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**Reflecting Diversity or Selecting Viewpoints:
An Analysis of the GM Debate in New Zealand's Media 1998 – 2002**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD in
Communication at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

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Abstract

The advent of genetically modified (GM) food in New Zealand in 1998 saw the beginning of a highly politicised debate about GM use in the country. The concern over GM and the political situation after the 1999 general election saw the Government establish a Royal Commission of Inquiry on Genetic Modification in May, 2000. The Royal Commission and strong public opposition to GM, evident in large public protests and other actions, made the issue highly newsworthy.

The aim of this study was to explore how newspapers reported the GM debate, in particular, examining whether the reportage facilitated greater public debate and awareness about GM through journalists adhering to the ideals of the theory of social responsibility and enacting their watchdog role as encapsulated in the Fourth Estate tradition of the media. To achieve these aims the overall tone of the reportage and also which news source types and themes were most frequently reported were examined. In addition, the relationship and perceptions of scientists and journalists involved in the reporting were explored to examine how these relationships may have influenced the reportage.

Content analysis showed the reportage had a pro-GM bias with policy-makers, scientists and industry spokespeople the most frequently cited news sources. The themes of Science, Economics and Politics dominated the reportage. Other source types and themes were less represented, especially themes dealing with ethical and environmental arguments. This lack of representation occurred despite the Royal Commission offering a space for all interested parties to speak.

The interviews illustrated that scientists believed the quality of newspaper coverage of GM lacked depth and that important issues were unreported. Journalists found the issue complex to report and said they took care not to oversimplify the science and issues surrounding GM. The relationship between scientists and journalists indicated particular tensions existing between the two groups.

The thesis concludes that if robust public debate is to occur within New Zealand regarding GM and other scientific developments, then the media should reflect a greater diversity of opinion by citing other potential news sources offering alternative arguments based on, for example, ethical or environmental grounds.

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