Perhaps the most well-known experiment after Merritt's Wichita *Eagle* effort is that undertaken by the *Charlotte Observer*, a daily newspaper in North Carolina, in 1992 (Eksterowicz et al. 1998; Johnson, 1998; Lambeth, 1998a; Merritt, 1998; Rosen, 1995, 1999a; Schaffer, 1997; Shepard, 1994, 1996b; Thames, 1998). Variously known as the Charlotte project or the Poynter Project (for the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, a media think tank which assisted the paper), the campaign took what has become the classic public journalism approach for covering elections. The newspaper surveyed voters to get them to identify the issues which they considered to be most important. The paper then wrote background pieces on these issues and got candidates to state their policies on them. The *Observer* set up a database of 500 (eventually 1000) representative citizens to consult on issues and promoted voting information. Then *Observer* editor Rick Thames (now editor of the Wichita *Eagle*) says the paper's campaign was influenced by the *Eagle*'s efforts and by David Broder's call to arms in the *Washington Post* (Thames, 1998). Like Merritt, Thames was motivated by "the sorry state of the political debate" in 1988, with low voter turnout and the media trailing around after politicians on staged photo opportunities (1998, p. 111). Thames says the Charlotte Project was also a reaction to reader anger over the paper's coverage of recent Senate elections. The *Observer* consistently reported polls as showing that Harvey Gantt would beat Jesse Helms. Helms won.

The *Observer* continued its efforts at what was coming to be known as public journalism in 1994-95 with a campaign called Taking Back Our Neighborhoods (Charity, 1996a, 1996c; Lambeth, 1998b). This project, involving co-operation with radio and television stations, was aimed at helping some of the city's communities deal with crime. Meetings were called, investigative pieces written. Some 200 community groups responded with offers of help. Then, in 1996, the *Observer* launched a major initiative based around that year's elections (Brewin, 1999; Buckner & Gartner, 1998; Clark, 1997; Grimes, 1997; Merritt, 1998). Fourteen other media outlets joined in the campaign, called Your Voice, Your Vote. One thousand people were polled in order to identify the six issues deemed by voters to be important.

Numerous similar campaigns were run by American daily newspapers and broadcast media during the 1990s. The *Virginian-Pilot* in Norfolk, Virginia set up "community conversations" to discuss political issues, creating a "public life team" to consult members of the public about local government matters, and trying to stimulate interest in elections (Ballard, 1996; Campbell, 1996; Charity, 1996c; Lambeth, 1998b; Merritt & Rosen, 1998; Rosen, 1995, 1999a). When the *Virginian-Pilot* ran a photograph of a dead American soldier in Mogadishu in 1993, it included an explanatory piece in which it explained the debate that lay behind the decision to publish (Durocher, 1998). Public response was apparently positive because people could see that publication was not aimed simply at selling more papers. In a speech to a Washington symposium sponsored by the Pew organization in 1995, the *Virginian-Pilot's* editor, Cole Campbell cast his ideas firmly in a theoretical public journalism mould, referring to Carey, Dewey and Lippmann (Rosen, 1999a).

When Dayton, Ohio was faced with the closure of a defence plant in 1994 at a cost of 4450 jobs, the *Dayton Daily News* responded with 12 pages of coverage aimed at discussing possible uses for the plant and stimulating business interest (Rosen, 1999a, 1999b). The paper repeated the exercise the following year after an air force base was shut, the site later becoming an industrial park. The *Daily News* also managed to get 2000 people along to meetings to discuss what could be done about teen violence following a number of child shootings (Charity, 1996c; Shepard, 1994). The Columbia (SC) *State* also ran a series on a child shooting death in 1994, branching out into other teen issues such as pregnancy and drugs (Johnson, 1998). Earlier, in 1991, it had kicked off its new approach to journalism by publishing a marathon 17-part series on the structure of the legislature and the existence of corruption within.

Campaigns to promote or co-ordinate local economic recovery have been common among media practising public journalism. Newspapers from across the United States have considered it appropriate to sponsor such initiatives, from Spokane, Washington to Wilmington, Delaware.

In Portland, Maine, the *Press Herald* tackled the hot local issue of depleted fish stocks, which had seen the fishing industry go into decline (Ureneck, 1999/2000). The paper brought fishers, regulators, environmentalists and scientists together, not with a view to printing articles about their predictable disagreements, but with the aim of leading reporters to an understanding of the issue so that a valuable series explaining the industry's predicament could be written. In another example, in 1996 the *Baltimore Sun* published a series on literacy problems in Maryland and then followed it up by setting up a reading programme whereby 160 of the paper's staff spent time reading to pupils in schools (Childs, 1998).

The *Wisconsin State Journal* in Madison, Wisconsin began its public journalism career in 1992 with a by now standard focus on elections, the 'We The People' experiment leading up to senate and gubernatorial elections in 1994 (Denton & Thorson, 1998; Friedland et al. 1998; Rosen, 1995). Meetings were held and debates organised, with the newspaper working closely with radio and television stations. The newspaper, along with a local television station, had also been running the City of Hope project since 1992. As with similar undertakings, this one was sparked by the shooting of a teenager, this time during a botched drug deal. The then editor of the *State Journal* Frank Denton says he wanted to avoid "hand grenade journalism" and discuss the issues raised with the community (Friedland et al. 1998, p. 214).

Race relations has triggered a number of public journalism campaigns in the United States. The *Beacon-Journal* in Akron, Ohio took a close look at race issues in 1993 in its 'A Question of Color' campaign (Haas, 2001; Merritt, 1998; Rosen, 1999a; Willey, 1998). The newspaper discussed where different races lived, noted disparities and even helped finance race relations projects.

The label of public or civic journalism has been applied to many different sorts of initiatives over the past decade. The Columbia *Missourian* has carried out projects on graduates trying to find work, health and the place of religion in public life (Thorson, Ognianova, Coyle & Lambeth, 1998; Willey, 1998). In Springfield, Missouri, the *News-Leader* carried out a month-long campaign in 1996 looking at problems like juvenile crime, homelessness and job training, followed by consideration of possible solutions (Gates & McGrath, 1996). The coverage culminated in The Good Community Fair, which attracted 7000 people and offered youth events and exposure for voluntary agencies. The *Caledonian-Record* in Vermont ran an aggressive campaign against domestic violence in 1993-96, publishing details of all restraining orders taken out against local men, the paper's argument being that the public had a right to know and such publication could help prevent crime (Alexander, 1998).

The public journalism projects detailed above involve media publications trying to identify themselves with the priorities of communities, either by asking what the public want during an election campaign or which issues the community needs help with. It would seem that right across the United States the news media have been reconnecting with their public in the spirit of Rosen and Merritt. However, public journalism models have not been universally picked up, especially in larger urban conglomerations. Some journalists have reacted angrily to such practices while even those who are otherwise in favour of public journalism have voiced misgivings.

3.4 Critics of public journalism

Michael Gartner calls public journalism a "gimmick" and joins other critics in seeing reporters as conceding independence to pollsters and the public (Buckner & Gartner, 1998; Case, 1994). His concern that the co-operative nature of many public journalism campaigns restricts the number of media voices the public hears is widely echoed (Buckner & Gartner, 1998; Grimes, 1997; Jackson, 1997):

> Media coalitions…homogenize the news and reduce the number of voices gathering it. They cede editorial judgment to pollsters or, worse, to readers or viewers in focus groups who have no particular knowledge of a state, of politics, or of politicians. They confuse the news pages with the editorial pages, serving up involvement and attachment instead of disengagement and detachment (Buckner & Gartner, 1998, p. 229).

For journalists like Gartner, detachment is seen as a virtue, even a necessity for good journalism (Stein, 1995). Gartner says journalists must not take sides even if, as in the case of the Akron *Beacon-Journal*, their goal is to help foster good race relations (as cited in Fitzgerald, 1995). Journalism is about exposing, not campaigning, about truth, not advocacy (Gartner, 1995). Gartner is particularly perturbed by the presence of third party money in the newsroom influencing coverage (Fitzgerald, 1998). *Washington Post* executive editor Leonard Downie and others claim the motivations for public journalism include a simple desire by the media for financial gain (Dennis, 1995; Jackson, 1997; Lambeth, 1998a; McGregor et al. 1998; Richards, 2000; Shepard, 1994). Downie likens public journalism to promotions work and claims, along with others, that its acceptable aspects are not really new (Case, 1994; Shepard, 1994, 1996a, 1996b). There is concern that public journalism will result in journalists producing feel-good stories (Benesch, 1998; Deneen, 1991). Elsewhere it has simply been labelled as "unbearably dull" (Fitzgerald, 1999, p. 6). Left-wing criticism sees public journalism as just another way of serving the corporate owners, with the added bonus of not upsetting readers (McChesney, 1999).

Friedland et al. (1998) point to the danger that public journalists will end up dealing primarily with articulate leaders and professional groups rather than engaging with the wider public. Philip Meyer asks whether public journalism is really worth the cost of hosting forums and focus groups, and conducting surveys (1998). He says while the costs are clear and quick to arrive, any benefits will take much longer to become apparent.

Alternatively, some fear that if the media get too closely involved in issues it can result in coverage that damages the democratic process. Critics of a public journalism project in Florida reacted with concern after vigorous newspaper coverage of a city development plan ended in the electoral defeat of three of the four city councillors who supported the development (Simmons, 1999). The *Observer*'s 1996 'Your Voice, Your Vote' coverage of senate elections was slammed by a House of Representatives candidate who saw it as undermining Democrat Harvey Gantt's chances (Jackson, 1997). Visiting journalists from metropolitan New York, Washington and Boston dailies blasted the *Observer*'s project as a multimedia attempt to take control of the political process (Effron, 1997).

Academic research does not always back up public journalists, undermining some of the most oft-repeated verses in the public journalism mantra – that journalists are out of touch and that horse-race polls divert the public from the really important issues. Grimes quotes research by David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit that suggests journalists really are not very different from the general public (1997). They may be more educated on average and less inclined to be religious, but just 1% of journalists earn over $100,000 and they have marriage and child-rearing rates comparable to the rest of the country. Other research notes the high level of community involvement of newspaper editors, especially among older editors on smaller papers (Akhavan-Majid, 1995). Meyer and Potter (1998) conclude that pre-election polls actually "ignite interest" in campaigns rather than divert voters' attention. Zhao and Bleske (1998) have found that horse race polls increase attention to other messages.

Academics also have methodological criticisms of public journalism campaigns to date. Recent research by Teresa Mastin (2000) suggests initiatives by local media are unlikely to succeed in getting African-Americans involved in civic life unless they incorporate churches and other existing community networks. Tanni Haas (1999b) says public journalism should recognise that the public are not a conglomerate and should focus on small communities with common interests and forget goals like increasing voter turnout. She argues campaign planners should address the public both as individuals and as members of groups (Haas, 1999a).

Schroll (1999) warns against the media taking control of public journalism campaigns away from the public and in so doing undermining the goals of the movement. Anderson, Dardenne and Killenberg (1996) argue that public journalism, to work effectively, needs to share control of the news process with the public as part of creating a "conversational commons". This would involve challenging traditional ways of making the news, for example allowing people to see stories before publication on the basis that the stories are owned by journalists and the public in common. Glasser and Craft (1996) argue that if public journalists see the media as having a central role in public life, they will have to open the media up to the same sort of scrutiny faced by other public institutions. Public journalists cannot, therefore, have their cake and eat it: claim a central democratic role, but maintain the secrecy that traditionally surrounds the newsroom and its practices. Hodges (1996) says the challenge for public journalists is to avoid both collectivism and liberal individualism and discover a communitarian approach that acknowledges human interdependence rather than detachment.

Criticisms are even to be found among the movement's staunchest supporters. More recent comment by Rosen (1999b) warned against seeing public journalism as a formula and turning the public into "gods". Merritt says some early campaigns, such as the *Ledger-Enquirer*'s original project, went too far (1996b; Rosen, 1999a). He says the large-scale of early campaigns, including his own newspaper's People Project, was also a mistake. The emphasis should instead be on changing daily news practices in favour of promoting re-engagement of journalists with the public (Blazier & Lemert, 2000; Kurpius, 2000; Merritt, 1995a, 1996b; Rosen, 1995). Merritt is dead set against journalists claiming to be doing public journalism without having a philosophical basis and, like Gartner, is uneasy about third party money coming into newsrooms from organisations like the Pew group (Merritt & McMasters, 1996). Parisi argues that while public journalism represents a welcome acceptance by some reporters that news is not simply "the transparent presentation of external facts", it has yet to fulfil its promise as a genuine change in media practice (1997, p. 673). By focusing on community voices, Parisi says public journalists effectively prevent a consideration of the full range of possibilities for finding solutions to problems.

Some research suggests that the average journalist, while wanting to preserve the media's independence, may in fact be sympathetic to the goals of public journalism. Bare's (1998) study of journalists' belief systems at the Wichita *Eagle*, Raleigh *News & Observer* and the Omaha *World-Herald* (the last-named being a non-public journalism paper) found that some of the values ascribed to public journalism were widely held on all three papers. Voakes (1999) likewise found general support for practices associated with public journalism, though it was higher among those working on smaller papers.

3.5 Evaluation of public journalism experiments

Supporters of public journalism would perhaps strengthen their case considerably if they were able to show positive results from the hundreds of experiments undertaken. Unfortunately, the evidence is by and large inconclusive, not least of all because reliable evaluative mechanisms have not always been used. The equivocal nature of the results provides ammunition for critics. The call for public journalism experiments to be properly evaluated has been widespread (Bare, 1998; Denton & Thorson, 1998; Haas, 1999b; Lambeth, 1998a, 1998b; McGregor et al. 1998, 1999; Meyer, 1998; Richards, 2000; Venables, 2001). Many of the experiments referred to earlier have been evaluated through surveys of readers and reporters or by content analysis of the publications concerned. Criticism has been levelled against current evaluation strategies on a number of grounds. Haas (1999b) argues that they typically do not take into account the different objectives of the various campaigns.

Meyer (1998) says public journalism proponents have to show two things regarding public journalism: that it produces results, and also that it exists. He says public journalism experiments need to ask whether or not circulation has increased and whether there has been an increase in public trust in institutions and social capital. He suggests using a variety of research techniques: content analysis, changes in journalistic values, finding out whether the public think it matters, seeing whether voter turnout is up or whether people took part in political processes, measuring public knowledge about candidates and issues, and assessing the quality of people's opinions (for example assessing the ideological consistency of people's views, the strength of their attitudes, or their willingness to accept consequences). Meyer suggests that surveys of public journalism's effects need to be done on up to 100 communities at once.

Regarding the *Charlotte Observer*'s public journalism campaigns, Charity (1996a) notes that the 1994 crime campaign was followed by a 19% drop in offences by the end of the following year. Thames (1998) says while voter turnout leapt 8.1 points to 56.9% in the *Observer*'s home county after the 1996 Your Voice, Your Vote campaign, this was eclipsed by a 12.5% rise in another county that was not part of the project. Moreover, he says while voters in the *Observer*'s catchment showed an increased interest in politics, they also displayed a reduced understanding of local politics.

Deneen (1991) says a campaign by *The News* in Boca Raton, Florida to target readers in the 25-43 age range succeeded in boosting circulation by 4500 to 26,500 and the number of pages by 30%, though critics charged that this had come at the expense of shorter articles and more feel-good stories. A Pew-funded attempt by *The Record* in Hackensack, New Jersey to run an issues-based campaign leading up to the 1996 elections appears to have been a failure, with only one in

five readers remembering having read about the campaign and with 42% being unable to name either of the two House of Representatives candidates (Childs, 1997; Diamond, 1997). Readers were also no more likely to vote than others in *The Record*'s circulation area. Allegations later flew that Pew delayed releasing the results and tried to explain them away as the result of candidates' malignant personal campaigning (Diamond, 1997).

Perhaps one of the most recent generally acknowledged public journalism failures occurred at a Chicago television station, CBS affiliate WBBM (Hickey, 2001; Potter, 2000). The station decided in 2000 to dump its traditional news diet of crime, disasters, sports, celebrity stories, lifestyle features and health scare pieces in favour of a no-frills, more old-fashioned approach. Its new round of stories included racial profiling by police and controls placed on a dangerous insecticide. Ratings initially climbed a little, but they quickly dropped and within nine months the project was ended by new management.

Following the *Wisconsin State Journal*'s 'We The People' campaign, Denton and Thorson (1998) found that 19% of potential voters said the coverage had made them more likely to vote, though a second survey after the 1994 election saw this figure drop to 11%. Friedland et al. (1998) noted that this campaign tended to reach only an "activist core" of 15-20% of citizens. Venables (2001), in his study of an election-based public journalism project in New Zealand, found likewise that those attending public meetings were more educated and politically active than the general population.

A study of 1996 coverage by two Seattle newspapers showed very little difference in terms of public journalism "story tendencies" between the 1996 *Seattle Times*, which practised public journalism, and the pre-public journalism *Seattle Times* of 1980 or the conventional 1996 *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (Blazier & Lemert, 2000). Compared with the 1980 *Seattle Times*, both the 1996 *Seattle Times* and the 1996 *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* carried significantly more locally-written stories, cited citizen sources more often in stories, and covered issues more thematically rather than episodically. While the *Seattle Times* of 1996 differed markedly from its 1980 predecessor in terms of numerous tendencies, similar differences were found between the 1980 *Seattle Times* and the 1996 *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. The only significant difference identified was that the public journalism-inspired *Seattle Times* tended to have more stories seen as providing mobilising information, such as phone numbers and times of meetings. The authors found that the 1996 *Seattle Times* provided more mobilising information than both the same paper of 16 years before and the conventional paper.

Comparing coverage of homelessness in the public journalism practising *Charlotte Observer* in North Carolina with the traditionalist *Indianapolis Star*, Moscowitz (2002) found the *Observer* was more likely to discuss solutions in its stories than the *Star* (97.9% as against 87.2%). He also found the former was more likely to include mobilising information in its stories than its conventional counterpart (66% of stories versus 46.8%). However, Moscowitz noted that public journalism coverage was not necessarily that different given that mobilising information was present in nearly half the *Indianapolis Star*'s items about homelessness.

McMillan et al. (1998), in their comparison of state gubernatorial election coverage of the Wichita *Eagle*, an early user of public journalism, with the conventional Topeka *Capital-Journal* over a 12-year period (1986, 1990 and 1994), found that the *Eagle* showed a stronger trend towards using mobilising information (from 9.2% to 12.3% to 27.3%) than the *Capital-Journal* (12.5%, 13% and 4.3% respectively).

Public journalism research has asked whether media using public journalism techniques have displayed any differences in terms of basic newsroom processes, with mixed results. Bare's (1998) study into journalists' attitudes at the Wichita *Eagle* concluded that after years of public journalism activities the paper's staff had a higher commitment to values associated with public journalism than staff at papers without experience of public journalism. However, staff at the traditional papers also showed significant commitment to the same values.

Research suggests that journalists' commitment to objectivity remains as strong on newspapers practising public journalism as on those that have shied away from the new approach. Gade et al. (1998) found that journalists tend to mix traditional libertarian values with ideas of social responsibility associated with public journalism. Arant and Meyer (1998) suggest that journalists on daily newspapers tend to support public journalism only as long as it does not depart from the traditional view of objectivity. Davis Merritt, formerly editor of the Wichita *Eagle*, has repeatedly called for public journalism principles to be incorporated into daily news journalism practices (1995a, 1996b). However, at the same time he has consistently rejected the activist, solutions-seeking line of some public journalism experiments, in the process re-affirming his commitment to objectivity (Merritt, 1995a, 1995b, 1996a, 1996b, 1998; Merritt & McMasters, 1996; Rosen, 1999a).

There is some evidence in the literature to suggest that public journalism does lead the news media to include more non-elite sources in their stories, but results are generally mixed. A study by Louisiana State University into the content of television entries for a public journalism award paints a highly encouraging picture of the benefits of public journalism (Kurpius, 2002).

Researchers found that citizen sources were used more often and more prominently in the public journalism items than is normally the case in the media. Women were more often used as sources than in traditional stories. Ethnic minority sources were used more than their proportion of the population would suggest. On the down side, the proportion of female sources was still below their percentage of the population, while it was clear that public journalism reporters still tended to favour sources from their own ethnic group.

Moscowitz (2002), in the study of coverage of homelessness cited above, found that the *Charlotte Observer*, a prominent user of public journalism techniques, used fewer official sources (18.2% as against 29.5%) and more volunteer sources (28% versus 19%) than the traditional *Indianapolis Star*. Zoch and Van Slyke Turk's (1998) longitudinal research into southern United States daily newspaper coverage from 1986-96, found that the *Observer* used more non-official sources over the period (nearly 20%) than two papers that did not use public journalism techniques. Likewise, it made more use of female sources (28.1%, as against 18.8% and 13.6% for the other papers).

Other research has indicated more complex and less encouraging results. Riede (1996, as cited in Massey, 1998), in a study of the Wichita *Eagle*'s often referred to People Project, notes that the public journalism newspaper still relied on official sources. In a study comparing the *Eagle*'s coverage of the 1986, 1990 and 1994 state gubernatorial election campaigns with that of the traditional Topeka *Capital-Journal*, McMillan et al. (1998) found no evidence for increased use of non-elite sources. Worse, the researchers found that the traditional paper used more non-elite sources than the *Eagle*, with the *Eagle* actually using fewer non-elites than it had before taking up public journalism in 1990.

Massey (1999) found that the use of female sources increased in a Florida public journalism newspaper, the *Tallahassee Democrat*, but the rise was marginal and confined to stories written by female reporters. Male sources still dominated. Overall, women gained neither a more frequent nor a more direct news voice (through direct quotation) as a result of public journalism. Worse, says Massey, women's indirect voice, as measured by partial quotes and paraphrased comments, actually reduced with public journalism. Elsewhere, Massey (1998) found that while non-elite sources had numerical parity with elites on the *Tallahassee Democrat*, the frequency of their mention and its directness (through direct quotation) showed little change from when the paper had used traditional coverage models. Public journalism appeared to mean the newspaper merely gave a lower profile to elites. Massey concluded that one could ask whether readers, the intended beneficiaries of public journalism, would have noticed any difference.

The above mixed results for the differences contained in public journalism assisted coverage were mirrored in Blazier and Lemert's (2000) study described earlier which compared public journalism "story tendencies" in the *Seattle Times* of 1996 with its pre-public journalism self (from 1980) and the conventional *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* from 1996. Both 1996 newspapers cited citizen sources more often in stories than did the 1980 *Seattle Times*.

Lee (2001) found that a public journalism newspaper used many more elite sources than non-elites. However, in terms of story actors (those who featured as part of a story rather than just as sources) non-elites prevailed in both the public journalism and traditional papers surveyed. The author also found that where non-elite actors featured they were often accompanied by elite sources, typically in crime stories where the non-elite actors were criminals and the elite sources police officers.

Haas (2001), considering the race relations public journalism experiment at the Akron *Beacon-Journal* in 1993, noted that more residents were cited as sources than university professors and officials combined. Residents' views also appeared more in direct quotes (a commonly accepted sign of prominence and authority) than the more elite sources. However, on taking a closer look Haas concludes that a key part of the public journalism puzzle is missing. While experts were quoted as giving abstract opinions on the causes and consequences of the city's racial problems, residents' quotes tended to be in the form of personalised accounts of events and experiences. The residents' views were offered without social or political context, while the experts quoted offered opinions devoid of empirical research results directly applicable to the city concerned. In short, Haas concludes, two separate conversations were going on – one among experts, the other among residents. The type of discussion sought by public journalism theorists, the creation of a Habermasian public sphere or a Yankelovichian dialogue, simply did not happen.

Overall, the literature suggests that public journalism's effect on traditional news selection and sourcing processes has been limited. A few American newspapers appear to have developed a different newsroom ethos from traditional newspapers, but there is no evidence to suggest that journalists on such newspapers have moved away from the principle of objectivity that underscores traditional news selection practices. Content analysis suggests there is some evidence that newspapers practising public journalism frame stories differently (as discussed above and in Chapter Four), but very little of this work has been done. Results presented in this chapter and the next suggest that there is some evidence for non-elite sources having a greater likelihood of getting a voice on a newspaper practising public journalism, but no consistent trend has been demonstrated in the literature.

Near the start of this section, Meyer (1998) was cited as saying one challenge for those wanting to evaluate public journalism is being able to clearly say what it is and how it is supposed to differ from traditional journalism. Section 3.6 below explores the contested definitions of public journalism.

3.6 Defining public journalism

A central problem faced by scholars attempting to determine the success or otherwise of public journalism projects is the absence of a clear definition of the term (Arant & Meyer, 1998; Gade et al. 1998; Glasser & Craft, 1996; Haas, 1999a, 1999b, 2000; Hippocrates & Tickle, 1999; McGregor et al. 1998, 1999; Merritt & McMasters, 1996; Meyer, 1998; Richards, 2000; Venables, 2001; Voakes, 1999; Whitehouse & Clapp, 2000). The absence of a clear definition allows critics free reign to either attack public journalism when they see something they do not like in an experiment, or to claim that they are already practising public journalism when they see something they do like.

Rosen defines public journalism in numerous ways, which does not help. Originally he identified three aspects to the new approach to journalism: an argument about the role of the media; a set of practices; and a movement of people of institutions (1995; also see Merritt & Rosen, 1998). In 1999 Rosen spoke of public journalism as taking five forms: an argument about what the press should be doing; an experiment in communities; a movement of journalists and academics; a debate about itself; and an adventure looking for a new press ethic. He described public journalism variously as “a climate of mind” (1999a, p. 263), “a style of commitment” (p. 264), “a disturbance in the hierarchy of influence” (p. 265), “a passage between journalism and a broader current of reform” (p. 266), and “an intersection between press and academy” (p. 268). Elsewhere, Rosen (1995) says public journalism should be left to become whatever journalists want it to be. Carey, who eloquently states the problem of public disengagement from political life, offers no clearer a view of what the news media need to do to help re-engage the public, calling simply for a journalism of “conversation” rather than “information” (Boylan, 1991; Carey, 1993; Haas, 1999a, 1999b).

Merritt’s definition, to reiterate, holds that the viability of public life and journalism are bound together, journalism should abandon its detachment from life, and journalists should seek to re-engage people in civic life (Merritt & Rosen, 1998). Asked during a debate to define public journalism Merritt replied that this was hard to do and that he preferred to think of public journalism as “an attitude; a state of mind in which we do journalism in a way calculated to re-engage people in public life” (Merritt & McMasters, 1996, p. 173). In the same debate with Paul McMasters, Merritt agreed with his opponent on many points, offering up more criticisms of

specific things done in the name of public journalism than supporting comments. Throughout his work Merritt displays a strong attachment to traditional news media values, declining to abandon the concept of objectivity and attacking public journalism projects that, in his view, cross the line into advocacy or solutions reporting (Merritt, 1995a, 1995b, 1996a, 1996b, 1998; Merritt & McMasters, 1996; Rosen, 1999a). Merritt argues that objectivity and values are not incompatible in journalism and holds Lippmann's commitment to objectivity to be an important step in the history of the profession.

Just how much Merritt's idea of public journalism represents a significant change in how the news media do their job is unclear. He says public journalism requires a "cultural change of a fundamental nature" in journalism, but also argues that it simply adds to the current job description of a journalist (1998, p. xii). Public journalism, Merritt (1998) says, is not about journalists carrying out specific activities, but is rather about stimulating debate – about "purposefulness, not technique" (p. 121). It could be suggested that in reality the change required is far from revolutionary and represents more a shift in *why* the media cover stories and *how* they cover them rather than in *what* they choose to cover. Another change appears to be in *how* journalists feel about their work. Merritt clearly felt much better about being a journalist once he started talking about his job in terms of public journalism.

In order to feel good about being a journalist, however, Merritt had to deal with the vexed question of journalists' belief that they can look at the world objectively, that is, with disinterest. While Merritt argued, like Rosen, that journalists were part of the world and should recognise that, he could not bring himself to reject the concept of objectivity as unequivocally as did Rosen (1993c). In order to confirm that journalists were not separate from the world, but could still be objective, Merritt drew a distinction between objectivity and detachment (1995a, 1995b; Merritt & Rosen, 1998). It is a contention of this thesis that in doing this Merritt did what a lot of other editors have since done, which is try to do journalism differently using public journalism techniques and language without altering the fundamental structure of media processes.

3.7 Conclusion

Public journalism has become perhaps the most common American response to the media-political malaise, which is seen as undermining democracy. The literature suggests that use of public journalism techniques has produced some differences in news media processes and coverage in the United States, but the results have been mixed and inconsistent. The question to ask now is to what extent countries outside the United States have turned to public journalism in order to improve the media's contribution to democratic life. Given the similarity of the democratic problems faced by countries outside the United States, and the similarity of some of the discussion about the media's role/responsibility, one could expect that the media might have considered using public journalism techniques. The discussion in Chapter Four will be limited to Australia and New Zealand.

Chapter Four
Public journalism practice in New Zealand and Australia

It is clear from the two previous chapters that there has been widespread debate among theorists and scholars about the extent and causes of democratic decline in the United States and other democracies. In the United States, public journalism has emerged, at least in the eyes of its proponents, as an exciting means of reconnecting the news media with their political/democratic responsibilities. Have the techniques associated with public journalism travelled outside American borders? Looking at Britain, Australia and New Zealand, the answer to this question is no, yes and yes.

Literature searches show no references to public journalism experiments in Britain. There is evidence of the use of public participatory techniques in the British media that are similar to those used in American public journalism experiments, for example having a phone-in line on a television election programme through which some members of the public got the chance to put their questions to candidates (Davis, 2000). However, there is no evidence of systematic use of public journalism campaigns to match those used in the United States. The situation is different in Australia and New Zealand, with the former hosting a substantial experiment based around the issue of race relations and the latter hosting a number of experiments based around elections. These projects, detailed below, show many of the hallmarks of American public journalism techniques.

4.1 Public journalism in Australia

'Public Journalism: Public Participation and Australian Public Policy, Connecting to Community Attitudes' is a suitably large name for the major undertaking that constituted Australia's first official public journalism campaign. The project, funded by the media industry, government and community groups, sought to cover the country's race relations debate in a more sustained way (Hippocrates, 1998). Hippocrates (1998, 1999) says the Australian media typically cover race relations issues such as Aboriginal land rights and Asian immigration in a piecemeal fashion, with adversarial debates and 30-second television items not being conducive to the public gaining any greater understanding of the subject matter. Hippocrates says race relations was chosen as the campaign topic because of its status as "the major emerging socio-political issue in Australia" (1999, p. 70). This was especially true in Queensland where Pauline Hanson's anti-immigration One Nation Party had gained a foothold.

The two-year project, which began in 1998, had two parts: first the metropolitan *The Courier-Mail* segment in Queensland; then the Rural Press-Fairfax segment run among regional newspapers in neighbouring New South Wales (Hippocrates, 1998, 1999; Hippocrates & Tickle, 1999). Three forums were held over three months – two in regional areas and one in Brisbane – with each being preceded by a three-week period of intense newspaper coverage and followed by an eight-page tabloid-sized insert. Some 25 staff at *The Courier-Mail* were involved, including reporters, photographers and editors. Community groups helped organise the forums. Hippocrates (1998, 1999) says the newspaper attempted to get the issues across in a variety of ways: standard event and opinion-based news stories; opinion pieces from several people; human interest stories; in-depth feature articles on specific issues; publishing relevant letters to the editor; promoting the fora themselves; and setting up a phone call-in line for reader feedback, some of which was published in the paper. Staff were briefed on the history of public journalism by journalism academics from two universities involved in the project. Romano (1999) says the first forum – held on June 1, 1998 – was preceded by over 400 column centimetres of story space, with the follow-up tabloid insert featuring edited versions of the six speeches delivered, seven feature articles and a commentary on the forum. The second forum, on September 19, 1998, focused on immigration, featuring four speakers from across the spectrum of opinions. A telephone "hotline" was set up to canvas public views on immigration, with some public comments being run in news stories. *The Courier-Mail* ran over 900 column centimetres worth of stories before the second forum, with another eight-page tabloid insert following (Romano, 1999). Some 600 people attended the first two forums (Hippocrates, 1999; Romano, 1999).

The Australian public journalism project was directly influenced by American models, specifically the Akron *Beacon-Journal*'s 1994 A Question of Colour campaign, which eventually saw some 10,000 people in the Ohio city become actively involved in race relations projects (Hippocrates, 1998, Hippocrates & Tickle, 1999; Romano, 1999). Cratis Hippocrates, one of the academics involved from Queensland University of Technology, refers in his writings about the project to the *Charlotte Observer* and *Virginian-Pilot* as well as to public journalism luminaries Merritt, Rosen, Carey and Batten (Hippocrates, 1998, 1999; Hippocrates & Tickle, 1999). Romano (1999) acknowledges Rosen, Merritt and Carey.

One of the great strengths of the Australian project was that it brought together academics, community groups and news media. As the academics concerned were involved from the start, they were able to plan proper evaluations of the campaign. At the start of the project Hippocrates (1998) said evaluation of the campaign's effects would be available through a number of means: analysis of letters to the editor and the call-in line comments; audience

surveys during the forums with focus groups afterwards; analysis of editorial coverage; interviews with the journalists involved; monitoring of newspaper circulation; and monitoring the level of inquiries to the community groups involved. Researchers concluded that there was no attributable increase in newspaper circulation following the forums, though Romano (1999) hypothesised that there might have been increased reader satisfaction. Romano felt *The Courier-Mail*'s coverage of the race relations/immigration debate was significantly better than the rest of the media's, avoiding the traditionally objective "he said, she said" approach. Hippocrates reports that the community agencies involved experienced significant numbers of calls following *The Courier-Mail*'s coverage, though some of these calls were critical (1998; Hippocrates & Tickle, 1999). The paper won major media awards for its coverage in two consecutive years (Romano, 1999, 2001).

Academics with an interest in public journalism have carried out a number of evaluations of the Australian project. Perhaps Romano's main contribution to research on the project has been her detailed interviews with the journalists who took part. Romano (2001) talked to nine of 13 journalists who contributed written, by-lined stories to the project coverage, plus a tenth reporter and *The Courier-Mail*'s editor. The interviews showed that the senior staff generally knew more about public journalism, at least at the start of the project. Some interviewees saw public journalism as revitalising readership of newspapers and helping educate journalists about their communities. One said it increased journalists' morale at the paper and sense of ownership of it. However, Romano also found that apart from senior staff involved, most had little conception of what public journalism was. Most also became involved after being asked to help, not because they were drawn to the project. She found little evidence to suggest that more than a few of the journalists felt they had grown professionally as a result of their involvement. Romano concluded that:

> Public journalism was a philosophy that many of the participating P.J. Project journalists either did not fully understand or were not fully committed to. It was thus unsurprising that they continued to run by the same routines that suit big-city newspaper production schedules but were not necessarily conducive towards building networks in the community (p. 58).

However, Romano says the project does suggest that helping younger journalists make fundamental connections with local communities by focusing on a single issue for a period of weeks may help their development as reporters.

The race relations project also came in for some criticism from the community groups involved. Romano (1999) notes that the first forum became gender skewed as female speakers withdrew,

while the immigration forum was unable to attract the desired political leaders. Follow-up focus groups were critical of what some saw as the small number of Aboriginal speakers and wanted more time for discussion. Some people found the polarised immigration views of some forum participants obstructive.

Romano (1999, 2001) also highlights a criticism that cuts to the heart of the debate about public journalism – the degree to which the ordinary person's voice is heard. Speakers during the Queensland forums and in the related news stories tended to be politicians and religious or community group leaders. While the use of community group voices represented a welcome change from the regular news sources, that is businesspeople, politicians and bureaucrats, this really only resulted in the creation of "an alternative set of 'usual suspects'" (2001, p. 56). Tickle and Hippocrates (1998) say there was a dearth of community and indigenous voices early on in the project, but this improved as time went on.

Ewart (2002) analysed the project on the basis that public journalism should provide ordinary people with greater access to the public sphere, in this case women and indigenous Australians. The evidence that this had occurred would be found in the sources of information used in the project's news coverage. Ewart found that of 62 sources cited in one group of 29 news stories, 48 were elite, suggesting that the journalists involved "did not address conventional journalism's reliance on authority figures and hence did not alter this group's dominance and control of the news" (2002, p. 72). Men also dominated the list of sources used, with 40 of the 48 elite sources being men. Women made up almost all of the 14 non-elite sources used. Measuring the use of indigenous sources, Ewart found that only five of the elite sources were indigenous, while 10 of the non-elites fell into that category. She concludes that *The Courier-Mail* experiment gave about the same level of exposure to Aboriginal speakers as is normally the case in Australian media coverage. Ewart's interviews with five of the journalists involved show that the reporters either thought they already used sufficient indigenous sources or believed the project increased the number of such voices in the newspaper. Overall the project failed to bring women and indigenous Australians into the public sphere.

Hippocrates points to another salient issue in the public journalism debate – the degree to which public journalism changes the basic newsroom processes and behaviours that underpin mainstream journalism. Editing processes did not change, and hence project stories were subject to the same regime as other items. Headlines did not always reflect the sensitivities of the debate, while stories were sometimes cut by removing individual speakers' contributions, causing a few participants to wonder why they had taken part (Tickle & Hippocrates, 1998). Hippocrates (1998, 1999) says this application of traditional news systems created tension with

the community groups involved, though they were at the same time happy with the overall coverage given to the issues. Hippocrates (1998) says the project has thrown into relief a key question in public journalism – the contrast between the community's call for journalists to listen to its diverse voices, and the media's power to shape the community agenda through their news selection and production processes. Romano (2001) says public involvement in the Queensland project was limited from the start, with journalists selecting the race relations topic and deciding the content of published stories. The needs of the production line meant that much of the material for the post-forum tabloid inserts had to be prepared ahead of time, which meant actual participants' views had less of an impact (Romano, 1999).

As to the future prospects of public journalism in Australia, Romano (1999) says public journalism may be a useful way of bringing the Australian people back into the political arena and back to the media. The public have disengaged, she argues, because of the media's habit of reducing complex issues to polarised debates and their failure to tell people how they can influence policy. This carries a clear danger for the health of the nation's political life. Hippocrates (1998) is surprised that Australia has not adopted American public journalism models in a more widespread fashion given the similar state of affairs in the two countries: flagging newspaper circulations; disjunction between communities and the media; and falling democratic participation and interest in public affairs. Part of the problem may be that editors typically believe that they are already doing public journalism (Hippocrates, 1998, 1999; Hippocrates & Tickle, 1999). Apart from the Queensland-New South Wales project, public journalism in Australia is almost non-existent. Romano (2001) suggests the use of American-style public journalism techniques demonstrates the cultural closeness of that nation and Australia, given that Australia's Asian neighbours have been using similar community-focused strategies for decades under the title of "developmentalist journalism" (p. 47).

Richards (2000) does not know how public journalism will fare in Australia as there is no freedom of press culture and a shortage of university-trained reporters relative to the United States. He also says while some say public journalism is overdue, others claim it is driven by management in an effort to re-assert the newspaper medium and satisfy financial goals. Richards actually doubts whether at the end of the day public journalism is really that different from the way at least some Australian journalists have traditionally done their jobs. He asks whether *The Courier-Mail* has really changed the way it practices journalism.

4.2 Public journalism in New Zealand

New Zealand newspapers took to public journalism a couple of years earlier than their Australian counterparts. Furthermore, the techniques associated with public journalism have become more widespread in New Zealand, with at least two of the country's small number of metropolitan daily newspapers using public journalism, along with a couple of provincial dailies and at least one free community newspaper. As Venables (2001) notes, a number of other newspaper projects could possibly be described as public journalism, though the label has not been used by the publications concerned. Also in contrast with Australia, New Zealand public journalism has focused on the classic Wichita *Eagle*-style election coverage rather than issues like race relations and immigration. Evaluative work has been done on most of the New Zealand projects from a number of different angles – content analysis, interviews with journalists, analysis of sources used, and questionnaires completed by public participants. The definitive work to date on public journalism in New Zealand has been done by a team of researchers from Massey University, led by Professor Judy McGregor. Their work began soon after editors on three of Rupert Murdoch's New Zealand dailies decided to change the way they covered elections in 1996.

In that year, the editors of *The Press*, a metropolitan daily in Christchurch, the *Waikato Times*, the country's largest circulation provincial daily in Hamilton, and the *Evening Standard*, a provincial daily in Palmerston North, decided, completely independently of each other, to change their election campaign strategies (McGregor et al. 1998). Interviews with senior editorial staff on the three newspapers about their adoption of public journalism techniques allowed the McGregor research team to gain an insight into the motives for adopting public journalism and the benefits the editorial staff saw accruing from public journalism. These included taking control of the electoral agenda away from candidates and feeling that the newspapers had become closer to their readers. The editors of the newspapers were conscious of the criticism of media performance and of the need to provide the public with a greater understanding of how to vote under the new, proportional electoral system used for the first time in 1996.

The senior staff interviewed on *The Press*, the *Evening Standard* and the *Waikato Times* were motivated by a combination of exposure to American public journalism techniques, frustration at politicians' attempts to control election campaign coverage, and a desire to do a good job for citizens, who were voting for the first time under the country's new Mixed Member Proportional electoral system, having rejected the old First-Past-the-Post system (McGregor et al. 1998, 1999). The papers decided to abandon the New Zealand tradition of reporters following candidates "on the bus" as they moved between photo opportunities and public

meetings, in favour of handing the campaign over to the priorities of the voters (McGregor et al. 1998). Readers were polled in order to identify the most important issues of the campaign so that these could be put to candidates. Reader panels, household forums and public meetings were organised with the same purpose in mind. One paper even labelled the project 'Operation Democracy' (McGregor et al. 1999, 2002), while another wrote to candidates to tell them that the rules were changing (McGregor et al. 1998). The response from politicians was hostile, though the Electoral Commission, responsible for overseeing the electoral system, applauded the initiatives (McGregor et al. 1998).

The three daily papers have continued to use public journalism techniques in more recent elections, though in a haphazard fashion (McGregor et al. 1999; Venables, 2001), with anecdotal evidence suggesting their commitment is affected by cost, staffing and/or changes in editorial leadership positions. The now defunct *City Voice* weekly newspaper, once described as "Wellington's living public journalism experiment", ran a standard public journalism project leading up to the 1999 general election (McGregor et al. 2002; Venables, 2001). Eligible voters were polled to identify a series of major issues, which then formed the topics of a series of candidates' meetings. Candidates or party representatives were given an equal amount of time to state their policies on the issue being discussed at each meeting and the floor was then opened for questions. *City Voice* previewed each meeting with a news story and followed up on each occasion with a report of proceedings.

During the 2001 local body elections, a number of daily newspapers ran public journalism projects. The *Waikato Times* and *The Press* used the tried and true approaches detailed above, the former still using its 'Operation Democracy' slogan (McGregor et al. 2002). However, they were now joined by Wellington's *The Evening Post*, a Murdoch paper led by former *Waikato Times* editor Tim Pankhurst, and the Dunedin-based independent *Otago Daily Times*. *The Evening Post* launched its project, entitled 'Your Call', with an editorial explaining the basic principles of public journalism (McGregor et al. 2002; Venables, 2002). Voters were surveyed and the issues they identified became the subjects of a series of background articles in the paper. Wellington mayoral candidates were then asked to state their policies on those issues. The newspaper ensured that during the month or so of the campaign candidates were given exactly the same amount of space in which to state their opinions. The paper's coverage culminated in a public meeting with the Wellington mayoral candidates. The *Otago Daily Times* organised meetings where voters got a chance to assess candidates' responses to issues-based questions (McGregor et al. 2002).

It is clear that all these campaigns are election-based. Non-election campaigns have taken place, though without the public journalism label being applied. *The Evening Post* used both its editorial columns and news pages to champion a number of community-focused initiatives in the capital before the paper was merged with *The Dominion* in 2002 (Venables, 2001, 2002). The paper pressured the government to site the region's planned new hospital in the capital, and also championed the construction of a new highway option north of Wellington. Before its demise, the paper was quick to support any projects or achievements that boosted Wellington's economic prospects, such as Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings trilogy. None of these projects was referred to by the paper as public journalism, but they all bear some resemblance to the solutions journalism that has come to characterise some public journalism experiments. A similar project has occurred in the country's southernmost city, Invercargill, where the *Southland Times* has thrown itself behind a successful city-wide campaign to promote the region.

It may be the case in New Zealand that provincial daily newspapers are actually engaging in emerging public journalism-style initiatives much more often than is realised. They are doing so without referring to, or even having been exposed to, public journalism theory. It should be remembered that some of the early American public journalism newspapers, for example the *State* in Columbia, South Carolina and the *Ledger-Enquirer* in Columbus, Georgia, changed their news priorities to reflect issues of central concern to the public before anyone told them about public journalism. A recent New Zealand example of what we might call "proto-public journalism" (public journalism without a coherent theoretical basis) was an attempt by the *Wanganui Chronicle* to boost the local community by focusing on the positive aspects of living there. In a front page editorial on September 21, 2002, editor John Maslin called on locals to realise how lucky they were to live in the city on the Whanganui River:

> Wanganui's the place where gridlock is six cars backed up at the traffic lights. It's where you [can] duck home at midday, grab a bite to eat and take the dog for a walk and still be back at work within the hour. Our sports facilities are admired internationally, we've got world-class skifields a little more than an hour up the road and beaches, rivers and lakes are our boundaries. We're spoilt for educational options and housing is affordable (Maslin, 2002).

Maslin asked citizens to make an "attitude adjustment", to stand up and tell the world that Wanganui-ites are proud of where they live. In keeping with this approach, the editorial announced the launch of a series of articles featuring locals talking about why they love Wanganui. One of the issues for New Zealand researchers is to decide exactly what constitutes public journalism. Is the *Wanganui Chronicle*'s effort public journalism? If not, why not?

More recently, in early 2005 *The Dominion Post* began a series called 'In The Neighbourhood' in which the paper examined complaints about delays in dealing with local problems. In each instalment a problem was backgrounded and the relevant local authority given an opportunity to say what was being done about it. Contact details for the local authority were provided and readers encouraged to complain. The paper promoted the series as follows:

> Got something broken in your neighbourhood and fed up with waiting for it to be fixed? Tired of making endless telephone calls and writing complaining letters and getting nowhere? We are going to take action and get things moving in your neighbourhood. Help us put the hard word on the bureaucrats and the politicians, and shake them up. Become a community activist and tell us if there's something broken in your neighbourhood that you want fixed. We'll highlight your gripes every week (*The Dominion Post*, June 6, 2005, p. A2).

The issues highlighted included residents waiting three years for damaged paving stones to be replaced as they were a danger to elderly people. In a similar grassroots vein were complaints about delays in roading projects, and colourful sludge in the gutters of one suburb. Is this public journalism? It certainly asks ordinary people to identify the issues and become involved, but is that enough?

The New Zealand newspapers which have practised public journalism over the past several years have tended to consider their efforts to be a success. McGregor et al.'s research uncovered a high degree of enthusiasm among some journalists for the new approach in 1996, with reporters feeling they had become closer to readers and had provided the public with quality information (1998, 1999). They suggest this reaction could serve as an antidote to the political cynicism which has infected journalists' views of politics. However, journalists feeling better about their jobs is not the real goal of public journalism:

> The widespread feel-good factor among editorial staff using public journalism is seductive, but it is dangerous if journalistic enthusiasm is the only measure.(McGregor et al. 1999, p. 66).

4.3 Evaluation of public journalism in New Zealand

What is missing consistently from New Zealand's public journalism projects is the kind of formal evaluation carried out in Australia where the race relations project operated as a virtual joint venture between industry and academe. Evaluations have been done in New Zealand, but always by academics interested in public journalism, not by the media themselves. Most of the New Zealand evaluations have been carried out by Judy McGregor's Massey University group, which has been concerned with trying to find out whether public journalism "works" and

whether it provides different coverage than newspapers using more traditional methods. This team, whose work constitutes the core studies to date in New Zealand public journalism, interviewed senior journalists on the target newspapers and also analysed the framing of stories. The goal was to identify how the newspapers were responding to public journalism and whether using public journalism techniques led to different news coverage.

McGregor et al. carried out the first New Zealand analysis of public journalism, based on daily newspapers' coverage of the 1996 General Election (October to November). They first examined the differences between coverage of papers practising public journalism and those using traditional methods, based on a sample of 941 stories from seven newspapers (1999). The sample comprised three newspapers using public journalism (the *Evening Standard*, *The Press* and the *Waikato Times*) and four taking a traditional approach (*The Dominion*, *The Evening Post*, the *New Zealand Herald*, and the *Otago Daily Times*). Next, McGregor et al. compared this coverage of the 1996 election with that of the previous one in 1993 (2000), which occurred before public journalism came to New Zealand. This second study was based on a total sample of 1938 stories from the seven dailies listed above. The sample included the original 941 stories from 1996 plus 997 from 1993.

McGregor et al. (1999) coded stories in terms of whether or not they mentioned campaign issues from a list of 46 provided. McGregor et al. then used problematic situation categories based on Edelstein's (1989) classifications. Each campaign issue was coded in terms of whether or not it was defined with reference to problematical situations. Those dealing with problematical situations were then coded in terms of which of the 11 types of problematical situation they focused on most: loss of value (societal or individual), need for value (societal or individual), conflict (societal or individual), an indeterminate situation where uncertainty is associated with the problem, interruption of progress towards a goal, steps toward solutions, denial of a problematic situation and consequences of earlier solutions.

McGregor et al. found that a higher percentage of public journalism papers' stories (76%) dealt with problematic situations than in other papers (67.4%). The newspapers practising public journalism were "more likely to perform an interpretative role in the construction of political news" (1999, p. 73). Stories in the conventional newspapers were more likely to feature conflict (29.3% as against 5.8%) and the loss of value (27.7% as against 21.2%) than those in the public journalism papers. Likewise, public journalism papers' campaign stories were more likely to feature steps towards finding solutions to problems (34% versus 15.6%) and the need for value (32% versus 14.8%) than their traditionalist colleagues.

The authors concluded:

> The results of the study also provide empirical support for those who argue that public journalism provides a different, more constructive framing of the news. The findings show clearly that campaign issues covered by newspapers committed to a public journalism model provide readers with relief from conflict-dominated political journalism (McGregor et al. 1999, p. 75).

The authors also found that:

> Public journalism stories covered policy – health, education, and economic policy. In contrast, mainstream political reportage relied on candidates, coalition politics, and economic policy. Public journalism elevated policy issues over campaign strategy (1999, p. 71).

In the later research, McGregor et al. (2000) looked at 1996 election stories in terms of whether they constituted Good news, Bad news or Neutral, as being either Hard (focused on daily news events) or Soft (focused on investigative pieces, personality stories), as having a Horse Race angle (focus on who's winning) or Non-Horse Race angle, and as being focused on the Candidates or Not on the Candidates (that is whether or not stories were personality-based). These categories reflected traditional themes in news media scholarship – the idea that news reports traditionally focus on "bad" (negative, conflict-based) news and "hard" (events-based) news, and the idea that election coverage is traditionally about who is winning and the personalities of candidates.

McGregor et al. (2000) found that the public journalism newspapers in 1996 were more likely to cover issues like health (15% of stories versus 6.4% in traditionalist papers), education and social welfare (9.6% and 6.2% respectively as against barely rating in traditionalist papers for all three categories). Conventional newspapers focused more on the electoral candidates (11.6% versus 5.8%), coalition politics (10.1% versus 6.5%) and political polling (7.6% as against barely rating in the public journalism newspapers). Regarding the emphasis contained in stories, public journalism papers were more likely to emphasise neutral news (86.7% versus 68%) while traditional papers placed more emphasis on bad news (23.3% of stories versus 8.9% in public journalism papers). Hard news (emphasised in 85.2% of stories versus 30.8%), focusing on candidates (22.8% versus 7.7%) and emphasising the political horse race (16.8% versus 4.4%) dominated the traditionalist papers, while soft news (40.7% versus 9.9%), and a mixture of soft and hard news (22% versus 4.3%) dominated in the public journalism newspapers.

It should be noted that while McGregor et al. (2000) concluded that public journalism clearly led to differences in story framing, they recognised that public journalism in New Zealand was still very much a "special events model" and there was a long way to go before the conventional style of political reporting was significantly undermined (McGregor et al. 2000, p. 145).

Ewart (2000), in a piece of research that would be repeated as part of the evaluation of the Australian race relations experiment, asked whether or not women fared better as sources under the 1996 New Zealand public journalism model than in conventional newspapers. Ewart identified 633 elite sources and 805 non-elites in *The Press*' election coverage, with 63% of the former and 44% of the latter being male. The female figures were 16% and 36% respectively (the remainder were classed as unidentified). Ewart says overall *The Press*' campaign was a success because it succeeded in bringing in more diverse sources of information. However, women were clearly still under-represented as sources in news stories, a situation that would need to be addressed in future public journalism projects. Ewart notes that as the election got closer, the elite sources started to take over the newspaper's pages, meaning that women started to disappear in more dramatic fashion. She suggests the problem lay with male reporters and their unenlightened sourcing policies.

Venables (2001) circulated a questionnaire among those who attended the issues-based candidates' meetings which formed part of the 1999 *City Voice* public journalism election project. The goal was to find out what those who attended thought about the meetings and also what sort of people they were. It became apparent that those attending the meetings were in no way representative even of the well-to-do Wellington Central electorate: 82% had a degree or better in terms of education; 60% were aged 40 or over; more than half had voted in all of the previous six elections; and nearly 80% were left or centre-left voters. Furthermore, while the respondents were heavily in favour of attending similar meetings in the future, it was by no means clear that they would do so because such meetings helped them decide how to vote. Just over half of those surveyed said the meetings were "useful" or better in helping them vote, but about a third said they were "no help at all". Given that *City Voice*'s editor, Simon Collins, had wanted to attract undecided voters and help them make up their minds, these results tend to suggest that the meeting attendees were either not in that category, or what was on offer was not enough. Either way, *City Voice* had no mechanism for determining whether or not its project was a success since no evaluation mechanism had been set up.

Venables (2001) laments the fact that the New Zealand media have not seen fit to properly evaluate its public journalism performance. McGregor et al. (2000), writing about the 1996

experiments, suggest this lack of post-mortems tells us something important about the attitude of the country's media towards public journalism:

> They (the journalists) felt public journalism enhanced editorial autonomy and vindicated the press's fourth estate mandate. But none of the three newspapers formally evaluated its use, nor do they use public journalism as a continuous feature of political reporting. In New Zealand, public journalism has been a "special events" model and has yet to be mainstreamed as a news gathering process. Its status is still experimental, despite editorial enthusiasm by those who have used public journalism (p. 145).

The authors argue that the key question about New Zealand public journalism is whether it will be adopted more widely. The fear is that traditional ways of doing journalism may be too embedded in journalistic culture to allow the new model to gain a permanent place in the mediascape, let alone become part of the daily news fabric:

> The ubiquity of news published under the dominant, conventional model of political journalism has negative implications. It suggests that old-style reporting will survive the change in New Zealand's electoral system. It may be premature to judge the news media's performance…But the results reported here are a potent reminder that the culture of conventional political journalism is deeply ingrained: so deeply ingrained, in fact, that it may largely resist the new demands made of it by proportional representation (McGregor et al. 2000, p. 145).

This chapter completes the discussion about public journalism and the background that led to its development as media theory and journalistic practice. Chapter Five will describe the methodologies adopted to examine the coverage of the 2001 Local Body Elections in New Zealand as a case study in the use of public journalism.

Chapter Five
Methodology

The challenge in evaluating public journalism lies in choosing and applying techniques that allow us to identify and analyse how public journalism is thought to differ from conventional journalism (McGregor et al. 1999). This, in many ways, sums up the approach taken in this thesis. The key question being addressed in this research is whether newspapers led by those with experience in using public journalism produced different coverage of the 2001 Local Body Elections than newspapers whose editorial leadership had no such background.

5.1 Introduction

A wide variety of techniques has been used to study the use of public journalism by newspapers and the impact it has had on news coverage. In the New Zealand and Australian contexts, interviews have been conducted with the journalists involved in public journalism campaigns (McGregor et al. 1998; Romano, 2001). Techniques for analysing the content of stories in New Zealand newspapers have been used extensively by McGregor et al. (1998, 1999, 2000). Ewart (2000) has analysed the sources used by a New Zealand newspaper that adopted public journalism techniques. In the United States context, Moscowitz (2002) has examined stories to identify mobilising information. This thesis uses a combination of interviews and a quantitative content analysis which identifies sources, mobilising information and a variety of public journalism elements in newspaper stories.

Following the example of other studies on public journalism this research compares newspapers which consciously practise public journalism techniques with those with no experience in public journalism (see Blazier & Lemert, 2000; McGregor et al. 1998, 1999, 2000; McMillan et al. 1998; Moscowitz, 2002). In order to study coverage of the 2001 Local Body Elections, six major New Zealand newspapers were selected. These were all five of the metropolitan dailies (*New Zealand Herald*, *The Dominion*, *Otago Daily Times*, *The Evening Post* and *The Press*) and the *Waikato Times*, which, while not a metropolitan daily, was at the time the country's largest provincial daily. This choice also allows some comparison with McGregor et al. (1998, 1999, 2000), who used the same six newspapers plus a seventh – the provincial *Evening Standard* in Palmerston North. As discussed below, this thesis also looked at the *Evening Standard* (in 2001 renamed the *Manawatu Standard*), but only as a test sample to check the reliability of the content analysis coding. Further details of the selected papers follow, starting with the three papers that had no experience of using public journalism.

The *New Zealand Herald* (the *Herald*) is the country's largest circulation newspaper (March 2001 circulation 209,898) based in the country's largest city – Auckland – and covers news in Auckland city plus in a number of surrounding cities (North Shore, Waitakere and Manukau) and the wider Auckland region. It is also one of the country's main media covering national politics. The *Herald* is the country's largest daily newspaper in terms of number of pages and in 2001 was the flagship of the Wilson and Horton group, which also owned a number of smaller daily newspapers. The paper had never been involved in a public journalism campaign.

The capital city's morning paper, *The Dominion*, has, since 2001, amalgamated with its sister paper in Wellington, *The Evening Post*, to form *The Dominion Post*. Both were, in 2001, owned by the Australian Murdoch-controlled group, Independent Newspapers Limited (INL), which was the country's largest media owner, accounting for nearly half of the daily newspaper circulation. They competed vigorously with each other in covering both major events in Wellington and national issues. *The Dominion*'s circulation in March 2001 was 68,454. It was a smaller paper than *The Evening Post*, having fewer pages on a typical day. *The Dominion*'s chief focus was on national politics. *The Dominion* had never conducted a public journalism campaign.

The *Otago Daily Times* (the *ODT*), located in Dunedin, south of Christchurch, had a circulation in March 2001 of 43,350. The paper, which is the country's largest independently-owned daily, considers itself to be a regional newspaper and provides extensive coverage of events in neighbouring areas such as Clutha and Central Otago. It is as large as *The Press* in terms of pages. The newspaper had not experimented with public journalism techniques.

The Evening Post (March 2001 circulation 56,484) competed with *The Dominion* in the Wellington metropolitan market until the amalgamation referred to above. It tended to focus on local and regional issues, including city councils, as well as providing updated coverage of national issues that might have featured in *The Dominion* in the morning. *The Evening Post* contained more pages than *The Dominion*, but was smaller than the *Herald*. The editor of *The Evening Post* had been involved in public journalism campaigns before 2001.

The Press (March 2001 circulation 91,003) is based in Christchurch in the central South Island. Besides covering its home city in detail it also features regional coverage of the West Coast and north of the South Island. *The Press*, which was in 2001 owned by INL, focuses its news on local Christchurch issues and issues in the wider Canterbury region. However, it also maintains staff in Wellington to provide national political coverage. *The Press* was typically a similar size

to *The Evening Post* in terms of page numbers. Both staff at *The Press* interviewed for this research had been previously involved in public journalism campaigns.

The *Waikato Times* (March 2001 circulation 40,427) was, in 2001, the country's largest provincial daily newspaper and, like three of the other papers in this study, was owned by INL. Like all provincial daily papers in New Zealand it focuses on local news and the local impact of national stories. The *Waikato Times*' area is centred on the small city of Hamilton in the Waikato region, but also covers regional areas heading north towards Auckland and south towards Rotorua. The *Waikato Times* was a similar size, in terms of pages, as *The Dominion*. Its editor, interviewed for this research, had extensive experience in implementing public journalism campaigns.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques used in this study is in line with McGregor et al. and fits in with recent scholarship around research methodology. Contemporary writers about the history of research methods often refer to a so-called "paradigm war" between quantitative and qualitative methods that arose as proponents of qualitative research reacted to the dominance of quantitative research in the 1970s (see Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2006; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Frey et al. characterised this as a struggle between a positivistic approach that applies physical science techniques to the study of human beings and a naturalistic approach that studies people in their context using qualitative techniques. The outcome of this conflict has been a greater acceptance of the idea of mixing quantitative and qualitative approaches into what Tashakkori and Teddlie call a "mixed method" research strategy.

This thesis uses both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in an attempt to answer the research questions in Chapter One and gain a fuller understanding of the differences between the election coverage of the six newspapers studied. The interviews can provide an insight into what editors and senior journalists thought they were trying to do during the 2001 elections, while the quantitative content analysis can provide a systematic description of actual newspaper coverage. To recap, the research questions are:

1. What did the editorial decision makers on the *New Zealand Herald*, *Otago Daily Times*, *The Dominion*, the *Waikato Times*, *The Press* and *The Evening Post* say they were trying to achieve through their 2001 Local Body Elections coverage and what was their assessment of the final coverage?

2. Did the editorial decision makers on the papers with experience of conducting public journalism experiments differ from other editorial leaders in their assessment of the type of coverage they were aiming for and achieved during the 2001 Local Body Elections?

3. In what way, if any, did the coverage of the 2001 Local Body Elections by papers with experience of conducting public journalism experiments differ from papers with no experience of using public journalism?

Research Question One will be explored through interviews with the editorial decision makers on the six newspapers during the 2001 Local Body Elections. Question Two will be explored by comparing the newspapers whose editorial decision makers had experience of public journalism with those whose newspapers had no such experience, again drawing on the interviews. Question Three will be explored through content analysis, examining a series of factors previously associated with public journalism.

Turning now to the methodologies adopted for this research, the interviews will be dealt with first then the various aspects of the content analysis will be discussed.

5.2 Interviews with editorial decision makers

The researcher sought to interview those primarily responsible for organising and executing coverage of the 2001 Local Body Elections on the six newspapers. This involved approaching, first, each newspaper's editor and identifying in each case the best group of people to interview. The final interview cohort comprised a collection of editors, news managers and senior reporters responsible for covering local government.

5.2.1 Interviews as a methodology

Contemporary discussions among scholars about interviewing indicate that it is a methodology with significant strengths. Seidman (2006) says interviews give participants a chance to create their own stories and make sense of their experiences. This method "provides access to the context of people's behaviour and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behaviour" (p. 10). Tashakkori and Teddlie identify the "power" of interviewing as allowing the researcher to ask for clarification, to explain questions to ensure understanding and to appreciate things that have not previously been noted (1998, p. 102). Against this the authors acknowledge that conducting interviews also has weaknesses. These include: the fact that logistics and costs frequently mean that only a small number of interviews can be conducted; the possible effects of the interviewer on people's responses, such as the risk

of encouraging certain responses (especially if the interviewer is also the researcher); and the risk of an interview being influenced by the researcher's expectations. Seidman adds to this list the impact of transcribing recorded interviews, the interpersonal skills required of interviewers and the complexity of analysing interviews.

In contrast to Seidman's concerns about the interviewer's involvement in the process, Rubin and Rubin (2005) assert the virtues of "responsive interviewing" in which the interviewer actively follows up on leads presented by answers to questions. The authors see each interview as an opportunity to gain a unique view of a situation or topic. In keeping with this approach, they argue it is not necessary for each participant to be asked exactly the same questions. Rubin and Rubin see value in "cultural interviewing", in which participants are asked about a typical day in their lives. Such an approach could be seen as valuable in exploring a media newsroom context. Some scholars see significant value in the interviewer being close to the respondents. Section 5.2.4 discusses the nature of the researcher's relationship to interviewees in this project.

5.2.2 Purpose of the 2001 election interviews

The aim of the interviews with the senior editorial staff involved in planning and executing the 2001 Local Body Elections coverage was to explore what each newspaper was trying to achieve through its election coverage. The goal was also to identify any differences between the interviewees from each paper with a view to comparing their intentions with the actual coverage their papers produced, as measured through content analysis. The interviews allowed the researcher to explore how each paper selected stories to cover and what each paper's priorities were during the 2001 Elections. While each participant was asked the same general questions, the methodology allowed for different aspects to be explored in each case based on each participant's individual view on the elections.

The interviews also sought to explore how each newspaper went about establishing priorities for coverage during the 2001 Elections. As described in Chapter Two, examination of news selection processes has been a common theme in much journalism scholarship. The literature suggests that such processes are central to the practice of journalism. It might be expected that if public journalism represents what Merritt (1998, p. xii) calls "cultural change of a fundamental nature" in journalism, media adopting a public journalism approach to coverage might exhibit some differences from other media in terms of practices around news selection.

The newspapers selected for this research comprised the six largest circulation dailies in New Zealand in 2001. Staff interviewed at three of them – *The Evening Post*, *Waikato Times* and *The Press* – had experience of using public journalism. Staff at the other three – the *New Zealand*

Herald, *The Dominion* and the *Otago Daily Times* – had no such experience. The six newspapers were chosen in order to investigate whether experience of using public journalism led to different election coverage in 2001. The interviews were conducted after the completion of voting in the 2001 Local Body Elections, in late 2001 and early 2002.

5.2.3 Selection of interviewees

At 14, the number of interviews conducted was relatively small. However, the interviewees, who comprised editors, news editors, chief reporters and senior rounds (or beat) reporters, represented a large proportion of the actual decision makers in terms of the 2001 election coverage. In the case of each newspaper, the people selected for interviewing comprised one very senior staffer and one or two other senior editorial staff a bit further down the chain. In four cases, the most senior staffer interviewed was the newspaper's editor; in one it was the chief reporter; in the sixth it was the news editor and the chief reporter. On this basis, the opinions of the interviewees can be fairly said to represent those of each newspaper's local government election coverage decision makers. While the editor of each newspaper was approached initially, in two cases the editor delegated the task of participating in the research to other senior staff.

The interviewees were approached by phone and invited to participate. The acceptance rate for interviews was very high perhaps due in part to the researcher's own journalism experience and credibility and in part to the reputation of the journalism school to which he belonged.

The interviews with the editors of the three newspapers with a background in public journalism were supplemented by other interview material with two of the editors which explored their personal experience of, and background in, public journalism[1]. Further original information about the history of public journalism in New Zealand was obtained from interviews conducted by the researcher with the former training manager of Independent Newspapers Limited (INL), who had actively promoted public journalism among the group's editors, and the former editor of the *Evening Standard*, which had adopted public journalism techniques in the 1990s.

5.2.4 Conducting the interviews

The editorial staff were interviewed on their own premises by the researcher, who travelled around the country for the purpose over a period of months after the 2001 Elections. One

[1] The editors interviewed were Tim Pankhurst, of *The Evening Post*, and Venetia Sherson, of the *Waikato Times*. The third interviewee was INL's training manager, Warren Page. The fourth, the former editor of the *Evening Standard*, was John Harvey. These four supplementary interviews took place in August 2002 (Warren Page), March 2003 (Tim Pankhurst) and October 2003 (Venetia Sherson and John Harvey). All four interviews were conducted face to face and took around half an hour each.

participant was interviewed by phone as he was not available on the day the researcher visited his newspaper. Scholars tend to advocate face-to-face interviews. Frey et al. (2000) say this affords the interviewer an opportunity to observe cues indicating comprehension or lack of it. A personal visit from the interviewee also indicates to participants that they are important to the research (Seidman, 2006).

All interviews were conducted by the researcher, who was an experienced journalist and journalism educator and was, in many cases, known to the participants. This ensured that the interviewer had the expert knowledge of the circumstances in newsrooms during election coverage as well as personal credibility in the eyes of the interviewees. Buchanan, Boddy and McCalman (1988) say rich information comes from a close relationship between interviewers and participants. For example, they argue that attempts to mislead the interviewer are usually transparent in such circumstances. In the context of this research, the researcher was able to benefit from previous experience of dealing with most of the newspapers involved, for example personal work experience and having liaised with the papers in placing journalism students on work experience.

All six newspapers approached were happy to cooperate with the research and made time for senior staff to attend the interviews, which ran for between 15 and 20 minutes each.

5.2.5 Recording the interviews

In line with interviewing best practice (see Buchanan et al. 1988; Seidman, 2006), the interviews were tape recorded for later analysis. Buchanan et al. also suggest that interviewers transcribe interviews to reduce the chances of error and, if interviewers have an appropriate professional background, they should also understand the jargon used by respondents. Most of the interviews in this research were transcribed by a former journalist rather than by the researcher. A former journalist was used for almost all of the transcription work because of her ability to cope with the technical nature of some of the language. A non-journalist was used to transcribe one interview. However, the researcher listened to all interviews and checked all transcriptions for accuracy. This ensured that any errors in the work of the non-journalist were picked up and corrected.

5.2.6 The interview questions

Each interviewee was asked the same set of 17 questions as follows:

- On a typical day, how does the newspaper decide what to publish?
- How does it decide what to put on page 1?

- How does it decide what to publish during an election period?
- During an election, how does the paper decide what to put on page 1?
- Who makes the decisions about what to publish and what to put on page 1?
- What sorts of attributes get a story in the paper? On page 1? During an election?
- What was the purpose of the newspaper's 2001 election coverage?
- What is the newspaper's role during elections?
- What sorts of special coverage or activities did you undertake in relation to the election?
- What is your opinion of your paper's 2001 election coverage?
- What do you think voters thought about the coverage?
- What do you think about the voter turnout?
- Do you think your paper has a role to play in improving turnout?
- Did you do any evaluation of your 2001 election coverage?
- Is there anything you would do differently for the next election?
- Does the paper take a different approach to covering local as opposed to national elections?
- What do you know about public journalism?

These questions were followed up depending on the answers given. For example, interviews with the three *Herald* staff explored the impact of the journalists' strike, which occurred on a number of dates during the lead up to the 2001 Local Body Elections, most notably in May and over a two-week period in July, culminating in three-and-a-half weeks of industrial action in August and September. The interviews with staff at *The Evening Post*, *Waikato Times* and *The Press* incorporated follow-up questions exploring their knowledge and experience of public journalism. Not all questions needed to be answered in every case as sometimes answers came out in answers to other questions. The order in which questions were asked varied as each interview tended to take its own path. The interviewer took a relaxed approach to interview structure in order to allow it to operate as much as possible as a conversation, but all questions were covered at some stage in each interview.

5.3 Content analysis of the 2001 election stories

As discussed above, the content analysis aspect of this research can be broken into three strands: identification of mobilising information in election stories, identification of public journalism "elements" in stories and analysis of the sources used in stories. Stories were also analysed in terms of two other features: amount of coverage given to the elections by each paper and the geographical spread of each paper's coverage. This approach to content analysis follows that

used in other research into public journalism, with some differences as explained in sections 5.6, 5.7 and 5.8 below.

Before considering the specific approach to content analysis in the research for this thesis, it is worthwhile exploring the methodology literature to establish the rationale for doing content analysis just as the literature on interviewing was examined earlier.

5.3.1 Content analysis as a methodology

Content analysis is a commonly used method of assessing the nature of news coverage, particularly of newspapers. Krippendorff (1980) traces the origins of content analysis back to 18th century Sweden when hymns were analysed to see if they carried ideas deemed 'dangerous' at the time. The first use of modern-style quantitative content analysis came towards the end of the 19th Century with work done by a former editor of a paper called *New York World* (Krippendorff, 1980; Sumpter, 2001). John G Speed compared the coverage of several New York dailies in 1881 with their coverage in 1893. He concluded that the "new journalism" of the time had injected more scandal and gossip into the papers, thereby displacing what he saw as more useful news. The use of content analysis spread in the 1940s due to a focus on research into the propaganda of the Second World War period (Kaid, 1989; Krippendorff, 1980). Content analysis has, according to one authority, now become "one of the most frequently used communication research methodologies" (Kaid, 1989, p. 197). Krippendorff describes it as:

> …one of the most important research techniques in the social sciences [seeking] to understand data not as a collection of physical events but as symbolic phenomena and to approach their analysis unobtrusively (1980, p. 7).

Overall, content analysis is seen as having both strengths and weaknesses as a tool for media research. On the plus side, says Kaid, it allows one to deal with large amounts of material, the research material is usually readily available, and the analysis can be done quickly and without major resource requirements. Content analysis can also provide information on processes over time, it is unobtrusive, and it can be easily combined with other techniques. Krippendorff says the advantages of content analysis are four-fold: it is unobtrusive, accepts unstructured material, gets data in context and can handle massive amounts of data.

The weakness of using content analysis is that it can be difficult to glean the underlying meaning of the data from what is effectively an analysis of what appears on the surface (Krippendorff, 1980; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). McGregor et al. (1999) allude to this problem when they say that while content analysis has strengths in describing news content, it

has limitations when it is confined to merely counting topical categories. Stempel (1989a) says content analysis faces four methodological problems: identifying the unit of analysis, the construction of categories, sampling and coder reliability. He argues that content analysis is very limited in terms of what it can tell us about the big questions in communication research. To reach its "full potential", communication research needs to be able to "relate content to communicator, audience, and effects" (Stempel, 1989a, p. 125). Kaid (1989) identifies the weaknesses of content analysis as its being restricted to analysing recorded information, the inability to draw inferences regarding the intentions of the sources used in the news media, the confinement of information to rigid categories causing researchers to miss important insights, and the impossibility of implementing the steps of content analysis in an ideal way.

Stempel (1989a) associates four key terms with content analysis: "objective" (meaning that different researchers would get the same results; "systematic" (the same procedure is applied to all content, all relevant content is analysed, and the aim is to secure data relevant to a stated research question or hypothesis); "quantitative" (the recording of numerical values is involved); and "manifest content" (content is coded as it appears rather than in terms of what the researcher thinks it is supposed to be saying).

Berelson (as cited in Hansen, Cottle, Negrine & Newbold, 1998, p. 94) has defined content analysis as "a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication". However, there has been a great deal of controversy regarding the notion that content analysis can be objective. Hansen et al. (1998, p. 95) indicate that in this methodology, as with all scientific research, objectivity is an "impossible ideal". The authors argue that in all content analysis certain aspects of the text studied are selected for analysis, and in selecting these aspects the researcher is making a values-based decision, indicating that there cannot be complete objectivity. Scholars have since removed the concept of objectivity from the definition, choosing instead to place the focus on systematic examination. Riffe, Lacy and Fico provide the following definition:

> [Content analysis is the] systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement, rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods, in order to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both production and consumption (1998, p. 20).

Kaid (1989) identifies seven steps to follow in content analysis: formulation of hypothesis, selection of sample, definition of categories, outlining of the coding process, implementation of

the coding process, determination of the reliability and validity of the research, and analysis of the results. Each of these stages poses significant challenges for the researcher. The content analysis process undertaken for this thesis is discussed below using Kaid's taxonomy.

5.3.2 Formulating the hypothesis

The hypothesis of this research is expressed through three research questions, as described under 5.1 above. Two of the questions are explored through the interviews with senior editorial decision makers. Research Question Three is addressed through the content analysis. It asks whether the election coverage of the newspapers with experience of conducting public journalism experiments differed from that of the papers with no experience of using public journalism. The hypothesis is that, based on previous research into public journalism, there will be a difference in coverage between the two groups of papers. As discussed in Chapters Three and Four, such differences have been found in content analysis work done both in New Zealand and overseas (for example, see Ewart, 2000; Kurpius, 2002; McGregor et al. 1999, 2000; Moscowitz, 2002; Zoch & Van Slyke Turk, 1998). Other research suggests that these differences are often minor in scale (see Blazier & Lemert, 2000; Haas, 2001; Massey, 1998; McMillan et al. 1998).

5.3.3 Selecting the sample

Kaid says one of the greatest problems faced by researchers is ensuring that the survey sample is representative of the wider target population. In terms of newspaper analysis, for example, random sampling is sometimes not particularly efficient as the population distribution can be abnormal (Riffe, Aust & Lacy, 1993). The clearest example of this is the often substantial weekend editions put out by newspapers, which tend to skew results if too many are included in a random sample (Riffe et al. 1993; Stempel, 1952, 1989a). This problem has led researchers to look to alternatives to simple random selection of days over a survey period. One option is to select representative weeks of coverage for analysis, either by choosing calendar weeks or by building "constructed" weeks. Researchers have found that the latter are more useful than the former because it is in practice difficult to generalise from calendar, or consecutive, weeks (Riffe et al. 1993). For example, Stempel (1989b) argues that one cannot analyse election coverage by focusing on one part of the campaign period. For research into media covering long periods of time, constructed weeks are the norm (as in Lee, 2001; Massey, 1998). For shorter periods it is common to look at all issues of the relevant publications (as in Haas, 2001; Lacy & Coulson, 2000; Ramsey, 1999; Taylor et al. 2000).

The research for this thesis covered the full period of election coverage in 2001, from the first election stories (which appeared on August 1, 2001) until voting closed (October 12, 2001).

Constructed weeks were considered, but given the relatively short period spanned by the election coverage (a bit over two months, less at some papers) the decision was made to include all issues of the target newspapers during the period of election coverage. In public journalism campaigns researchers sometimes consider only those stories deemed to be part of the civic experiment (for instance, see Ewart, 2000). For the purposes of this research all stories that could be labelled as forming part of the election coverage were used. It should be noted that for local body elections in 2001 New Zealand used a system of postal voting, with electors being given a number of weeks in which to vote. Some newspapers chose to focus their coverage on only part of this period in the belief that voters did not want drawn-out campaign coverage.

All news stories were analysed for this research. Consideration was given to ignoring very small stories and briefs, but this ran the risk of removing important informational items from the research. It became clear during the pilot analysis that information about how to register for voting and the voting process, exactly the sort of items that can be classified as displaying features of public journalism, was often contained in small, one or two paragraph stories.

Election coverage in this research was defined as any stories that dealt with the local body election, either directly or indirectly. Direct examples included interviews with candidates and backgrounders on salient election issues. Indirect examples included where the election was simply mentioned in a story or where the story was about a salient election issue, but the election itself was not mentioned. The problem here was to avoid including all local government stories. Stories about council meetings continued during the campaign period, but only those that mentioned the election or election issues were included in the sample. Editorials about the elections were included, but letters to the editor were not. This is because the research was looking only at the newspapers' editorial and journalistic election coverage as is typical of most such analysis. Election coverage was limited to territorial local authorities and did not include stories about district health board elections being held at the same time.

5.3.4 Defining categories

Kaid (1989) says no step in content analysis is "more crucial" than the third step in his list of seven – the formulation of categories and their units of analysis (p. 203). Stempel (1989a) says the categories chosen must be pertinent to the objectives of the study, that is, allow the hypotheses to be tested. They should also be functional, that is, tell us something about media processes, and manageable, meaning that the number of categories should be limited. The result is a balancing act between having clearly defined categories that allow coders to easily classify content while also not having so many categories that the results are dissipated to the extent that they become meaningless. Krippendorff says a key decision is to choose the "unit of

enumeration", for example to decide whether one's hypothesis is best explored by measuring column inches or frequency of use (1980, as cited in Kaid, 1989, p. 204).

The categories used in this research are discussed in detail below under 5.4 (amount of coverage), 5.5 (geographical spread of coverage), 5.6 (use of mobilising information), 5.7 (use of public journalism elements) and 5.8 (sources used in stories). The categories for measuring each type of content are by and large based on the literature on public journalism (see Chapters Three and Four) with refinements added based on this researcher's observations.

The amount of coverage given to the 2001 Local Body Elections was measured in terms of square centimetres. The geographical spread of coverage was measured in terms of frequency of mention of each local authority. Mobilising information was measured by identifying the presence in stories of four coding categories identified through analysis of the literature. The use of public journalism elements was measured by coding whether stories use one or more among 12 features identified in the literature as being associated with public journalism. And in terms of source use, each source was coded by types used in the literature on public journalism – by gender and by elite or non-elite status.

5.3.5 Outlining and implementing the coding process

Vying for the most crucial spot in Kaid's list of steps in content analysis are his fourth and fifth stages – setting up a coding system for media content and implementing it. For this research, a coding form was produced for each election story to record some of the target information (including basic story details, names of councils mentioned and public journalism elements identified). A second form was created to record the details of each source and the use of mobilising information. Each story and each source had a unique number identifier. This number and the use of the forms allowed the coding of every single story and source to be easily found later.

There is widespread agreement among experts that coding must be tested before application to live data and the coders themselves trained (Kaid, 1989; Stempel, 1989a). This should occur even where coding is being done by a solo researcher (Riffe & Freitag, 1997). In this research, all the coding was done by the researcher. This was due to resource constraints and in order to minimise the possible effects of inter-coder reliability problems.

In line with this, a pre-test of the coding categories in this research was carried out with the assistance of a doctorally qualified journalism academic. The test was carried out on the 2001 election coverage of the *Manawatu Standard*, a provincial daily newspaper in Palmerston

North. This testing threw up some problems with categories and definitions of terms, with adjustments being made before coding of the sample newspapers began.

In the pre-testing, the tester was given a list of election stories from the *Manawatu Standard* and asked to choose 25 for coding. There was generally a high degree of agreement between the tester and the researcher, with agreement being reached between 82.4% and 100% of the time, with one exception discussed below. However, some problems emerged for the researcher to deal with. For example, while there was 100% agreement in terms of classifying sources as either elite or non-elite, there was only 82.5% agreement in terms of classification within the elite source category. This was, however, almost entirely due to the tester not having the researcher's knowledge as to whether some elite sources were sitting politicians or new candidates.

Another problem was identified with the decision as to whether a story contained mobilising information. Agreement was 84% and it emerged that the discrepancy was focused around stories where the tester had coded "No" whereas the researcher had coded "Yes". It appears that the tester was inadequately briefed and as a result was missing one particular category of mobilising information – whether or not the story was directly or indirectly encouraging people to either vote or become candidates.

One area of coding showed up very poorly in this pre-test: identifying sources as of Māori or non-Māori ethnicity. Regarding Māori ethnicity, agreement between the researcher and the tester was less than 2%. This was due to the researcher categorising many sources as non-Māori while the tester coded these as Unknown. This result and the general difficulty of identify a source's ethnicity led to the abandonment of attempts to identify sources by ethnicity.

5.3.6 Determining the reliability and validity of the research

A properly planned and tested coding regime is seen as essential to ensuring the success of Kaid's sixth step in content analysis – establishing the reliability and validity of the results. A statement regarding inter-coder reliability is seen as compulsory in content analysis (Lacy & Riffe, 1993). Some scholars argue that for researchers to try to avoid the above inter-coder reliability problem by simply doing all the coding themselves carries its own risks. In such cases reliability checks remain crucial (for example, see Krippendorff, 1980). As noted above, in this case the researcher did all the coding. This was checked by re-coding a sample of newspapers.

Intra-coder reliability was tested by going back to the earliest coding work done and re-coding a sample of stories from those newspapers and a random sample from later in the process. The

sample consisted of a randomly selected group of stories from the first two newspapers coded: the *Herald* and the *Otago Daily Times*. Stories were selected on the following basis. In the case of the *Herald*, five days were randomly selected in August, five in September and two in October. For the *Otago Daily Times*, five days in August, three in September and two in October were chosen. All election stories in the papers on those days were re-coded and the results compared with the original coding. Twenty-four *Herald* and 35 *Otago Daily Times* stories were covered by this sample. This was out of a total of 100 *Herald* and 270 *Otago Daily Times* election stories. Agreement between the original coding and the re-coding ranged from 83.3% to 100% for the *Herald* sample and between 85.7% and 100% for the *Otago Daily Times* sample. The low figures occurred in relation to the identification of public journalism elements. This appears to have been due either to the original coding being too liberal or the re-coding missing some public journalism elements.

As the coding process proceeded, the researcher often checked coding with that done on earlier stories. This was done as an informal check on consistency.

Each of the five strands of content analysis carried out for this research will now be discussed in detail. The amount of coverage and geographical spread will be dealt with first before moving on to discuss the coding of stories for mobilising information, public journalism elements and sources.

5.4 Amount of election coverage

To measure the amount of coverage given to the election, stories were measured in square centimetres. Photographs were included in the story size, but were also measured separately. Where a story was in a box, the size of the story was determined by measuring the size of the box. The use of measurements in column centimetres was considered, but this had to be abandoned due to the wide variety of column widths used in the different papers.

5.5 Geographical spread of coverage

Stories were coded in terms of the territorial local authorities mentioned. Each newspaper's circulation area included one main city with its own city council and a number of neighbouring suburban, semi-rural or rural towns or districts. Each of these outlying areas was represented by its own local authority. Geographical spread was defined in terms of the numbers of stories that mentioned each local authority. A greater percentage of stories mentioning a newspaper's main city council indicated reduced geographical spread. A lower incidence of mentioning the main city council and accompanying greater frequency of mentioning outlying councils indicated increased geographical spread.

A maximum of three local authorities were coded in each story, selected on the basis of those that featured more prominently in the story. Coding of local authorities mentioned is worthwhile as it seems reasonable to assume that a newspaper practising public journalism during an election would give priority to airing the salient issues in all its major communities.

5.6 Type and extent of mobilising information

The identification of mobilising information has been used as a tool for analysing the coverage of newspapers using public journalism techniques in the United States (for instance, see Blazier & Lemert, 2000; McMillan et al. 1998; Moscowitz, 2002).

The identification of mobilising information in news stories has usually been interpreted as referring to the provision of contact details for readers, such as phone numbers, email addresses, web addresses, contact person names and other details that offer readers a first step if they wish to become involved (as per Moscowitz, 2002). In this research, mobilising information was defined more widely as also information designed to help people take part in the election process, for instance providing times and locations of meetings, explaining the voting process, encouraging people to attend meetings and/or vote or become candidates. In terms of where the line was to be drawn, a story that merely gave people the election date was classified as not providing mobilising information.

Stories were coded as Yes or No in terms of whether or not they contained mobilising information. Stories were also coded for what sort of mobilising information they contained. The options here were:

- providing information about meetings
- giving candidate or group contact details
- making comments designed to encourage people to vote
- providing information about the electoral process.

Each story was coded for a maximum of three categories.

5.7 Public journalism "elements"

The literature on public journalism is replete with discussions about what exactly it is in practice. As discussed in the literature review (Chapter Three), it is difficult to compare the work of newspapers practising public journalism with other papers without a clear definition of public journalism (for example, see Meyer, 1998). The researcher surveyed the literature to identify the features, or "elements", of public journalism. The six newspapers in the sample

(three with a public journalism background and three without) were compared to see if there were any differences in frequency of use of public journalism elements or types of elements used.

Five general themes were identified to describe the elements of public journalism:

- the idea of public journalism as promoting public participation
- the inclusion in stories of the views of ordinary citizens
- the idea that public journalism leads the media to focus on certain topics in stories
- explicit statements by the media supporting democratic processes
- the idea that public journalism leads the media to discuss election candidates in terms that are useful to voters.

Each theme in turn covers a number of public journalism elements designed to identify nuances of coverage within the theme. The full list of themes and elements is as follows:

Theme 1 Participation

- Story contains information showing people how they can participate in the elections (short title: participatory information)
- Story encourages people to participate (participatory encouragement)

Theme 2 Views of ordinary people

- Story contains views of ordinary people from interviews (public interviews)
- Story contains views of ordinary people from polls (views from polls)
- Story contains views of ordinary people from meetings (views from meetings)

Theme 3 Discussion topics

- Story contains discussion of issues based on public priorities (discussion about public priorities)
- Story contains discussion about solutions to problems (discussion about solutions)

Theme 4 Newspaper statements

- Story contains a statement by the newspaper about public journalism (public journalism statement)
- Story contains a statement by the newspaper about the media's role in helping the democratic process (media role statement)

- Story contains a statement by the newspaper about the public's role in helping the democratic process (public role statement)

Previous research refers only to the four themes discussed above. In this research, a fifth theme has been added on the basis that the two elements involved fit in with the philosophy of public journalism. The first element fits in with public journalism theory because it offers readers raw data about the priorities of candidates who are sitting councillors. Likewise, the second allows voters to hear directly from candidates about their priorities and policies.

Theme 5 Candidate information

- Story contains information about how councillors voted on major election issues (how councillors voted)
- Story contains candidates' views in own words (candidates' views in own words)

A survey of the literature of public journalism shows that scholars have come up with a wide variety of features identified with public journalism as discussed in Chapters Two, Three and Four. Some of these features have been incorporated directly into the 12 elements listed above. Others have been incorporated in a partial or modified way. Still others have not been included in the list for the reasons stated in the discussion below.

The idea represented by Theme 1 – that public journalism is linked to public participation in election processes, and public life generally – is at the core of public journalism theory. As discussed in the literature review chapters, at the heart of public journalism is the conviction that there is a malaise deep in the democratic process, with the public becoming separated from political processes. The media have a duty to help reconnect the public to political life (Glasser & Craft, 1998; Haas, 1999b; Merritt, 1995a, 1995b; Rosen, 1993a). In terms of the research into the 2001 Local Body Elections, the participatory theme has been defined in terms of whether stories provided information showing people how they could participate or whether stories encouraged people to participate.

Theme 2, the idea that public journalism should lead to greater use of ordinary people as sources in stories, is also a very common feature in public journalism theory (Haas, 2001; McMillan et al. 1998; Moscowitz, 2002). In this research, the use of ordinary people as news sources has been identified through three mechanisms: through being interviewed by journalists, through public opinion polling, and through being quoted in media reports of public meetings.

The first discussion topic identified under Theme 3 – discussion of issues based on public priorities – is a common feature of public journalism projects run by the media. This is often presented as trying to focus coverage on the issues the public thinks are important rather than on those the candidates wish to highlight (Blazier & Lemert, 2000; McGregor et al. 1998; Thames, 1998). The second element under Theme 3 – discussion about solutions – is an equally prominent feature of public journalism practice, often cited in lists of features associated with public journalism (Blazier & Lemert, 2000; McGregor et al. 1999; Moscowitz, 2002).

Theme 4 comes out of the public journalism literature's focus on the importance of the public and the media working together to build a healthy body politic (Charity, 1996a; Merritt, 1995a, 1995b, 1996b; Merritt & Rosen, 1998; Rosen, 1992a). This theme looks at the media's coverage of the 2001 Elections in terms of the New Zealand media's consciousness of democratic and public journalism theory, specifically whether the six newspapers make formal statements about the role of the media and the public in the democratic process and whether the three papers with experience of public journalism discussed public journalism with their readers.

Theme 5 is a new construct developed for this thesis after reflection on the literature's discussion about public journalism as moving away from horse race coverage of elections and candidates' characters in favour of focusing on their policies and records in office (Blazier & Lemert, 2000; McGregor et al. 2000; McMillan et al. 1998).

The final aspect of the content analysis to consider is the use of sources by the newspapers during their election coverage.

5.8 Coding of sources

As indicated in the literature review (Chapters Two, Three and Four), the idea that public journalism leads to (or should lead to) a different selection of sources in stories is a common one in public journalism research. Specifically, this should lead to greater use of citizens as sources rather than authorities. The literature suggests that source selection is a key part of the newsgathering process and that ordinary citizens traditionally struggle to be heard in news media stories.

Source analysis is often seen by researchers as part of content analysis (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1991; Gamson, 1989; Graber, 1989; Welch, Fenwick & Roberts, 1997). Looking at a newspaper's choice of sources perhaps helps researchers get behind the "what" of coverage and consider the "why", the meaning of what is being covered, which is often cited by scholars as something akin to a holy grail (Gamson, 1989; Graber, 1989).

For the purposes of this research, sources were categorised by both gender and elite/non-elite status. The expectation, following earlier research findings, such as Ewart (2000) and Massey (1998, 1999) as outlined in the literature review, was that newspapers using public journalism techniques would be more likely to use non-elites and women as sources during the 2001 Elections than newspapers using conventional approaches.

5.8.1 Sources by gender

Sources were identified as Male, Female or of Unidentified gender. Some stories did not have an identified source. A source was defined as a person, group, study or document that addressed the reader in a story, that is, the source's identity needed to be accompanied by a verb of attribution. As Ewart (2000) noted, something like 20% of sources could not be identified by gender. Had these turned out to be predominantly female, her results could have been significantly different.

5.8.2 Elite versus non-elite sources

Regarding the identification of sources as elite or non-elite, definitions are by and large consistent across researchers. For example, Ewart (2000) defines elites as politicians, political candidates, government spokespeople, business leaders and prominent lobby groups. This research uses these five categories, identifying them as:

- Politicians
- Election candidates (candidates not already incumbent councillors)
- Government staff
- Representatives of large organisations
- Businesspeople

This research has, however, added three more categories to the list originally used by Ewart. She included private sector lobby groups in the non-elite category. However, some lobby groups are large, highly-institutionalised bodies that are well connected to the halls of power, for example Federated Farmers. These belong in the elite category as distinct from small non-elite grassroots lobby groups. Some election stories also featured journalists and celebrities as sources. The researcher considered these to also be elite sources. Hence three new categories of elites were added to the above list, for a total of eight categories (see Table 1 below):

- Representatives of large lobby groups
- Members of the news media
- Celebrities

Non-elites are typically defined as those who traditionally have been scarce as media sources, essentially ordinary citizens, sometimes identified as "unaffiliated" sources (for instance, see Blazier & Lemert, 2000). Ewart (2000) identifies non-elites as people unconnected to businesses or organisations and spokespeople for small, grassroots organisations. For this research, non-elites have been defined in three categories (see Table 1 below):

- Representatives of small lobby groups
- Representatives of local community organisations
- Unaffiliated individuals (members of the public)

It was not always possible to tell whether a source was elite or non-elite. These sources were coded as Unknown. Furthermore, within both the elite and non-elite categories there were sources that, while they could be categorised as elite or non-elite they could not be identified as fitting into one of the sub-categories. These sources were coded as Elite Unknowns or Non-elite Unknowns.

Table 1 Coding of sources – categories

Elite	Non-Elite
Politicians	Small lobby groups
Candidates	Community organisations
Local government staff	Unaffiliated
Large organisations	Non-elite unknowns
Business	
Large lobby groups	
News media	
Celebrities	
Elite unknowns	

5.8.3 Sources by ethnicity

The coding of sources by indigenous Māori ethnicity was attempted. In New Zealand, media scholarship often highlights one particular ethnic minority, the Māori, as being disadvantaged in news coverage. The nation's founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi, and subsequent legislation established a special constitutional relationship between Māori and Europeans. Comparisons are often made between Europeans and Māori or between all other New Zealanders and Māori across a range of areas, such as health, education and media coverage. This research followed an accepted pattern, then, in New Zealand research in highlighting Māori as a minority group. However, identifying Māori only by name was difficult for both the coder and coding tester and attempts to identify sources as Māori or non-Māori led to a huge

proportion of sources being identified as Unknown. The only way to effectively reduce this number of Unknowns would have been to do further research on the sources to pin down their ethnicity. This was beyond the resources of this research and so the attempt to code by ethnicity was abandoned.

5.9 Analysing the content analysis results

The content of the 2001 election stories was coded on forms specially prepared for this research, as described under 5.3.5 above. A form was completed for each election story covering a number of units of analysis, such as amount of coverage, use of mobilising information and public journalism elements. A different form was completed for each news source.

Information was recorded on the forms using a simple numbering system. For example a source was coded as 1 (Elite), 2 (Non-elite) or 3 (Unknown). Within the Elite and Non-elite categories numbers were allocated to the sub-categories: under Elites, this ranged from 1 (Politicians) to 9 (Unknown Elite); and under Non-elites, the range was from 1 (Small lobby groups) to 4 (Unknown Non-elite). The information on the forms was entered in a spreadsheet where it could be readily analysed by counting or calculation. The spreadsheet allowed for the material to be easily sorted for analysis of each category of information. The results of this analysis are presented in Chapter Seven.

5.10 Conclusion

In summary, the methodology used for this research involved using both qualitative and quantitative research techniques to explore the three research questions identified in Chapter One. Questions One and Two were pursued through the interviews with the editorial decision makers on the six newspapers during the 2001 Local Body Elections, while Question Three was investigated via content analysis of the papers' actual election coverage from August to October 2001.

The interviews focused on the intentions or goals of each paper's coverage and the processes for selecting items for news coverage. Interviews with journalists have often been a feature of research into public journalism. Focusing on news selection processes and news values is in line with approaches taken by other public journalism researchers and with the wider body of media research.

Content analysis was conducted in line with other such analysis undertaken into public journalism. The choice of sources used by the six newspapers was analysed in terms of gender and elite/non-elite status. The use of mobilising information was also examined. The general

nature of story content was also analysed for the presence of features, or elements, previously associated with public journalism.

The goal of the collection of methodologies chosen was to find whether there were consistent differences, across multiple measures, between the three papers with experience of using public journalism and the three without such experience. Alternatively, were the differences between the two groups of papers inconsistent or insignificant?

The next two chapters present the results of this research, starting with the interviews with the editorial decision makers in Chapter Six and then moving on to the results of the content analysis in Chapter Seven.

Chapter Six
Interviews with newsroom decision makers

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of interviews conducted with a group of editors and senior journalists at New Zealand's, at the time, six largest circulation daily newspapers: *The Evening Post*, *The Dominion*, the *New Zealand Herald*, the *Waikato Times*, *The Press* and the *Otago Daily Times*.

Where possible the editor of each newspaper was interviewed as well as the senior journalist(s) responsible for the coverage of the 2001 Local Body Elections. In two cases (*The Dominion* and the *New Zealand Herald*) the editor of the paper declined to be interviewed and delegated the task to senior staff. The interviews were conducted face to face in the first half of 2002. One interview (with Geoff Taylor, of the *Waikato Times*) was conducted by phone due to his not being available when the author visited his newspaper.

The interviewees were as follows:

- *The Evening Post*: Tim Pankhurst (editor), Mary-Jane Boland (deputy chief reporter) and Anne-Marie Johnson (senior journalist, local government reporter)
- *The Dominion*: Barrie Swift (news editor), Bernadette Courtney (chief reporter)
- *New Zealand Herald* (referred to henceforth as the *Herald*): Jeremy Rees (chief reporter), Bryan Rudman (senior journalist, columnist writing on local government), Bernard Orsman (senior journalist, local government reporter)
- *Waikato Times*: Venetia Sherson (editor), Geoff Taylor (senior journalist, local government reporter)
- *The Press*: Paul Thompson (editor), Colin Espiner (deputy chief reporter)
- *Otago Daily Times* (referred to henceforth as the *ODT*): Robin Charteris (editor), Andrea Jones (senior journalist, local government reporter)

The purpose of the interviews was to gain an understanding of each newspaper's approach to covering the election, what it was trying to achieve through its election coverage and what the interviewees thought of the coverage. The interviews were aimed at exploring the news approach and priorities of the different papers' leadership – what journalists call "the top table"– when covering local elections. This qualitative understanding of the election process at each newspaper provides a background and wider context to the content analysis of each newspaper's coverage in the next chapter. As discussed in Chapter Five, a second group of interviews was

conducted with some of the participants as part of a wider body of research examining the historical roots of public journalism in New Zealand. Some of this information will also be drawn on where relevant.

As discussed in Chapter One, the 2001 Local Body Election coverage at three of the newspapers was informed by the use of public journalism practices that had been tried in earlier election coverage. These papers were *The Press*, the *Waikato Times* and *The Evening Post*. The others – *The Dominion*, the *New Zealand Herald* and the *Otago Daily Times* – had not experimented with public journalism in earlier elections.

The interviews with editorial decision makers were aimed at exploring whether the editorial decision makers with experience of public journalism experiments differed from other editorial leaders in their assessment of the type of coverage they were aiming for and that they believed they achieved.

This sets the scene for the content analysis of coverage by the six newspapers which is designed to answer the related research question: did the actual election coverage of papers with experience of conducting public journalism experiments differ from that of papers with no experience of using public journalism?

The chapter is structured as follows. First, it compares the news selection processes on each newspaper as revealed through the interviews. News selection is perhaps the key process in any news media publication as it is about how a paper decides what to put in its pages. If there are differences between newspapers with experience of public journalism and others, the assumption is they should show up in news selection practices. The chapter goes on to describe interviewees' perceptions of what they were trying to achieve with their 2001 Local Body Elections coverage and what they thought of the actual coverage. The papers without any experience of public journalism will be examined first under each of the two headings, followed by those with experience of using public journalism. The chapter concludes with a summary analysing the differences and similarities between the papers.

6.2 News selection processes

6.2.1 New Zealand Herald

Three staffers from the *Herald* were interviewed: the chief reporter (Jeremy Rees); a senior columnist who wrote regular pieces during the election campaign (Bryan Rudman); and a senior

staffer who also wrote extensively about Auckland City Council during the campaign (Bernard Orsman).

Jeremy Rees provided a full description of the *Herald*'s news selection approach. He said on a typical day, story ideas came from a number of sources: editors and senior staff, reporters, a daily news diary of events, regular meetings of organisations and follows on previous stories. The following is a good summary of the traditional newspaper approach in New Zealand:

> The first ones of course are the reporters, who will come up with ideas themselves. They would have found things, people they have spoken too. They will have scoops and ideas and they will come to me…At the same time, we obviously have a news diary and assignments that we believe have to be covered that day…I may have ideas or the editor, or the news editor…as well as follow ups from the day before. So there will be this mass of possibilities…and we will obviously keep monitoring during the day the wires, the radio and so on.

Rees said the day kicked off with a meeting with senior staff and reporters to discuss the day's ideas. Prioritisation of ideas was a key feature of the news selection process. As Rees put it: "We will splash out with limited resources [in the face of] infinite demands." The editor then fed his ideas into the mix. A further meeting of senior staff was held in the afternoon to confirm the story list. The final meeting was held at around 5pm, with the news editor, who actually puts the paper together, effectively having the final say on coverage and story placement depending on events that might happen in the evening.

Rees portrayed the news selection process as being based on discussions between staff, with all senior staff and reporters being able to contribute. As the day progressed, senior staff made the final decisions, with the editor always having the right to overrule others' decisions.

Regarding the attributes of stories that make the paper, Rees said there were three:

> Freshness – new and different, something you are not necessarily always hearing, that you have heard, all day on radio or tv…We have been looking as well at 'Quality'…There was a sort of feeling that…we got into a slightly knee-jerk silliness at times where we have jumped onto things that looked like they were going to be interesting and entertaining but were fairly lightweight. So we have been tasked with looking at things that are genuinely important…Number three – whether it's entertaining and informative and so on.

The key thing, Rees said, was to have something different each day.

6.2.2 Otago Daily Times

Two staffers from the *Otago Daily Times* were interviewed: the editor (Robin Charteris) and the local government reporter (Andrea Jones).

The news selection process at the *ODT* followed the same pattern as at the *Herald*. Robin Charteris said a series of news meetings was held during the day, with story priorities being updated during the day by senior editorial staff. He said prioritisation was important as there were always more stories than space. Andrea Jones described the process of identifying stories as a highly flexible one, with a wide net being cast initially and a lot of discussion occurring during the day between reporters and the chief reporter, who was responsible for overseeing stories:

> We try and give the chief reporter on the previous day an idea of what we think may be coming through from our rounds. He's also got ideas of stories that have come through to him directly from the public or things the newspapers [have covered]. Then we come in the next day, we pick up on that, plus we react to anything that has come in or we may have had another idea since then, or a contact may have rung us. It's a fairly fluid procedure basically, but most of us keep in good contact with the chief reporter…there are leads from him about what he considers to be the most important stories of the day and then these are our priorities and hopefully we can deliver them.

Jones saw the news selection process as a sort of good-natured competition to make the front page, with luck sometimes entering into the equation. She said canny reporters could sometimes sell their stories to the chief reporter in order to get them prioritised:

> If you do this judiciously, you can put a bit of pressure on and try and sell that story. I think we are encouraged to do that to a degree and I think that's a good thing and then he will pass it on. So that's your way in but at the same time you've got to be realistic.

Charteris said for the *ODT* one news value topped the priority list: "I think the biggest thing probably of all is…local relevance. Local news is the best news of all."

As for the front page, the best stories were local ones that affected readers' lives:

> We are looking consciously every day for a human interest story, so it appeals across the board to readers, but generally a local story. Local always outweighs anything else in our eyes given there are no absolutes in these selections. It's how a

> story affects our readers and that ranges from tax cuts to whatever. The effect on readers dictates everything.

6.2.3 The Dominion

Two staffers from *The Dominion* were interviewed – the news editor (Barrie Swift) and the chief reporter (Bernadette Courtney).

The *Dominion* staff offered a similar approach to determining the day's news agenda as described above. Barrie Swift said the chief reporter reviewed stories from the previous day to see if they were still viable, listened to the morning's radio news, reviewed the television headlines, checked other newspapers' morning coverage and checked the diary to see what was coming up. Mail was also checked as was the fax machine for media releases. The chief reporter had a list of prospective stories available when the first reporters arrived at 9am. Reporters were also encouraged to throw in their own ideas. News meetings occurred during the day to review progress with stories. As with the other papers discussed above, the final decision about what got into *The Dominion* was left to the news editor, who assembled the paper for printing in the evening.

Swift said making news selection decisions was basically about journalists exercising professional judgment both as individuals and as a group:

> Is it news basically, that's the guiding thing. We're employed to exercise our judgment as to what is newsworthy, *a la* of interest to our readers and what isn't, and we make those decisions on a minute by minute basis throughout the whole day – either guiding reporters into an area where they may have missed the wood for the trees, initiating something, as a follow up to something else, or some information that we have received. We do get tips from the public for example. We get a lot of approaches to publish things and make a decision whether it's worth publishing. Some of it is and some of it isn't. We're quite ruthless to that degree.

According to Swift, part of being a journalist is being able to work out what readers want:

> It's a judgment call. You have your experience and your training in the industry, and you either have a news sense or you don't, basically, and if you don't, you generally don't get very far in journalism. You just hone that. To some degree it's trial and error over a long period. You know deep down what's going to sell the paper because it's sold it before.

Bernadette Courtney echoed Swift's point about the importance of journalistic experience in story selection. She said identifying the big stories was a matter of professional skill: "It's a gut feeling. It's not often that I'll go home and…pick up the paper the next morning and say 'Oh, why's that the lead?'"

Courtney said a strong factor that influenced *The Dominion* was the coverage of its afternoon competitor, *The Evening Post*. *The Dominion* simply would not pursue stories broken in *The Evening Post* unless it was able to develop them further. She said good stories were topical stories that the paper could move on significantly:

> Basically we want the lead story to be the story that everyone's going to be talking about the next morning over breakfast, you know in the cafés. So, it may actually be quite a quirky story, not necessarily a political story. If it is a political story, we try to tailor it to how it is going to affect the readers.

6.2.4 Summary of news selection on newspapers without experience of public journalism

The three newspapers without any experience of public journalism tended to follow a similar process when choosing what to put in the paper each day, with some differences. The differences related to the way each paper sought to respond to its own particular market, as explained below.

Stories came from a wide variety of sources – other media, reporters' ideas, follows on previous stories, media releases put out by organisations, set meetings of organisations such as city councils, events diaried for that day, ideas sent in by the public, crime, etc. The initial selection of stories involved some discussion among all editorial staff, but as the news day wore on decisions were increasingly made by senior staff, with the news editor effectively having the final say as to what got into the paper. The interviews pointed to the news agenda setting exercise at the three papers being a complex process involving senior journalists choosing from numerous options using professional judgment accrued from years of working in the industry.

The *Herald* staff talked about the importance of freshness in stories, finding something new or a new take on a previous story. The *Herald* saw itself as a national paper, which also had a responsibility (and financial need) to cover events in its local area – Auckland. *The Dominion* also considered itself to be a national paper first while also having to cover important local events in its hometown – Wellington. Its coverage was influenced heavily by news choices made by its daily rival in the capital – *The Evening Post*. The *ODT* staff emphasised the

overriding importance of local news from either Dunedin or neighbouring regions in its circulation area, such as Central Otago and Queenstown.

6.2.5 Waikato Times

Turning now to the three newspapers with experience of public journalism, two staffers from the *Waikato Times* were interviewed, the editor (Venetia Sherson), and the senior reporter responsible for covering local government (Geoff Taylor).

Venetia Sherson said the *Waikato Times* was first and foremost a provincial paper covering news stories from Hamilton and the surrounding region. The paper treated national stories as a secondary priority (unless they had clear local implications) and overseas stories as even less important. News meetings each morning considered stories that had broken overnight and those held over from the previous day to see if they were worthy of inclusion. She described a similar set of story sources as those considered by the *Herald*, *ODT* and *The Dominion*.

Echoing Bernadette Courtney's words above, she said news priorities were:

> …based on our view of what sells newspapers in the Waikato, and what are the stories that people are talking about. That is the question we ask each other in the morning. What are people talking about today? What is the one thing that people are going to be discussing when the paper comes out? It's not scientific. It's probably our own sense of what we were talking about in our living rooms the night before, or what we are likely to be saying 'wow' about that day when we are standing around. Is that true? Can this be? That shock value that I think makes people pay attention, look at a paper and then pick it up.

Sherson said she left page editors to make their own decisions about what went on their pages. She tended to focus on what went on the front page. She said the final say was hers, though she was prepared to defer to senior staff. Overall, the selection process for stories was based on discussion among editorial staff, trying to identify the best coverage for each day.

Sherson said a good story was "gripping, entertaining" and could be readily identified by experienced reporters. Like Jeremy Rees at the *Herald* she considered freshness to be an important news value. Echoing Barrie Swift at *The Dominion*, she said the ability to recognise good stories was "often no more than gut instinct". News judgment was something that journalists developed over time. However, she admitted, this was a fallible process, with journalistic news judgments open to change based on experience. An example of this learning

process was that the paper failed to pick that readers, weaned on a diet of rugby, were also very interested in following netball.

Sherson said the *Waikato Times*' coverage was not just about picking up on what readers wanted, but also about proactively trying to get readers interested in a topic the paper thought was important: "I think we are looking to surprise each day in a way that says, 'Don't take this for granted…this is what you need to be interested in'."

Geoff Taylor said reporters had a major influence on what was covered by the *Times*, at least at the start of the day. Reporters were the ones who were out covering their communities and identifying newsworthy things that were happening. Final decisions, though, were made by senior staff (editor, deputy editor, news editor, chief subeditor and chief reporter).

Taylor said for a story to get on page one, it had to stack up in terms of news values. This was as true for ordinary news days as for election coverage. An example was a scandal involving suggestions of misuse of mayoral authority by Hamilton's mayor:

> I had a very strong story while the voting papers were out about the incumbent Russ Rimmington and the fact that he had some involvement with an Auckland marina and was trying to interfere with a development plan up there wearing his Hamilton mayoralty hat. We exposed that, and that was a hell of a big story. That was something that was enjoyable but at the same time it was also unfortunate for the mayor because that and another story really did him a hell of a lot of damage a few weeks before that. It was a bit sad, but it was also a good story.

This story made the front page because it suggested corruption by a public official. Taylor implied that it would probably have made the front page whether or not there was an election happening.

6.2.6 The Press

Two staffers from *The Press* were interviewed – the editor (Paul Thompson) and the deputy chief reporter (Colin Espiner).

The *Press*' stories and story ideas come from the same sources as the other papers discussed above: what's in other media, what's on the radio in the morning, what's on the internet news sites, reporters working their rounds and contacts. Editor Paul Thompson had his own ideas as did other senior staff. The day started with a news meeting, with a view to setting a news agenda. Diaried events, including sports matches were taken into consideration, as was what

Thompson called “all the sort of standard stuff that is going to give us some news”. Decisions had to be made from among the mass of material available. Always lurking in the background were the things no one knew about, the things that had not yet happened that would change the agenda.

Like Venetia Sherson at the *Waikato Times*, Thompson said news selection was not scientific. Rather, it was a subjective process involving a balancing of various news values with journalistic professional judgment thrown into the mix:

> Freshness, is it news, is probably the key thing…You know, we have a bit of a head start, so if something’s fresh and new, if it’s a scoop and it’s ours that’s probably the thing we like most. Of course, you can’t divorce that quality from the fact that it is interesting, it’s relevant, it means something to affected people. Apart from that, if it’s local it has an edge, if it’s something about Canterbury or Christchurch, something about the South Island. News judgment’s such a subjective process and often it’s a combination of all those. You rarely get something which is just black and white, and sometimes you make a gut call based on what you think, weighing up a number of those factors against another story which may have some of those other attributes.

Thompson, reflecting those interviewed on the other papers, said the process of deciding what to cover was collaborative. The final decisions were really team ones:

> I’ll want things that I want done that I’ll talk to people about, and the idea may be modified while we talk about it. So sometimes editors say ‘I definitely want that story’ and it happens, but normally it’s more just a process of discussion and consensus…I don’t say ‘I want that story done and I want that reporter to do it’. Normally it’s just the supervisors out there making the decisions based on what else is on and who’s there and who’s available.

As with the other papers discussed above, probably the most influential person, apart from the editor, was the news editor, who was effectively making the decisions at the end of the evening as the paper was finalised for printing. Colin Espiner said if something happened later on and the news editor felt it was a better story, he would change the editor’s direction without asking.

Espiner said strong local items were most likely to make it into the paper – council stories, crime, major accidents, “oddball” or colourful stories – as well as big international stories. As for the front page, Espiner said photographs were almost as important as stories. He said good front page pictures could boost casual sales of the paper.

6.2.7 The Evening Post

Three staffers from *The Evening Post* were interviewed: the editor (Tim Pankhurst); the deputy chief reporter (Mary-Jane Boland); and the senior local government reporter (Anne-Marie Johnson).

The Evening Post's news cycle was affected by the fact that it was an afternoon paper competing with a morning daily in the same city. Planning for the paper started the previous afternoon, with a final editorial meeting at 7am on the morning of publication. Tight deadlines meant there was little time to write fresh stories for publication on the same day. As Tim Pankhurst said, staff had to "hit the deck running".

The primary focus was stories from the Wellington region or national stories that lent themselves to a local follow. Pankhurst said sport was important to *The Evening Post*, as were good photographs. As with the other papers, stories came from a variety of sources: reporters initiating stories from their rounds, major stories coming off the news wires, overnight developments on overseas stories, major events (such as sports) that warranted coverage. Pankhurst said he aimed to create a balanced paper. *The Evening Post*'s focus was on getting the right tone, the right balance of pictures and stories, including lighter, brighter stories and backgrounding major issues further into the paper. The best story was a big local scoop that the paper could splash on the front page:

> The old adage that news sells is absolutely correct…Our ideal story is a good, strong local story that we've broken, preferably with a good picture…and maybe a side bar to it as well or a graphic background giving some supporting detail. We look very much at packaging, packaging an issue.

Mary-Jane Boland said front page stories often came from three areas: transport, crime and local government. She said the paper went for a mix of "light" and "heavy" stories on the front page. There would be a strong lead story, one or two other strong items, sometimes with a sport or business flavour, and a quirky or human interest people story.

Pankhurst said *The Evening Post*'s news selection was heavily influenced by that of its competitor, *The Dominion*. *The Evening Post* would sometimes leave alone stories covered by *The Dominion*, especially photo stories. It also had less political coverage than *The Dominion* because this did not appeal so much to readers of *The Evening Post*. The competition between the two was fearsome despite the fact the papers were housed in the same building. Getting an exclusive story that *The Dominion* did not have would also give a story a higher profile in *The Evening Post*.

Pankhurst said one difference between the papers was that *The Evening Post* was especially keen on human interest stories for the front page, moving away from what he called "institutionalised reporting" and looking at the human impact of events and policies:

> A good example was the way that the two dailies here reported crime figures…*The Dom* just reported it as 'crime was rising in these areas and here are the details of it', and it was a very statistical story. The way we look to treat those sorts of stories is to personalise it. We angled it on a man who had come to work early one morning and been set upon for no reason and beaten up, so we wanted to put a face on that story and that's what drives us all the time. What does a story mean to our readers? Why should they care about it? Why should they want to read it?

Boland and Johnson emphasised that story selection at *The Evening Post* focused on breaking news, with a particular preference for getting stories before *The Dominion*.

Pankhurst said news selection was driven by the editor and was based on research into what the paper thought readers wanted. However, selection was not just based on journalists' instincts as *The Evening Post* did an enormous amount of research into its readership, both for editorial and direct commercial reasons:

> We can tell advertisers how many readers are in the A's and B's category, the top level reader paper. We can draw right down and tell them how many people reading the *Post* on a Wednesday night will go to the movies that week. That sort of detail is of huge market intelligence. That's of huge importance to advertisers, but it also pertains to editorial, because we can look very closely at that and see what categories our main readership lies with. As you would be aware, the pollsters break people down into various segments – affluent acquirers, liberal sophisticates and so on – and these groups have defining characteristics. Liberal sophisticates will be more interested in dining out, in book reviews, less interested in television. So if we discover that we have got a very strong readership in that segment then that's the way we will position our feature in the news coverage.

Boland said there were essentially four influences on what went into the paper each day, with an emphasis on consultation: the editor and other senior managers, the chief reporters, the news editor who put the paper to bed at the end of the day, and the reporters themselves.

6.2.8 Summary of news selection on newspapers with experience of public journalism

Considering the above material about the three newspapers with a public journalism background, it appears that there was little difference in news selection processes. All three papers were strongly focused on their local region. *The Evening Post* and *The Press* included national political coverage, like the *Herald* and *The Dominion,* but were also thoroughly committed to covering their home cities. The *Waikato Times* was more like the *Otago Daily Times,* being entirely committed to local coverage.

The three public journalism newspapers drew their story ideas from the same sources as the other papers and had the same collaborative approach to choosing which stories to put in the paper. The editor directed the process in each case, but, to a greater or lesser degree, operated in consultation with other editorial staff. Reporters had an influence, generating stories from their assigned rounds. Events during the day could change news priorities, while the news editor reserved the right to change things late in the process. These factors were consistent across all six papers.

Regular sources of stories across the three public journalism papers included other media, follows on each paper's own previous coverage, information about opinions and events coming off the fax machine or through email, and ideas from reporters and senior editorial staff. In all three papers there was a desire to find fresh stories that other media did not have.

Interesting variations included the impact of competition in Wellington, which had two daily papers in 2001. *The Evening Post* was clearly heavily influenced by what appeared in *The Dominion,* and vice versa, with the papers' reporters keen to scoop each other. The heavy use of audience research by *The Evening Post* was also of interest, as was its related focus on photographs and on finding human interest angles in policy or issue stories. This suggests the paper was taking a more scientific or marketing oriented approach to planning its news selection, or at least to how stories were covered. This can be contrasted with *The Press* and *Waikato Times,* whose editors said clearly that news selection at their papers was not scientific, and with other interviewees who talked about the use of gut instinct and journalists' professional experience in divining what readers want. *The Evening Post* editor, Tim Pankhurst, was also quite explicit about the importance of the commercial imperative in the news business and the need to use layout and story-telling techniques in order to sell more papers.

Also interesting was *Waikato Times* editor Venetia Sherson's discussion about the qualification to be placed on the journalistic mantra about 'giving readers what they want'. Her view was that

sometimes it was a journalist's job to proactively try and interest people in stories that the media considered to be important.

6.2.9 News selection on the six newspapers

The process for finding potential stories was almost identical across all six papers. Other media were surveyed, existing stories were followed up with new angles, official news sources provided many ideas, and reporters came up with their own ideas from their assigned rounds. Senior staff met with each other and with reporters during the day to sift through the options and prioritise stories.

It is at this point that the newspapers begin to differ from each other. *The Evening Post* and *The Dominion* were competing in the same market and their coverage was driven by the need to differentiate their news products and to beat each other to stories. The former focused more on local events while the latter sold itself as a national paper. At the same time, *The Evening Post* could not ignore national issues because it was selling to a similar audience. *The Dominion* also couldn't completely ignore local issues and took pride in those occasions when its reporters beat *The Evening Post* to local stories.

The *Herald* and *The Press* also had strong elements of national issues coverage, especially the former. The *Herald* saw itself as a national newspaper, but was also very conscious that it was mainly selling in the Auckland and surrounding regional markets and needed to satisfy those readers. Its local focus, however, tended to be on Auckland city and pan-region issues. It quite consciously left a lot of the single-area issues to the weekly or twice-weekly community newspapers. *The Press*, while covering the big national stories, particularly politics, saw its priority as serving Christchurch and covering Canterbury regional issues.

The *Waikato Times* and *Otago Daily Times* made no claim to being national papers and, apart from the most significant national stories, focused almost exclusively on local events. These papers tended to be most interested in events in their parent cities and the surrounding regional areas.

While it could be suggested that the local status of an event was important to all six newspapers, they differed in the threshold at which a local story made it into the paper. On the basis of the interviews, it seems the threshold was lowest on the *Waikato Times* and *Otago Daily Times* and was highest on *The Dominion*. The *Herald, The Evening Post* and *The Press* all covered local stories, at least major ones in their metropolitan areas. *The Dominion* was similar, but was happy to leave almost all local coverage to its local competitor, *The Evening Post*. The *Waikato*

Times and *Otago Daily Times* interviewees not only saw their papers' role as being to cover local metropolitan news, but also regional news.

It seems that the key factor in prioritising which stories to cover came out of each paper's identification of the market it was in and the audience it was seeking to satisfy. This appears to have been a more significant factor than whether or not a paper's editorial leadership had experience with public journalism.

The above discussion examines the news selection processes at the six newspapers. The following looks at the interviewees' comments on the 2001 election coverage itself. What did these senior staff members say about the aims of their coverage and what did the journalists involved think of the results of their efforts? Do the interviews indicate any difference in approach between the three newspapers that had a background in public journalism and those that lacked such a background?

6.3 Aims of 2001 local body election coverage

This section considers what the news managers and senior journalists interviewed thought their newspapers were trying to achieve through their 2001 election coverage. This will involve looking at their perception of the goals of the coverage and the techniques used to attain those goals. It will include discussion about what each journalist saw as the role of their paper during the election period, with interviewees being specifically asked about the importance to them of increasing voter turnout. This section also considers what they felt about their paper's performance during the 2001 Local Body Elections.

As with the previous section, the three papers that had no experience of public journalism will be dealt with first and then those that had a public journalism background. A comparison will then be made between the two groups of papers.

6.3.1 New Zealand Herald

The 2001 election coverage of all papers was affected, to a greater or lesser extent, by the September 11 attacks in Washington and New York, which kept election stories off the main news pages. This was especially true for the more nationally focused papers – the *Herald*, *The Dominion* and *The Evening Post*. The *Herald*'s election coverage was further limited by ongoing industrial action by journalists. The paper, with its greatly reduced reporting resources, tended to focus on the local authorities in Auckland city, leaving its regions to other papers.

Chief reporter Jeremy Rees saw the goal of election coverage as first informing readers about the electoral and voting process:

> The goal I think of covering any election is to make sure that most people are as well informed as they possibly can be about the main issues that they see for the election. In a fragmented local body election that is harder and that is why we concentrated on trying to get the main issues, simply so that they then have a choice to have a vote. I still believe there is a certain public service…in the standard information that a paper or a website should be able to impart – candidates, where to vote, how to vote, how to do it. I think that can't be underestimated that we try to actually explain what you should be doing at this point in voting, then after that presenting the candidates and the issues.

Senior staffer Bernard Orsman spoke broadly of the role of the paper being "to inform our readers of the candidates and the issues and to play a role in facilitating the democratic process".

Columnist Brian Rudman felt the role of a daily paper should be to help people decide whom to vote for, but he said this was a major challenge in a city like Auckland which has a large number of local authorities to cover without even including the regions where the paper circulates. Rudman was unsure whether a paper should actively try to encourage more people to vote:

> I am a bit wary of newspapers campaigning in that sort of way. I see no reason why it shouldn't if it thought it was important to get people to turn out. I'm not certain how you would do it. I haven't got strong opinions whether we should be encouraging it or not.

Rudman felt that poor voter turnout in local elections, which is typically below 50%, was understandable given the task facing voters:

> Most people haven't a clue who the people they're voting for are. I think it is understandable that turnout is pretty poor and in some ways you can say it's quite good. Who are these people who are standing in the wards? You vote for a raft of those and you've got to vote for one or two ward councillors, you've got to vote for the ARC [Auckland Regional Council] [and the] hospital board now – there are so many things.

Rudman said voters need a reason to get out and vote during local elections. In 2001, the candidacy of outspoken former national politician John Banks and his radical policies, such as

selling city-owned housing, was the sort of thing that could stimulate greater turnout. Rudman suggested that voters need "burning issues" to get them out to vote.

Orsman agreed and did not think increasing turnout was the role of the paper:

> I think it's the role of a newspaper to debate the issues, to inform our readers as best we can of the candidates and the issues around the election, but at the end of the day it is up to the voters themselves whether or not they wish to participate in the democratic process.

Rees, as chief reporter, disagreed with his colleagues and thought the paper definitely had a role to play in improving voter turnout, though he said it was not a specific goal of the 2001 coverage. He noted that turnout was often better in rural areas, suggesting this was because voters felt there was a more direct relationship between their involvement and council actions.

Rees rated the paper's 2001 election coverage as "surprisingly good" considering the on-going industrial action by editorial staff. He said he did not know what readers thought of the coverage. No formal evaluation of the coverage was done.

Orsman thought that readers were disappointed with the level of coverage that the *Herald* gave the local body elections. He said that the journalists' strike and the 11 September attacks were not the only elements impacting on the paper's coverage. Overall, he said, the paper's interest in the elections was low because the then editor was not interested. Orsman said that as a reporter he found it was hard to get local authority stories in the paper unless they were considered important or sensational. He felt the *Herald* let the public down in its election coverage by focusing on the leaders involved, particularly concentrating on the mayoral battle between the former National Party politician John Banks and former Labour Party politician Christine Fletcher. This concentration on leadership contests is something which, he said, often happens in election coverage. He thought not enough attention was given to analysing candidates' policies.

Rudman also said overall the coverage was not very good. In particular, he felt that while the *Herald* did report the policies of the eventual Auckland city mayoral winner, John Banks, it did not do enough to help voters understand Mr Banks' policies. Rudman said it was difficult for local body stories to get reported in the paper because they had to fight for their place against world stories or national stories, since the *Herald* sees itself as a national paper. He also thought that the editor focused too much on "people stories" and crime in the overall news selection. Rudman doubted the public were very interested in local government politics. All three *Herald*

staffers contrasted the lack of interest in local elections with the much higher voter turnout in national elections.

Rudman said there is a fundamental difficulty in covering local elections – trying to balance the need to inform the public with the need to avoid boring them:

> I guess they expect to be informed and [to be told] what's going on, but they also don't like being bored and the trouble is it's two opposite issues. Local government politics, by its very nature is pretty boring. Our job is to sell papers too and often on a general basis you've got to have a balance. I know readers think they should be informed and want to be informed, but when you start informing them in any detail they just turn over and want something to entertain them.

In future, Rudman would like to see the *Herald* assign a reporter to each local authority during elections. He said rather than talk to the numerous candidates to get their views, the reporters should focus on giving sound coverage to the main issues in each area.

6.3.2 Otago Daily Times

Editor Robin Charteris felt that a newspaper's role in elections was primarily informational. In 2001, he said, the *ODT* produced a summary of Dunedin and regional issues and candidates timed for publication at the same time as voting papers were sent out. Questions were put to the relevant candidates about issues in Dunedin and key provincial areas Central Otago and Queenstown, with the answers published over a number of weeks. The questions were determined by newspaper staff, with regional reporters expected to generate questions on local issues in their areas. The paper also sponsored mayoral candidate meetings in the main centres.

Charteris said identifying the issues in Queenstown was easy because a prominent and controversial mayor, Warren Cooper, stood down and the style of leadership of the mayoral candidates became a big issue. Dunedin's mayoral election was a non-event by comparison, effectively "a one-horse race".

Charteris felt newspapers have a special role to play in local government elections:

> The major newspapers are the predominant source of information for a base for candidates to get their message across and for voters to learn how they should be considering how to vote and we take that role quite seriously.

He thought part of the paper's role was to improve voter turnout, but to some extent this was beyond the paper's control. For example, in Queenstown turnout was higher because of local

interest in the change of mayor. He said Dunedin's turnout was still very good by national standards. Charteris thought helping voters make up their minds was more important than increasing turnout. Overall, though, he was not satisfied with voter turnout.

Like the other editors interviewed for this research, Charteris noted that there was greater interest in national elections than in local ones.

Local government reporter Andrea Jones said one problem with the 2001 elections in Dunedin was that there was no desire for change among voters. She felt the paper was "up against it a bit" in trying to stimulate interest. She contrasted the 2001 elections with the high level of voter interest in 1998 and said the difference was that voters had an interest in the previous election independent of media coverage:

> This time around the problem was we didn't really run because that base level interest was never there. I think that's the struggle. If it isn't happening already, then you can do your best, but I don't think you can go much further.

In the face of this situation, Jones felt it was the paper's role to assert the importance of local body elections and to try and get people out to vote:

> …to try and make the push 'you should vote, this is your chance here to have your say'…to say 'hey, elections are important, you should take them seriously, you should hear your candidates', and I think that this was an important role.

However, she said that in the end the paper can do only so much and voters have a responsibility to do their bit, too. Jones was disappointed with the actual turnout, but liked to think the *ODT* had a positive effect.

Charteris felt the paper's coverage was well read and that its regional coverage was particularly strong. He based this view on anecdotal feedback from readers and candidates, plus his observations from the *ODT*-sponsored mayoral candidate meetings. He said some meetings were very well attended, though Dunedin's was not (some 100 people turned up as against 300 in 1998). Charteris identified an increasing circulation in a period when the local population was falling, which he said indicated the paper was "doing something right". No scientifically valid analysis of readers' views was carried out. Charteris said papers generally do not do such evaluations partly because they do not have time. Both Charteris and Jones admitted that such evaluations would be useful, though, and they would do them "in an ideal world".

Charteris said while the paper would like to have given more space to the election coverage, this was a trade-off with advertising considerations. Jones said local government stories presented particular challenges to reporters as they could tend to sound repetitive:

> …you are looking at perhaps different ways to handle them – a new angle, a new approach, a fresh look and we are also quite conscious, I think, now of trying to be a bit more people orientated. Local bodies are often a bit dry. They can be worthy but dull I'm afraid, so we are looking to inject a little bit of people into the stories.

Jones felt the best aspect of the paper's coverage was that it tried to cover everything it could, used different approaches to get the message across to voters, presented its coverage in the paper well, and covered the various regions well. One thing the paper did not do, but had done previously, was its own polling. She wanted to see that brought back. It opened the paper up to criticism from some quarters, but overall she thought it would be a good idea and would bring some excitement to the election coverage.

One issue that presents a dilemma for journalists is how to treat minor mayoral candidates who have no chance of success. All candidates were outlined for voters, but Jones said the *ODT* felt it had to acknowledge that some were well out in front. It "copped some criticism for that", according to Jones, with minor candidates saying they had no chance of getting votes if the paper effectively said they were out of the running.

6.3.3 The Dominion

News editor Barrie Swift said *The Dominion,* as a national daily, faced significant hurdles when it covered local body elections:

> Local body elections are boring and they're best done in my opinion by local giveaway papers. Those who are interested read all about their local candidates. We have 29 local bodies in our circulation area and there is no way that we can cover, in depth or in detail and regularly, news about those campaigns in those 29 local bodies because we'd be boring the other 28 areas to death.

He said in 2001 *The Dominion* decided to focus on doing one solid backgrounder on each local authority and only picked up other election stories if they met everyday news values:

> In terms of daily coverage, I mean, if there was an outstanding news story, you know, the mayor or a candidate for mayor went mad in the street and shot somebody, of course it's a news story, but if it's just campaigning we tended to leave it and just rely on the backgrounders that we had prepared.

Chief reporter Bernadette Courtney said readers could have turned to their local free papers for more detail. She agreed with Swift that readers found local elections boring and said there were no complaints about *The Dominion*'s minimal coverage. She said people would have written letters to the editor if they had concerns about the coverage.

Swift said the public's lack of interest was evident through the low voter turnout:

> Only 50% bothered to return their polls. It's hardly difficult to tick something, put it in an envelope and put it in the mailbox, but they don't even vote…This is a country where 92% of the people vote in a general election and…fewer than half vote in local bodies. You can't make the process any easier for them.

Swift was very disappointed with the low turnout in 2001, but doubted the paper could have done anything to improve it. In any case, he did not think that was the paper's role. He said *The Dominion*'s competitor, *The Evening Post*, had put a lot of effort into trying to boost turnout, without, in his view, having much effect.

Courtney said people were not particularly interested in local elections and doubted whether wider or more in-depth coverage would have had any effect on voter turnout. Like Swift, she did not think it was the paper's role to ensure people got out and voted. Likewise, neither she nor Swift thought the paper had a role in helping people decide how to vote.

Swift said the paper gave national elections much more attention:

> Local body elections decide how your rates are spent and how it affects your local neighbourhood, but it really doesn't have the same overall impact on you as a citizen of New Zealand that a general election has. So, we will be in there boots and all, with a lot more detail…Not on local bodies because as I say [voters] can get it elsewhere. The giveaways do quite a good job…That's their bread and butter. It's not ours.

Swift thought the paper's level and type of coverage was about right. He thought if anything, *The Dominion* gave too much space to the 2001 elections. He acknowledged that the paper had to provide some local election coverage, largely because readers expected it, but said coverage should not be any more extensive than was necessary.

6.3.4 Summary of election coverage aims and approaches on newspapers without experience of public journalism

The above discussion about the interviews with senior staff indicates that the three newspapers with no background of public journalism experimentation appeared to take quite different approaches to their election coverage. The *Herald*, hamstrung perhaps by its ongoing strikes, restricted itself largely to covering Auckland city and to a lesser extent the greater Auckland areas of North Shore and Waitakere, neglecting other parts of its circulation area. The *Otago Daily Times* provided coverage across its entire circulation area, with lots of regional stories. *The Dominion* basically did one story on each local authority in its region and then focused on major Wellington city stories only.

The staff at *The Dominion* did not see the paper as having a significant role to play in local government election coverage and felt they had given too much coverage to the election. In contrast, those at the *ODT* considered local election coverage to be central to the paper's role, while staff at the *Herald* would have liked to have done more than they did. The *ODT*, despite the absence of experience with public journalism, actually used a number of techniques in 2001 that are common among those using public journalism. This included organising candidates' meetings and publishing candidates' views on topical issues in their own words.

Staff on all three papers recognised innate problems with covering local, as opposed to national, elections. These problems include the large numbers of candidates standing (with voters consequently not knowing how to differentiate between candidates) and, in some areas, an absence of issues prompting voters to seek a change in their representatives. However, they differed widely in deciding how to respond to this.

There was general acknowledgement that people either find local elections boring, or only become interested in them in certain circumstances, for instance, where there is a high-profile, contentious race for the mayoralty of a main centre. *The Dominion*'s response to this was to leave local elections to weekly community papers. The *ODT* staff felt their paper had to do its best to counter lack of interest among the public. The *Herald* staff were divided, with the then chief reporter, Jeremy Rees, showing a greater interest than his two colleagues in democratic concepts of public participation and the paper's role in stimulating that.

The differences were also highlighted when the interviewees considered their publication's role in boosting voter turnout. The *Dominion* staff saw their paper as having no such role. The *Herald* reporters were divided. At the *ODT*, the staff thought there was a need to try and boost turnout and said their paper tried to do this through arranging public candidates' meetings.

However, they varied in the importance they assigned to this sort of effort. The *ODT* staff highlighted the importance of the public's responsibility to engage in the election process.

Of particular interest was *Herald* chief reporter Jeremy Rees' detailed discussion about public journalism (see section 6.4.1) and his indication above that such ideas were on his agenda for 2001, but had to be abandoned due to the *Herald*'s industrial problems. His post-election interest in democratic participation indicates that perhaps under other circumstances the *Herald* might have pursued a public journalism line.

Another point of interest was the complete lack of evaluation work done post-election. Not one of the papers made a formal effort to find out what readers and voters thought of the election coverage, or whether it encouraged people to vote or helped them make choices. The *ODT*'s editor, Robin Charteris, thought that the coverage may have contributed to a circulation increase, but had no way of knowing that. This lack of evaluation seems odd given that all three papers, even *The Dominion*, made a significant commitment to election coverage. One might postulate that this unscientific approach to election coverage actually fits in well with the unscientific, "gut instinct" approach to deciding news priorities discussed in the first part of this chapter.

The next section considers the aims and approaches to election coverage used by the three newspapers with experience of using public journalism.

6.3.5 Waikato Times

The then editor of the *Waikato Times*, Venetia Sherson, said its 2001 coverage, like earlier election coverage, was branded as 'Operation Democracy'. It continued a consciously public journalism-style approach to elections begun a few years earlier.

The paper ran three public meetings: in Hamilton city, in the smaller town of Cambridge and in the Māori-dominated town of Ngaruawahia. Sherson said the meetings were very successful, with full venues and lots of public participation, including "jeering and heckling and thumping of the floor", which she saw as a positive sign of public involvement. She said the paper also published comments from people highlighting specific local issues in smaller provincial council areas. Correspondents thought one area had a problem because the council covered two towns that were too far apart; in another council's area there was a battle between two towns competing for resources.

Sherson said the goal of the coverage in 2001 was:

> …to illuminate the issues that people felt strongly about, which was done through polling; to get a view from politicians about what they were going to do about that; to try to condense, in a way that the public could understand, the most serious issues, the issues of direction for a council and what it is going to mean to you for the period of the next term; to try to reduce it to a personal level as much as possible.

Sherson said the *Waikato Times* marked sitting councillors' performances out of ten and publicised this. The paper's articles looked back on what councillors had promised at the previous election, asking if they had fulfilled those promises. Reporters gave their predictions on who was likely to win and what that would mean for the councils. Sherson said a crucial goal of the paper's coverage was helping people decide how to vote.

She said the policy was to give preference to local authorities in the circulation area representing the largest population centres – Hamilton City Council, and Waipa and Waikato District Councils. "Fringe" local bodies like the Thames-Coromandel, South Waikato and Matamata-Piako District Councils received less coverage. In the smaller areas local reporters wrote a background piece on the major issues, covering candidates' views and predictions for who would win the mayoralty.

Reporter Geoff Taylor said the election coverage was aimed at educating voters about the major candidates, who they represented and what they represented. He said this was because of the sheer number of candidates standing. The paper tended to concentrate on "notable" candidates. The goal was to let people know who to vote for and what the major issues were that they should think about before they voted.

Sherson said newspapers have a duty to encourage readers to see the importance of some issues and cannot just reduce coverage because readers might get bored:

> If newspapers disengage and think, you know, 'This is boring. Readers won't want to read this', then readers are certainly going to think that. I think that with certain things newspapers do actually have to say, you know, 'You may think this is boring, but it's actually quite important and we are going to sort of make sure that you understand the importance of it and get you to come with us on it'.

Despite this, Sherson said the *Waikato Times* actually reduced its election coverage period in 2001. In previous local government elections, the paper had run a six-week campaign, but she

felt this had been tiring for both staff and the public. Coverage was reduced to four weeks for 2001. While she was happy with the coverage overall, she noted that it did not increase the *Times*' circulation.

Sherson said election stories needed a "spark" or something new to make the front page. The election coverage in Hamilton moved to the front page when it became apparent that the mayoralty could change. Quirky stories also attracted coverage, as did those suggesting hypocrisy or suspect dealings. An example was a story about the Mayor complaining about candidates breaking the rules and smothering fences with excessive numbers of billboards. Later the paper revealed that the Mayor's billboards were among those doing the same thing in another area.

Local government reporter Geoff Taylor felt the public was clearly often bored by local politics. He said in 2001 the paper was waiting for a major issue to come up in Hamilton and for a battle to develop between mayoral candidates. Its wish was granted when David Braithwaite emerged as a contender against incumbent mayor Russ Rimmington. Braithwaite brought with him the big issue the paper was looking for – the building of a new stadium for the city.

Venetia Sherson said newspapers must keep covering elections. Their response to claims that elections are boring should be to try new ways of coverage, not give up:

> I think that it'd be a sad day when newspapers decide that elections, whether general or local body are too dull to cover. I think it's up to us to discover ways to raise interest into, regenerate enthusiasm for, democratic process and debate…it's really still to my mind our absolute responsibility in provincial papers to never stop covering elections because they don't sell papers, to look at any way possible to make them into things that people are talking about…If we stop covering them, if we start saying it's too difficult, there are too many candidates, too much information and who the hell cares, then it's a sad day really for all of us.

Taylor said improving turnout was one of the *Times*' goals, but this was dependent on factors outside the paper's control, for instance whether or not there was an exciting battle for the Hamilton mayoralty. At the end of the day, Taylor thought the 50% turnout in the Waikato was a good result and doubted it could have gone much higher:

> You could just about knock on everybody's door and you still wouldn't get a lot more…I think it would have been nice to have a higher turnout, but I think unless some more charismatic candidates appeared or some horrendous issue appeared,

> then we had to be realistic. It certainly was a priority. If 10% of people had voted, I'd feel pretty depressed about it.

Sherson also said that improving voter turnout was certainly one of the newspaper's election coverage goals. Indeed, she said it really has to be a goal of all election coverage:

> It's always a goal, I think, because it's the only measure really to my mind because we're talking about a crucial process, a process of democracy, where you have a right to vote, your vote counts and in the end that can be a measure of success. I can't say whether we can measure the success of the campaign in any other terms.

Sherson was not happy with the voter turnout and thought that part of the reason was the fact that postal voting was used, with electors submitting their votes over a three-week period rather than having one high-profile election day as with the national elections.

Regarding public feedback, local government reporter Geoff Taylor said there were accusations of bias, with critics feeling the paper did a "hatchet job" on the incumbent mayor, Russ Rimmington. Much of this criticism came from candidates. No formal public feedback was sought on the election coverage. Sherson said the public provided verbal feedback on the *Times*' coverage, which was, by and large, positive. She agreed with Taylor that the complaints about coverage tended to come from candidates who wanted more publicity.

Sherson confessed that the paper's failure to do a proper evaluation of its coverage was a significant oversight. She felt this was typical of newspapers:

> We tend to move on so rapidly that we often don't go back and review and test…The fact that we don't do that is pretty much somewhat budget restraint, but somewhat perhaps arrogant in that we think we know best what is appropriate…We put a whole lot of work into planning and the brainstorming of ideas and the coverage, and then we just moved on to something else. I think that's awful.

6.3.6 The Press

Press editor Paul Thompson said the goal of the paper's election coverage was simply to inform the public:

> To let people know about the key candidates and the key contests, to get a review of how the council had performed in the previous three years, talk about the major issues and where the key people stood on them and then to cover the breaking news out of the campaign…to arm people with some information so that they can make their own mind up.

Thompson said the focus was on Christchurch City Council because it was the largest local authority in the circulation area. Smaller councils got one feature, each identifying the issues and candidates. Within Christchurch, the coverage centred on the mayoralty because it provided an easy focal point for the elections: "It's quite easy to focus on a mayoral race as well. It becomes a little bit personality, a confined struggle, there's a winner or a loser."

Deputy chief reporter Colin Espiner said commercial realities were behind the focus on Christchurch. Three-quarters of *The Press*' sales take place in the city, while the commercial imperative also means that news space is limited.

Paul Thompson said *The Press* used the Christchurch City Council's own surveys of the needs of its communities to identify five issues to focus on. These issues had been top of the council's list that people had responded to through the annual plan process – law and order, transport, smog, water quality and basic services such as rubbish, roads and libraries. The paper looked at what all the candidates thought about these issues and ran items over a series of weeks. This coverage was kicked off with a front page news story telling people about the coverage plan and inviting them to ring, write to or email *The Press* with their experiences or any problems they had that they wanted the paper to cover over the campaign.

Thompson said the coverage was also informed by letters to the editor from previous years and by the instincts of journalists:

> I suppose it's what journalists always do, which is try to put yourself in your readers' shoes, try to think about what makes a story interesting…and trying to think about what things actually matter.

Espiner said *The Press* started its coverage by running features designed to get readers interested in the elections, but, outside of these features, normal news values still applied, especially for the front page.

Thompson said improving voter turnout was a goal, but added that newspaper readers tended to be voters, so in a sense *The Press* was "preaching to the converted". While it would be nice to boost voting numbers, he said it was unlikely that the paper could do that. One way to improve turnout would be to change the nature of the coverage of local government per se, but Thompson had his doubts as to whether this would work either:

> I think a different approach to local government reporting, actually creating more interest in councils, and making people feel more connected to them, that ultimately may boost turnout, but that would have to be part of a huge campaign where the

> council got involved in that and other agencies. It couldn't just be the newspaper by itself. But I don't think you are ever going to increase voter turnout, no matter how hard you try…What drives a good voter turnout is a real good close mayoralty race.

Espiner said *The Press* tried to strike a balance between encouraging readers to vote and informing them about the issues while not boring them. He said boring people was a common risk in local government election coverage and no newspaper had yet come up with a solution. Apathy was evident in 2001 when the paper tried to run a competition. Only 30 entries were received for an election-based competition offering a prize of $250 in book tokens, while another competition offering a Harry Potter movie ticket attracted 400 replies.

Espiner, as deputy chief reporter, differed from Thompson, his editor, in that he did not regard improving turnout as being a goal of the election coverage. He felt it was much more important for the paper to help confirmed voters decide how to vote.

Thompson, however, felt *The Press* let its readers down by not doing its democratic duty and encouraging greater interest in local government. He thought the coverage should have been more constructive and balanced. He believed the media had a responsibility to enhance democracy and try to instil confidence in institutions rather than getting into negative slanging matches and petty disputes:

> You have this cynicism about local government particularly at voting time…Well, I think it just indicates a huge disconnection. People don't understand local government as being quite vital to the community and their lives. I think *The Press* could have done better, probably over a number of years, in writing local government stories which [show] how interesting local government is, how important it is, that it's not just a matter of personalities, it's a matter of community and social fabric and cohesion. At times we are much better at writing stories about the breakdown of that cohesion or the odd incident where personalities, or failure, rather than the ongoing information about things they're doing, what it's costing you, how you can have your say, how you can get involved…

Thompson said national elections were easier to cover than local ones. This was because the issues were big and people were a lot more aware of what the issues were. He thought people found it easier to see the link between their life and the health system or the police.

Thompson said *The Press* didn't do any formal evaluation of its 2001 coverage. He said that in "an ideal world" evaluations would be carried out regularly, but in the real world the need to

keep on producing a newspaper tended to distract journalists' attention. He thought using experienced reporters to cover future elections would be a better use of the paper's resources than doing evaluative research. Thompson said he didn't know what the public thought about the paper's 2001 coverage.

Espiner would have liked to have seen more planning and some formal research as well as polling, though he said polling was difficult to do because of the cost.

6.3.7 The Evening Post

The Evening Post's editor, Tim Pankhurst, said the paper's 2001 election coverage, titled 'Your Call', was "the epitome" of public journalism, being closely modelled on campaigns used by the *Charlotte Observer* in the United States. Central to the 2001 election coverage was letting the coverage be driven by readers' interests rather than by journalists "sitting in the office and setting the agenda".

Prior to the election coverage beginning, 400 people were polled to identify the major issues for voters. Ten issues were selected and these formed the basis of the election coverage, with Wellington's mayoral candidates being required to give their views on each issue. The campaign was kicked off by an editorial promoting the right to vote. Towards the end of the campaign a large venue was hired for a public meeting of the mayoral candidates.

Pankhurst said *The Evening Post*'s coverage was aimed primarily at the Wellington mayoralty, though all other areas were covered. He said the mayoralty of the capital city attracted the biggest interest among the public. Also, a high profile mayor, Mark Blumsky, was standing down, so there was a lot of interest in who would succeed him. Other cities in the greater Wellington metropolitan area (Lower Hutt, Upper Hutt and Porirua) were also covered as were regional centres (Masterton and Kapiti Coast) and the region's two rural councils (South Wairarapa and Carterton). In all these cases the focus was on the mayoral contests. Pankhurst felt the paper made "an enormous commitment" in 2001 and provided more coverage than any other newspaper.

Pankhurst said *The Evening Post* had an eye for quirky stories during the campaign because staff were aware that people could get bored with election coverage. A lot of election items made it on to the front page or were teased on the front, with the full item inside the paper. Again, Pankhurst said the paper had to have other stories on page one because some readers weren't interested in the election.

He said the goal was to promote voter interest in the election, encouraging people to vote by warning them that they couldn't complain afterwards if they didn't take part. He was disappointed with the final voter turnout and especially with the poor showing at the paper's final election candidates' meeting – just 250 people.

The Evening Post's other staffers were divided on the question of improving voter turnout. Local government reporter Anne-Marie Johnson agreed that improving voter turnout was a goal of the election coverage. However, deputy chief reporter Mary-Jane Boland said it wasn't the paper's role to improve voter turnout or help people decide how to vote.

Overall, editor Tim Pankhurst was proud of the 2001 coverage. However, he was critical of a number of aspects. He considered the 2001 coverage to have been excessive in terms of space and would not do the same thing again. He also said the questions put to candidates needed changing because too many responses were "mealy-mouthed". One particular shortcoming of the election coverage irked him in particular. This was that by treating all mayoral candidates the same, the paper ended up giving equal space to "loonies, the bewildered and the deranged". He felt the paper had, to some extent, abrogated its news sense and been unfair to the serious contenders.

Johnson and Boland were generally happy with *The Evening Post*'s coverage, but felt there was an excessive focus on Wellington city. They would have liked to have seen more coverage of the other mayoral elections and councils. Johnson said another weakness was a perceived conflict between giving all candidates equal coverage when *The Evening Post* clearly had its own favourite for Wellington's mayor. She agreed with her editor in thinking the paper gave too much space to the elections. Boland also agreed that the paper published too much election material given the lack of interest evident among many people and the lack of financial benefit to the paper. She thought it would have been better to have done a single lift-out one day rather than cover the election and candidates in detail every day.

Pankhurst said no evaluation was done of *The Evening Post*'s coverage, largely because of the expense and the fact that all efforts were going into covering the top 10 issues.

He said the twin goals of the coverage were commercial and democratic. The paper wanted to make money as well as discharge its civic duty: "We were genuinely concerned about debating issues and getting bigger voter buy-in, but also we wanted to raise our profile as well and sell more papers."

He identified no large circulation gain during the elections. By contrast, the September 11 attacks did boost sales significantly, with the September 12 issue selling 28,000 extra copies.

6.3.8 Summary of election coverage aims and approaches on newspapers with experience of public journalism

There were some significant common features between the three newspapers with experience of public journalism in terms of their election coverage in 2001. There were also differences.

The common goal appears to have been to inform readers, with a desire by all three editors to also improve voter turnout on previous elections. They were all subsequently disappointed by the poor voting levels in 2001. All three papers attempted to identify the issues of importance to voters and residents generally – the *Waikato Times* and *The Evening Post* by conducting their own polls, *The Press* by using Christchurch City Council's poll results. The three papers all decided to focus their coverage on the main metropolitan council and significant other ones rather than cover all local authorities equally. Within the councils, the focus was on mayoral races rather than trying to cover all offices up for election. There was general agreement that election stories needed a "spark" to give them a prominent place in the paper. A good tussle for the mayoralty was seen as a good way of boosting interest in the elections.

There seems to have been a general feeling, certainly among the editors of the papers with public journalism experience, that their newspapers had a very important role to play during elections. *The Evening Post* put together a classic programme of public journalism coverage, with detailed polling followed by systematic coverage of the issues identified by the public and organising a major public candidates meeting. The *Waikato Times* editor expounded at length on the democratic role of the media and said that just because some readers might get bored with local elections, that was no reason to cut back on coverage. The paper promoted public involvement by organising three candidates meetings, including two outside the main centre, Hamilton. *The Press*' editor, although somewhat disillusioned with public journalism (see section 6.4.5 below), still said there was a need for the media to support the electoral process and avoid being drawn into focusing on the candidates' agendas.

Some staff at the three papers displayed a generally cautious approach to public journalism, with others identifying problems with aspects of it. *The Press*' staff, including the editor, were clearly jaded by previous experiences with using public journalism techniques in election coverage and had already begun to move away from it in 2001. There were concerns that public journalism coverage could be "turgid" and make too much of the views of a few ordinary citizens. *The Evening Post* journalists felt they had gone overboard with their coverage, with the

editor regretting having given "loonies" as much space as serious contenders. The *Waikato Times* editor, perhaps the strongest proponent of public journalism among the interviewees, felt that public journalism needed freshening up if it was going to be used again (see section 6.4.4).

None of the three papers considered it worthwhile to evaluate their coverage in any formal way. Only the editor of the *Waikato Times* seemed to think it was a problem that this didn't happen. Evaluation of coverage has been a common feature of US public journalism experiments, checking to see if the campaigns have produced any positive effects. Not so in New Zealand.

There were some differences between the interviewees on the papers with experience of public journalism. While the editor of *The Press* was keen to boost turnout, his deputy chief reporter had no such interest. The *Evening Post* staff were likewise divided. Only the *Waikato Times* interviewees were agreed that improving turnout was part of the paper's role. All three of *The Evening Post* journalists said they felt they had given the election too much coverage. This was in contrast to the other two papers whose staff talked about what else they could have done to improve their coverage. The editor of *The Evening Post* and the deputy chief reporter of *The Press* both highlighted the importance of their paper's keeping an eye on the commercial imperatives of the news business.

6.3.9 Election coverage aims and approaches on the six newspapers

There were some significant similarities and differences among the six newspapers in terms of their goals and approaches taken in relation to coverage of the 2001 elections, and these were not always related to the public journalism experience of the newspapers.

In all six cases the papers were aiming to inform the public in order to help them vote. All papers focused their coverage on only some of the local authorities in their circulation area and, within these councils, they focused on the mayoral contests. This was because it was deemed in all cases to not be feasible to cover all the elections underway.

Differences emerged when the interviewees were asked about coverage outside their main metropolitan area. Only the *ODT* and the *Waikato Times* identified a commitment to covering their regional areas in any depth. It is fair to describe these two papers as being more provincially focused than the other four. Even in their case, though, the main focus was still on the main cities.

Differences also emerged when the interviewees were asked whether it was their paper's role to boost voter turnout. While *The Dominion* was the only paper on which all interviewees felt

improving turnout wasn't the paper's role, staff on the *Herald*, *The Press* and *The Evening Post* were divided on this point. Interviewees from the *Otago Daily Times* and *Waikato Times*, on the other hand, were agreed that newspapers should try and get more people out to vote.

Some newspapers stood back from the electoral process, preferring to focus on covering the issues and providing readers with information. Others, however, took a more active part in the process and tried to create events to involve the public in the election process. The three papers with public journalism experience all used polls to identify the issues that people were most concerned about. Two of these papers – *The Evening Post* and *Waikato Times* – plus the *ODT* organised public candidates meetings.

The editors of the three papers with a public journalism background, along with the chief reporter at the *Herald* and the *ODT* staff identified as important the media's role in supporting the democratic process during elections. *The Dominion* staff identified no such role and indicated a reluctance to provide much coverage for local elections, concluding that too much space had been given to the elections in 2001. *The Evening Post* interviewees, in spite of their commitment to public journalism, took the same view and indicated that their coverage was excessive.

Staff at the three papers with public journalism experience, like those at the *Herald*, *The Dominion* and the *ODT*, were conscious that the public has a mixed attitude to local election coverage. All interviewees recognised that it was their papers' role to provide coverage, but they feared boring readers with excessive coverage. However, while *The Dominion*'s response was to shy away from covering elections and *The Evening Post* staff felt they had done too much coverage, many other interviewees took the opposite view. The *ODT* staff, the *Herald*'s most senior participant, the *Waikato Times* staff and the editor of *The Press* felt their papers had to actively try to counter lack of interest among the public.

None of the six papers considered it worthwhile to evaluate their coverage in any formal way. Only the editor of the *Waikato Times* seemed to think it was a significant problem that this did not happen. As mentioned earlier, evaluation of coverage has been a common feature of US public journalism experiments, checking to see if the campaigns have produced any positive effects.

Looking at all six papers, there was a widespread sense of disappointment with the results of the election coverage, created largely by poor voter turnout. There was a common feeling of duality about local elections – an acceptance that they have to be covered, but a concern that the public

just are not very interested. There was also a tension between the need to cover elections and the need to make money by selling newspapers. None of the journalists interviewed was able to point to a circulation increase that coincided with the 2001 election coverage.

From the above, it is clear there was variation between the papers and even between the staff on each paper, particularly when they were asked to discuss the voter turnout issue and the media's role in the democratic electoral process. The *Otago Daily Times* staff reflected the same commitment to trying to make the electoral process work as was expressed by the editors of the three papers with public journalism experience. The chief reporter of the *Herald* indicated that he took a similar view of the media's role during elections. Only the staff at *The Dominion* took a generally negative approach to local election coverage and did not consider their paper had much of a role to play. However, it has to be noted their view was that their competitor, *The Evening Post*, was already covering the elections in a substantial way.

The next section examines what the interviewees knew about public journalism. After that, the overall results of the interviews will be considered.

6.4 Editorial decision makers' knowledge of public journalism

All interviewees were asked about the term "public journalism" and what it meant to them. Some of the answers reported below are very brief because the interviewees concerned had little to offer.

6.4.1 New Zealand Herald

Asked about public journalism, senior reporter Bernard Orsman said he had never heard of it. Columnist Bryan Rudman thought it was "something from America" that a person in a journalism school might know something about. Chief reporter Jeremy Rees, however, said he had heard about public journalism from American journalism reviews, and offered the following, fairly well informed, definition:

> It seems to me that the guts of it is that the role of the paper is…being very informative on what readers want, the issues that actually seem to affect them and to be part of that process either by town hall meetings as they call them in New England or getting the MP or candidate to actually discuss through the pages directly with reader feedback. We are part of the process of democracy and we try to involve the public as much as possible in that process…rather than simply being captured by what the politician wants. So it is opposed to political journalism where you are sort of discussing what so and so said yesterday and what that means for

> the vote. Public journalism means back down with issues and what the readers, what they believe the issues are.

Rees was aware of early public journalism experiments conducted by other New Zealand newspapers in the 1990s and had been interested in pursuing a similar approach to coverage in 2001. However, the strikes prevented the *Herald* going further with these plans. Rees said he was interested in identifying the big issues in Auckland and polling the public, though he said there was never an intention to poll readers to identify issues of concern to them. The issues to be covered appeared to be those identified by journalists.

Rees said that since 2001 *Herald* staff had been talking more about how they could help people better participate in democracy on an ongoing basis, not just during elections. This approach included publishing a lot more reader feedback on issues. It recalled some of the aspects of public journalism:

> The *Herald* has got into…actually trying to foster people to generate a lot better dialogue between the readers and the newspaper and website and ourselves as part of a function of allowing people to be better informed and take part in democracy and life in general.

6.4.2 Otago Daily Times

Editor Robin Charteris said he had heard about public journalism, which he identified as an American idea written about in journalism publications. He believed public journalism focused on public opinion, but beyond that knew nothing about it. Local government reporter Andrea Jones, however, had heard nothing about public journalism.

6.4.3 The Dominion

News editor Barrie Swift and chief reporter Bernadette Courtney had both heard "something" about public journalism, but were not sure what it was. Swift said he had seen references to public journalism, but had never been clear in his mind as to what the term actually meant.

6.4.4 Waikato Times

As mentioned earlier, the *Waikato Times* had a history of using public journalism in its election coverage pre-2001. Editor Venetia Sherson was personally involved in this for a number of years and drove the use of public journalism on the paper. She said its 'Operation Democracy' branding of elections was all about helping readers make up their minds rather than taking a more campaigning approach on key issues. The campaigning approach is a technique which she

associated with American media. She said her observation from previous experience was that telling readers what to think actually offended them. Having said that, she thought that on occasion the *Waikato Times* should take a position in order to draw public attention to an issue or project.

Sherson said the use of what she called "public service journalism" was a response to voters turning off local body elections. She noted that it had been used in the United States for the same reason:

> It's an absolute lack of relevance, a feeling of powerlessness, that these are things which you hear, the campaign promises. You see a wave of faces that you have never seen before come before you, you hear what they say and they go away again and then they never listen to you again. A feeling, I think, of disenfranchisement…We were, like a lot of newspapers, frustrated by the disengagement of the public, the turn-off factor, the fact that we seemed to every year report elections in the same way, so we were looking for some new energy and some new engagement and the model of what they had done on those [US] papers was very appealing to us. We didn't think of it, I don't think, as public service journalism at that time, or public journalism. We just felt it was a very good way to cover local body and civic activities.

The *Waikato Times*' approach was to let voters pick the issues rather than base election coverage on the priorities of politicians. Sherson had done a lot of reading on the topic and saw public journalism as being about the media getting involved in stories:

> As I understand it, it's very much a paper being part of the democratic process, not being a bystander but being a participant and having a view, and making sure that view is heard and that it's something that you drive as a person with an interest in it, as opposed to covering what other people are saying about something.

Sherson said the fact that voter turnout did not seem to improve in 2001 suggested that the public journalism approach might need rejuvenating so it could work properly again. She said when public journalism techniques were first used at the *Times*, there was an increase in turnout. While she acknowledged that this could not necessarily be attributed to public journalism, she felt it was related to the fact that the coverage attracted more reader interest. She believed public journalism could help people re-engage. An example of this was the three public meetings run by the *Times* in 2001:

> We filled the halls in all of those places. Barnstorming meetings they were – wonderful meetings…I think that was an indication to us that when you are talking

> in a way that voters believe is a real way, we're not just publishing platitudes and those sorts of things, that people will engage.

Sherson said the public journalism approach was liked by readers, but it had its critics, usually politicians. The criticism often resulted from the paper asking candidates questions that reflected public interests and ignoring candidates' own campaign messages.

Sherson acknowledged that public journalism did have its pitfalls, especially if a paper started to avoid covering things that did not suit its campaign. However, she felt this was a risk that had to be accepted when using public journalism. She also believed people could be put off if the media were seen to brow beat people with a certain viewpoint.

Sherson didn't see a conflict between the goals of public journalism and the commercial goals of the paper or the traditional role of the newspaper. She saw public journalism as simply what good newspapers should do:

> What I've always thought about public journalism or civic journalism is that it is in fact what journalists should be doing anyway. We had just got away from doing it in the way newspapers used to do it…I'm not an expert, I'm not an historian, but it does seem to me that newspapers have become a lot more timid in taking a stand and a lot less inclined to go out on a limb or to take any role other than that of an objective observer…I suppose I put it down to newspapers being much more middle of the road, trying to please too many people, going for the mass market…

Sherson said she would always stick with public journalism, which she tended to see as harking back to some old-fashioned reporting style:

> I think the fact that this has been given a label probably makes some people wary of it, but I do think it's what newspapers have always done and now, you know, they are starting to do it again.

She said New Zealand newspapers had tended to adopt aspects of public journalism, but wider acceptance had been hindered partly by the absence of intellectual discussion among journalists and timidity:

> One of the things which we don't have the privilege of in New Zealand is that intellectual discussion of such subjects. If editors could get together and discuss public journalism and its benefits and its disadvantages and the way forward, I think we might come up with a good model which newspapers could apply much more regularly, but I sense that that won't happen unless one newspaper does really

> start to push ahead and really demonstrates that that is a good route. So, as I say, I think we are a little timid or newspapers in general are a little timid because they are all going after every reader and they don't want to offend or alienate any group at all.

Interestingly, *Waikato Times* local government reporter Geoff Taylor hadn't heard about public journalism, but was interested to know what it was. This was remarkable given his editor's interest in discussing the ins and outs of public journalism at length and the long experience of using public journalism techniques at the *Waikato Times*.

6.4.5 The Press

Both Editor Paul Thompson and deputy chief reporter Colin Espiner appeared to have become disillusioned with public journalism by 2001. Thompson had experience in using public journalism while working at the *Waikato Times* on previous election coverage under the leadership of then editor Tim Pankhurst. Thompson defined public journalism as the media playing a deliberately positive role in the election process:

> Rather than the newspaper just reporting the news passively…you actually try to take a bit of a broader view of your role as a newspaper and try to play a positive role as a member of the community.

However, Thompson said his experience of public journalism had been that while it was interesting, it tended to become "turgid". He had no on-going commitment to public journalism, which he saw as something that had to extend to everything a paper did:

> I don't place a priority on that type of journalism at *The Press*. I think if you are going to do it, you have to commit to doing it everyday, every year, and on an ongoing basis not just six weeks around an election campaign. I think that was a mistake.

Espiner said public journalism was about the media campaigning on issues. He said a "public-driven" approach used by *The Press* during the 1998 local body elections had not really improved the quality of coverage:

> We did lots of polling, which was fine, but my problem with that approach, while it won us a journalism award at the time for an innovative approach, I don't think our readers learnt anything because all they were getting back was what Disgruntled of Aranui thought rather than, 'Here's a problem, here are the issues, here's some information that might help you make up your mind'.

In 2001, as a result, *The Press* decided to focus on an "issues-based approach". Espiner contrasted this with the earlier "public-driven" approach.

6.4.6 The Evening Post

Editor Tim Pankhurst said the 2001 coverage at *The Evening Post* was derived from public journalism campaigns used by the *Charlotte Observer* in the United States and followed a much-used public journalism approach. The coverage was based on public journalism theory of disconnection and involved identifying the main issues that the public were concerned about, basing coverage around those issues and forcing candidates to buy into the process. *The Evening Post*'s 2001 coverage mirrored coverage of the 1998 local body elections in Christchurch by *The Press*. Pankhurst, as editor of *The Press* in 1998, led that project, which was called "Your voice, your vote".

His exposure to public journalism actually began in 1996 when he was editor of the *Waikato Times*. Venetia Sherson, editor of the *Times* in 2001, was its deputy editor in 1996 and passed on to Pankhurst her own enthusiasm for public journalism. He understood public journalism to mean involving the readers in the news and, instead of journalists setting the agenda and deciding what should be covered, going out and consulting a lot more with readers. Pankhurst and Sherson first experimented with public journalism during the 1996 national elections, polling readers to identify the main issues. Pankhurst said the *Waikato Times*' focus on readers' priorities in 1996 led it to be very direct with candidates, telling them to stop sending out media releases and warning them that the agenda would be set by readers' priorities. He continued to pursue this pattern of coverage at *The Press* in 1998 (local body elections) and 1999 (national elections) and at *The Evening Post* in 2001. Pankhurst said he ended up studying public journalism further by visiting the *Observer* in the late 1990s, while Sherson did courses at the Poynter Institute in Miami.

The 2001 local elections saw Pankhurst making a very clear statement to *The Evening Post* readers about the public journalism philosophical basis for the paper's coverage, though interestingly the words "public journalism" were nowhere used:

> We said in an editorial many people feel disconnected from the political process…They see the politicians and the media in an intricate, intertwined dance that does not allow for another partner. Voters have become the wallflowers, almost marginalised, as powerful players set the agenda and pursue their interests.

He said *The Evening Post* had also used public journalism outside the election context. One example was over poor train service. The paper set up a hot line and an email address and got

hundreds of responses. It then set out to embarrass the rail company into improving its service. The paper was flooded with stories about trains going slow because of poor track maintenance, cancellations, lateness, going through stations. The paper also found out that none of the rail company's senior managers took the train to work. The company quickly apologised to customers. Other such stories include *The Evening Post* advocating for roading projects and a new hospital.

Pankhurst acknowledged that there was also a commercial reason behind adopting public journalism techniques:

> Well, I think the aim is pretty clear. Ultimately it is to increase readership and circulation by becoming more relevant, by involving the people more in the product and bridging that divide…I think there was a sort of a dim recognition that we are quite isolated from, in some respects, from our community and I suppose what brought that home was the decline in circulation, or flat circulation, and the realisation that to a hell of a lot of people out there we are not relevant.

He didn't have much time for US critics of public journalism because he said their newspapers were losing circulation. He thought public journalism was just "good journalism…newspapers doing what they should be doing". He said being sensitive to readers led to more positive stories and more human interest pieces.

Local government reporter Anne-Marie Johnson and deputy chief reporter Mary-Jane Boland saw public journalism as "public duty journalism". They were aware that *The Evening Post*'s 2001 election coverage was an example of public journalism. They both identified a key feature of this approach as providing readers with information. They also referred to there being a tension between this role of the newspaper and the risk of putting readers off by providing too much coverage.

Boland had a greater knowledge about public journalism than her colleague. She knew that *The Evening Post*'s use of public journalism was based on techniques used by United States newspapers. She considered public journalism to be primarily about "developing a crusade or doing stories on campaigns". She identified stories written by the paper outside the elections as also being public journalism, specifically stories promoting a preferred new state highway route north of Wellington and locating a new regional hospital in the capital.

6.4.7 Summary of knowledge about public journalism

The above discussion indicates quite a wide range of understanding about public journalism. The majority of interviewees, including those on newspapers that had no experience of using public journalism, had heard the expression "public journalism". However, few had much idea of what the term meant. As might be expected this was particularly the case on papers with no experience of public journalism approaches.

Interestingly, the chief reporter of the *Herald* had a very detailed understanding of public journalism and indicated that he was interested in using this approach. It seemed to fit well with his understanding of the *Herald*'s role in the democratic process. Meanwhile, among the staff on the newspapers with experience in using public journalism there were significant gaps in knowledge about the concept. The *Waikato Times*' local government reporter knew nothing about it despite his editor being one of the staunchest supports of public journalism. The *Evening Post*'s local government reporter knew what public journalism was in general terms, but had no depth of understanding.

In the case of the papers with experience of public journalism, the three editors had the most extensive knowledge of public journalism and were able to discuss it in significant detail. This included offering insights into its weaknesses and reflecting on the use of public journalism in 2001. All three had an extensive background in the use of public journalism over a number of elections on different newspapers. This suggests that the New Zealand experience of public journalism mirrors the US one with public journalism being driven from the top.

6.5 Summary of interviews with editorial decision makers

The news selection processes used on the six papers were almost identical. The final decision about what appeared in each paper was the result of an on-going process through which ideas changed during the day. Input came from a wide range of sources: following up stories from the previous day, picking up on important national stories, the priorities of senior staff, reporters' own ideas, etc.

The news selection process at all the papers had a collegial or cooperative aspect to it, with editors having a dominant role, but with all editorial staff having the right to be heard. The final say always ended up with the news editor who decided what physically went on the page immediately before it went to print. Events could always change the front page. The input of the public seems to have been confined to news tips phoned through to the paper or passed by word of mouth.

Asked more closely about news values, the typical response in the interviews was that experienced journalists basically know what makes a story. This conviction seems to be a bedrock belief among journalists, being expressed in different ways by almost all those interviewed. *The Evening Post* took a more scientific approach, with the editor indicating that market research was used to keep in touch with reader's priorities.

During election periods, the above process continued. The six newspapers all recognised a public duty to cover local government elections, but the prominence given to election stories was still largely determined by standard, daily news values. The *Waikato Times* interviewees, for example, said that the election was moved to the front page by a story suggesting that the mayor was using his status to pursue a personal dispute over an Auckland marina. The fact it was an election gave the story added value, but the implied misuse of mayoral status would have made a good story on any news day.

Also important in terms of news selection was the nature of each paper's market. The *Herald* and *The Dominion* saw themselves as national dailies. They covered their local areas, but only on the major issues. The latter was also motivated by the priorities of its competitor in the Wellington market, *The Evening Post*. It generally left local coverage to *The Evening Post* except when it was able to get an exclusive story or the story was big enough to demand attention. The *Herald* was likewise happy to leave coverage outside Auckland city proper to community newspapers. *The Evening Post* and *The Press* had a partial national focus, largely in terms of political coverage, but were aware that their bread and butter was their respective local metropolitan markets. The *Waikato Times* and *Otago Daily Times* forsook national coverage, except for major stories, as their markets were smaller cities and neighbouring regional communities.

During the 2001 elections each paper tended to stick close to its metropolitan area and cover that city's mayoral race. The *ODT* had a greater commitment than any other paper to its regions, although even in its case the metropolitan Dunedin City Council got significantly more coverage than other councils.

Almost all respondents mentioned the danger of boring people with too much or too prominent local election coverage. *The Dominion* staff, who saw their paper as having a very limited role in covering local elections, said national elections were much more important to both the media and the public and as such warranted more attention. They proposed cutting back local election coverage in future. *The Evening Post* journalists also felt their coverage had been too extensive.

There was plenty of discussion about the democratic role of the news media during elections, but it was universally acknowledged that election coverage had to be balanced with the need to sell papers for everyone to read. Staff on all papers contrasted the poor local election turnout (often at or even below 50%) with the high turnout for national elections (historically above 80%). In this environment consideration always had to be given to readers who weren't interested in local elections. Too much coverage and the implied fear was that newspaper sales might fall.

There were wide differences in what one might have thought was a key feature of media coverage of elections – the need to stimulate people to vote. Of the 14 journalists interviewed, eight felt this was at least an important part of the media role during an election. Six, however, felt it was either a minor role or not a role at all. At the *Waikato Times* and the *Otago Daily Times*, staff uniformly felt this was an important role. At *The Dominion*, both staff felt it definitely wasn't a role for the media. At the other three papers, staff were divided as to the appropriateness of the media trying to improve turnout. Interestingly, it was the most senior staff on these three papers (the editors of *The Evening Post* and *The Press* and the chief reporter of the *Herald*) who said the media should try and get more people out to vote while it was their subordinates who felt the opposite.

Among those who thought improving turnout was a media role there was considerable disappointment about the poor final turnout. None of those interviewed seemed to have had any real idea about how to increase turnout. A common refrain was that many people simply find local body elections boring and/or that people will only vote when an issue or mayoral race comes up that motivates them to take part.

Differences emerged between the six papers when the journalists considered how they should respond to the lack of public interest in local body elections. *The Dominion*'s view was to cut coverage. Its lack of interest in the elections was not shared by others, though, despite their knowledge that people got bored. While *The Evening Post* wanted to cut its coverage, its editor still acknowledged the importance of trying to stimulate voter interest. *The Press* and *Waikato Times* editors felt it was not good enough for the media to simply give up and buy into the voter apathy story. The *ODT* staff felt the same. The *Herald* chief reporter displayed a very strong commitment to the democratic role of the media and wished he could have published more election coverage.

All three of the papers with public journalism experience sought to base their coverage on polls that identified issues of importance to the public. Two of these papers also organised public meetings to bring voters together with the candidates. The *ODT* also organised such meetings.

Not one of the six papers surveyed did any formal evaluation of its coverage, which may seem extraordinary given the huge effort made to cover the elections in most cases. Typically, the reasons given for this were that there was not enough time to reflect on yesterday due to today's deadlines, or that it simply was not cost effective. Only the editor of the *Waikato Times* felt that this lack of evaluation was a major shortcoming. However, despite the lack of evaluation, all interviewees felt they had a sense of how good their coverage was, often pointing to an absence of public complaints to indicate the coverage was at least adequate. As with the discussion about news values, there was a feeling that journalists know what the public is thinking, in general terms, and get a sense of whether coverage is on the right track.

Those staff with experience of public journalism-style campaigns found some value in this approach, but they also often expressed misgivings about public journalism. *The Evening Post* staff were quite happy with their public journalism-based campaign in 2001, but felt they had given too much space to the election and had doubts as to whether it produced any circulation gains. The editor felt that too much of a voice had been given to "loonies". The *Press* interviewees were clearly disillusioned with public journalism and the value of public input into coverage, opting for a more controlled approach focusing on a small number of issues. The editor of the *Waikato Times*, who had a long-standing enthusiasm for public journalism, doubted it sold more papers and felt it had to be freshened up after being used for a few elections.

The impression one gets is that while public journalism techniques in general were still seen to be useful by those who had used them before, each paper involved seemed likely to pick and choose what it might do in future. Different techniques were used by different papers in 2001 and this was likely to continue: perhaps using reader polls to identify issues or perhaps just journalistic experience; perhaps publishing candidates' voting records; perhaps letting candidates speak in their own words; perhaps organising public meetings. The decisions about how to cover future elections were likely to be driven by a combination of wanting to keep coverage fresh, while not boring readers or offering them information or candidates' views that aren't useful.

Significantly, the *ODT*, which had no history of using public journalism, displayed a number of features that are common in public journalism. It organised public candidates meetings. While it did not poll readers to identify important issues, its reporters did identify a group of issues and

then run a series in which candidates stated their positions in their own words. The staff interviewed also stated very clearly that the paper had an active role to play during local elections. In the case of the *Herald*, the chief reporter stated very clearly that he was interested in public journalism and would have adopted some of its techniques if he had had more staff available during the 2001 elections.

Perhaps the most salient aspect of public journalism theory to come through strongly in the interviews is a commitment to have election coverage driven by issues identified either by the public or, more likely, by a combination of the public and the views of experienced journalists. No paper seemed interested in giving candidates more of a say. *The Evening Post* and *ODT* both ran extensive series in which candidates stated their policies, but the candidates did not get to choose the issues they were commenting on. This perhaps is the enduring legacy of public journalism in New Zealand metropolitan daily newspapers. Regardless of the techniques used, there seemed to be general agreement that the politicians should not call the shots during elections.

The interviews from the papers consciously using public journalism techniques or having previous experience in using public journalism techniques talk about the large investment needed for public journalism initiatives to succeed. They also highlight a certain tiredness with public journalism, a feeling that perhaps not enough has been gained for the investment. Some editorial staff talked about cutting back on coverage, trying different techniques in future elections.

The above discussion highlights many similarities between the six newspapers in terms of their approaches to news selection and covering the 2001 Local Body Election. It also points to numerous differences. The differences and similarities do not match up simply as differences or similarities between newspapers with, or without, experience of public journalism.

In terms of news selection, there is a strong sense of similarity between all the papers. The evidence from staff at newspapers using public journalism techniques was that they incorporated into their regular news processes techniques like polling and allowing coverage to be driven in large part by the issues highlighted by those polls rather than solely by the journalists' own priorities or those of the candidates. Coverage of these issues seems to have supplemented other coverage rather than supplanted it. Two of the papers with experience in using public journalism also promoted public candidates' meetings. However, such meetings were also provided by the *ODT*, which required candidates to answer questions on issues that the paper believed were important to the public.

In terms of approach to coverage, similarities come through across the papers, such as a commitment to covering elections while not boring readers. Differences are driven by a number of factors, for example the *ODT* and *Waikato Times*' commitment to covering their local provinces, and *The Evening Post*'s need to differentiate itself from *The Dominion*, and vice-versa.

The next chapter will take a closer look at the actual coverage of the elections in 2001, focusing on a number of aspects. This will help determine further whether a commitment to public journalism led to noticeably different election coverage.

Chapter Seven
Results of content analysis

7.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the content analysis of the 2001 Local Body Elections coverage in New Zealand's six largest daily newspapers: the *New Zealand Herald*, *The Dominion*, *The Evening Post*, *The Press*, *Otago Daily Times* and *Waikato Times*.

All election stories from the period 1 August 2001 to 12 October 2001 were sampled across a number of diverse criteria: amount of coverage; geographical spread of coverage; use of mobilising information; use of other recognised public journalism elements in stories; and types of sources used (including elite/non-elite socio-political status and gender). Full details of the content analysis schedule are described in Chapter Five, which also explains how analysis criteria were chosen in order to be compatible with other investigations into public journalism. The time period for the sample was chosen so as to capture all election coverage from August 1, the time the first stories on the elections appeared, up to the date by which votes had to have been cast (12 October). All stories mentioning the election or any issues clearly associated with the election were sampled, regardless of size.

The purpose of the content analysis was to identify similarities and differences between the papers' coverage, both on an individual paper-by paper basis and by comparing papers led by editorial decision makers with experience of public journalism experiments with papers whose editorial leaders did not have such experience. Chapter Six explored whether the editorial decision makers with experience of public journalism differed from the other editorial leaders in their assessment of the type of coverage they were aiming for and that they believed they achieved. The content analysis presented in this chapter is designed to establish whether the actual election coverage of papers with experience of public journalism differed from that of papers with no experience of using public journalism, and if so what was the nature of that difference.

The three newspapers whose election coverage was informed by editorial leaders' background in public journalism were *The Press*, the *Waikato Times* and *The Evening Post*. The three led by editorial decision makers with no background in public journalism were *The Dominion*, the *New Zealand Herald* and the *Otago Daily Times*. For convenience, as in Chapter Six, the *Otago Daily Times* will often be shortened to *ODT*, while the *New Zealand Herald* will be referred to as the *Herald*.

7.2 Amount of coverage

First, the extent of election coverage was examined by assessing the number of election stories published and the space given to election coverage. The average length of election stories was also calculated. As noted in Chapter One and elsewhere in this thesis, all newspapers' election coverage had to contend with the need to cover the September 11, 2001 terror attacks.

Table 2 Number of election stories and size of coverage for each newspaper

Newspaper	Number of stories	Size of coverage (cm^2)	Average size of stories in cm^2
The Evening Post	368	94,191.4	256
Otago Daily Times	270	56,598	209.6
The Press	269	69,735.6	259.2
Waikato Times	158	45,825	290
New Zealand Herald	100	45,306	453
The Dominion	73	22,101.9	302.7

As can be seen in Table 2, *The Evening Post* published the largest number of election stories, over a third more than the next closest papers, the *Otago Daily Times* and *The Press*. *The Evening Post*'s total was more than twice that of the *Waikato Times* and more than three times the story count at the *New Zealand Herald*. Furthermore, *The Evening Post* published just over five times the number of election stories published by its capital city rival *The Dominion*. As noted in Chapter Six, the *Herald*'s coverage was curtailed to a significant extent by an on-going strike by journalists.

In terms of space allocated to the elections, *The Evening Post* again led the field, allocating over a third more space to election coverage than the next-placed paper, *The Press*. *The Evening Post* allocated over twice as much space to election coverage than did the *Waikato Times* and *Herald*. *The Evening Post*'s election coverage, in terms of square centimetres, outnumbered that of *The Dominion* by a factor of over four-to-one.

The *Herald* put in a stronger showing in terms of newspaper space given over to the elections mainly because of the number of very large backgrounders it published. The average size of *Herald* stories was around 50% larger than the next nearest papers, *The Dominion* and *Waikato Times*, 80% larger than *The Evening Post* and *The Press*, and more than twice the size of the stories in the *ODT*.

7.3 Use of mobilising information

The second aspect of election coverage coded in the sample newspapers was the presence of mobilising information. This is information aimed at encouraging or enabling people to act. As discussed in Chapter Five, the use of mobilising information has been linked to public journalism as an example of the media trying to engage the public in the electoral process.

The results are presented in terms of the number and percentage of stories containing mobilising information and the types of mobilising information used. Four types of mobilising information were identified in the sample: providing details about election meetings the public could attend; providing information about how to contact candidates and/or election-related groups; publishing comments designed to encourage people to vote or otherwise act in relation to the election; and providing information about the electoral process (for instance, explaining how to vote, or publicising deadlines for returning postal ballots). Some stories contained more than one type of mobilising information.

Table 3 Number and percentage of election stories containing mobilising information

Newspaper	Total number of election stories	Number of stories with mobilising info	Percentage of stories with mobilising info
The Evening Post	368	69	18.7
Otago Daily Times	270	59	21.8
Waikato Times	158	40	25.3
The Press	269	36	13.4
New Zealand Herald	100	13	13
The Dominion	73	5	6.8

Table 4 Number and percentage of election stories containing different types of mobilising information

Newspaper	Meetings information		Contact details provided		Voting encouragement		Election information	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
The Evening Post	35	50.7	2	2.9	28	40.6	23	33.3
Otago Daily Times	24	40.7	7	11.8	12	20.3	19	32.2
Waikato Times	23	57.5	0	0	19	47.5	21	52.5
The Press	10	27.7	2	5.5	19	52.7	8	22.2
New Zealand Herald	0	0	0	0	5	38.5	8	61.5
The Dominion	0	0	0	0	1	20	5	100

NB Percentages are % of election stories that contain mobilising information

Table 3 shows that *The Evening Post* contained more stories with mobilising information (69) than any other paper, but this was perhaps not surprising given that it had far and way the largest number of election stories. However, in terms of stories containing mobilising information as a percentage of all election stories, the *ODT* (59 stories – 21.8%) and *Waikato Times* (40 stories – 25.3%) eclipsed *The Evening Post* (18.7%). *The Dominion* stood out as the paper with the least number of stories using mobilising information (five stories or 6.8% of its election stories), around half the frequency of the next ranked paper, the *Herald* (13 stories – 13%).

Table 4 shows that the six papers also differed in terms of the types of mobilising information they used in their stories. Neither the *Herald* nor *The Dominion* provided any information about meetings or contact details of candidates. In contrast, the *Waikato Times* (in 23 stories or 57.5% of stories containing mobilising information) and *The Evening Post* (in 35 stories or 50.7%) tended to emphasise information about meetings that voters could attend. The *ODT* also featured prominently in this respect, with 24 (40.7%) of its stories with mobilising information providing information about public meetings. In the case of *The Evening Post*, *Waikato Times* and *ODT*, providing this meeting information was the most common form of mobilising information offered to readers.

While Table 4 shows the *Herald* (with 61.5%) and *The Dominion* (with 100%) rated proportionally the highest in terms of providing straight factual information about electoral processes, the small number of stories involved (eight and five respectively) make this finding a little misleading. The *Waikato Times* had electoral process information in just over half its 40 mobilising stories and *The Evening Post* and *ODT* in around a third of their mobilising stories.

The Press rated most highly in terms of encouraging people to get out and vote in the elections, with just over half its mobilising stories containing such information. The *Waikato Times* offered this encouragement to potential voters in just under half its mobilising stories. *The Evening Post* (40.6%) and *Herald* (38.5%) encouraged people to get out and vote in around 40% of stories containing mobilising information, although in the latter case we are talking about just five stories as against 28 in *The Evening Post*.

The fourth type of mobilising information identified in the election stories was relatively little used in any of the newspapers – the provision of contact details so readers could get in touch with candidates or election event organisers. Table 4 shows that only the *ODT* (seven stories, or just under 12% of its mobilising stories) showed much interest in using this approach.

7.4 Elements of public journalism practice in local body election coverage

As discussed in Chapter Five, this research has examined the 2001 election coverage for use of frames and inclusion of information associated with public journalism – collectively referred to as "elements of public journalism". Analysis of the literature suggests that newspapers with experience of public journalism would be more likely to use such elements in their stories. The elements are not exclusive to newspapers practising public journalism, but can be expected to be used with greater frequency in such papers.

The elements of public journalism referred to here have been identified as basic practices characterising public journalism in the United States. Previous research, however, refers only to 10 of the 12 elements listed below. In this research, two others have been added on the basis that they fit in with the philosophy of public journalism: letting readers know how sitting councillors have voted in the past; and allowing candidates to state their policies in their own words. The first extra element fits in with public journalism theory because it offers readers raw data about the priorities of candidates who are sitting councillors. Likewise, the second lets voters hear directly from candidates about their priorities and policies.

This section will first consider the proportion of election stories in each paper that contained public journalism elements. It will then look at the 12 public journalism elements to see whether papers made similar use of the elements or whether different papers tended to use different elements. The 12 elements will be considered under five themes. The elements will be grouped as follows:

Theme 1 Participation

- Story contains information showing people how they can participate in the elections (participatory information)
- Story encourages people to participate (participatory encouragement)

Theme 2 Views of ordinary people

- Story contains views of ordinary people from interviews (public interviews)
- Story contains views of ordinary people from polls (views from polls)
- Story contains views of ordinary people from meetings (views from meetings)

Theme 3 Discussion topics

- Story contains discussion of issues based on public priorities (discussion about public priorities)
- Story contains discussion about solutions to problems (discussion about solutions)

Theme 4 Newspaper statements

- Story contains a statement by the newspaper about public journalism (public journalism statement)
- Story contains a statement by the newspaper about the media's role in helping the democratic process (media role statement)
- Story contains a statement by the newspaper about the public's role in helping the democratic process (public role statement)

Theme 5 Candidate information

- Story contains information about how councillors voted on major election issues (how councillors voted)
- Story contains candidates' views in own words (candidates' views in own words)

Table 5 Use of public journalism elements in election stories

Newspaper	Number of election stories	Stories with PJ elements	% with PJ elements
The Evening Post	368	169	45.9
Otago Daily Times	270	77	28.5
The Press	269	74	27.5
Waikato Times	158	45	28.5
New Zealand Herald	100	22	22
The Dominion	73	10	13.7

NB Percentages are % of total number of election stories

The Evening Post had clearly the greatest proportion of stories containing the elements of public journalism. As shown in Table 5, 169 (nearly 46%) of its election stories contained one or more elements of public journalism, more than half as many again as any other paper. The *ODT* (77 stories), *Waikato Times* (45) and *The Press* (74) made almost exactly the same level of use of public journalism elements, with such elements present in 27-28% of election stories in each case. *The Dominion* stood out as making least use of the elements (under 14% of stories – 10 out of 73 stories).

The results for the five themes of public journalism elements will now be dealt with in turn.

Table 6 Types of public journalism elements used in election stories

Theme 1: Participation

Newspaper	Stories with PJ elements	Participatory information		Participatory encouragement	
		No.	%	No.	%
The Evening Post	169	59	34.9	24	14.2
Otago Daily Times	77	37	48	10	13
Waikato Times	45	36	80	17	37.8
The Press	74	30	40.5	18	24.3
New Zealand Herald	22	8	36.4	2	9.1
The Dominion	10	6	60	1	10

NB Percentages are % of election stories that contain public journalism elements

The number and percentage of stories that contain participatory information are shown in Table 6 above. Only three of the 12 public journalism elements were used by all six papers, with two of these coming under the participatory theme: the inclusion in stories of information designed

to help people participate in the elections, and comments in stories and editorials encouraging people to take part.

Table 6 shows that information designed to help people participate in the elections featured in between 35% and 80% of stories containing public journalism elements. This was easily the most popular element among the papers. The *Waikato Times* used it in four out of every five stories containing a public journalism element, followed by *The Dominion* (60% or six stories), *ODT* (48% or 37 stories), *The Press* (40.5% or 30 stories), the *Herald* (36% or eight stories) and *The Evening Post* (just under 35% or 59 stories). As pointed out above, the low number of stories involved in the *Herald* and *The Dominion* tends to overstate their use of the elements of public journalism.

Although all six papers included comments encouraging voters to take part in the 2001 Elections, the use of such comments was minimal in two papers. The *Waikato Times* used this approach in 17 (just under 38%) of its public journalism element stories, with *The Press* next on 18 stories (24.3%), followed by *The Evening Post* (24 stories or 14.2%), the *ODT* (10 stories or 13%), *The Dominion* (10%) and the *Herald* (9.1%). In the case of the last two papers, these percentages equate to just one and two stories respectively.

Table 7 Types of public journalism elements used in election stories

Theme 2: Views of ordinary people

Newspaper	Stories with PJ elements	Public interviews		Views from polls		Views from meetings	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
The Press	74	11	14.9	12	16.2	3	4.1
The Evening Post	169	10	6.9	35	20.7	5	2.9
Otago Daily Times	77	2	2.6	4	5.2	1	1.3
New Zealand Herald	22	1	4.5	6	27.3	0	0
Waikato Times	45	0	0	5	11.1	2	4.4
The Dominion	10	0	0	3	30	0	0

NB Percentages are % of election stories that contain public journalism elements

The third public journalism element to have been used by all six newspapers comes under the theme of presenting the views of ordinary people – providing the views of ordinary people gained through opinion polls (see Table 7). *The Press* and *The Evening Post* featured prominently in using this technique, with respectively 12 stories (16%) and 35 stories (20.7%)

with public journalism elements containing this particular feature. Both papers' use of views gained from opinion polls was proportionately eclipsed by that of *The Dominion* and *Herald*, which had a frequency of use of 30% and over 27% respectively. However, again, the latter two papers' percentages are exaggerated by the small number of stories involved.

The Press made particularly heavy use of comments from the general public taken from interviews. Table 7 shows such comments featured in nearly 15% (11) of its stories containing public journalism elements. Its frequency of use of this element was more than twice that of any other paper. *The Evening Post* used comments from interviews with the general public in almost as many stories (10), but this equated to a much lower frequency (7%).

Although four papers used the public journalism element involving reporting the views of ordinary people expressed at meetings, the percentage of stories involved was very small. This element featured in just 11 election stories in total.

Table 8 Types of public journalism elements used in election stories

Theme 3: Discussion topics

Newspaper	Stories with PJ elements	Discussion about public priorities		Discussion about solutions	
		No.	%	No.	%
The Evening Post	169	42	24.8	12	7.1
Otago Daily Times	77	21	27.3	11	14.3
The Press	74	12	16.2	10	13.5
Waikato Times	45	5	11.1	0	0
New Zealand Herald	22	1	4.5	3	13.6
The Dominion	10	0	0	1	10

NB Percentages are % of election stories that contain public journalism elements

The two public journalism elements covered by the third theme – discussion topics – were each used by five of the six papers: stories containing discussion of issues based on public priorities and stories containing discussion about solutions to problems (see Table 8). In the case of the former, the *ODT* (21 stories or 27.3%) and *The Evening Post* (42 stories or just under 25%) framed their election stories in terms of focusing on public priorities more often than other papers. *The Press* (12 stories or 16.2%) and *Waikato Times* (five stories or just over 11%) also discussed issues based on public priorities to some extent. *The Dominion* used this approach in none of its election stories.

In terms of framing stories as discussions about solutions, Table 8 shows the *ODT* (11 stories or 14.3%) and *The Press* (10 stories or 13.5%) used this technique most often. *The Evening Post* used the solutions approach in 12 stories, although this equated to a smaller percentage of its stories containing public journalism elements (7.1%). The *Herald* (13.6%) and *The Dominion* (10%) framed stories as discussions about solutions proportionately more than *The Evening Post*, but the usual rider applies to the first two papers due to the low story numbers involved. The *Waikato Times* was the only paper to not publish any stories containing discussions about solutions.

Table 9 Types of public journalism elements used in election stories

Theme 4: Newspaper statements

Newspaper	Stories with PJ elements	Public journalism statement		Media role statement		Public role statement	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Waikato Times	45	0	0	6	13.3	5	11.1
The Evening Post	169	0	0	3	1.8	2	1.2
Otago Daily Times	77	0	0	3	3.9	2	2.6
The Press	74	0	0	2	2.7	5	6.8
New Zealand Herald	22	0	0	1	4.5	0	0
The Dominion	10	0	0	0	0	0	0

NB Percentages are % of election stories that contain public journalism elements

As can be seen in Table 9, very little use was made of the three elements listed under Theme 4, that is, newspaper statements about the media's role in the democratic electoral process, statements about the public's role in the process and statements about public journalism.

The *Waikato Times* stood out in terms of making statements of this kind. The paper made statements about the role of the media in six (just over 13%) of its stories containing public journalism elements and statements about the public's role in five stories (just over 11%). In terms of statements about the media's role in elections, the frequency of this element in the *Waikato Times* was nearly three times that of any other paper. In terms of statements about the public's role, the *Waikato Times*' frequency was nearly twice that of the next ranked paper. The interviews in Chapter Six with the newspaper's editor show that she, above all the editorial decision-makers, was particularly interested in talking about the public's role in elections. This democratic theoretical basis for public journalism is commonly expressed in US newspapers taking this approach to election coverage. As Table 9 shows, the *Waikato Times*' use of these

elements was matched in just one case, with *The Press* also making statements about the public's role in elections in five stories (6.8%).

While the *Waikato Times* used the above two features (making statements about the roles of the media and the public) in 11 stories in total, the five other newspapers used them in a collective total of just 18 stories. *The Press* used these elements in seven stories, *The Evening Post* and *ODT* in five each and the *Herald* in one story. *The Dominion* published no stories containing statements about the role during elections of either the media or the public.

As for the third element under this theme, Table 9 shows not one paper made a statement about using public journalism. This is in contrast to the practice of US newspapers which practise public journalism. This lack of comment about public journalism is despite the fact that three papers (*The Evening Post*, *The Press* and *Waikato Times*) had a history of using public journalism techniques during elections and their editorial leaders indicated that public journalism informed their coverage in 2001. *The Evening Post* came close, in an editorial opening its election coverage on August 1, 2001. However, while the paper used some of the language associated with public journalism theory (for instance, discussing the disconnection between the public and the political process), the ideas were not presented in terms of a coherent theory about the media's involvement in public life called "public journalism".

Table 10 Types of public journalism elements used in election stories

Theme 5: Candidate information

Newspaper	Stories with PJ elements	How councillors voted		Candidates' views in own words	
		No.	%	No.	%
The Evening Post	169	23	13.6	52	30.8
New Zealand Herald	22	9	40.9	0	0
The Press	74	1	1.3	0	0
Otago Daily Times	77	1	1.3	15	19.5
Waikato Times	45	0	0	0	0
The Dominion	10	0	0	0	0

NB Percentages are % of election stories that contain public journalism elements

Under the fifth and final theme – providing voters with information about candidates – four newspapers thought it worthwhile to tell readers how sitting councillors had voted on important local issues, as can be seen in Table 10. However, two of these papers only mentioned this in one story each. Only *The Evening Post* and the *Herald* considered information about

candidates' previous voting history important enough to offer it to readers with any degree of regularity. The former did this in 23 (13.6%) of its stories containing public journalism elements; the latter in nine stories (just under 41%). The small number of stories involved in the *Herald* (just nine) is nevertheless a significant proportion of its 22 stories containing public journalism elements and indicates a conviction by the paper's decision makers that candidates' voting records were important information for readers. The *Waikato Times* and *The Dominion* did not report at all on how councillors had voted on issues.

Table 10 shows that only two papers presented candidates' views in their own words. *The Evening Post* and the *ODT* published 52 and 15 stories respectively that allowed candidates to address potential voters at length in their own words. In the case of the former, candidates' views were presented in their own words in nearly 31% of stories containing public journalism elements; in the *ODT*, this approach was used in just under 20% of such stories. No other paper allowed candidates to speak to readers like this.

From the above discussion about the elements of public journalism it can be seen that there was quite a lot of variation in use of the elements. Only three elements were used by all six papers: the two participatory elements from Theme 1 (providing information designed to aid participation and encouraging people to participate) and presenting the views of ordinary people from polls (from Theme 2).

The two elements from Theme 3 (discussion about solutions and discussion based on public priorities) and one of those under Theme 4 (statements about the role of the media in elections) featured in five of the six papers, though in each case one of the five papers featured the element in just one story.

Four newspapers featured the other two elements of Theme 2 (the views of ordinary people from meetings and from interviews), one of those under Theme 4 (statements about the public's role in elections) and one of those under Theme 5 (saying how candidates voted). Again, in each of these instances one or more papers ran only one story using the element.

One public journalism element was featured in just two newspapers (under Theme 5 – presenting candidates' views in their own words). One feature under Theme 4 (statements about public journalism) failed to make an appearance in any election story.

7.5 Geographical extent of coverage

Each newspaper had a number of local bodies in its circulation area, with one city council governing the main centre where each paper was published. Other, smaller city councils and/or district and regional councils were also covered by each paper's circulation area. This research examined the extent to which the papers focused their coverage on the main city council or spread coverage across other regional local authorities. The rationale for discussing these results is that newspapers practising public journalism might be expected to pay greater attention to a wider spread of local bodies in their circulation area rather than focusing on the main metropolitan council.

The following tables detail the number and percentage of election stories in each paper that mentioned particular councils. For logistical reasons, only the 10 or 11 most frequently mentioned councils are listed.

Table 11 Occurrence of references to local authorities in election stories

New Zealand Herald

Council	Number of stories	% of stories
Auckland City	48	48
Auckland Regional	13	13
North Shore City	10	10
Manukau City	9	9
Hamilton City	8	8
Tauranga District	7	7
Waitakere City	7	7
Infrastructure Auckland	7	7
Far North District	4	4
Rotorua District	4	4
Waikato District	4	4

NB Figures are number and percentage of election stories that mention each council.

The *Herald* mentioned a further 22 councils in its stories (frequency of 3% or less)

From Table 11 it can be seen that nearly half the *Herald*'s election stories mentioned Auckland City Council, which is the largest council in its circulation area. This suggests that Auckland city events dominated the paper's 2001 Local Body Elections coverage. Just two other councils warranted mention in 10% or more of stories. However, the *Herald*, which circulates widely in the top half of the North Island, had four city councils to cover in its metropolitan area (Auckland, Waitakere, North Shore and Manukau) plus a regional council and the Infrastructure

Auckland body, along with significant numbers of district councils stretching north to Whangarei and south towards Hamilton and Tauranga. The *Herald* mentioned a total of 33 councils in its stories, more than any other paper.

The *Herald* clearly made an effort to cover all of these areas to some extent, with a total of eight councils being mentioned in at least five stories. However, as the interview with chief reporter Jeremy Rees in Chapter Six reveals, plans to provide more regional coverage were hamstrung by on-going strikes by journalists. As a nationally focused newspaper, the *Herald* also attempted to canvass some of the main issues in other cities around the country, such as Wellington.

Table 12 Occurrence of references to local authorities in election stories

Otago Daily Times

Council	Number of stories	% of stories
Dunedin City	101	37.4
Central Otago District	54	20
Queenstown District	42	15.5
Waitaki District	42	15.5
Otago Regional	32	11.8
Clutha District	31	11.5
Invercargill City	7	2.6
Canterbury Regional	3	1.1
Waimate District	3	1.1
Christchurch City	2	0.7

NB Figures are number and percentage of election stories that mention each council.

The *ODT* mentioned a further six councils in its stories (frequency of 0.7% or less)

The *ODT* perhaps stands out among the six papers in seeing regional election coverage as particularly important, providing at least 30 stories about each of the six councils in its area, as Table 12 shows. The interviews with the editorial decision makers in Chapter Six back this up by stating explicitly how important the paper viewed its regional coverage outside Dunedin, that is, Central Otago, Clutha, Queenstown and Waitaki. While Dunedin city was still mentioned in more than a third of election stories, these other four councils were the subject of 54, 31, 42 and 42 stories respectively. The *ODT* featured a total of five councils other than Dunedin City in more than 10% of its election stories. The *ODT*'s local focus is perhaps emphasised by the fact that only one council outside its region warranted more than five election stories – Invercargill City Council, in the neighbouring Southland region (seven stories). Outside this, the *ODT* ran

very few stories about Southland and Dunedin's other neighbouring province of Canterbury and none about the neighbouring West Coast.

Table 13 Occurrence of references to local authorities in election stories

The Dominion

Council	Number of stories	% of stories
Wellington City	32	43.8
Wellington Regional	18	24.6
Kapiti Coast District	10	13.7
Hutt City	8	11
Porirua City	8	11
Auckland City	8	11
South Wairarapa	3	4.1
Carterton District	2	2.7
Masterton District	2	2.7
Upper Hutt City	2	2.7

NB Figures are number and percentage of election stories that mention each council.

The Dominion mentioned a further 16 councils in its stories (frequency of 1.4% or less)

From Table 13, it can be seen that more than 40% of election stories in *The Dominion* featured the main council in its chief circulation area – Wellington City Council. Five councils other than Wellington City were mentioned in at least 10% of stories. However, while *The Dominion* did provide significant coverage of the councils immediately bordering Wellington, its coverage peters out quite quickly as councils further afield are looked at. *The Dominion* considered events in Auckland to be more important than those in some of the smaller regional centres near its home base. As the Chapter Six interviews with staff at the paper indicate, it did not consider local elections in Wellington to be as important as national issues, preferring to leave local election coverage in the capital to its sister paper, *The Evening Post*.

Table 14 Occurrence of references to local authorities in election stories

Waikato Times

Council	Number of stories	% of stories
Hamilton City	109	69
Waikato District	22	13.9
Waipa District	18	11.4
Waikato Regional	13	8.2
Waitomo District	8	5
Otorohanga District	7	4.4
Matamata-Piako District	6	3.8
Thames-Coromandel	6	3.8
Auckland City	5	3.1
Hauraki District	5	3.1
Ruapehu District	5	3.1

NB Figures are number and percentage of election stories that mention each council.

The *Waikato Times* mentioned a further 14 councils in its stories (frequency of 1.9% or less)

The *Waikato Times*, which focused most heavily of all the papers on its main council (nearly 70% of stories – see Table 14), nevertheless provided significant coverage of the district councils covering rural areas and smaller centres in its part of the country. A total of 11 councils featured in at least five stories in the *Waikato Times*. This included stories about issues in Auckland, with which the Waikato region is intimately connected.

Table 15 Occurrence of references to local authorities in election stories

The Press

Council	Number of stories	% of stories
Christchurch City	135	50.2
Canterbury Regional	39	14.5
Ashburton District	13	4.8
Buller District	9	3.3
Waimakariri District	9	3.3
Hurunui District	8	3
Invercargill City	8	3
Banks Peninsula District	7	2.6
Auckland City	6	2.2
Nelson City	6	2.2

NB Figures are number and percentage of election stories that mention each council.

The Press mentioned a further 21 councils in its stories (frequency of 1.8% or less)

The Press (see Table 15) faced a similar problem in the South Island to the *Herald*'s problem in the North Island. It provided wide coverage of issues across the South Island, focusing mainly on its home province Canterbury, but also extending north towards Nelson and Marlborough, across to the West Coast councils and south to Otago and Southland. It also saw itself as having to cover major issues from other cities around the country, such as Wellington and Auckland. Table 15 shows that while *The Press*' coverage was spread thinly percentage wise, it managed to mention 12 councils in at least five stories. Its stories mentioned 31 councils in total, the second highest after the *Herald*. Like other papers, however, its main metropolitan council – Christchurch City – attracted most coverage (mentioned in just over 50% of stories).

Table 16 Occurrence of references to local authorities in election stories

The Evening Post

Council	Number of stories	% of stories
Wellington City	219	59.5
Wellington Regional	58	15.7
Upper Hutt City	29	7.9
Hutt City	27	7.3
Kapiti Coast District	25	6.8
Porirua City	23	6.2
Carterton District	11	3
Masterton District	10	2.7
Auckland City	6	1.6
South Wairarapa District	6	1.6

NB Figures are number and percentage of election stories that mention each council.

The Evening Post mentioned a further 13 councils in its stories (frequency of less than 1%)

The Evening Post featured 10 councils in at least five election stories, with six getting coverage in 20 or more stories, as can be seen from Table 16. These included all the councils that make up the wider Wellington region, indicating a significant commitment to the region as a whole. It considered Auckland to be important enough to be the subject of six stories, but spread its coverage very thinly over the rest of the country. Again, the main metropolitan council – Wellington City – was easily the most regularly covered local authority at nearly 60%.

One clear result from the research is that all newspapers focused on one main local authority, with a number of secondary local bodies also being covered and numerous other councils receiving one or two stories worth of coverage. Four papers concentrated particularly heavily on their one main city council: *Waikato Times* (69% of election stories mentioned Hamilton City

Council – Table 14), *The Evening Post* (59.5% of election stories mentioned Wellington City Council – Table 16), *The Press* (50% of election stories mentioned Christchurch City Council – Table 15) and the *Herald* (48% of election stories mentioned Auckland City Council – Table 11). *The Dominion* (43.8% of election stories mentioned Wellington City Council – Table 13) made slightly less reference to its main council, while the *ODT* (Table 12) was the least wedded to coverage of its main metropolitan local body, with 37.4% of election stories mentioning Dunedin City Council.

The Dominion and *ODT* spread their coverage of councils more widely than the other papers, perhaps suggesting a greater commitment to regions outside the main centre. By contrast, at the other four papers, just one or two councils other than the main metropolitan council featured in 10% or more of election stories.

Using a percentage threshold like this, however, is a bit of a blunt instrument as different papers had significantly different numbers of local bodies in their circulation area. Some also published considerably more election stories than *The Dominion*. While *The Dominion* mentioned six councils in at least 10% of its election stories, this equated to just eight or more stories each. This numerical issue is best illustrated by comparing *The Dominion*'s coverage (see Table 13) with its fellow Wellington broadsheet, *The Evening Post* (see Table 16). *The Dominion*'s total of six councils featuring in more than 10% of election stories compares with only two councils in the same category in *The Evening Post*. However, when the numbers of stories are considered, *The Dominion*'s coverage looks much more sparse. *The Evening Post* published many more stories about each of Wellington's councils than did *The Dominion* – 219 involving Wellington City Council as against 32 in *The Dominion*, 29 about Upper Hutt City Council as against 2, 27 mentioning Hutt City Council as against 8, 25 about Kapiti Coast District Council as against 10, 23 about Porirua City Council as against 8, and 10 about Masterton District Council as against 2.

7.6 Sources used in election stories

This section will consider the news sources used in the 2001 election stories, using two categories: number of sources used and types of sources. The former will include consideration of both the total number of sources used and the number of sources relative to the number of stories published. The source type discussion will consider sources in terms of socio-political status and gender. As discussed in Chapter Five, research has indicated that use of public journalism techniques can lead to a difference in sources used by news media. The coding of sources by ethnicity was also investigated, but, as explained in Chapter Five, was abandoned as the results were not considered reliable enough.

7.6.1 Number of sources

Turning to the sources cited in election stories, the number of sources used in each paper's election coverage is shown in Table 17 below.

Table 17 Number of sources in election stories

Newspaper	Number of stories	Number of sources	Sources per story
The Evening Post	368	1119	3
The Press	269	770	2.9
Otago Daily Times	270	685	2.5
Waikato Times	158	418	2.6
The Dominion	73	229	3.1
New Zealand Herald	100	222	2.2

It is perhaps not surprising that *The Evening Post* used the greatest number of sources as it published far more election stories than any other paper. *The Dominion* (3.1), however, used the greatest number of sources per story, with *The Evening Post* (3.0) having the second highest. *The Press* is next (2.9), then the *Waikato Times* (2.6), *ODT* (2.5) and *Herald* (2.2). *The Dominion*, which had the least number of election stories, used the greatest number of sources per story.

7.6.2 Types of sources used

Sources in the election coverage were coded as to whether they were elite or non-elite (with each category having a number of subcategories) and results of this are presented in Tables 18, 19 and 20. Gender of sources was also recorded and results are presented in Table 21. Previous research (see Haas, 2001; Kurpius, 2002; Zoch & Van Slyke Turk, 1998) has suggested that newspapers practising public journalism are likely to use a greater proportion of non-elite and female sources.

Ewart (2000) identified the following sources as elites:

- Politicians
- Election candidates (candidates not already incumbent councillors)
- Local government staff
- Representatives of large organisations
- Businesspeople

This research, as discussed in Chapter Five, has added three more categories to Ewart's list:

- Representatives of large lobby groups

- Members of the news media
- Celebrities

Non-elite sources, in line with Ewart (2000), were identified as:

- Representatives of small lobby groups
- Representatives of local community organisations
- Unaffiliated individuals (members of the public)

Sources that could not be identified as elite or non-elite were coded as Unknown, as were those that could be coded as elite or non-elite, but could not be assigned to a subcategory of either.

Table 18 Occurrence of elite and non-elite sources in election coverage

Newspaper	Elite sources		Non-elite sources		Unknown sources	
	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.
New Zealand Herald	94.6	(n=210)	4	(n=9)	1.3	(n=3)
Otago Daily Times	94	(644)	5.4	(37)	0.6	(4)
The Dominion	92.1	(211)	5.7	(13)	2.2	(5)
The Evening Post	88.6	(992)	10.7	(120)	0.8	(9)
Waikato Times	86.6	(362)	12.7	(53)	0.7	(3)
The Press	86.2	(664)	13.4	(103)	0.4	(3)

NB Figures are percentages of total number of sources used by each paper.

Table 18 shows that all papers used mainly elite sources in their election coverage, at least 85% in all cases. When non-elite sources are considered, the papers seem to fall into two groups, with *The Evening Post*, *Waikato Times* and *The Press* using non-elite sources at least twice as often as the *Herald*, *The Dominion* and *ODT*. One point worth noting, however, is that *The Evening Post* almost completely stopped using non-elite sources from about September 20, 2001, that is for the last three weeks of its campaign coverage.

Table 19 on the next page identifies the types of elite sources used by each newspaper in its election stories.

Table 19 Types of elite sources used in election coverage

Newspaper	Politicians		Candidates		Local government		Large organisations		Business		Large lobby groups		News media		Celebrities		Unknown	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
New Zealand Herald	97	43.7	40	18	33	14.9	5	2.2	19	8.5	6	2.7	5	2.2	0	0	5	2.25
Otago Daily Times	263	38.4	187	27.3	105	15.3	5	0.7	58	8.5	16	2.3	3	0.4	3	0.4	4	0.58
The Dominion	121	52.8	33	14.4	33	14.4	0	0	18	7.9	0	0	1	0.4	2	0.9	3	1.31
The Evening Post	439	39.2	270	24.1	155	13.9	22	2	69	6.2	6	0.5	5	0.4	12	1.1	14	1.25
Waikato Times	138	33	82	19.6	64	15.3	2	0.5	42	10	12	2.9	4	1	4	1	14	3.34
The Press	319	41.4	93	12.1	117	15.2	14	1.8	72	9.3	26	3.4	4	0.5	0	0	19	2.46

NB Figures are numbers of each source type used and percentage of total number of sources used by each paper.

Table 19 indicates that all papers had a preference for using sitting politicians, followed by candidates who were not sitting politicians and government staff, primarily council officers. *The Dominion*, which identified itself in the Chapter Six interviews as a paper focusing on politics, placed the greatest emphasis on using sitting politicians as sources, with more than half its sources being in this category. Two other papers had more than 40% politician sources: the *Herald* (43.7% or 97 sources) and *The Press* (41.4% or 319 sources). *The Evening Post* (39.2% or 439 sources) and *ODT* (38.4% or 263 sources) also made heavy use of politicians. The paper to make least use, proportionately, of sitting politicians was the *Waikato Times* (33% or 138 sources).

The *ODT* made greatest use of candidates who were not sitting politicians (27.3% or just over one in every four sources – a total of 187 sources), with just one other paper, *The Evening Post* (24.1% or 270 sources), having more than 20% of sources in this category. Two other papers (*Herald* and *Waikato Times*) had just less than one in five sources of this type (40 sources or 18% and 82 sources or 19.6% respectively). *The Press* made least use of this type of source, with only around one in eight sources being election candidates, though the number of sources involved (82) was greater than the number of candidate sources in the *Waikato Times* and *Herald*.

Table 19 shows that the only other categories of elites to make up more than 2-3% of sources were local government sources and businesspeople. The percentage of sources in the former category was remarkably consistent across the six papers – between 13.8 and 15.3%. All papers made similar use of business sources, with the *Waikato Times* leading in this category with 10% of sources (42) and *The Evening Post* using the least proportion (6.1%). However, the number of business sources used by *The Evening Post* (69) was greater than the number used by four other papers.

Table 20 Types of non-elite sources used in election coverage

Newspaper	Small lobby groups		Community organisations		Unaffiliated		Unknown	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
The Press	17	2.2%	2	0.2	82	10.6	2	0.2
Waikato Times	7	1.7	0	0	45	10.8	1	0.2
The Evening Post	15	1.3	2	0.2	102	9.1	1	0.1
The Dominion	3	1.3	0	0	10	4.4	0	0
Otago Daily Times	4	0.6	6	0.9	26	3.8	1	0.1
New Zealand Herald	2	0.9	0	0	6	2.7	1	0.4

NB Figures are numbers of each source type used and percentage of total number of sources used by each paper.

Looking at the types of non-elite sources used, Table 20 shows all papers had a preference for unaffiliated sources, that is, those speaking as members of the public rather than as representatives of any organisation. Typically, such people's views came across through opinion polls or vox pops (street polls of very small numbers of people, say half a dozen). Scientific polls are a common tool used by newspapers to canvass the views of ordinary people – the non-elite. This was true of the 2001 election coverage, with five of the six papers making use of such polls. The percentage of unaffiliated sources used accentuates the difference between *The Evening Post*, *Waikato Times* and *The Press*, and the other three papers. The first three papers used more than twice the proportion of unaffiliated sources as *The Dominion*, *Herald* and *ODT*.

7.6.3 Gender of sources

The sources used by the six newspapers were also coded in terms of gender. In a significant number of cases it was not possible to determine the gender of sources. This was often the case where, for example, the source was an unnamed person quoted from a poll or a meeting. Sources of unknown gender also included a wide variety of non-human sources such as "a poll", "a report" or other documentary sources.

Table 21 Gender of sources used in election coverage

Newspaper	Male		Female		Unknown	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Otago Daily Times	469	68.5	152	22.2	64	9.3
Waikato Times	275	65.8	40	9.6	103	24.6
New Zealand Herald	146	65.8	37	16.7	39	17.6
The Press	495	64.3	129	16.7	146	19
The Dominion	143	62.4	53	23.1	33	14.4
The Evening Post	626	55.9	285	25.5	210	18.8

NB Figures are numbers of each source type used and percentage of total number of sources used by each paper.

Looking at the gender of sources used, Table 21 provides clear evidence that all papers gave a significantly greater voice to men than to women in their election coverage. Five of the papers used male sources between 62% and 68% of the time. *The Evening Post* stood out as using proportionally fewer male sources (just under 56%). *The Evening Post*, *The Dominion* and *ODT* made the greatest use of women as sources (between 22 and 25% each) as against 16% for the *Herald* and *The Press*. The *Waikato Times* stands out as making the least use of women as sources (9.5%). Part of the reason for the variation could be whether or not a paper's metropolitan centre had a male or a female mayor. All six newspapers focused to a greater or lesser degree on the mayoral contest in their main metropolitan centre (see Chapter Six interviews and Tables 11-16 above), with the *Waikato Times* having the strongest such preference (see Chapter Six interview with the paper's editor and Table 14). Women were mayors of Auckland city and Dunedin in 2001 and Wellington's leading mayoral contender in 2001 was a woman, while in Hamilton the mayoral contest was between a male mayor and a male front-runner challenging him.

It is likely that many of the sources of unknown gender that came from opinion polls were female. Certainly, logic suggests that the composition of sources in a scientific opinion poll will reflect the composition of the general population. This might be more the case on the *Waikato Times* than on the other papers since the *Waikato Times* was the most frequent user of scientific poll respondents in terms of percentage of sources – 29 sources (6.93%). *The Evening Post* had more sources from scientific polls (52), but these represented a smaller percentage of the total (4.64%). Figures for the other papers were *The Dominion* (four sources at 1.74%), *The Press* (12 sources at 1.55%), *ODT* (two sources at 0.29%) and *Herald* (no sources).

7.7 Content analysis results by newspaper

The content analysis results for each paper are summarised below. The three papers with no background in public journalism will be discussed first and their results as a group summarised. Those with experience in using public journalism techniques will then be reviewed and those results summarised. The overall content analysis results will then be summarised, with comparison made between the results for the two groups of newspapers. This mirrors the structure of the discussion of the interviews in Chapter Six.

7.7.1 New Zealand Herald

The *Herald*, which is the largest newspaper in the country, both in terms of size and circulation, had the second smallest number of election stories and the second smallest amount of space devoted to election coverage in 2001. However, the paper's stories were on average much larger than those of other papers, which would have aided visibility for the election coverage. *Herald* election stories were around one-and-a-half times the size of the average story of the second-placed paper in this category, *The Dominion*. As stated earlier, The *Herald*'s coverage was severely affected by industrial action by its journalists, with the paper having planned much more coverage.

In terms of proportion of stories containing mobilising information, the *Herald* features second to bottom among the papers. The *Herald* stories with such information were more likely to offer straight factual election information and, to a lesser extent, comments encouraging people to participate, with none offering information about meetings open to voters.

Just over one in five *Herald* stories contained elements of public journalism, which was second to lowest among the six newspapers. As with almost all the papers, the most common element used was the provision in stories of information that enabled public participation in the elections. The *Herald* was one of just two papers to provide readers with details of how sitting councillors voted. The paper also made significant use of the views of citizens as expressed in opinion polls (second highest) and rated highly in terms of discussing solutions to problems in its stories (second highest).

The *Herald*'s coverage, like that of all the other papers, centred on the main metropolitan council in the region – in this case Auckland City Council – which featured in nearly half the election stories. The *Herald* did, however, provide some coverage of all the local authorities in its region, with eight councils warranting at least five stories during the election period. The interviews in Chapter Six indicate that more coverage would have been provided to these councils had the paper's journalists not conducted a rolling series of strikes.

In terms of sources used in its stories, the *Herald* had the smallest number of sources both in total and on a per story basis compared with the other newspapers. It had the highest proportion of elite sources and the smallest proportion of non-elites. Its elite sources were predominantly politicians (second highest among the six papers) and non-incumbent candidates for election, with local government staff in third place. It had the third highest proportion of male sources and the second to lowest proportion of female sources.

7.7.2 Otago Daily Times

The *ODT* had the second largest number of election stories, though on average its stories were easily the smallest of the six papers. It devoted the third largest amount of space to election coverage.

In terms of stories containing mobilising information, the *ODT* rates second highest. The *ODT* featured prominently in all four types of mobilising information, especially in terms of providing readers with details about election meetings. The *ODT* was one of only three newspapers to provide contact details in stories so that readers could follow up items for themselves. It included such details in seven stories (*The Evening Post* and *The Press* provided them in only two stories each).

The *ODT* was placed second in terms of the proportion of its stories containing elements of public journalism. The main elements used were providing information that helped people participate (third highest), the discussion of issues selected on the basis of public priorities determined through polling (highest) and discussion about solutions to problems (highest). The *ODT* was one of only two papers to allow candidates to make statements in their own words. The *ODT* used a much smaller proportion of stories based on opinion polls than the other papers.

The *ODT* was also one of only two papers (the other being *The Evening Post*) that provided substantial coverage of communities across its entire region, with the six councils concerned featuring in 10% or more of the paper's stories. These councils each warranted at least 30 stories. The main metropolitan council, as with the other papers, clearly attracted most coverage (101 stories, or 37.4% of the paper's election stories), but this focus was less pronounced than in the other papers.

The *ODT* had the third largest number of sources, but on a sources-per-story basis ranked second to bottom. This reflects the smaller size of its stories, as indicated above. Its proportion of elite sources was second highest, while its inclusion of non-elites was second to lowest. Its

elite sources were predominantly sitting politicians or candidates, with local government staff in third place. In the case of the candidates' category, the *ODT* ranked highest among the papers. The paper also made marginally the greatest use of local government staff as sources. It ranked highest in the proportion of sources that were male. It also ranked third highest in terms of use of female sources.

7.7.3 The Dominion

The Dominion's election coverage was the sparsest among the six papers. It had far fewer election stories than the others. While the average size of its stories was the second highest, its total area of coverage (in cm^2) was just under half that of the second lowest placed newspaper. It should be noted that *The Dominion* was one of the smallest newspapers in terms of news space.

Very few stories in *The Dominion* featured mobilising information. All five stories containing such information offered factual information about the election process, with none providing details about public meetings.

The Dominion was the least likely of the six papers to include public journalism elements in its stories. It did, however, feature prominently in including participatory information (second highest) and the views of ordinary people from polls (highest). However, the very small number of stories involved distorts the paper's results.

The Dominion did attempt to spread its coverage across its entire region, with six councils featuring in 10% or more of the paper's stories. However, these figures are less impressive when looked at in terms of numbers of stories. The paper provided substantially less coverage of each of the six councils than its competitor, *The Evening Post*. The main metropolitan council featured less often in *The Dominion*'s stories than in four of the other papers.

In terms of sources used, *The Dominion* had the second smallest number of total sources, but the highest number of sources per story. This is perhaps not surprising given the relatively small number of stories involved. It had the third highest proportion of elite sources and the third to lowest proportion of non-elites. Elite sources were predominantly politicians (highest among the papers), followed by candidates and local government staff. *The Dominion* ranked fifth in use of male sources and second in terms of female sources.

7.7.4 Summary of content analysis results for papers without experience of using public journalism

Two of the newspapers without experience of public journalism ranked at the bottom in terms of the number of stories and the amount of space devoted to the 2001 Elections – the *Herald* and *The Dominion*. Both preferred to run fewer election stories, with each story on average being larger than the election stories in the other papers. As noted already, the *Herald* had intended to provide more coverage. The *Otago Daily Times*, in contrast, had the second largest number of election stories, though its stories were the smallest among the six papers.

The above pattern is repeated in the three papers' treatment of mobilising information. *The Dominion* and the *Herald* ranked at the bottom of the six newspapers in frequency of use of mobilising information, while the *ODT* ranked second highest. Furthermore, while the first two papers focused on providing factual information about election processes and offered readers no details about public meetings, the *ODT* rated very highly in terms of providing information about meetings would-be voters could attend.

When use of public journalism elements is considered, again the *Herald* and *The Dominion* ranked at the bottom of the listings for the six papers. The *ODT*, in contrast, ranked second highest. All three papers, as with the three papers that had experience of using public journalism, tended to focus on providing information that enabled public participation in the elections. However, differences emerge when other public journalism elements are considered. The *Herald* considered it important to let readers know about councillors' voting records and made heavy use of opinion polls, while the *ODT* tended to provide information that helped people participate, write stories about issues selected on the basis of public priorities and discuss solutions to problems. *The Dominion*'s stories focused only on providing participatory information.

In terms of the geographical spread of coverage, the three papers without experience of using public journalism tended to focus fewer stories on the main metropolitan council in their circulation area. In percentage terms, all three devoted a significant proportion of coverage to other communities in their regions. However, the results for the *Herald* and *The Dominion* are exaggerated due to the relatively small numbers of stories involved. The *ODT* stands out as devoting large numbers of stories to each of the communities outside its metropolitan centre.

The three papers ranked first, second and third highest in terms of proportion of sources that were elites. They also ranked as the three lowest in terms of proportion of non-elite sources used. Their elite sources were predominantly politicians, followed by non-incumbent candidates

and government staff. There was some variation in terms of source gender, with the *ODT* rated highest in use of male sources, the *Herald* third highest and *The Dominion* fifth. *The Dominion* used the second highest proportion of female sources and the *ODT* the third highest. This contrasts with the *Herald*, which rated fifth in use of women as sources.

In summary, there were significant differences between the three papers, with the *ODT* having significantly more coverage and making greater use of mobilising information and public journalism elements than the *Herald* and *The Dominion*. There was some variation in source gender between the three papers. In contrast, there were strong similarities in their tendency to use elite sources and, in part, in their geographical coverage spread. However, in terms of spread of coverage, the similarities are exaggerated because of the small number of stories in the *Herald* and *The Dominion*. The *ODT*, in contrast, showed a substantial commitment to its entire region, writing many more stories about each community than the other two papers. As previously discussed, though, while the Chapter Six interviews indicate that *The Dominion* staff felt their election coverage was probably excessive, the *Herald*'s chief reporter would have liked to have had more stories about non-metropolitan areas.

7.7.5 Waikato Times

The *Waikato Times* was placed in the middle of the pack in terms of volume of coverage, with the fourth largest number of election stories and the third highest placing in terms of average story size. In terms of total size of coverage it was ranked third to bottom, just above the *Herald*. However, the *Waikato Times* had less news space than the *Herald*.

The *Waikato Times* offered proportionally more mobilising information than any other paper, with more than a quarter of its stories providing such information. A significant number of its stories offered more than one category of mobilising information. The paper featured particularly strongly in offering public meeting details (highest), encouraging people to vote (second highest) and providing factual election information (highest).

The *Waikato Times* contained the third highest proportion of stories containing public journalism elements. It showed the strongest preference for stories containing information about how the public could participate in the electoral process. It also led the field in stories that actively encouraged public participation. The paper also, more frequently than the others, made statements about the roles of the public and media in helping the democratic process. This importance of the democratic process is reinforced in the Chapter Six interview with the newspaper's editor.

More than any other paper, the *Waikato Times* focused its coverage on its main city council at the expense of coverage of other local authorities in the region. Some of its regions were the subject of a dozen or more stories, but Hamilton was clearly the centrepiece of most stories.

The *Waikato Times* ranked fourth both in terms of the total number of sources used and number of sources per story. It ranked lowest in terms of using elite sources and second highest in the proportion of sources that were non-elite. As with the other papers, the elites were mainly politicians, followed by candidates and local government staff. The *Waikato Times* scored higher than others in using businesspeople as sources. The non-elites, as with all the other papers, were predominantly the unaffiliated, that is, individuals speaking on their own and not as members of groups. These people came into the paper through use of opinion polls. The *Waikato Times* ranked highly in its use of male sources (second highest) and ranked lowest by a wide margin in use of women. The paper also had the highest rate of sources of unknown gender. This appears to have been because of its greater use of scientific opinion polls. It is reasonable to suggest that, proportionately, poll results reflect the gender balance in the general population.

7.7.6 The Press

The Press had the third highest number of stories in its election coverage and the fourth largest average story size. It devoted the second largest amount of space to covering the elections.

In terms of mobilising information, *The Press* rates in fourth place, just ahead of the fifth placed *Herald*. *The Press* stood out as having the highest proportion of mobilising stories that encouraged people to participate.

The Press had the fourth highest proportion of stories with public journalism elements, most commonly containing participatory information, followed by statements promoting public participation (second highest), giving public views based on poll results, discussing solutions to problems and discussing issues chosen on the basis of public priorities. The paper made the greatest use of the views of ordinary citizens gained through interviews.

The Press, like almost all the other papers, focused its election coverage largely on its local metropolitan council – in this case, Christchurch City Council. It ranked third highest in this respect. Only one other local authority appeared in more than 10% of election stories. Even in terms of story numbers the focus remained largely on Christchurch, with only two councils other than Christchurch City featuring in more than 10 stories.

The Press had the second highest total number of sources and the third highest number of sources on a per story basis. It made marginally the least use of elite sources and the greatest use of non-elites. The elites were predominantly politicians, followed by government staff and non-incumbent candidates. The non-elites were almost all unaffiliated individuals. *The Press* ranked fourth in use of both male and female sources.

7.7.7 The Evening Post

The Evening Post published the largest number of election stories, just under 100 more than the second placed *ODT*. Its total of 368 stories is more than three-and-a-half times the number in the country's largest newspaper, the *Herald*, and more than five times the total published in the other Wellington paper, *The Dominion*. The average size of *The Evening Post*'s stories was the second smallest, though the total area of coverage as measured in cm^2 in *The Evening Post* was still twice that of the *Herald* and four times that of *The Dominion*.

The Evening Post had the third highest proportion of stories with mobilising information, with a focus on providing details of public meetings (ranked second highest) and, to a lesser extent, on encouraging people to vote (third highest).

The Evening Post had the highest proportion of stories containing public journalism elements, by a large margin. The most common element featured was providing readers with participatory information, followed by presenting candidates' views in their own words (ranked highest), presenting ordinary people's views through opinion polls (third highest) and interviews (second highest), the discussion of issues based on priorities indicated by the public (second highest) and encouraging people to take part in the elections (third highest). *The Evening Post* was one of only two papers (the other being the *Otago Daily Times*) to let candidates speak in their own words. The paper was also (along with the *Herald*) one of only two that saw it as valuable to let readers know how sitting councillors had voted.

The Evening Post ranked second highest in terms of the proportion of stories dealing with its metropolitan local authority – Wellington City Council. However, while in percentage terms its coverage seemed focused on Wellington city, when story numbers are considered the paper can be seen to have given substantial coverage to its entire region. All eight councils involved received coverage in at least 10 stories.

The Evening Post used the greatest number of sources in total, nearly half as many again as the second placed *The Press*. On a per story basis, it ranked second highest. It ranked fourth in the proportion of elite sources and third in terms of non-elites. Elites used were mainly politicians,

followed by candidates (second highest) and government staff. *The Evening Post* used, proportionally, significantly fewer male sources than the other papers and ranked highest in use of female sources.

7.7.8 Summary of content analysis results for papers with experience of using public journalism

There were strong similarities between the three papers with experience of public journalism in terms of their election coverage. They were ranked as three of the top four papers in terms of amount of coverage given to the 2001 Elections, both in terms of numbers of stories and amount of space. Their stories were generally smaller than those in the other three papers, ranking third, fourth and fifth in average story size. The *ODT* ranked second highest in number of election stories and third in space allocated to the election.

The *Waikato Times*, *The Press* and *The Evening Post* also ranked as three of the top four papers in terms of the proportion of stories containing mobilising information. The *ODT* was second highest. The three newspapers with public journalism experience featured most strongly in offering details of meetings open to the public (ranked highest, second and fourth) and encouraging people to vote (ranked highest, second and third).

The three papers ranked as three of the top four in terms of use of public journalism elements in election stories (the *ODT* was second highest). The papers' overall preference, as in the three papers without public journalism experience, was for information about how the public could participate in the electoral process. Other preferences were for actively encouraging public participation (ranked first, second and third), presenting ordinary people's views through interviews (first and second highest – the *Waikato Times* had no such stories) and discussing issues chosen on the basis of public priorities (second, third and fourth). There were also significant differences in use of public journalism elements. While *The Evening Post* and *The Press* each discussed solutions to problems in at least 10 of their stories (as did the *ODT*), the *Waikato Times* did not discuss solutions to problems in any election story. *The Evening Post* was one of only two papers to let candidates speak in their own words (the *ODT* was the other). It was also one of only two that saw it as valuable to let readers know how sitting councillors had voted (the *Herald* was the other). The *Waikato Times* showed a stronger preference than any other paper for making statements about the roles of the public and media in making the democratic process work. *The Press* and *The Evening Post* did make such statements, but not to the same extent.

The three papers with experience of public journalism ranked highest in the proportion of election stories focused on their main metropolitan local authority. None of them matched the geographical spread of coverage achieved by the *ODT*. However, as the three papers published many more articles than the *Herald* and *The Dominion*, they were still able to provide half a dozen or more stories for each council in their region. *The Evening Post*, due to the relatively large number of election stories it produced, came closest to the *ODT* and was able to provide at least 10 stories on each of its regional communities.

The three papers with public journalism experience made least use, proportionally, of elite sources and greatest use of non-elites. Their use of non-elite sources was roughly twice the frequency of the papers without experience of using public journalism. The main types of elites used were the same as with the other three papers – politicians, non-incumbent candidates and local government employees, with a lesser use of business sources. In terms of non-elites, the main contributor to the use of these sources seems to have been the inclusion of unaffiliated sources, that is, people speaking as individuals and not as members of an organisation. In terms of source gender, there were some differences among the three papers. The *Waikato Times* ranked second highest in its use of men as sources, while *The Press* ranked a close fourth and *The Evening Post* a distant sixth. The *Waikato Times* used far fewer female sources than any other paper, though as explained above, it can be expected than many women are included in the significantly larger number of unknown sources coded for the paper. *The Evening Post* had the largest proportion of women as sources, but *The Press* ranked just fourth.

7.8 Summary of content analysis results for the six newspapers

Comparison between the two groups of newspapers shows some broad differences as well as a few similarities. However, in relation to a number of categories, the division is between two of the papers with no experience of public journalism (the *Herald* and *The Dominion*) and the other four papers (the three papers with public journalism experience plus the *ODT*).

In terms of the amount of coverage devoted to the elections, the three experienced public journalism newspapers gave more space over to election stories. The *ODT* also featured strongly in this respect, ranking third highest. The *Herald* ran a close fifth to the *Waikato Times*. However, the *Herald* is the country's largest newspaper while the *Waikato Times* is a smaller paper. *The Dominion* ranked a distant sixth. The interviews in Chapter Six provide some explanation for this variation in coverage. This will be explored in Chapter Eight.

The three papers with experience in using public journalism, along with the *ODT*, also differed from *The Dominion* and the *Herald* in a couple of other aspects of the research. The three papers

with public journalism experience all ranked in the top four in use of mobilising information in election stories and use of public journalism elements. The *ODT* ranked second highest in both categories.

In terms of mobilising information, the papers with public journalism experience showed a greater preference for encouraging people to vote (ranked highest, second and third) and offering readers details of meetings open to the public (ranked highest, second and fourth). In the case of public meetings, the *ODT* ranked third highest, with *The Dominion* and the *Herald* offering no such information in any election stories. The last two papers showed a greater preference for providing factual information about the electoral process.

Regarding use of public journalism elements, for five of the papers their greatest preference was for providing readers with information enabling them to participate in the elections. The *Herald* showed greatest preference for letting readers know how sitting councillors had voted. However, its second preference was for providing participatory information. Some public journalism preferences were more closely associated with the papers with public journalism experience than the other papers: actively encouraging public participation (ranked highest, second and third) and discussing issues chosen on the basis of public priorities (ranked second, third and fourth). The *ODT* ranked highest in terms of the latter element. Five of the papers made significant use of ordinary people's opinions gained through opinion polling. The *ODT* stood out as making least use of this public journalism element (less than half the frequency of the fifth ranked paper). [The paper's local government reporter mentioned in the interviews in Chapter Six that the *ODT* did not do any of its own polling in 2001; she thought this was a mistake.]

All three newspapers with experience of using public journalism ran at least two stories containing statements about the media's role in the electoral process and the role of the public. The *ODT* did likewise. The *Herald* ran one story mentioning the role of the media, but none about the public's role, while *The Dominion* ran no stories mentioning the role of either group. No newspaper ran a story making a statement about public journalism.

Some public journalism elements were incorporated in the stories of some papers while others all but ignored them. *The Evening Post* and *The Press* featured information from interviews with members of the public in 10 and 11 stories respectively, but the other papers showed little interest in this approach. The third paper with a public journalism background, the *Waikato Times*, did not use such information in any of its election stories. Discussion about solutions to problems has been associated with public journalism. However, in this research while *The*

Evening Post and *The Press* contained such discussion in 12 and 10 stories respectively, the *Waikato Times* published no stories containing this element.

Looking at the papers without experience of using public journalism, similar differences emerge. While the *ODT* published 21 stories discussing issues based on public priorities and 11 discussing solutions to problems, *The Dominion* and the *Herald* all but ignored these elements. In 10 *ODT* stories, voters were encouraged to take part in the elections, but this encouragement featured in only two stories in the *Herald* and one in *The Dominion*.

The Evening Post and the *Herald* were the only papers to show any real interest in letting readers know how councillors voted. *The Evening Post* and *ODT* were the only papers to let candidates explain their views on issues in their own words.

The three papers with a background in public journalism were more likely to focus on issues to do with their main metropolitan council rather than those associated with other parts of their regions. *The Dominion* and the *Herald* were ranked fourth and fifth in this respect, though the latter was only marginally behind the third-ranked *The Press*. The *ODT* spread its coverage around its region far more than any other paper, which is in line with priorities identified by its senior staff in Chapter Six. It should be noted that while in percentage terms *The Evening Post* focused heavily on Wellington City Council, the number of election stories it produced was significantly greater than any other paper and allowed it to publish a substantial number of stories about each of the councils in its region. In general terms, however, all six papers reserved the greatest amount of coverage for their main metropolitan council, which was perhaps at least partly justified on population grounds.

In terms of sources, the papers with public journalism experience made more use of non-elite sources than those without experience of using public journalism. This difference was by a factor of around two to one. However, all six papers overwhelmingly used elite rather than non-elite sources – 86-88% elite sources in the case of the papers with public journalism experience and over 92% in the case of the other three papers. In terms of source gender, there was no clear distinction between the two groups of newspapers, with *The Evening Post* making the greatest use of women as sources and the *Waikato Times* the least. The *ODT* and *The Dominion* ranked second and third highest in use of female sources.

In summary, there were some significant differences between the content of stories in the three newspapers with experience of using public journalism and the three papers with no such experience. Most notably, the former group showed a consistently greater preference for

encouraging people to vote (under mobilising information), actively encouraging the public to take part in the elections (under public journalism elements) and using non-elite sources. Previous research suggests that these preferences are strongly associated with public journalism.

However, on the basis of this research a simple, exclusive link cannot be established between the three papers with public journalism experience and story content that is strongly associated with public journalism. This is because in many cases, while the experienced public journalism newspapers featured prominently in providing such content, the *Otago Daily Times*, which had no experience of public journalism, also provided such content, sometimes to a greater extent than all other papers.

The *ODT* provided much more election coverage than the *Herald* or *The Dominion*, though not as much as *The Press* or *The Evening Post*. The *ODT* also ranked second highest in terms of providing mobilising information in stories and frequency of using public journalism elements. Among mobilising information categories, the *ODT* matched the public journalism experienced papers in providing information about public meetings. In terms of public journalism elements, the *ODT* ranked highest in stories discussing issues chosen on the basis of public priorities, putting it ahead of the three papers with public journalism experience in a criterion that is very strongly associated with public journalism in the literature.

The picture that emerges through this content analysis of the 2001 Local Body Elections coverage is complicated. In some respects it shows a strong correlation between experience of using public journalism and objective measures of the use of public journalism. However, the strong showing of a newspaper with no experience of using public journalism suggests that there is something about the way that newspaper, the *ODT*, operated in 2001 that was highly compatible with outcomes associated with public journalism.

The Dominion and *Herald*, also with no experience of using public journalism, nevertheless used some aspects of public journalism. Some of their election stories provided mobilising information and contained elements of public journalism. The *Herald*'s heavy use of stories letting readers know how councillors voted is compatible with public journalism theory in that it gives readers raw information that they can use to inform their voting choices. The *ODT*'s decision to let candidates explain their views on issues in their own words is compatible with public journalism theory for the same reason. Only *The Evening Post* among the papers with public journalism experience saw fit to provide would-be voters with these two categories of raw information. It was also not possible in this research to get results that support a clear correlation between use of public journalism techniques and greater use of women as sources.

The *ODT*, *Herald* and *The Dominion* all made use of female sources to a level compatible with the three papers experienced in the use of public journalism.

In many ways results from the papers with public journalism experience closely match those from the other three papers. The sources used by all six papers were predominantly elites and only one of the papers, the *ODT*, could be said to have avoided focusing its coverage largely on its main metropolitan centre. There was no real difference between the six papers in use of women as sources, with the exception of *The Evening Post*. The great majority of election stories on all papers were devoid of mobilising information. Apart from *The Evening Post*, public journalism elements were absent in more than 70% of stories in the papers.

These results suggest that the six newspapers perhaps had more in common in the way they covered the 2001 Elections than they had differences. It also suggests that some aspects of public journalism may be highly compatible with how New Zealand newspapers have traditionally discharged their triennial democratic duty. Or perhaps it is a case of one newspaper seeing another using logos on election stories or polls to identify election issues and simply copying what it sees as interesting or effective techniques.

Having presented the results of the interviews and the content analysis, these will now be discussed in terms of the three research questions posed in Chapter One. Chapter Eight will also consider the extent to which the results of this research mirror or deviate from those of previous research on public journalism.

Chapter Eight
Discussion

8.1 Introduction

This thesis examined coverage of the 2001 Local Body Elections by New Zealand's then six largest newspapers as a case study in the practice of public journalism. Three of the newspapers (*The Evening Post*, the *Waikato Times* and *The Press*) had experience in using public journalism and, as the interviews in Chapter Six reveal, senior editorial staff at those three papers had been involved in public journalism campaigns. The other three papers (the *New Zealand Herald*, *The Dominion* and the *Otago Daily Times*) and their senior editorial staff had no such experience. The literature review in Chapters Two, Three and Four suggests that the use of techniques associated with public journalism can produce different media coverage, though the literature also suggests that these differences may not always be significant or consistent.

The interviews explored questions about how stories were prioritised for publication during the election, the goals of the election coverage, whether the coverage was evaluated by the journalists involved or by the public, voter turnout and knowledge of public journalism. The content analysis used measures drawn from the literature – the presence in election stories of public journalism "elements" or features associated with public journalism, the types of sources used, and the presence of mobilising information – as well as measuring the amount of coverage and the geographical spread of each paper's coverage.

The goal of the research was expressed in terms of three research questions:

1. What did the editorial decision makers on the *New Zealand Herald*, *Otago Daily Times*, *The Dominion*, the *Waikato Times*, *The Press* and *The Evening Post* say they were trying to achieve through their 2001 Local Body Elections coverage and what was their assessment of the final coverage?

2. Did the editorial decision makers on the papers with experience of conducting public journalism experiments differ from other editorial leaders in their assessment of the type of coverage they were aiming for and achieved during the 2001 Local Body Elections?

3. In what way, if any, did the coverage of the 2001 Local Body Elections by papers with experience of conducting public journalism experiments differ from papers with no experience of using public journalism?

Results of Research Questions One and Two reported in Chapter Six will be discussed in sections 8.2, 8.3 and 8.4 below. These sections will deal respectively with the interviewees' goals for their election coverage, the news selection priorities they say they used at the time, and their evaluation of their papers' election coverage. Section 8.5 will address Research Question Three using the content analysis results from Chapter Seven. The conclusions drawn from the research will then be summarised in Chapter Nine.

8.2 The goals of the 2001 election coverage

Public journalism promoters (see Merritt, 1998; Rosen & Taylor, 1992) suggest that public journalism should represent a fundamental change in media practice. If this is correct, one might expect that newspapers with a background in public journalism might take a different approach to covering elections. Analysis of the interviews in Chapter Six, however, suggests that while such differences were evident between the six newspapers surveyed in this research, the differences were not necessarily between the three papers with a background in public journalism and the three without such experience.

The interviews with the 14 editorial decision makers identified a generally similar goal across the entire cohort of newspapers of helping people to vote by providing them with information. Even on *The Dominion*, with its focus on national politics and its admitted tendency to leave local politics to *The Evening Post*, editorial decision-makers all felt a responsibility to provide some coverage of local elections. This identification of the media with a higher purpose of social responsibility finds reflection in the work of Altschull (1995), Keane (1991) and McQuail (1969, 1992). The decision makers all believed their role included providing information about the candidates, their policies and important election dates. This willingness to take on a public service role in the complex arena of local body politics is perhaps at variance with the negative judgement that New Zealand media commentators have made about coverage of national politics (see Palmer, 1987, 1992; Atkinson, 1997).

However, all six papers, regardless of their commitment to public journalism principles, concentrated their coverage on one major urban council and, within that, on the mayoral election. The mayoral elections arguably provide media with a relatively unambiguous story fulfilling the news values of conflict (see Hall, 1981; Hope, 2001), local impact (see McQuail, 1992) and focus on prominent people (see Galtung and Ruge, 1965) and are frequently covered

using the horse race frame (see Palmer, 1987; Rosen & Taylor, 1992). The strong commercial imperative governing the press (Keane, 1991; McChesney, 1999; McGregor & Comrie, 2002) was further evidenced by a common theme from the interviews that editorial decision makers were concerned about giving too much space to a topic of limited public interest and that they risked 'boring' readers. This was even the case for the most committed 'public journalism' editor, *The Evening Post*'s Tim Pankhurst, who was very clear on the need to balance public duty with the requirement to sell newspapers. The reluctance of all six newspapers to push the boundaries can be contrasted with public journalism experiments in the United States where newspapers have attempted to bring the public together to deliberate on the issues (see Dykers, 1998; Lambeth, 1998b; Rosen, 1999a, 1999b; Thames, 1998). Interestingly the *Otago Daily Times* staff, with no experience of public journalism but with a strong commitment to local communities, were as close to the idea of building community capacity in relation to the electoral process as the editors on the classic American public journalism papers (Merritt, 1998; Rosen, 1999a; Thames, 1998). Another common theme from the interviews with decision-makers from all the papers was the difficulty of covering the number of candidates and local bodies within their circulation areas. This reflects the constraints faced by the New Zealand media in terms of staff shortages (see Palmer, 1992) and subsequent reliance on media releases and statements (see Comrie, 2002).

Despite an overall commitment to some form of local election coverage, there were significant differences between the newspapers' goals. The differences are seen most clearly between the interviews with staff at *The Dominion*, who had no experience of public journalism, and those at *The Evening Post*, who did have such experience. *The Dominion* staff had a very negative attitude to local elections, clearly seeing national elections as a higher priority. Even though their coverage was the sparsest of the six newspapers (73 stories), they felt they should have done less. They expected the bulk of local election coverage to be done by others. *The Evening Post*, which covered the same geographical market as *The Dominion*, took the opposite view and produced the greatest amount of election coverage in 2001 (368 stories). *The Evening Post* gave a large amount of time and space over to the elections, polling would-be voters to identify salient issues and then systematically covering Wellington mayoral candidates' policies on those issues. This was in line with classic public journalism practice in the United States (Buckner & Gartner, 1998; Hoyt, 1992; Thames, 1998) and New Zealand (McGregor et al. 1998, 1999). The paper's opening election campaign editorial set the tone for its coverage by putting it in the context of trying to re-engage the public in the election process. In line with this, the paper organised a large public meeting with candidates as the culmination of its coverage. While *The Dominion* interviewees were happy to leave comprehensive coverage of local elections to others, *The Evening Post*'s editor said his goal was to get people out to vote.

This focus on trying to boost voting numbers has been a recurring theme in the American literature of public journalism experiments (Hoyt, 1992; Rosen, 1999a; Thames, 1998).

Looking at the other papers without experience of public journalism, the *Otago Daily Times* editorial decision makers saw local elections as part of their core business of serving their local communities. The content analysis in Chapter Seven shows that the *ODT* delivered on this by focusing least among the six newspapers on its main metropolitan city council and producing the second largest number of election stories (270). The *ODT* also proactively organised candidates' meetings for would-be voters, chaired by the editor. The paper's decision makers were among the least aware of all those interviewed in regard to knowledge about public journalism. Yet they still used techniques that were emphasised as an important part of public journalism coverage by the editors of *The Evening Post* and the *Waikato Times* and by newspapers using public journalism in the United States (regarding the value of public meetings, see for example Charity, 1996c; Denton & Thorson, 1998; Lambeth, 1998b). The *Herald*, by contrast, produced the second smallest number of election stories (100). However, the interviews show that its editorial decision makers would have done a lot more but for the journalists' strike. The chief reporter, Jeremy Rees, also indicated that he had heard about public journalism and was interested in using such techniques in the future. The *ODT* staff and the *Herald*'s chief reporter expressed a clear desire to make the electoral process work and pointed to the media's role in supporting the democratic process during elections. They felt the news media also had to counter public apathy about local elections rather than reduce coverage. In this, they mirrored the views of the editors of the *Waikato Times* and *The Evening Post*. This might also be further evidence in support of the findings of researchers who have concluded that the values of journalists involved in public journalism experiments are not always that different from those of other journalists (see Bare, 1998; Voakes, 1999).

Looking at the other two papers with experience of public journalism, the *Waikato Times* interviewees indicated that their paper had priorities similar to those at the *ODT* in terms of focusing on local rather than national events. *The Press* also covered its immediate region, but balanced this with a stronger national focus than the *Waikato Times*. Like *The Evening Post*, both papers chose to base their coverage on issues of public importance identified by polls. The *Waikato Times*, also like *The Evening Post* and the *ODT*, organised public candidates' meetings. The editors of the *Waikato Times* and *The Press* emphasised the importance of the media's role in supporting the democratic process during elections. This focus on serving local communities has been a key feature of public journalism experiments in the United States (Campbell, 1996; Grimes, 1997; Merritt, 1998; Thames, 1998). It is worth noting that public journalism initiatives

have been pursued much more readily by smaller and medium-sized daily newspapers in the United States than by the major metropolitan dailies (Arant & Meyer, 1998).

Rosen (1992a) says that public journalism is about the media helping to make politics "go well" (p. 34). This involves the media taking an active role in political life, for example by trying to boost public involvement in elections (Merritt & Rosen, 1998; Shepard, 1994). While all interviewees for this research were disappointed by the final voter turnout in 2001, they differed on whether their newspapers were responsible for improving voting figures. In this respect there was no clear division between papers with a public journalism background and those without. *The Dominion* was the only paper on which all interviewees felt improving turnout was not the paper's role. Staff on the *Herald*, *The Press* and *The Evening Post* were divided. On all three papers the most senior person interviewed (the *Herald*'s chief reporter, *The Press*' editor and *The Evening Post*'s editor) thought getting more people out to vote was part of their paper's job. Interviewees from the *Otago Daily Times* and *Waikato Times* were agreed that newspapers should try and get more people out to vote.

The commitment of the editors of the newspapers with experience of public journalism to trying to get more people out to vote is in line with public journalism theory, which promotes the need for the media to help the public re-engage in public life (for example, see Merritt & Rosen, 1998; Rosen & Taylor, 1992). However, the *ODT* participants and the chief reporter of the *Herald* also shared this goal without having had any exposure to public journalism practice.

There is also a question about the goals of the participants with experience of using public journalism in terms of the aims of public journalism. The literature would suggest that trying to improve voting numbers or getting people to turn up to candidates' meetings is a fairly limited response in terms of wider public journalism theory. Ultimately, if the democratic ideals of John Dewey, Davis Merritt and Jay Rosen are to be realised, the media need to find a way of helping the public talk to itself (Dewey 1922, 1925, 1926; Merritt, 1998; Merritt & Rosen, 1998; Rosen & Taylor, 1992). There is also no evidence that the six newspapers tried to pursue the ideals of theorists like Altschull (1995, 1996) who want the news media to change the way they do news and make the public an integral part of the news process.

8.3 News selection priorities

The interviews indicate that while some of the six newspapers used different methods of prioritising stories for coverage during the 2001 Elections, these differences did not necessarily reflect a consistent distinction between the three papers with public journalism experience and

the other three. There were also some common features in all papers' approach to their coverage.

The interviews show that conventional news values still applied on all six newspapers during the elections. Stories did not get on the front page just because they were about the elections. Election stories had to compete with other stories on the basis of established media news values. For example, the *Waikato Times*' editor, the *Herald*'s chief reporter and the editor of *The Press* all mentioned the importance of "freshness" in creating a strong story, that is, something that was genuinely new. The *Waikato Times*' local government reporter spoke about the importance of having a high profile mayoral contest, i.e. conflict, in order to get people interested in the election. The *Waikato Times*' editor and the chief reporter at *The Dominion* both cited the importance of stories that would get become the topic of conversation in workplaces. Staff at *The Dominion*, *The Evening Post* and *The Press* all mentioned the value of getting stories that no other media had. Two staff from *The Evening Post* cited the importance of a story's human interest value.

A similar collection of methods was used on each paper to generate stories each day – other media were surveyed, existing stories were followed up with new angles, official news sources and news savvy groups provided ideas via the fax machine, and reporters came up with their own stories from their assigned news beats or rounds. This system is identified by media scholars as an efficient way to generate stories for publication (see Carey, 1986; Schudson, 1986; Tuchman, 1978). Senior staff met with each other and with reporters during the day to sift through the options and prioritise stories. Stories were initially selected with input from a wide range of editorial staff, but as deadlines approached the most senior staff increasingly made the decisions. Priorities could change very late in the process with the news editor, responsible for finally producing the paper, being able to change the paper on the basis of late breaking news. However, differences do emerge when a closer look is taken at how each paper operated in its own market.

Considering first the papers with no experience of public journalism, staff on the *Herald* and *The Dominion* saw their papers as national organs responsible for prioritising national political stories, while those on the *ODT* emphasised the importance of local coverage and saw local election stories as essential for its readership. It is worth noting that the *ODT*'s circulation area traditionally has one of the best voter turnouts in local elections. The *Herald*, as the only daily paper in Auckland, also acknowledged a strong Auckland focus and a responsibility to cover the relatively large number of local elections there. In contrast, *The Dominion*'s staff, whose paper competed with another daily in its home city, *The Evening Post*, did not feel as great an

obligation to cover local elections, preferring to leave this task to their competitor. *The Dominion* would, however, cover such items if it could get a story that *The Evening Post* did not have. This competition factor among media is a common theme among scholars (see Curran & Seaton, 1997; Keane, 1991; Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 1990). The *ODT* differed from the *Herald* and *The Dominion* in that it organised candidates' meetings for the public and used these as a source of stories, an approach associated with public journalism practice (Friedland et al. 1998; Hippocrates, 1998, 1999; Romano, 1999).

All three papers with a background in public journalism showed a strong preference for local stories during the elections. *The Press* and *The Evening Post* covered national politics from Wellington, but both were also heavily committed to covering their respective home cities and regions and therefore also put significant resourcing into local government coverage. Staff on the *Waikato Times*, like those on the *ODT*, said their paper was primarily concerned with local issues and local implications of national issues. *The Evening Post* and the *Waikato Times* used polls to identify issues to cover during the elections. *The Press* did something similar based on a survey conducted by Christchurch City Council. *The Evening Post*, along with the *Waikato Times*, also generated stories from public candidates' meetings organised by their newspapers.

If the 2001 coverage was considered on a continuum from local focus to national focus, the *Waikato Times* and *ODT* would be down the local end, with *The Evening Post* and *The Press* somewhere between the middle and the local end. The *Herald* would be on the national focus side of the middle and *The Dominion* would be down the national end.

The key question regarding the differing approaches to news selection during the 2001 elections is perhaps whether the differences were due to the use of public journalism or to each newspaper's pursuit of its identified news market. *The Dominion* and the *Herald* made the least effort to cover the elections. *The Dominion* staff interviewed said clearly that their priority was national news and only major local election stories. The *Herald*'s chief reporter said his paper would have liked to have written a lot more election stories, but it would have had to write a huge number extra to match *The Evening Post*. There was a sense that the *Herald* staff were a bit uncertain about the extent to which their paper was a national daily or an Auckland one.

The Evening Post and *The Press* were both committed to covering large cities and the surrounding regions. It was probably not surprising that they took local government elections seriously since the candidates focused on local issues and the new councils would put in place policies that would form the basis of future media stories. Both papers also had to maintain national coverage for their urban audiences, which led to some concern about finding the right

balance. The only two interviewees to stress the commercial imperative in running newspapers were from these two papers. The editor of *The Evening Post* and the deputy chief reporter of *The Press* said that whatever their papers did they had to keep an eye on the bottom line – not losing circulation. This bedrock commercial factor underpinning most newspapers is seen by scholars as a major impediment to the news media operating fully in the interests of the public, creating conflict between journalists performing their public duty and effectively being salespeople for a product (Altschull, 1990; Chaney, 1987; Curran & Seaton, 1997; Gandy, 2000; Habermas, 1989; Keane, 1991; McChesney, 1999; McQuail, 1992; Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 1990). Commercial considerations are, however, not seen as being incompatible with the practice of public journalism (see Hoyt, 1992). Supporters of public journalism see it as a win-win situation for both the media and the public (see Merritt, 1998; Merritt & Rosen, 1998; Rosen, 1995).

The *Waikato Times* and *ODT* were genuine provincial newspapers in that they covered only the biggest national stories and preferred to put their effort into local coverage. In this context, the local elections loomed very large. The interviews made it clear that such elections have become central to the papers' focus. In terms of market considerations, for these two papers the local elections could be seen as having the highest degree of compatibility with their regular commercial priorities. This compatibility between election coverage and market considerations perhaps reduced with the other papers, particularly *The Dominion*.

Even allowing for market factors, however, there remain other differences between the papers that appear to be associated with the practice of public journalism. *The Evening Post*, *The Press* and the *Waikato Times* chose to use polling to establish the issues that drove their coverage, a common feature of public journalism (Hoyt, 1992; McGregor et al. 1998, 1999, 2002; Rosen, 1999a; Thames, 1998; Venables, 2001). All papers used polling to some extent, but, as the content analysis in Chapter Seven shows, *The Evening Post* and *The Press* clearly made the greatest use of this source of stories and, along with the *Waikato Times*, let the polls guide their news selection.

The Evening Post and *Waikato Times* also organised public meetings where voters could quiz candidates. The interviews show their editorial leadership felt such meetings were essential to engaging the public in the elections. However, the *ODT*, with no experience of public journalism, also put a lot of resources into organising candidates' meetings.

The literature, as discussed in Chapter Two, emphasises the importance of the news selection process in journalism, with journalists effectively creating reality as they go about gathering

information and writing stories (Altschull, 1990; Manoff & Schudson, 1986; Postman, 1985; Tuchman, 1978). Scholars and public journalism advocates argue that public journalism should lead to changes in daily news practices if it is going to have full effect (Blazier & Lemert, 2000; Kurpius, 2000; Merritt, 1995a, 1996b, 1998; Merritt & Rosen, 1998; Rosen, 1995). Research on public journalism projects points to minimal changes taking place in these basic news practices (see Bare, 1998; Romano, 2001; Tickle & Hippocrates, 1998). For example, Romano says public involvement in the Queensland race relations project in the 1990s was limited from the start, with journalists deciding the content of published stories. McGregor et al. (2000) suggest that although public journalism has affected media election coverage in New Zealand, it has a long way to go if it is to significantly undermine conventional political reporting.

As discussed above, basing media coverage on public polling is a hallmark of public journalism election campaigns. Using this approach gave the three newspapers with public journalism experience a different input into their coverage. However, noting Romano's (2001) comments above, journalists were still writing the stories and deciding what went where in the paper. They still had complete control of the election coverage. The interviews conducted for this thesis suggest that all 14 editorial decision makers involved remained comfortable with journalists directing their election coverage with minimal public intrusion.

The sponsoring of public meetings fits in with public journalism's focus on engagement, but some writers point to concerns about the limited, unrepresentative audience that attend such meetings (see Venables, 2001). Media run the risk of preaching to just the usual suspects, what one set of scholars calls the "activist core" (Friedland et al. 1998). Having said that, the editor of the *Waikato Times* indicated that her paper's public meetings were a big success, full of energy. By contrast, the editor of *The Evening Post* was disappointed with the low turnout at his paper's major candidates' meeting, which was billed as the culmination of its public journalism campaign.

The discussion above about the impact of the market factor on each paper's coverage is significant. Each newspaper had its own public and sought to serve its needs during the elections, but the interviewees felt that these needs extended beyond the election coverage.

8.4 Evaluation of the 2001 election coverage

Looking at the interviewees' evaluation of their papers' 2001 election coverage, there was a general feeling of negativity driven by disappointment about the poor voter turnout. However, there was also a strong sense among some that it was the media's job to keep covering local elections regardless of whether it boosted public participation. These journalists saw such

coverage as core media business. There was, however, no simple split between the newspapers practising public journalism and the other three.

Considering the newspapers without public journalism experience first, *The Dominion*'s staff felt that the turnout backed up their view that most people were not that interested in local politics and they planned to cut back coverage in the future. By contrast, the *Herald* staff wanted to do more next time and felt they had short-changed the public in 2001 due to the journalists' strike and to what two interviewees saw as an excessive focus on the Auckland mayoralty. The *Herald*'s chief reporter displayed a particularly strong commitment to covering local elections. The *ODT* staff said it was the media's job to cover local elections and apathy should not come into the equation.

Among the papers with public journalism experience, there was a strong sense that local elections had to be covered by newspapers. The editors of *The Press* and *Waikato Times* said voter apathy was no justification for not covering local elections. *The Evening Post* staff retained a commitment to local election coverage, but they also wanted to reduce their paper's coverage of future elections, especially to minimise the news space wasted, in their view, on candidates without a hope of succeeding or who had nothing useful to say to voters on the issues. *The Press*' two interviewees felt quite negative about their experience of using public journalism for similar reasons, that is, that too much time was spent giving a voice to characters they saw as unworthy. However, rather than wanting to pull back from local election coverage they felt they could have done more to help voters. The *Waikato Times*' editor was happy with her paper's coverage, but felt that public journalism needed to be rejuvenated.

As indicated earlier, no formal evaluation was done of the 2001 election coverage, leaving the editorial decision makers either in the dark about how their readers felt or in possession of only anecdotal feedback. This is surprising given that the literature on public journalism is full of calls to ensure that public journalism campaigns are evaluated in a reliable manner (see Bare, 1998; Denton & Thorson, 1998; Haas, 1999b; Lambeth, 1998a, 1998b; McGregor et al. 1998, 1999; Richards, 2000; Venables, 2001). Meyer's (1998) suggested list would be a good starting point: whether circulation has increased; whether there has been an increase in public trust in institutions and social capital; changes in journalistic values; finding out whether the public think it matters; seeing whether voter turnout is up or whether people took part in political processes; and measuring public knowledge about candidates and issues. Without proper evaluation, New Zealand journalists will never know if public journalism actually works.

Comparing the two groups of newspapers, the three papers with experience of public journalism and two of the other papers retained a strong sense that the media needed to cover local elections. The editors of *The Press* and *Waikato Times* expressed this commitment in terms of a philosophical statement about the need for the media to support the democratic process. *The Evening Post* editor showed a similar commitment, but tended to couch his views in more commercial terms, that is, local election coverage was about connecting with readers, which would make for a viable newspaper. The *Herald*'s chief reporter also expressed his commitment to local election coverage in terms of supporting the democratic process and expressed an interest in using public journalism techniques when they were explained to him. Staff on the *ODT* expressed an ongoing commitment to local election coverage regardless of whether public engagement improved. Only *The Dominion*'s staff showed an inclination to significantly pull back from covering local elections.

There was a high degree of similarity across five of the papers in terms of their evaluation of their 2001 election coverage. Only *The Dominion* interviewees showed a clear lack of interest in local elections. The other papers' journalists were resolved to continue providing coverage even in the face of public apathy. The commitment to keep covering local elections evident among staff at *The Evening Post*, *Waikato Times*, *The Press*, the *ODT* and the *Herald* fits in with the public participation goal of public journalism – the drive to reconnect the public with political life (Hoyt, 1992; Merritt & Rosen, 1998; Rosen & Taylor, 1992).

8.5 Differences in coverage between papers with public journalism experience and papers without public journalism experience

This section addresses Research Question Three and focuses on the actual coverage provided of the 2001 Local Body Elections as laid out in the content analysis results in Chapter Seven. The five areas of content analysis – amount of coverage, geographical spread, use of mobilising information, use of public journalism "elements" and use of sources – will be dealt with in turn.

8.5.1 Amount of election coverage in 2001

The three newspapers with experience of public journalism ranked in the top four in terms of the number of stories written in their election coverage. *The Evening Post* (368), *The Press* (269) and the *Waikato Times* (158) produced many more stories than the *Herald* (100) and *The Dominion* (73). They also ranked in the top four in terms of space devoted to election coverage.

However, the *Herald* and *The Dominion*, while producing fewer stories and providing less space for election stories, produced on average larger stories. The *Herald*'s 453cm^2 average story size

was a full 50% larger than the next placed *The Dominion* (302cm^2). Perhaps these two papers, aware that they were going to produce fewer stories (the *Herald* due to journalists' strikes, *The Dominion* due to its focus on national news), compensated by doing more substantial background items on election issues. Certainly, the interviews with staff at *The Dominion* in Chapter Six show that the paper's plan was to provide a single major background article on the election issues in regional centres.

The *ODT* was the one newspaper without experience of public journalism that matched *The Evening Post*, *The Press* and the *Waikato Times* in terms of amount of election coverage (270 stories). The *ODT*, as discussed in section 8.3 above, saw local elections as its core business and the Chapter Seven results confirm this.

Overall, the newspapers with experience of public journalism delivered on the statements made in interviews by their editorial decision makers. The interviewees said they considered local elections to be important and content analysis shows that they followed through by producing more stories than two of the three newspapers without experience of public journalism. The *ODT*, without experience of public journalism, also delivered on its interviewees' commitment to local election coverage.

8.5.2 Geographical spread of the 2001 election coverage

This research looked at the spread of the six papers' coverage across their regions. A search of the literature has revealed no other studies that have looked at this aspect of coverage by newspapers using public journalism. However, on the basis of the core principles asserted by proponents of public journalism, the researcher argues that newspapers using public journalism should be more likely to provide full coverage of each of their main communities. This is supported by public journalism advocates arguing that it is about reconnecting the public to political processes (Merritt & Rosen, 1998). Haas (1999b) argues that public journalism should not deal with the public as a single mass, but should focus on the communities to which people belong.

All six papers focused primarily on their main metropolitan council in their election stories. However, this was most likely to happen on the papers with a background in using public journalism – *The Evening Post* (in 59.5% of election stories), *The Press* (50.2%) and the *Waikato Times* (69%). The *Herald* and *The Dominion* focused a bit less on these main councils (48% and 43.8% respectively). However, given the much larger numbers of stories published by the first three papers they were still able to write more stories about smaller councils outside their main centres than the *Herald* and *The Dominion*. The *ODT* (37.4%) stood out as spreading

its coverage into the regions, with five councils outside Dunedin city being covered in more than 10% of stories, which equated to at least 30 stories each. *The Evening Post* came closest to this, writing at least 20 stories about five councils other than Wellington City Council.

The Evening Post appeared to see it as important to systematically cover the issues in the communities in its surrounding regions, but the *Waikato Times* and *The Press* did not seem to see this as so important, preferring to focus on their main centres, particularly the mayoral contests. The interviews with staff at *The Press* indicated that their focus was on Christchurch and on issues affecting the Canterbury region as a whole rather than covering all regional communities. The *Waikato Times* interviewees spoke about the importance of local coverage, with the content analysis results suggesting that this meant in practice coverage of Hamilton as the regional centre. Perhaps in the case of *The Evening Post* the sheer volume of coverage it published allowed it to get the best of both worlds – extensive coverage of the Wellington mayoralty and writing numerous stories about neighbouring cities.

The content analysis results suggest that the papers without experience of public journalism seem to have fulfilled the expectations indicated in the interviews. *The Dominion* staff said they did not see local elections as a priority and that their intention was to produce a more substantial backgrounder about each regional area and leave it at that. This appears to be what happened. The *Herald* staff pointed to abortive attempts to cover councils outside Auckland due to the journalists' strike. The content analysis reveals how limited the coverage by the country's largest newspaper was – its circulation in March 2001 (209,898) was more than twice that of the next largest paper (*The Press*, 91,003). However, the *Herald*'s perhaps gallant attempt to cover its entire region can be seen in the fact that it published stories about more councils (33) than any other paper. The *ODT* interviews highlighted the importance of covering regions outside Dunedin and the content analysis shows that this definitely happened.

Comparing the two groups of three newspapers, only the *ODT* and *The Evening Post* showed that in practice they were committed to full regional coverage. *The Press* and the *Waikato Times* were, like the *Herald*, primarily committed to covering their main metropolitan council. *The Dominion*, although it produced less coverage than other papers, could be seen as having a systematic approach to regional coverage by doing one major story on each and then leaving the rest of the coverage to *The Evening Post*. It could be argued that by spreading coverage more widely across their regions, the *ODT* and *The Evening Post* were taking a step towards fulfilling one long sought after goal of media critics – greater diversification of the news (see Gans, 1979; Iosifides, 1999; Keane, 1991; McQuail, 1992; Negrine, 1994; Negrine & Papathanassopoulos,

1990; Seymour-Ure, 1991). Spreading coverage more widely raises the prospect of different sources and issues being incorporated in stories.

Perhaps it is best to view the geographical spread of 2001 election coverage in terms of the discussion about markets in section 8.3 above. In this context, the *ODT* and *The Evening Post* can be seen as servicing their main markets in 2001. *The Press* and *Waikato Times* could be seen as doing the same, given the understandable need to focus coverage where the bulk of the population lived. *The Dominion*'s coverage fitted in with its national focus and reliance on *The Evening Post* to cover most local Wellington stories. The *Herald*'s spread of coverage reflects its industrial problems and perhaps also points to uncertainty at the paper about how it blends its national focus with the need to service its home Auckland market and also the host of substantial communities in the wider Auckland region.

8.5.3 Use of mobilising information in the 2001 Elections

Mobilising information has been associated with public journalism research in a number of United States studies. A Seattle study comparing a paper using public journalism with one that was not using it in found that the only significant difference was that the former used more mobilising information in its stories (Blazier & Lemert, 2000). A similar study between two papers, this time over an eight-year period, found that the one using public journalism showed a stronger trend towards using mobilising information (McMillan et al. 1998). Moscowitz (2002) found that a public journalism practising newspaper used more mobilising information than a conventional paper, though the latter still used a lot of mobilising information.

Looking at the research for this thesis, the results seem to match those found in the United States studies. The three newspapers with experience of public journalism made significant use of mobilising information in their 2001 election stories. They all ranked in the top four in frequency of use of mobilising information. In terms of types of mobilising information contained in election stories, these three papers showed a greater preference than the papers without public journalism experience for encouraging people to vote and offering readers details of public meetings.

However, the *ODT*, a newspaper with no background in public journalism, also rated highly in terms of using mobilising information (second highest). It also ranked third highest in terms of providing details of public meetings. Perhaps the paper's strong local focus and desire to boost voting, as presented through the interviews, led it naturally to use mobilising information. This commitment to boosting turnout also reflects core public journalism principles of promoting public engagement as pursued by newspapers like the Wichita *Eagle* (Hoyt, 1992; Merritt,

1998; Willey, 1998), *Charlotte Observer* (Eksterowicz et al. 1998; Johnson, 1998; Shepard, 1994; Thames, 1998) and the *Wisconsin State Journal* (Denton & Thorson, 1998; Friedland et al. 1998).

The Dominion and the *Herald*, in contrast, offered no public meeting information in any election stories. These two papers showed a greater preference for providing factual information about the electoral process. The *ODT*, *The Dominion* and the *Herald* showed less interest in encouraging people to vote than the three papers with public journalism experience. In this respect, however, the *ODT* showed more interest than *The Dominion* or the *Herald*.

8.5.4 Use of "elements" of public journalism in the 2001 Elections

The use of story elements associated with public journalism in 2001 Elections stories saw the six newspapers fall into two groups. The three papers with a background in public journalism and the *ODT* made the most frequent use of these elements (present in between 28% and 46% of stories). *The Evening Post* stood out, with an incidence more than 50% higher than any other paper. The *Herald* fell behind the pack with 22%, while *The Dominion* was a distant sixth (13%).

Looking at the elements used by the different papers, the most commonly used one was providing people with information that enabled them to participate in the elections. Five of the papers also made significant use of ordinary people's opinions gained through opinion polling. This feature sits at the heart of public journalism, according to the literature, which focuses on the need for the media to reconnect the public to political life, that is, to promote the involvement of people in political processes like elections (Glasser & Craft, 1998; Haas, 1999b; Merritt, 1995a, 1995b; Rosen, 1993a).

The papers with public journalism experience showed a preference for the following elements: actively encouraging public participation (highest, second and third) and discussing issues chosen on the basis of public priorities (second, third and fourth). The latter is also widely accepted in the literature as a central feature of public journalism practice (Blazier & Lemert, 2000; McGregor et al. 1998; Thames, 1998). The papers with public journalism experience also made more statements about the roles of the media and public during elections, indicating the sort of philosophical commitment to the democratic process that Merritt is seeking (Merritt & McMasters, 1996).

There were, however, some inconsistencies. For example, while *The Evening Post* and *The Press* featured information from interviews with members of the public in 10 and 11 stories

respectively, the *Waikato Times* did not use such information in any stories. Discussion about solutions to problems has been associated with public journalism (see Blazier & Lemert, 2000; McGregor et al. 1999; Merritt, 1999a; Moscowitz, 2002). However, in this research while *The Evening Post* and *The Press* contained such discussion in 12 and 10 stories respectively, the *Waikato Times* published no stories containing this element. The first two papers also made much greater use of opinion polls than the *Waikato Times*, though all three papers did use polls to help set the election news agenda as is typical in media using public journalism (Hoyt, 1992; McGregor et al. 1998, 1999, 2002; Thames, 1998). Not one of the papers with experience of public journalism made any statement explaining how it was influencing the paper's coverage. *The Evening Post* came close in its opening election editorial, but no mention was made of public journalism. This oversight suggests that the three newspapers actually fall short of fully realising Merritt's desire for the media to adopt a philosophical commitment to public journalism (Merritt & McMasters, 1996).

Looking at the papers without experience of using public journalism, the *ODT* tended to give different results than the *Herald* and *The Dominion*. The *ODT* ranked highest of the six papers in frequency of discussing issues chosen on the basis of public priorities and discussing solutions to problems. However, the other two papers without experience of public journalism all but ignored both elements. The *ODT* encouraged voters to take part in the elections in 10 stories while the *Herald* did so in just two stories and *The Dominion* in just one. The *ODT* also mentioned the roles of the public and the media as much as did the papers with experience of public journalism, with the *Herald* running a single story about the role of the media and none about the public's role, and *The Dominion* running no such stories at all.

In regard to a couple of elements – telling readers how sitting councillors voted and letting candidates speak to readers about their policies in their own words – only two papers made significant use of each one. In each case, one of the papers was from the public journalism group and one from the group without public journalism experience. *The Evening Post* and the *Herald* showed greatest preference for letting readers know how councillors had voted, while *The Evening Post* and the *ODT* were the only newspapers to run items letting candidates explain their policies on salient issues in their own words. These two elements are consistent with the literature, which identifies public journalism as moving away from a traditional focus on personality and horse race election coverage in favour of focusing on the issues and what candidates have to say about them (Blazier & Lemert, 2000; McGregor et al. 2000; McMillan et al. 1998).

Overall, the *Herald* made some use of public journalism elements in providing information about candidates' voting history, which matches its chief reporter's demonstrated interest in public journalism in his interview, particularly in the way public journalism focuses on issues identified by the public. *The Dominion*'s lack of interest in local elections and in encouraging voting, as expressed in the interviews, is mirrored by content analysis of its 2001 coverage.

The preference of the papers with public journalism experience for actively encouraging public participation and discussing issues chosen on the basis of public priorities is entirely consistent with the literature, as discussed above. Public journalism is fundamentally associated with promoting participation and it would be expected that any newspaper claiming to be using public journalism would, through content analysis, be shown to have encouraged the public to get involved. Showing a preference for basing coverage on issues identified by the public is also consistent with the literature. Again, the picture is made more complex by the fact that the non-public journalism *ODT* also featured more heavily in terms of the participatory theme than the other papers without experience of public journalism.

Two findings of this analysis will be of particular interest to students of public journalism. The first is the *Waikato Times*' failure to write any stories containing discussion about solutions to problems, a perennial feature of public journalism research, as discussed above. The second is the failure of any of the newspapers with a public journalism background to discuss public journalism with readers, which would have been expected in the American context.

In terms of the solutions element, the interview with the *Waikato Times*' editor, who had long experience of using public journalism and had read some of the foundation literature, suggests that her interest in public journalism revolved around re-engaging the public (as per Merritt & Rosen, 1998; Rosen & Taylor, 1992) and not focusing on solving public problems. Certainly, in her lengthy supplementary interview about the development of public journalism practice she made no mention of the solutions aspect of public journalism theory. It should be noted, however, that Merritt himself has counselled against news media going too far in terms of promoting solutions reporting to the point where it becomes advocacy journalism (Merritt & McMasters, 1996).

The complete absence of explicit discussions about public journalism is interesting, perhaps indicating a reluctance to introduce a theoretical or philosophical justification for using public journalism and a preference for using other justifications. It may also point to a gap in the transfer of knowledge about public journalism from the editors of *The Evening Post*, *Waikato Times* and *The Press* to their staff. The interviews certainly show that while the three editors had

extensive knowledge about public journalism theory, their staff had only a rudimentary knowledge. In the case of the *Waikato Times*, the local government reporter did not even know what public journalism was. This concentration of public journalism knowledge in the minds of newspaper editors has been found elsewhere (see Romano, 2001). However, it is perhaps not good news for public journalism.

8.5.5 Use of sources in the 2001 Elections

Journalism scholarship discussing the basic processes under which the media operate points to a traditional preference among journalists for official, or elite, sources (Entman, 1989; Gans, 1979; Schudson, 1986). Using such sources gives journalists credibility and their stories status (Lacy & Coulson, 2000; Lee, 2001; Tuchman, 1978). This extends to a bias in favour of using male sources (see Zoch & Van Slyke Turk, 1998).

Research into public journalism has indicated that using this approach can alter the source mix in media coverage. A television study by Louisiana State University found that citizen sources and women were used more often in the public journalism items than is normally the case in the media (Kurpius, 2002). Moscowitz (2002) found that the *Charlotte Observer*, a prominent user of public journalism techniques, used fewer official sources and more volunteer sources than the traditional *Indianapolis Star*. Zoch and Van Slyke Turk (1998) found that the *Observer* used more non-official sources and women than two non-public journalism papers. Ewart (2000) found that a New Zealand paper (*The Press*) used a more diverse set of sources after using public journalism. However, a number of such pieces of research have shown marginal or even negative results for citizen or non-official sources (Blazier & Lemert, 2000; Ewart, 2002; Haas, 2001; Lee, 2001; Massey, 1998; McMillan et al. 1998; Riede, 1996) and for citing of women (Massey, 1999). Romano found that in the Queensland public journalism project elites tended to dominate coverage of public forums via politicians, religious and community leaders (1999, 2001)

The three papers with public journalism experience covered in this research made more use of non-elite sources than those without experience of using public journalism by a factor of around two to one. However, 86-88% of the sources used by the papers with public journalism experience were still elites (as against between 92% and 94.6% for the other three papers). The most commonly used sources among all six papers were incumbent politicians followed by non-incumbent candidates and local government officials. These results support, in general terms, the findings of Ewart (2000) in relation to *The Press*' election coverage in 1996. However, the overwhelming continued preference for official sources in 2001 suggests there is a long way to

go before diversity of sources in the New Zealand media reaches the vision contained in Gans' (1979) goal of "multiperspectival" coverage.

In terms of the gender of sources, there was no clear difference between the two groups of newspapers, with *The Evening Post* making the greatest use of women as sources, *The Press* ranking fourth equal and the *Waikato Times* ranking bottom. Men still made up about two-thirds of sources on *The Press* and the *Waikato Times*, with this falling to 55% on *The Evening Post*. The *ODT* and *The Dominion* ranked second and third highest in use of female sources, with the *Herald* fourth equal. The results for *The Evening Post* tend to support findings linking public journalism with greater use of female sources (Kurpius, 2002; Zoch and Van Slyke Turk, 1998). However, the results for *The Evening Post* are not supported by those of the other two newspapers with public journalism experience, which tends to undermine any claim of an unequivocal link between public journalism and greater use of women as sources during the 2001 elections.

Comparing the two groups of papers, both were still wedded to elite and male sources. However, there was a consistent trend among the papers with a public journalism background towards greater use of non-elite sources. Unlike the discussion above about mobilising information and use of public journalism elements the three papers with a record of using public journalism were not grouped with the *ODT*. This paper's use of elites mirrored that of *The Dominion* and the *Herald*. In terms of source gender, there was no clear trend in favour of papers with a background in public journalism using more female sources. If anything, the public journalism experienced papers as a group made less use of female sources than the other papers. However, these three papers also had the largest number of unknown gender sources and made more use of polls than the other papers. Making the reasonable assumption that scientific polls contain near equal numbers of men and women, it could be that many of the unknown sources in polls reported in *The Evening Post*, *The Press* and *Waikato Times* were women.

The research for this thesis shows a consistent increased preference for using non-elite sources among the papers with a background in public journalism. However, no similar correlation was found for female sources. This research therefore suggests inconsistent results for public journalism in influencing source selection during the 2001 Elections. The findings described above suggest that overall the traditional preference for elite and male sources continued through the coverage of the 2001 Elections in New Zealand.

This completes the discussion of the results of the interviews and content analysis conducted for this research. Conclusions will now be drawn from these results in the final chapter.

Chapter Nine
Conclusion

This thesis has explored the concept of public journalism by considering a case study of the 2001 Local Body Elections in New Zealand. The country's six largest daily newspapers were selected for the case study: three with experience of using public journalism (*The Evening Post*, the *Waikato Times* and *The Press*) and three without experience of public journalism (the *New Zealand Herald*, *The Dominion* and the *Otago Daily Times*). In line with previous public journalism research (such as Blazier & Lemert, 2000; McMillan et al. 1998; Moscowitz, 2002) the coverage of the three newspapers with experience of public journalism has been compared with that of the three newspapers without such experience. This research has followed the work in New Zealand of McGregor et al. (1998, 1999, 2000) who examined the 1996 General Election coverage of seven daily newspapers, including the six studied for this thesis.

The six newspapers were examined by content analysis of their total 2001 local government election coverage and through interviews with a total of 14 staff – two or three senior staff from each paper who were intimately involved in making decisions about their paper's election coverage. In four cases (the *Otago Daily Times*, the *Waikato Times*, *The Press* and *The Evening Post*) the most senior person interviewed was the newspaper's editor. The interviews provided an insight into what each paper was trying to achieve through its election coverage, how it went about deciding what to publish and what the editorial decision makers thought of the final product. The content analysis measured how much coverage each newspaper produced, the geographical spread of each paper's coverage, the use of sources, the use of mobilising information and the presence in stories of public journalism "elements" or features of public journalism identified in the literature.

Previous research on public journalism, as discussed in Chapters Three and Four, has showed some differences in coverage by newspapers using a public journalism approach – in terms of story content (McGregor et al. 1999, 2000; Moscowitz, 2002), use of sources (Ewart, 2000; Kurpius, 2002; Moscowitz, 2002; Zoch & Van Slyke Turk, 1998) and use of mobilising information in stories (Blazier & Lemert, 2000; McMillan et al. 1998; Moscowitz, 2002). However, some of these studies (Blazier & Lemert, 2000; McMillan et al. 1998) along with other research (such as Ewart, 2002; Haas, 2001; Lee, 2001; Massey, 1998; Massey, 1999) have drawn a complex picture where the differences between newspapers using public journalism and those without knowledge of public journalism have been inconsistent and not always significant. Some longitudinal research has showed that the differences in coverage are greater

between a newspaper using public journalism and the same paper in its pre-public journalism days, than between a newspaper using public journalism and one of its traditional contemporaries (Blazier & Lemert, 2000).

Some of the most consistent results demonstrating a difference between newspapers using public journalism and those using a traditional approach to news coverage have been found in New Zealand by McGregor et al. In studying coverage of the 1996 General Election, they found that stories in the newspapers using public journalism practices were less likely to feature conflict and more likely to feature steps towards finding solutions to problems (1999). The team's later research found the newspapers using public journalism were more likely to cover issues like health, education and social welfare and less likely to focus on the election candidates, coalition politics and horse race polling (2000).

In this project, the discussion of the results of the interviews and content analysis in Chapter Eight identifies some differences between the two groups of newspapers – those with and those without experience of public journalism. However, reflecting other investigations (Massey, 1999; Romano 1999, 2001), the differences are not always clear or consistent. The *Otago Daily Times*, whose editor and local government reporter had no knowledge or experience of public journalism in 2001, often featured prominently in measures associated with public journalism, especially in the extent of its coverage, its local focus, use of mobilising information in stories, encouragement of voters to cast their ballots, and its running of public meetings. The *Otago Daily Times* was, therefore, different from the other two papers without public journalism experience (*The Dominion* and the *New Zealand Herald*). The coverage of the newspapers with a public journalism background (the *Waikato Times*, *The Press* and *The Evening Post*) also did not always display the features that one might expect, based on a reading of the literature, such as the failure of the *Waikato Times* and *The Press* to use more female sources than the newspapers without public journalism experience, and the *Waikato Times*' failure to take a solutions-based approach in any of its stories.

This chapter will consider each of the three research questions that drive the thesis before discussing limitations and future research.

9.1 Research Question One

What did the editorial decision makers on the *New Zealand Herald, Otago Daily Times, The Dominion,* the *Waikato Times, The Press* and *The Evening Post* say they were trying to achieve through their 2001 Local Body Elections coverage and what was their assessment of the final coverage?

The interviews in Chapter Six indicate that the editorial decision makers by and large felt a duty to provide coverage of the 2001 Local Body Elections. However, the participants were all concerned about public apathy towards local elections and were conscious of not neglecting other news coverage. All the journalists interviewed felt the news media had a duty to provide support for people so they could cast an informed vote, though there were differences between the participants in terms of whether they thought the news media should take an active role in encouraging people to vote. The editors of the *Waikato Times, ODT* and *The Press* said public apathy was no reason for downgrading local election coverage. However, the staff from *The Dominion* made it clear that they covered local elections under sufferance and were happy to leave the bulk of coverage to other papers.

The staff on each paper indicated that their coverage would focus on the elections in the main urban centre in their area. However, the *ODT* participants asserted the importance of their wider region and their intention to cover smaller centres fully. The *Herald*'s plans to spread its coverage outside Auckland city were hampered by weeks of journalists' strikes. *The Evening Post* staff led a well-planned public journalism campaign in 2001, starting with an editorial about public disconnection that was pure Rosen and continuing with regular coverage of issues identified by the public as important. *The Dominion* staff, by contrast, said they aimed to produce just one solid background piece on each council area.

Each paper had a similar newsroom management structure and a similar process for identifying and prioritising stories under normal circumstances. All interviewees indicated that the news values that applied under normal circumstances still held sway during the 2001 Elections. However, each paper carried into the election a different approach based on its market situation, while some of the papers also challenged the normal news prioritisation process in covering the elections.

The *Herald* and *The Dominion* considered themselves to be national newspapers, with the latter's participants particularly stressing this point. *The Evening Post* and *The Dominion,* which competed in the same market, were motivated in large part by the desire to beat each other to stories and not to duplicate coverage. The former, as an afternoon paper, felt a strong pull to

cover local Wellington events. *The Press, ODT* and *Waikato Times* were also motivated by their commitment to local coverage.

The *ODT, Waikato Times* and *The Evening Post* challenged the usual news values by organising and then covering public candidates' meetings during the election. The *Waikato Times, The Evening Post* and *The Press* also challenged the normal order of things by basing their coverage on issues identified by the public.

The poor voter turnout was disappointing for all participants and this made it difficult for them to be overly enthusiastic about their coverage. Staff on *The Dominion* and *The Evening Post* all said they thought they had spent too much coverage on the 2001 Elections and would scale it back in the future. *The Press*' participants seemed a bit disillusioned about the value of continuing to use public journalism techniques, while the *Waikato Times* editor felt public journalism needed freshening up. The *Herald* interviewees felt they had focused too much on Auckland city's mayoralty and had done readers a disservice. Two of *The Evening Post*'s participants felt the same way about their coverage of Wellington city. The editor of *The Evening Post* also wanted to limit future coverage of fringe candidates who had no chance of success.

The absence of proper research into the 2001 Elections meant all six sets of participants had to rely on hearsay and anecdotal feedback in order to evaluate the success of their coverage. Cost and lack of time were cited as the reasons for not doing formal evaluations. This oversight was acknowledged only by the editor of the *Waikato Times*, who appreciated that public journalism campaigns should be evaluated and admitted to being almost ashamed that no evaluation had been done in 2001. Without evaluations along the lines advocated by Meyer (1998), it is very difficult for the news media to assess whether or not their efforts have been a success. Future public journalism projects in New Zealand should include a strategy for evaluating them.

The interviewees' comments about their failure to evaluate the 2001 election coverage suggest that most of the participants, including those on the newspapers practising public journalism, were comfortable to rely on their own anecdotal appreciation of what the public thought. To gain an objective measure of success, they instinctively turned to circulation figures, which are at best a blunt instrument. In keeping with public journalism principles, it might be more productive if media running public journalism campaigns tried to measure the benefits gained by readers, such as whether the coverage led them to engage more in the political process or improved their understanding of the issues.

9.2 Research Question Two

Did the editorial decision makers on the papers with experience of conducting public journalism experiments differ from other editorial leaders in their assessment of the type of coverage they were aiming for and achieved during the 2001 Local Body Elections?

The three newspapers with experience of public journalism – *The Evening Post*, *Waikato Times* and *The Press* – shared some features in terms of their plans to cover the 2001 Elections. All three chose to inform their coverage by using poll results in which the general public identified the issues of greatest importance to them. *The Waikato Times* and *The Evening Post* also organised candidates' meetings for voters. The editors of the *Waikato Times* and *The Press* emphasised the need for the media to support the democratic process and cover local elections even in the face of public apathy. All three papers were committed to prioritising coverage of their local region. The *Waikato Times* participants felt the media should encourage people to vote, while those on *The Evening Post* and *The Press* were divided.

Considering the papers without experience of public journalism, the *ODT* participants shared, and even exceeded, the above commitment to local coverage. This contrasted with *The Dominion* and, to a lesser extent, the *Herald*, which tended to concentrate on national events. The *ODT* staff and the *Herald*'s chief reporter shared the commitment to support the democratic process expressed by the editors of the *Waikato Times* and *The Press*. Only the staff from *The Dominion* actively derided the importance of local government elections. The *ODT* staff supported the view that the media should actively encourage voting, while the *Herald* staff were divided and *The Dominion*'s participants rejected the idea. Overall, the *ODT* made the greatest effort to cover the elections among the three papers with no experience of public journalism. As with two of the papers with public journalism experience, the *ODT* organised its own public meetings to introduce candidates to voters.

The absence of formal evaluation of election coverage by any of the papers seems extraordinary given the efforts they put in. This is especially so for the three papers with experience of public journalism, whose editors had been exposed to public journalism theory and literature. Resource issues have been cited, but the extent of the election coverage undertaken, with polling and public meetings and a huge number of reporting hours committed suggests that resources were not the sole issue. Perhaps it was also the case that the editors, who controlled the purse strings, simply did not see value in evaluating their coverage.

It could be argued that this failure to evaluate points towards a deeper problem in the use of public journalism in New Zealand in 2001. If the newspapers in this case study were fully committed to the ideals of public journalism, that is, to re-engaging the public in public life (see Merritt & Rosen, 1998) one would expect them to be interested in knowing whether the public were in fact re-engaged as a result of the election coverage. As indicated above under section 9.1, circulation figures cannot be relied on as a measure of engagement because a move in circulation could have many causes – witness the huge jumps in paper sales following the 11 September 2001 attacks. The public could still have benefitted from the election coverage even if circulation stayed the same or fell slightly. A cynic might suggest that the fact the interview participants on all three newspapers with a background in public journalism turned to circulation to measure their success could indicate that it is newspaper circulation that they were primarily concerned about. It is not that a newspaper editor should not be concerned with economic success; rather, the question is why an editor committed to public journalism is not equally concerned with finding out whether their strategy for election coverage has produced positive results.

Perhaps, after all, public journalism in New Zealand is simply a technique of coverage that sits well with newspapers' priorities and marketing and is not, in fact, a genuine shift in media behaviour from a journalism of "information" provided to the public to one of "conversation" with the public (Carey, 1993).

9.3 Research Question Three

In what way, if any, did the coverage of the 2001 Local Body Elections by papers with experience of conducting public journalism experiments differ from papers with no experience of using public journalism?

Content analysis shows that the 2001 election coverage by the three newspapers with experience of public journalism (*The Evening Post*, *Waikato Times* and *The Press*) displayed a number of differences from that of the other three papers.

The former produced many more election stories than the latter (795 stories against 443), though the *Herald* and *The Dominion* produced on average larger stories. The *ODT*, however, stood apart from its non-public journalism colleagues in publishing the second highest number of election stories. The claims made by the newspapers with experience of public journalism and the *ODT* that they saw local coverage as important carried through into actual news copy.

All six papers focused primarily on their main metropolitan council in their election stories, but the three papers with public journalism experience showed the strongest preference for doing this. However, viewing these results in percentage terms is risky since the papers with public journalism experience wrote many more stories than *The Dominion* and the *Herald*. The *ODT* stands out as having the strongest commitment to spreading its coverage over its entire region. As noted in Chapter Eight, each paper's election coverage, in terms of volume and geographical spread can be understood in terms of the paper serving its target market. The exception to this is the *Herald*, which wanted to do more, but was mired in rolling strikes.

In terms of use of mobilising information, the three papers with public journalism experience ranked in the top four. They also showed a greater preference than the papers without public journalism experience for encouraging people to vote and offering readers details of public meetings. The *ODT* also rated highly for mobilising information (second) and giving details of public meetings (third). *The Dominion* and the *Herald* published no meeting information in their election stories, preferring to give readers factual information about voting.

The frequency of use of public journalism "elements" in election stories followed a similar pattern, with the *ODT* rating in a range with *The Press*, *The Evening Post* and *Waikato Times*. *The Evening Post* rated highest, with an incidence of using public journalism elements at least one-and-a-half times that of any other paper. The *Herald* and *The Dominion* made significantly less use of these features of public journalism. The three papers with public journalism experience rated highest in terms of actively encouraging participation in their stories. They rated three out of the top four in terms of discussing issues chosen on the basis of public priorities. The *ODT* was fourth highest in terms of encouraging participation and highest in discussing issues based on public priorities. The *ODT* also joined *The Evening Post* in running stories in which candidates explained their policies in their own words.

The Dominion ranked lowest on almost all public journalism measures, while the *Herald* rated a bit higher on most measures, though still below the *ODT* and other three papers. The *Herald* stood out on one feature – it was one of only two papers to publish details of politicians' voting records (the other was *The Evening Post*).

As discussed in Chapter Eight, these results highlight a couple of interesting points relating to the papers with public journalism experience – the absence of any discussion about solutions to problems in *Waikato Times* stories and the failure of any of the three papers to explicitly discuss public journalism with readers. The former is perhaps explained by the interview with the *Waikato Times'* editor in which she discusses the paper's priorities (see section 8.5.4). In

relation to the second point, *The Evening Post*'s editorial on 1 August, 2001 discussed the basic theories of public journalism, but did not explain the context from which the ideas emerged, that is, the fact that public journalism had been used in the United States with some positive effects. The editorial also set up a goal of trying to re-engage the public in political life, but, as discussed above under sections 9.1 and 9.2, no evaluation was done to see if the public had been re-engaged.

Regarding use of sources, the papers with public journalism experience consistently made more use of non-elite sources than those without experience of using public journalism (around twice the frequency). This is a significant result in terms of the literature, though all papers still overwhelmingly used elite sources. The *ODT*, often grouped with the three public journalism experienced papers in the research results, was rated very closely to the *Herald* and *The Dominion* in relation to sourcing. Hence, there is a clear correlation in terms of sources between newspapers with a background of using public journalism and use of more non-elite sources. In terms of gender, *The Evening Post* rated highest in using women as sources, but there was no consistent result identifying the papers with public journalism experience as leading the way in this respect.

9.4 Summary

The literature on the use of public journalism suggests that it can lead to different news coverage than is traditionally provided by the media, specifically differences in story content, use of more female and non-elite sources, and greater use of mobilising information. The research to date, however, often fails to show consistent and clear differences when comparing newspapers practising public journalism and those using a conventional approach.

The results presented in this thesis mirror those of previous research by showing significant differences in the coverage of the newspapers with public journalism experience in relation to some factors, but not others. The papers with a public journalism background consistently used more non-elite sources than the traditional papers, but did not consistently use more female sources. They also included mobilising information in stories more frequently and made greater use of story features, or "elements", associated with public journalism. However, one of the papers with no experience of using public journalism, the *Otago Daily Times*, also ranked highly in relation to these two factors.

The interviews revealed some differences in goals among the journalists, but this was not a simple split between the journalists on papers with public journalism experience and the other journalists. For example, not all interviewees working for the papers experienced in using public

journalism agreed that their goal should be to boost voter turnout. By contrast, the two participants from the *ODT* and the chief reporter of the *Herald* felt that it was their paper's goal to boost voter numbers. Nor was an overt commitment to supporting the democratic process expressed only by staff on the papers with public journalism experience. Again the *ODT* staff and the *Herald*'s chief reporter made explicit statements in their interviews about the media's role in supporting the democratic process by covering local elections. The interviews did identify that only the three newspapers with a public journalism background used polling to identify the issues that were important to the public and proceeded to cover these issues during their election campaign.

The results of this research confirm that New Zealand newspapers with experience in using public journalism produced, in some respects, different media coverage during the 2001 Local Body Elections from newspapers that had no background in public journalism. However, one of the latter papers, the *ODT*, produced coverage that was very similar to that produced by the newspapers with experience in using public journalism. This suggests that public journalism, certainly as practised by New Zealand newspapers, is comparable to the coverage of a metropolitan daily newspaper that gives priority to reporting on local events and, specifically, local elections. It might also suggest, however, that since the introduction of public journalism into New Zealand in 1996 newspapers that have not been directly exposed to public journalism have nevertheless picked up aspects of it. Perhaps in this way public journalism has changed the way that elections are covered.

9.5 Limitations on this research

This research is limited to an analysis of one period of election coverage for the six target newspapers. It has not, like some research into public journalism, taken a longitudinal approach (see Bare, 1998; McGregor et al. 2000; McMillan et al. 1998). Such research is useful as it can show whether the use of public journalism over a number of years produces long term changes in the media. The newspapers that started using public journalism in New Zealand in 1996 have now been using such techniques for as long as 12 years, which could provide a good basis for longitudinal study.

Resource limitations have prevented this research from trying to match the work of McGregor et al. (1998, 1999, 2000) in analysing the framing of stories published during election coverage by newspapers using public journalism. An update on this work would be extremely useful.

Some research has been done on source ethnicity during public journalism campaigns (see Ewart, 2002; Kurpius, 2002). An attempt to do something similar in this thesis failed as there

appeared to be no simple way of identifying sources by ethnicity, that is, as Māori or non-Māori. It would be worth exploring whether a public journalism project in New Zealand has resulted in more Māori sources being used.

9.6 Further research

The main priority for research into public journalism in New Zealand must be to evaluate projects that are identified as being public journalism. This needs to done on a consistent basis so that the media can see whether such an approach produces results. Meyer's (1998) list of factors to look at is a good starting point (see Chapter Three, section 3.5). The failure to evaluate projects is a major gap in the New Zealand research.

Another potentially productive avenue to explore is whether public journalism use in New Zealand has continued with projects like the 1996 General Election and 2001 Local Body Elections initiatives or whether it has moved into issues-based projects. The question might also be asked as to whether recognisable public journalism campaigns are still carried out at all. If they are not, it would be useful to see whether the public journalism experiences of the past have led to a different way of covering events or issues or whether public journalism has simply slipped away into the night.

9.7 Concluding reflections on public journalism

Public journalism proponent Davis Merritt says that public journalism constitutes "cultural change of a fundamental nature" in the media (Merritt, 1998, p. xii). However, Merritt also expects it to take many years to realise the goals of public journalism. The question is whether there is any evidence in the research results presented here that such fundamental change is happening in New Zealand media exposed to public journalism. Or is public journalism as practised in New Zealand, to use Meyer's words, a mere "course correction" for the media (1998, pp. 256-258)?

The results of this thesis suggest that while journalists leading news coverage on New Zealand newspapers using public journalism showed a strong commitment to supporting the deliberations of the body politic, this commitment was also shared by others. Furthermore, the coverage that their newspapers produced during the 2001 Local Body Elections, while different from that of two conventional newspapers, was not radically different from the coverage of a third paper serving a provincial community. There is no suggestion from these results that newspapers in New Zealand practising public journalism produced radically different coverage than other papers. Overall, male sources still dominated all newspapers in the 2001 Elections, as did elites. The newspapers with experience of using public journalism took a different tack by

using polls to identify issues for coverage. However, this could be seen as simply using what the editorial decision makers saw as an effective technique for connecting with readers rather than as evidence of fundamentally different coverage.

Some researchers argue that one of public journalism's greatest weaknesses is that it does not go far enough in stimulating public discourse, which is one of the goals of public journalism identified by its supporters (see Merritt, 1998; Rosen & Taylor, 1992). These theorists argue that increasing non-elite and female or minority source use is not enough. Haas (2001), who looked at the Akron, Ohio *Beacon-Journal*'s A Question of Color campaign on race relations, concluded that simply having more voices was not enough. Citizens and experts needed to come together to share the experiences of the former and the research of the latter and debate the options available. Elsewhere, Haas says journalists seem to persist in clinging to ideas of objectivity rather than thinking about relationships with the community based on conversation and discussion (1999a). Other scholars also argue that public journalism needs to ensure that the public are brought together as part of the process (Lambeth, 1998a; Schroll, 1999).

Coleman (2000a) says public journalism proponents should adopt communitarian principles as these will give public journalism a better philosophical foundation. She says communitarianism will work because it wants to restore communities and makes communities the starting point for decision-making. It is also compatible with capitalism, sees the audience as a group of active people, and supports the hearing of diverse voices. Anderson et al. (1996) argue that public journalism needs to share its control of the news process with the public and challenge traditional ways of making the news.

Considering the 2001 Local Body Elections, there is little about the approaches used by the newspapers with experience of public journalism that would be recognisable to Haas, Coleman or Anderson et al. While the public were brought into the election process through polls and were invited to attend a few candidates' meetings, it could not be said that *The Evening Post*, *Waikato Times* and *The Press* created opportunities for their various communities to come together to deliberate on issues facing them. After the initial polling, the course of the 2001 Elections coverage was largely determined by the news media. The public deliberative aspect of public journalism and the idea of sharing power with the public remain unexplored in the New Zealand context.

As discussed in Chapter Four, New Zealand newspapers have embarked on coverage of special issues outside elections, such as *The Evening Post*'s roading and regional hospital campaigns and the *Southland Times*' joining in a regional promotion project. However, these tend to be

advocacy-type initiatives, not occasions where the media facilitate deliberation by the public, leaving the public to make the decisions. Merritt has made it clear that he does not support such advocacy reporting under the banner of public journalism (Merritt & McMasters, 1996).

Overall, the picture in New Zealand remains, as McGregor et al. found it, one of public journalism as a "special events" model of reportage (2000, p. 145). It has informed election coverage since the mid-1990s, but as of 2001 had not been incorporated into mainstream news processes on a regular basis. The results of this research suggest that the kinds of differences identified by previous research into public journalism also existed in coverage of the 2001 Local Body Elections. However, while there was evidence that newspapers working with a public journalism model based their coverage on public priorities, there was no sign that these papers were prepared to share power with the public or make fundamental changes to news processes on an on-going basis. This is the sort of thing that the literature suggests that Rosen and Merritt really want to see.

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