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# What Makes News Online: A New Zealand Perspective

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
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## Abstract

The digital revolution has had far-reaching implications for the news media. The Internet has influenced how, where, and when citizens get news. It has added another element of competition between news providers, one that is not restricted by geographical boundaries. The ensuing attempts by news producers to increase, establish, and maintain a loyal readership online have been linked to an increase in tabloid and sensationalist news content (Fox & Gangl, 2011). Further, the fragmentation of the media landscape as a result of online news requires the media both to reconsider its position as the stalwart upholder of objectivity and to rethink its democratic watchdog role (Mancini, 2013).

Additionally, studies have shown that readers of news online are increasingly selecting soft news stories (Tewksbury 2002; van Heekeren 2005; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010). Several authors (Iyengar & Hahn, 2011; Sunstein, 2002; Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010) have expressed concern that this trend will lead to a poorly informed public unless news providers embrace the participatory potential of the Internet to foster meaningful debate on issues of importance. The concerns raised by previous research formed the background of this study.

This mixed method inquiry considered three New Zealand news websites operated by newspaper organisation – the *Otago Daily Times* and the *Timaru Herald*, which are regionally based, and *Stuff* a national provider. Content analysis was used to find out what stories website readers were interested in and what story topics were being

promoted to online readers. Interviews were also conducted with the editors responsible for the websites' online coverage to canvas their views on the New Zealand digital news sphere.

This thesis found that lead news online was dominated by crime and softer news topics, particularly on the *Stuff* site. It also found readers "top five" news choices were similarly dominated by crime and softer news topics. However, analysis of the geographic sources of the stories also indicates the value and demand for local news focussed on local issues, particularly from regional websites.

Interviews with the editors of the three websites point to the difficulties faced by news organisations, particularly as regards resourcing the web and the ability to provide a true participatory news environment within financial constraints. Ultimately, because news providers and readers more often select news topics related to entertainment rather than to information, the online news environment, as it is currently heading, is unlikely to fulfil the hopes of democratic engagement. While the provision and uptake of local news is an encouraging sign, the news choices citizens make suggest a full reliance on online content is unlikely to produce the informed citizenry envisaged by internet optimists.

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## **Chapter One Introduction**

The advent of new digital media technologies has been the catalyst for significant change in the news media environment during the last 15 years. The demand for an online news product has developed alongside the increase in internet users around the world, who grew by more than 500 percent between 2000 and 2011 (Internet world stats, 2013). As news organisations throughout the world turn to the internet in a bid to increase their influence and readership, they are finding the online audience an unknown quantity, and readers with needs for which they are unsure how to cater. Online news is instant and constantly accessible through an ever-increasing range of technologies. No longer are news seekers tied to the 6pm news bulletin or the radio update on the hour. This increase in demand for instant, anywhere, anytime, online news has prompted debate on the future role of the media in democracy. This debate considers who sets the media agenda, the rise of the citizen journalist and blogger, and the expectation of the reader who may no longer want to be a passive consumer of news.

### **1.1 Theoretical Background**

While some authors (Dahlberg, 2011; Benson, cited in Russell, 2010) believe the rise in internet news readership will foster a new form of democracy, through the development of online communities of interest and reader participation, other researchers have expressed concerns. Some researchers (Dahlberg, 2011; Bimber, 2003; Trippi, 2004, cited in Dylko, Beam, Landreville & Geidner, 2012) believe the digital environment offers potential for the rise of a new e-democracy through

increased opportunity for reader participation and engagement. Others (Davis & Owen, 2008; Mancini, 2013; Wihelm, 2002) are less optimistic, suggesting the online media environment would increase fragmentation among audiences. Further, they state engagement and participation in the interest of democracy would only succeed if news providers embraced and promoted meaningful debate. McQuail (2005) believes the shift of power in relation to news selection whereby readers online are no longer passive news consumers, may see readers actively choose not to engage with news concerned with political or public affairs. Instead, he fears online consumers may choose to solely follow narrow areas of specific interest like sport or entertainment.

Attempts are being made to adapt existing media theory to the online context. Dahlberg (2011) reconstructed the four positions of the press (Siebert, Paterson & Schramm, 1963) to demonstrate the potential for the online environment to support democracy through rational communication and the sharing of opinion. Bimber (2003) and Trippi (2004, cited in Dylko, Beam, Landreville & Geidner, 2012) saw the web as providing greater access to political information, thus giving more people the opportunity to be politically informed. McQuail's (1983) democratic-participant theory, which supports the role of grass-roots media and two-way communication, has been proposed as aligning with the internet as a news medium. This is because it supports the potential for the news media to be a participatory medium that could foster democratic participation. Alternatively, Davis and Owen (2008) suggest the web will hinder democracy in allowing elites to circumvent mainstream media. Wihelm (2002) believes online engagement will result only in extending existing social networks of like-minded individuals rather than encouraging any meaningful debate. This would reinforce existing views rather than expose participants to new ideas or views.

Alongside the impact of the web on democracy, this review will also consider the commercialisation of the media. The last two decades have seen considerable change in the mass media environment through the development of media conglomerates, more and different kinds of competition, and the increase in digital news provision (Mancini, 2013). The impact of each of these developments on democracy has been widely debated. The rise in the number of internet consumers has led to research that considers the ability of consumers to select their own news on democracy (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000) and the impact reader selection has on what news providers offer their audiences online (Boczkowski & Peer 2011).

In light of these findings, this study has sought to discover what readers are choosing to engage with online in the New Zealand news environment. International studies (Boczkowski & Peer, 2011; Tewksbury, 2003; van Heekeren, 2005) have found online news readers were selecting soft news such as sport or entertainment as opposed to public affairs news such as politics or the economy. News provision online has been studied, with Boczkowski and Peer (2011) finding American journalists were beginning to alter the online news provision to include more non-public affairs-type stories, such as human interest and celebrity news, in response to reader interest. However, the impact of the web on democracy has been the specific focus of this study.



## 1.2 The New Zealand Media Landscape

In order to understand the online news environment it is important to consider first the broader media context. Media in New Zealand tends to be under-researched, which, while providing little comparison for this study, also positions this research as one of value. No research has been conducted in New Zealand specifically relating to online newspaper provision.

As a result of deregulation, which imposed no rules on who could own the New Zealand media, how much they could own, and how much needed to remain New Zealand owned (McGregor, 1992), the national media environment is dominated by four overseas-owned companies. These companies, APN News and Media (APN), Fairfax Media, MediaWorks, and News Corporation/Sky, are primarily owned by international financial institutions (Myllylahti, 2011). Australia's Fairfax Holdings Ltd and APN together own more than 90 per cent of this country's newspapers. While several small, independent newspapers and one metropolitan, the *Otago Daily Times*, remain, they are developing closer ties with APN, as evidenced by the 2011 copy-sharing agreement between Allied Press and APN Media (Stone & Cunliffe, 2011). Further, APN's Radio Network together with the other dominant owner, Australian-owned MediaWorks, are key players in the country's radio market (Rosenberg, 2008). Sky-TV, the only pay-per-view network and also Australian-owned, owns one free-to-air channel (Lealand, 2000; Media in New Zealand, 2010). Media Works also owns two television channels and an interactive service, which consists of 18 websites and a mobile network. The remaining

television network, TVNZ, remains state-owned. These media outlets all have a web news presence and host the same mix of audio, print and video news.

Three New Zealand news websites were considered for this study: the Dunedin-based *Otago Daily Times*, published by independent company Allied Press, and two Fairfax Media websites, the *Timaru Herald* and *Stuff.co.nz*. The *Timaru Herald* is a regional news website based in South Canterbury; *Stuff* is a national news website based in Wellington. Two research methods were used: content analysis and interviews with the editors of the three websites. The content analysis was carried out between May and July 2012 with 3637 stories gathered from the lead story, readers' choice and Editors' Picks sections of the website homepages. These were coded by story topic to ascertain the story topics most published and read. Interviews with the website editors took place later that same year to ascertain their perspectives on the online news environment in New Zealand. Full discussion of the rationale for selecting the websites and the research methodology is provided in Chapter Three, Research Design.

### 1.3 Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore both the online news choices made by New Zealand newspaper readers of selected newspaper websites and those made by the associated news providers. This was to identify what specific topics were popular online and to consider what impact these might have on democracy. Second, the study sought to identify if there were differences in these selections between national and regional news providers – hence the selection of two regional news websites, *The Timaru Herald* and the *ODT*, and one national website, *Stuff*. Third, interviews were conducted with the editors of these websites to gain insight into their views of the online medium, its challenges, and future implications for society. This research is the first analysis of web news provision and reader choices online conducted in New Zealand. It has further value in that it builds on previous studies conducted overseas into online reader and provider news choices.

The four questions directing the research were:

RQ 1. What story topics appear in New Zealand newspaper online-news readers' most popular sections?

RQ 2. What story topics are selected as lead stories and as Editor's Picks by New Zealand on-line news providers?

RQ 3. What differences (if any) exist between regional newspapers online-news and national newspaper online-news?

RQ4: What are online editors' perspectives on the online news medium and its content?

The next chapter, Literature Review, provides the theoretical background, and includes consideration of social responsibility, democratic-participant and agenda-setting theories, the impact of media conglomerate ownership, competition and tabloidisation, and the role of local news. It also highlights previous studies in the online news field. The third chapter, Research Design, explains the methods used in carrying out both the content analysis and the interviews and considers these in an online context. This study used mixed methods, which Plano, Clark and Badiee (cited in Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) advocate for studies of mass communication. This is because mixed methods allow both consideration of the total communication process from production to news reception, and exploration of the implications of this communication for readers. This was achieved using content analysis and interviews with the website editors. The findings are presented in Chapters Four and Five. The sixth chapter, Discussion, considers the findings of both the content analysis and interviews in the light of previous research and theory. It highlights the potential for online news to impact on democratic engagement in New Zealand. The Conclusion considers the overall implications of this research for New Zealand within the broader context of news provision and democratic engagement. It also offers several suggestions for further research that would extend and explore the findings from this study.

## Chapter Two Literature Review

Professional journalism is at a cross roads, driven by the pressures of technological innovation and commercial imperatives. As technology creates a more fragmented media landscape and segmentation among audiences, the concept of the news media as an objective, agenda-setting watchdog bringing citizens together in the interests of democratic engagement is under increasing pressure (Mancini, 2013). As the traditional print media faces circulation woes and online news consumption grows, the potential for increased reader participation is forcing the media to reconsider its traditional approach as news provider. McQuail (1992) and Dahlberg (2011) suggested the media should reposition itself as the facilitator of debate in order to meet the needs of the digital generation. In 2012, academic and vice president for research studies at the American-based National Endowment for Democracy, Marc Plattner, stated he was not confident traditional media had found a way forward: “The old self-confidence, even arrogance, of what some now label the ‘legacy’ or ‘dinosaur’ media is giving way to uncertainty and self-doubt” (p. 71). He also expressed concern that the way forward was more likely to have a foundation in financial motives as opposed to any form of social responsibility. This review considers social responsibility theory alongside democratic-participant theory (McQuail, 1992) as a framework to examine the media’s position in a democratic society, in particular one that incorporates the online news environment.

This chapter presents key theories of the place of media in democracy as comprising social responsibility, democratic-participant and agenda-setting theory, the impact of

media conglomerate ownership, and competition and tabloidisation. It also considers the role of local news. Specifically, the chapter discusses how these theories have been applied to the online news environment. Research investigating the online news selections of readers and providers is then presented, followed by a review of the debate about whether the online news environment might foster or hamper democratic engagement.

## **2.1 The Media and Democracy in the Digital Age**

There is ongoing debate about the democratic role of news media in the digital age. Anderson and Ward (2007) took the traditional view that the media perform a critical function in a democratic society, as the “communicative core” of the democratic process, ensuring citizens are engaged in society. Champlin and Knoedler (2002), however, saw the news media’s role in the modern era as that of infotainment in the interests of gaining audience share and making a profit. Althaus and Tewksbury (2002) agreed the focus was shifting, and cited the increasingly, commercially driven nature of the news media as having greater impact on the nature of news being selected by news providers. This shift saw them question whether news now is what people needed to know or what people wanted to know. Champlin and Knoedler described news for profit as that which must attract ratings, particularly ratings from the audience group most attractive to advertisers. This is in contrast to the view of McChesney (1999) who argued that while newspapers were not exempt from commercial pressures before the 1980s, they still published content shaped by core public service values rather than dictated by owners, advertisers or the biases of newsroom staff. Dahlberg (2011) maintained that both the drive to maximise profit and the developing relationships between media corporation owners, political actors and, technological innovators are detrimental to

democracy, because the critical functions of media in democracy, including ethical practice, freedom of expression and the trustee role, are not part of the economic model being adopted. Baker (cited in McAllister & Proffitt, 2009) argued that the power held by media conglomerates directly conflicts with the concept of democracy because democracy implies a wide dispersal of power within the public sphere. The concept of the media conglomerate weakens the assurance of distributive democracy where the deliberations of the public impact on governance. This is because large conglomerates have a greater ability to undermine democracy through influencing public support. Conglomerates have more outlets to spread their own agendas in the interests of increasing their own power. These commercial pressures alongside technological innovation bring into question the role of the media in democracy. To consider this further this review now discusses both the social responsibility theory and the democratic-participant theory.

### **2.1.1 Social responsibility theory.**

The social responsibility theory provides a framework against which media performance can be judged. The theory originated in 1947 as a result of the American Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press. The Commission was appointed to:

Examine areas and circumstances under which the press of the United States was succeeding or failing; to discover where free expression was or was not limited, whether by government censorship, pressure from readers or advertisers or the unwisdom of its proprietors or the timidity of management (McQuail, 1992).

The Commission's report included recommendations for the media on its role and its ethical responsibilities and encouraged cultural pluralism, whereby minority groups could participate more fully in society yet retain their cultural independence. As a

normative theory, social responsibility is an ideal rather than a reality. The theory accepted the need for regulation alongside freedom of expression, which required the media to accept an obligation to society. Siebert, Paterson and Schramm (1963) described the social responsibility theory as requiring the media to maintain a duty to provide well-contextualized, comprehensive diverse news and to go beyond merely entertaining news consumers. Enough information and diversity of views should be provided to allow the public to make informed decisions about societal issues. Peterson (1956; cited in d'Haenens & Saeys, 2001) stressed the media's duty to society is to adhere to a socially responsible role once it has adopted the role of an authority. McQuail described social responsibility theory as attempting to combine the three principles of individual freedom and choice, media freedom, and media obligation to society. The main principles of the theory are:

- Media accepting and fulfilling obligations to society
- Maintenance of high professional standards in relation to informativeness, truth, objectivity, and balance
- Media should be self-regulating within the framework of law
- Media should be pluralist and reflect the diversity of their society by providing access to varied views and by rights of reply (McQuail).

Baran and Davis (2006) outlined the strengths and weaknesses of the social responsibility theory. They argued the strengths of the theory are that it values media and audience responsibility, as well as diversity and pluralism, and advocates restricting government intrusion while allowing some media control. However, Baran and Davis maintained that the social responsibility theory is too hopeful about the media's willingness to meet their responsibilities. They considered the theory to be



overly optimistic about individual responsibility in that individuals will not necessarily be willing to seek information. Finally, they argued that the theory's failure to consider the power and profit motivation of news media and the realities of competition means social responsibility often "came second" (Baran & Davis, p. 117).

However, despite the relevance of such critiques, journalists draw on the ideas of social responsibility when explaining what they do (Altschull, 1995), and the core themes expressed in the Hutchins Commission's recommendations can be seen in New Zealand's own print media self-regulatory body, The Press Council, and in New Zealand's Broadcasting Standards Authority. The Press Council's principles state that among other principles, accuracy, fairness and balance, discrimination and diversity, and maintenance of public faith should guide editorial decisions (New Zealand Press Council, 2013). Further, the Press Council's preamble to its statement of principles states:

Freedom of expression and freedom of the media are inextricably bound. There is no more important principle in a democracy than freedom of expression. The print media is jealous in guarding freedom of expression, not just for publishers' sake but, more importantly, in the public interest (New Zealand Press Council, 2013).

The socially responsible position can be seen as an ideal; however, its reflection in New Zealand's own media self-regulatory body signals a commitment to its principles. The change in production practices, specifically the digital environment and its associated production practices, present challenges to maintaining these principles (Baran & Davis, 2006). Additionally, the social responsibility theory must be considered in relation to the greater audience power and choice offered by the online news medium through its

interactive elements. These factors – greater audience power, interactivity, and choice – associated with the digital news environment, allow for reconsideration of the existing theory, which can be adapted to online news provision where a democratically responsible position may exist in the online sphere.

### **2.1.2 Digital technology and democracy.**

Scholars have sought to adapt existing theories about the democratic role of news media to the new digital environment. The democratic-participant theory, initially proposed by McQuail in 1983, has been reconsidered for its suitability in the online news environment because it supports the role of grass-roots media, two-way communication, and participation (McQuail, 2000). The democratic-participant theory argues the media should look after the rights of citizens, which, in turn, challenges the notion of dominant, centralised, and controlled media. The theory supports the notion of news media as a participatory medium that encourages engagement with its audience as a means of fostering democratic participation.

The digital environment has potential to foster a stronger democracy through engagement, increased opportunity for participation, and access to the elite (Dahlberg, 2011; Bimber, 2003; Trippi, 2004, cited in Dylko, Beam, Landreville, & Geidner, 2012). Dahlberg reconstructed the four positions of the press (Siebert et al., 1963) to take account of the impact of the digital environment on democracy, and three of these approaches are of particular relevance in this research context. The adapted 'Liberal-individualist' position argues that online exchange would foster a stronger democracy through allowing greater opportunities of participation. Dahlberg's reconsideration of 'Deliberative digital democracy' drew on the potential for the internet to support the

“extension of a deliberative democratic public sphere of rational communication and public opinion formation that can hold decision makers accountable” (2011, p. 859). Deliberative digital democracy, unlike the liberal-individualist position, suggests individuals would be transformed into publically orientated, democratic subjects through rational deliberation for the common good. This would be fostered by public interaction both via media channels such as citizen journalism and online discussion forums on news sites. Dahlberg’s third position, ‘counter-publics digital democracy’, saw digital media as having a role in political group formation and activism rather than supporting individual action or consensus-seeking discussions. The author described digital media as opening the door for marginal groups, who would normally be excluded from dominant discourse, to engage with like-minded individuals to develop representative strategies to challenge the status quo. Dahlberg’s views on the potential of digital democracy were also reflected in the writings of Bimber (2003) and Trippi (2004 cited in Dylko, et al, 2012). These authors also saw the internet as providing easier access to political information, allowing previously ostracised groups the opportunity to engage in collective action.

In contrast to the positive views of digital media in fostering engagement, others have identified factors both in and outside media control that could work against the potential for e-democracy (Davis & Owen, 1998; Wilhelm, 2002; Mancini, 2013). Davis and Owen suggested the elites would circumvent mainstream media by finding better ways to harness new technology and communication channels to increase their political strength. Wilhelm sees commercial news providers having to shift their focus to survive in the digital environment. This shift was from registering and combining news for publication to encouraging exchange and thoughtful responses in order to foster

common ground and highlight points of contention for further debate. This shift would be valuable, although Wilhelm doubts it would be embraced by news providers. While Dalbergh (2011) highlighted the potential for like-minded individuals to engage, Wilhelm argued these groups would likely become an extension of existing social networks. He forecast the emergence of silos reflecting groups to which people would belong in a physical community. This homogeneity offered little potential for overcoming difference, or broadening horizons. Mancini agrees online engagement would not foster democratic participation, saying new media would serve to reinforce existing opinions rather than expose audiences to new thoughts and ideas. According to Wilhelm, the potential for the web to foster greater democratic engagement is based on the assumption that the individual will make a conscious decision to engage and participate in the interests of democracy. He maintained the optimistic views of Dahlberg, Bimber (2003) and Trippi (2004, cited in Dylko, et al, 2012), which assumed internet access was universal, do not exist even in America: "In the United States, social exclusion and alienation persist ...as communities continue to languish without basic information and communications infrastructure" (2002, p. 297).

The positive perspectives that have been discussed in this section assume that a socially responsible position will be adopted by news providers, ensuring audiences have access to news of a politically orientated nature. Yet this section has demonstrated the debate as to whether the internet will advance or hinder democracy has not yet been resolved and is likely to continue to be a subject of deliberation. Regardless, the decisions facing news providers in the future must be considered alongside other elements in the media environment, especially the commercial media imperative, conglomerate ownership,

and competition with its associated increase in tabloidisation to attract audiences. The review now turns to these points.

### **2.1.3 Media ownership and competition.**

Historically, the news media consisted of numerous independent enterprises allowing for diversity of content and view; however, since the mid-1980s large-scale privately owned mega-media operations have developed as a result of deregulation, government-assisted privatisation, and expansion of market relationships (Schiller, 1996). The trend toward concentrated media ownership in the newspaper market, the nature of the competitive media environment in New Zealand, and the financial considerations of online news provision all have the ability to impact negatively on the media's democratic function. This section of the review considers this impact and documents the associated trends – the increase in tabloid journalism and the impacts on democratic participation.

Large media conglomerates now span media, incorporating radio, television, print, telecommunications, and internet divisions that draw on shared resources to produce news and programming, as well as incorporating non-media business interests. The result, according to Deuze (2004), has been the concentration of media ownership and convergence of formerly distinct media operations. Deuze argued that while this has in some cases had economic benefits it has also had detrimental impacts on democracy and diversity of news coverage. Gillian Doyle (2002, cited in Myllylahti, 2011) highlighted concerns about concentrated media ownership:

Democracy is threatened if individual media owners, with the power to propagate a single political viewpoint, are allowed to predominate over the supply of media (p. 7).

Scholars present differing views on whether competition in the media environment has a positive or a negative influence on news provision, diversity, and access to information. Becker, Hollifield, Jacobsson, Jacobsson and Vlad (2009) argued that high levels of market competition produced more innovation, a greater range of choice, and lower prices therefore maximising consumer welfare. Van Gompel, Van Den Bulck and Biltreyst (2002) described competition as necessary in media industries to ensure diversity of content and to enable consumer choice while also encouraging innovation. Conversely, Bourdieu (1998) maintained that the reduction in the number of independent news organisations competing in local markets has had a negative impact on news quality and diversity. As regards diversity of news production in New Zealand, Bourdieu's view is supported by examples given later in this section. In their 2004 study, Hollifield, Vlad and Becker found evidence to support Bourdieu's view, arguing that news organisations in highly competitive markets were reducing their financial commitment to news production and opting for low-cost, low-quality news content. Further, Hamilton (2004) reasoned that quality journalism in the current commercialised media market will only remain if there is sufficient consumer demand. He believed there is potential in a competitive market for news agendas to be adjusted to increase sales, rather than actively contribute to any public good.

Internationally, the trend towards concentrated media ownership has increased markedly since 1980 and has been well documented (Franklin, Hamer, Hanna, Kinsey &

Richardson, 2005; Free Press, 2011). While overseas media mergers have been regulated to some degree, New Zealand's lack of regulation has seen no government or public control in place to limit conglomerate and foreign media ownership (McGregor, 1992; Myllylahti, 2011). In New Zealand, the two leading print media companies, Fairfax Media and APN News and Media, are described by Myllylahti (2011) as undertaking a process of economising, digitising and monetising since 2009. She noted there is clear pressure on both companies to economise and reduce their overall workforce. Further, the provision of online news has presented challenges to the industry in terms of how to make this web arm profitable. Mitchelstein and Boczkowski's (2010) review of the literature on online news production, demonstrated that before 2000 most online news divisions were not making a profit. While this trend had turned by 2005 it has seen providers move from traditional revenue sources such as subscription and advertising to developing e-commerce arms and specifically targeting advertising to consumer profiles. This has had limited success, given online expenditure on advertising is considerably less than that of other mediums (Project For Excellence in Journalism, 2007 cited in Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2010). While user pays or subscription-based models have been proposed and are being used by some large news providers online, studies show readers do not want to pay for content (Bustamante; 2004; Chyi, 2005). To introduce any user-pay access or pay-wall approach to online news may therefore result in a loss of readership followed by a loss in advertisers willing to use the website.

Examples of economising occurring in New Zealand's media sector include APN Media's sale in 2013 of its last two remaining South Island newspapers, Christchurch-based *The Star* and *The Oamaru Mail*. Selling to the privately owned Mainland Media Group, which

has links with the Otago-based independent newspaper stable, Allied Press, APN stated it wanted to quit the South Island to focus on its North Island business (Wood, 2013). The link with Allied Press, which owns two South Island newspapers and has strong links with APN, could suggest the beginning of a third conglomerate in the New Zealand media market. However, Mainland Media's managing director, Pier Smulders, denied this in an interview with Radio New Zealand (Radio New Zealand, May 5, 2013). He said Mainland's focus was on contributing positively to the community. In terms of economising, Fairfax, which owns six of the 10 daily South Island newspapers, closed its one Dunedin-based metropolitan weekly, the *D-Scene*, in 2013 ("*D-Scene*", 2013). In 2010 the company also closed the print version of its business publication, *The Independent*, after 20 years of existence, opting to resurrect it as part of its digital stable.

As the major news players attempt to rationalise their product portfolio in the interests of economy, New Zealand news consumers are being impacted on as content standardisation and ownership dominated by two companies limit diversity of product (Rosenberg, 2008). Further, standardisation and limited ownership do not allow for a diverse news environment that would provide alternative viewpoints for debate and consideration. McAllister and Proffitt, (2009) and McQuail (2000) argued that diversity and debate are essential for promoting a more informed society. Becker, Hollifield, Jacobsson and Jacobsson (2009) believed that product diversity could be difficult for media outlets to address, given each dealt with the same commodities – breaking news and hard news. This similarity of news product has led to horizontal differentiation. Under this model, providers may choose to focus on different news types in order to survive, for example, to provide predominately local coverage, or sports news or business news rather than meeting all needs. Mullainathan and Shleifer (2005) also



suggested newspapers will respond by providing readers with what they wanted – slanting news to serve audiences or offering sensationalist content to outsell rivals. Of further concern, the dominance of just two companies has served to curb independent competition in the New Zealand market (Rosenberg, 2008). At present, no daily newspaper in the South Island has competition in the region in which it operates – which limits consumer choice and diversity of view. Any attempts by rival publications to establish themselves in these dominated markets are short-lived. Finally, Fairfax, which dominates the New Zealand regional print market, has opted to share news and commentary across its stable. While this makes sense from an economic perspective, in that re-production costs are lower than initial production (Van Gompel, Van Den Bulck & Biltereyst, 2002), it means large sections of New Zealand society are only being exposed to one view on national issues if they choose not to seek an alternative view. To illustrate the demise of competition and the impact of the media corporation in the New Zealand market, the three following examples are relevant for this study.

The first example is the closure of the New Zealand Press Agency (NZPA), which, despite a 125-year history of news collaboration, was unable to continue independently after the two dominant print media companies, Fairfax Media and APN Media, ended their relationship with the service (Ellis, 2007). The demand for exclusivity between rival companies and the development of news websites saw a decline in the willingness for rival media groups to share stories given they could be published instantly (Ellis, 2007). This was described by senior NZPA journalist Max Lambert, (2011, cited in Myllylahti, 2011) as a loss of New Zealand's last independent news source:

The closedown means the newspaper industry has lost a truly independent source of New Zealand news. NZPA has a proud tradition of producing straight-up-and-down news stories unflavoured by bias, comment of opinion (p. 10).

More recently, as previously mentioned, Fairfax Media has announced the closure of its *D-Scene* Otago-based weekly publication, which they had bought from an independent company in 2008. At the time of purchase, Fairfax Media maintained the company's ownership would turn the ailing publication around and they believed there was demand for an alternative to Allied Press's domination of the Dunedin market (Hall, 2008). The fate of the *D-Scene* provides evidence that, given news production is expensive, the likelihood of a new independent newspaper becoming established and surviving amid competition in the New Zealand regional market, at least, is poor. Therefore, despite Fairfax Media's attempt to reposition the publication within its large stable, it was not able to compete with the regional domination of Allied Press. The selling of its last remaining South Island newspapers by APN further reduces South Island news diversity, given the purchaser's links with Allied Press.

The final example is the 2001 attempt by a US company to publish the *Christchurch Citizen*; its print run lasted just one year (Bridgeman, 2002). The publishers were not able to gain sufficient advertisers or readership from the dominant Fairfax-owned daily, *The Press*. While, APN, Fairfax and Allied Press do not currently compete in the traditional daily print environment, the ability to post news online has added a competitive element to the news market. It is in markets where competition is more prevalent that there is an increased focus on celebrity and sensationalism in order to make a profit (Fox & Gangl, 2011). This has potential implications because, as

demonstrated, the online news realm will likely become increasingly important for democracy.

#### **2.1.4 Tabloidisation of the media.**

Tabloidisation or the dumbing down of the news (McNair, 2009) is associated with a competitive and financially driven news environment in which media companies present sensationalist, superficial, negative news in order to sell their product.

Tabloidisation within newspapers has been traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when newspapers realised the economic benefits of devoting sections to entertainment and sport news, leading them to see readers as customers rather than an 'audience' (Esser, 1999). In the contemporary era it can be defined as an increased emphasis on "soft" entertaining and sensationalist news in combination with a visually aesthetic dynamic layout that uses increased visuals (Franklin, 1997; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000).

Tabloidisation can also be seen in the rise of infotainment news that focuses on the private lives of individuals and the promotion of emotion through reporting of human tragedy and sorrow where grief is made a matter of public concern (Pensar, 2006). Joy Wiltenburg (2004) described the sensationalism of crime as a commercial product. Bakke (1999, cited in Currie n.d, p. 2) argued that news of social importance is being replaced by "trivial rarities" that appeal to "morbid curiosities".

As news producers seek to gain the larger audience share, which in turn secures a larger advertiser base, serious, objective journalism is therefore being replaced with entertainment rather than issues of public concern. This subjective journalism and trivialising of serious issues has the ability to marginalise important information which, "can lead to a mass of apathy and cynicism" (McNair, 2009, p. 44). From the perspective

of informed democracy, McQuail (1992) stated, competition has made it more difficult for news media to give due attention to world affairs or daily domestic politics: the “typical logic” of competitive mass media is to offer sensational, tabloid style news along with summaries and opinions to meet reader demand. Sparks and Tulloch (2000) saw this shift in content as a necessary adjustment to the presentation of news to align with perceived needs and demands of news audiences. Fox and Gangl (2011), discussing the online medium specifically, agreed that as news outlets compete to attract audiences they will strive to present more attention-grabbing news. The result is a rise in celebrity-focussed content, particularly in the online news environment.

This increase in tabloidisation has also been well documented in the New Zealand television news environment (Atkinson, 2011). However, no local research has been conducted to identify similar trends online, despite the blurring of distinction between traditional broadcast media such as radio and television versus print. Websites are able to offer multi-mediality, which as the name implies, is the integration of multiple media forms, such as audio and video, therefore positioning these sites to compete with television and radio (Tapas, 2006). Deregulation and increased competition are seen as the catalysts for the growth of tabloidisation in the media (Atkinson 2011; Edwards, 2002; McGregor, 2002). Edwards believed the drive for ratings as a result of competing news networks had seen the 6pm news bulletins across rival networks develop into infotainment as opposed to a vehicle for information. Harcup and O’Neill (2001), in their study of three United Kingdom newspapers, found that many stories were published not because they offered serious information for the reader but because they served to entertain the audiences. This was most prevalent in the tabloid *The Sun* but was not confined to it. This finding confirmed Franklin’s (1997) view that broadsheets were also

adopting a more tabloid agenda. However, Harcup and O'Neill did find the broadsheet newspapers offered a greater range of hard news alongside their more light-hearted content than did *The Sun*. Commercialism and the increase of tabloid and entertainment pieces as news pose concerns for the consumers' ability to distinguish the important issues, particularly when it comes to being democratically aware. The next section will consider the media's gatekeeping function through the agenda-setting theory.

### **2.1.5 The agenda-setting theory and the online environment.**

Increased tabloidisation and the focus on gaining an increased audience share in a competitive market have the potential to impact on consumers' awareness of the issues that matter. In 1972 McCombs found a strong correlation between the weight the media placed on an issue in terms of amount of coverage or placement, and the importance attributed to these issues by the audience. This agenda-setting theory has since evolved into a broader theory of mass communication. The origins of the media-agenda and its links with the gatekeeping function (McCombs & Funk, 2011) are relevant to the focus of this study. While initially the agenda-setting theory focused on the media's power to shape the political judgements of an audience by promoting issues and making them more relevant to readers, latterly the question has been, if the media sets the public's news agenda, who sets the media agenda? McCombs (1981, cited in Baran & Davis, 2006) acknowledged that the agenda-setting theory implies a direction of influence or causality from the media to the audience. However, the argument can equally be made that the media are actually responding to audience needs. Boczkowski and Peer (2011) supported this view, particularly in relation to the online news environment where, they said, consumer preference has an increasing potential to dictate news provision, which impacts on the media's gatekeeping function. The authors proposed that the

newspaper agenda would respond to the readers' agenda in favour of increased web traffic. This response can be achieved rapidly online because web traffic and story popularity can be measured instantly.

Althaus and Tewksbury (2002) posed a further question: is there a difference in the agenda-setting effects produced from traditional media compared with those in online news websites? The authors argued that differences in presentation of news between print and online media are relevant to the agenda-setting process. The medium can alter the traditional ways editorial decisions might influence the agendas of newspaper readers in two ways. First, the flexibility of web-based formats encourages readers to be selective in news consumption. This is because the traditional hierarchy of the print newspaper format (linear stories in order of importance by page) requires readers to undertake a page-by-page search for stories of interest, thus exposing themselves to stories they may not have been actively seeking. Comparably, online news sites are often arranged by topic, allowing readers to seek only those stories in which they are directly interested. Second, conventional print news cues are not suitable for use on the web. Space constraints on a viewing screen reduce visual cues such as headline size and story length. Althaus and Tewksbury proposed that readers of online newspapers will draw different inferences about important public issues from readers of printed newspapers; an assertion supported by the fact that print newspaper readers are found to be better informed than those online. Althaus and Tewksbury's study will be discussed further in this chapter.

### **2.1.6 The value of keeping the news local.**

As technology allows media companies to seek a wider audience share through more internet news provision and increased digital news options, local news providers are re-evaluating their position in the market. Rather than opting to compete with the expanding national providers, local and community newspapers are returning to their roots, opting to increase local coverage and reduce national coverage in order to attract target audiences (George & Waldfogel, 2006). Local newspapers are still a valuable source of local affairs and, according to the American Pew Center's 2011 study, are still a key information source for local political news. While 39 percent of respondents to the study said the loss of the local newspaper would have little impact, the report said:

Newspapers play a much bigger role in people's lives than many may realize.

Newspapers (both the print and online versions, though primarily print) rank first or tie for first as the source most people rely on for 11 of the 16 different kinds of local information asked about – more topics than any other media source

(Rosenstiel, Mitchell, Purcell & Rainie, 2011, p. 2).

The 11 local topics that readers looked for in their local newspaper were crime, local politics, community events, arts events, taxes, schooling, housing government activities, jobs, zoning and development, and social services. Further, in relation to local government politics, Lacy, Fico, Baldwin, Bergan, Wildman and Zube (2012) found that of 138 local dailies and 83 weeklies in the USA, city government was an important aspect of both daily and weekly newspaper coverage.

Local media are also identified as playing a role in fostering community involvement and integration. While it is accepted that community integration is a multi-dimensional concept, the consensus is that local media assisted in moulding homogenous

communities (McLeod, Daily, Guo, Eveland, Bayer, Yang & Wang, 1996; Viswanath, Kosicki, Fredin & Park, 2000). Modern, large and diverse communities use community newspapers to assimilate themselves into smaller homogenous groups (Janowitz, 1952, cited in McLeod et al., 1996). This is achieved through connection to persons, events and issues within the community, creating allegiance and ties to the community. These local publications reflect local agendas and serve a maintenance role, which in turn supports the communities' norms and social arrangements (Hindman, 1996). Viswanath et al. (2000) believed that knowing about events and happenings in the community facilitates participation, articulation, and mobilisation, and they agreed with Friedland and McLeod's (1999) view that:

The local media perform the central integrative function in the local community that spans the boundaries of all levels of community life, facilitating the flow of information across interpersonal networks and encouraging discussions among individuals, groups and institutions (cited in Viswanath et al., p. 31).

The position of regional or local news providers then, can be seen as both informational and symbolic (Shah, McLeod & Yoon, 2001) in that it connects a district's citizens and institutions as well as assists in constructing a community of shared values and norms to be adopted by citizens. Shah et al. argued that the use of print media and local newspapers has a positive effect on participation and trust. Local media are seen as key in informing their communities on political happenings at a local government level. Considering election coverage on New Zealand television is dominated by national issues and campaign leaders as opposed to local electorates and concerns (Atkinson, 2011; Comrie, 2009), the provision of local political news is arguably an important public service. As has been discussed, New Zealand's regional newspaper providers face



competition, both internally from other print news providers, including those within the same stable in terms of masthead competition, and externally from other news media. The news market has also opened up, with the advent of internet news sites adding further competition. Therefore, local news providers have two choices. They can either opt to compete online at a national level for audience, or they can choose to target their news to meet their local audience. The next section of this review, which discusses the research on what news people choose to read online, will consider identifying those audience needs.

## **2.2 Online News Selections**

The impact of the greater individual choice available to readers of news online, combined with the commercialisation of the news environment, poses a concern for democracy. Research suggests readers may choose to avoid political or public affairs orientated news when making their selections of what to read online. Fundamentally, readers may avoid the news highlighted as important by the media, preferring to set their own agenda (Tewksbury, 2003). McQuail (2005) argued this had shifted the balance of power from the media to the audience, because traditional mass communication was one-directional, while the new forms were interactive, with consumers no longer having to be passive in the news process. Rice (cited in McQuail, 2005) still saw a demand for the gatekeeping function of traditional news outlets, arguing that while individuals have more choice, this provides a paradox in that to execute choice readers needed prior knowledge and must make more effort to integrate and make sense of the communication. According to McQuail, "Many people do not have the energy, desire, need or training to engage in such processes" (p. 139). As the boundaries between news producer, distributor and consumer blur, mass media

consumers now have the ability to become networked-users, that is, groups of internet users acting as audience members and participants engaging in areas of shared interest (Dahlberg, 2011). Dahlberg saw this as fostering a new e-democracy. The differing views on whether online news facilitates or erodes democratic engagement will form the basis for this section of the review, which presents findings from research into the preferences of the online news consumer and provider. First, however, the difference between hard and soft news is presented to provide context.

### **2.2.1 The distinction between “soft” and “hard” news.**

News stories can be classed as soft news, which aims to entertain or advise the reader, and ‘hard’ news, which encompasses breaking news stories such as politics, war, economics and crime (Boczkowski & Peer, 2011). Hard news addresses up-to-the-minute news and events that are reported immediately, whereas soft news tends to be background information or human-interest stories (Media Monitoring, 2011).

Traditionally, politics, war, economics, and crime are considered hard news, while arts and entertainment and human interest are considered soft news. The Nepalese Media Monitoring Report, however, identified this historical interpretation as increasingly problematic:

The distinction between hard and soft news is narrowing and it is difficult to ascertain whether a story about the private life of a politician is "politics" or "entertainment"? Is an article about the importance of investing early for retirement a "business" story or a "lifestyle" story? Judging solely on subject matter, it can be difficult to tell (Media Awareness Network, cited in Media Monitoring, 2011, p. 10).

Because subject matter alone can no longer be used as the sole measure of hard or soft news, tone and the presentation of news must be considered (Baum, 2002; Media Awareness Network, 2011). For example, the Media Awareness Network defines the traditional view of a hard news story as one that takes a factual (who, what, where, when and why) approach; whereas soft stories will focus on entertaining or advising and are mostly of a social nature. Yet in his study of foreign crises, Baum, along with the Network authors, saw this distinction as simplistic. Baum described the difference between hard and soft news as one of “degree rather than kind” (p. 92) when he considered the moralistic stance being taken in soft news portrayal. This trend toward soft news portrayal was also noted by Baum in the emotional coverage of crime as drama in modern media. On this basis, any interpretation of whether news is hard or soft must consider factors beyond traditional story topic definitions and should include where a story is published, how it is published and, potentially, the reasons behind its selection as news.

### **2.2.2 Online reader news selections.**

The average daily newspaper will carry a mix of hard and soft news stories in every edition and these categories are reflected in the associated newspaper websites. However, unlike the print version, readers of online news websites are able to select their own daily news diet rather than accepting that delivered by traditional news media (Tewksbury, 2006). With this in mind, a number of studies have attempted to identify what types of news, be it soft or hard, people choose to read online. Research conducted by van Heekeren (2005) found entertainment news was most popular with readers of the *Sydney Morning Herald* online edition. Of the categories she measured as appearing most in the readers’ top five, entertainment came first, followed by crime,

national politics, international news, and sport. The story topic that appeared most in the number one ranking was entertainment, at 40 percent, followed by crime, at 20 percent. Van Heekeren believed the average regular readership age of the online newspaper, which is younger than that of the print edition (between 35 and 49), was a contributing factor to the soft news selections. This conclusion was also reached by Cotes (2004). Further, *Sydney Morning Herald* Editor in Chief, Mark Scott (cited in van Heekeren, 2005) said he believed the younger generation did not make the same news distinctions as their elder counterparts in that they saw entertainment as news.

In a comparable study, Tewksbury (2003) discovered American readers were also reading a mixture of news online, but yet again, soft news topics were ranked as most popular. Sports news was the most frequently accessed topic during his 2-month study of 13 online American news publications. The second most popular topic was business and money, third was arts and entertainment, and the fourth, feature stories. United States national news was fifth. Therefore, three of the top five topics were, traditionally regarded as soft news. It should be noted that Tewksbury's study was conducted across a much wider viewing audience, and van Heekeren's (2005) was conducted during the Olympic Games when the sports news had been removed to a separate area on the *Sydney Morning Herald* site.

In contrast to these findings, Wu and Bechtel (2002) found hard news or public affairs news more popular overall. Their study of the *New York Times* online showed international news was the most frequently sought by readers; second was domestic politics, third legal proceedings, fourth the domestic economy, followed by crime and accident and disaster. In analysing this finding, the authors argued that consideration

should be given to the traditional print audience of the publication, who were largely affluent, educated, and socio-politically active. Assuming the same demographic was accessing the online edition, this anomaly in preference compared with the other studies would be expected. Wu and Bechtel proposed a further explanation for online reader story preferences by correlating television news coverage with news stories accessed online in the corresponding period. They found breaking news (generally hard news), referred to by the authors as 'disruptive news', resulted in an increase of web news traffic. Further, they found readers went online because of hearing or seeing a snippet of this news via other media. This, they argued, indicated that readers sought greater depth of information from the online news version. As a result of their findings, Wu and Bechtel suggested that online news sites benefitted from other news media, and newspapers should specialise in their online version, rather than attempt to meet the needs of all readers.

The above studies suggest that online news consumers are adopting a mixed news consumption agenda, although the findings of Tewksbury (2003) and van Heekeren (2005) found audiences reading less hard news. The work of Wu and Bechtel (2002) differed, in finding more politically relevant content accessed by readers of online version of the *New York Times*, paper whose readership is traditionally more interested in political and financial issues. Tewksbury's study was also more extensive than that of van Heekeren and Wu and Bechtel with 13 news publications considered as opposed to one. Notably, van Heekeren's study was also carried out in 2004; two years after Wu and Bechtel's, which in terms of online news growth is a significant timeframe. The potential impact of these findings will be discussed in the next section.

### **2.2.3 Meeting the needs and expectations of online audiences.**

Meeting the needs of a new breed of news audience, the 'digital native,' has been the focus of media conglomerates for the last two decades (Deuze, 2003). Even the definition of online users is being reconceptualised from that of digital natives, those born into the technological world, and immigrants, those who have had to adapt to it, to visitors and residents (Prensky, 2001). White and Le Cornu (2011) proposed visitors will visit the web for a purpose and see it as a tool while residents see the web as their home for everything including their social network. In terms of format, visitors and residents therefore have different needs and different expectations of the information they seek online, including the ability to view information on different technologies, engagement with other users, and the chance to have input on content. Contributing to this challenge is the widely held belief that print newspapers will cease to exist as a younger generation seeks instant gratification and choice via online media (Allan, 2006). To this extent, media mogul Rupert Murdoch, in 2005, described the challenge for his generation of digital immigrants as peculiar, in that to succeed a mindset shift was required:

We need to realise that the next generation of people accessing news and information, whether from newspapers or any other source, have a different set of expectations about the kind of news they will get. This includes when and how they will get it, where they will get it from, and who they will get it from (cited in, Allan, 2006, p. 3).

Bird (2009) also stated that news readership habits had changed, in that fewer people read print newspapers and young people who would have once matured into newspaper readers no longer did so:

They may be still interested in news, but their ‘news habit’ is completely different...research reveals that younger people (and many older too) essentially consume news in a steady stream of information bites. They are constantly connected, through computers and cell phones, both with each other and with multiple news sources (p. 293).

Despite attempts in recent years to meet the wants of online audiences, there seems no consensus as to what these news websites should be providing to meet these needs (Deuze, 2003; Gunter, 2003). The development of multi-mediality means online news audiences find themselves in an environment that adds video, sound, and the opportunity to share their opinions (Tapas, 2006). This means news providers have to make further decisions about how much they will provide and how they will resource and maintain this level of interactivity and multi-modality, which puts them in direct competition with broadcasters. Studies conducted to date suggest there is a challenge in identifying who that online audience is, what they want to read, and what news sites they visit to get their news (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; 2000; Rainie, 2000; Salwen, Garrison & Driscoll, 2005). For instance, Salwen et al. found well-educated people in their 30s and 40s were the highest online news consumers. Yet Althaus and Tewksbury (2000) maintained this demographic would change as patterns of internet use developed as technology became more widespread. Tewksbury (2005) found distinct audiences, based on gender, demographic, and income level, were being selective in their news source. This was combined with evidence that online news sites were also beginning to specialise in order to attract distinct niche groups. He maintained audiences were visiting websites based on the individual website’s strengths; for example, he found the BBC rated highly with readers for international news but not for

national news. While Tewksbury noted this audience fragmentation could have value in moving news outlets away from homogenised content, it could also separate audiences into isolated knowledge clusters. Therefore, the challenge ahead, according to Boczkowski and Peer (2011), was determining what it is readers want, and how they want it, which has important economic ramifications for news providers whose goal is both to establish and to maintain reader loyalty.

Both Gans (2004) and Schudson (2003) maintained that mainstream media serve as society's watchdog by covering stories that relate to political, economic, and international matters, which constitute hard news. However, as discussed earlier, evidence suggests consumer news preferences are becoming more inclined toward soft news options such as arts, entertainment, and human interest. Several studies have focused on, and identified a gap in the news choices of journalists and consumers in the online news environment. Boczkowski and Peer (2011) described this choice gap as the difference between what news providers and consumers select as news, which results from changes in the media industry:

As for the evolution of large companies, such as those examined here, interests, and greater predisposition to cater to them than when the industry was dominated by a few organizations with monopoly or oligopoly power, provide a reasonable basis to believe that the supply of news might move toward decreasing the share of public affairs stories in an attempt to close the choice gap (Boczkowski & Peer, p .869).

Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2010) adopted two story topic definitions, public affairs news and non-public affairs news. Non-public affairs news includes soft news, features,



and religion among others, while public affairs news includes politics, crime, and breaking news. The authors' findings suggest journalists prioritised public affairs type stories regardless of their awareness of a public preference for non-public affairs-type stories. Boczkowski and Mitchelstein found such a gap existed in their study of two Argentinian online news sites. However, the identified gap between the story types chosen by providers versus those selected by consumers, only existed at times of relatively low political activity and decreased at times of heightened political activity:

Journalists enact them [their preferences for public-affairs news] even when the awareness of the public's preference for non-public affairs stories generates a tension between their occupational duty and a desire to increase public appeal. In contrast, during normal times, consumers privilege non-public affairs stories that are tied to positive affect and place lower cognitive demands on them than public affairs news. But during periods of heightened political activity these preferences change, and normative demands of civic duty acquire greater importance than they have during more ordinary periods (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, p. 433).

In a further study, Boczkowski, along with Mitchelstein and Walter (2011), compared the preferences of news providers and consumers from 11 generalist online news sites from six countries in Western Europe and Latin America. This study also found journalists chose to publish a greater proportion of public affairs-type stories for dissemination while readers were found to consume more non-public affairs stories. The researchers found a significant gap between the preferences of providers and consumers. In eight of the 11 sites, journalists' choices were dominantly public affairs related. However, in nine of the 11 sites consumer preferences were more often non-

public affairs. An American-based study, however, suggested mainstream newspaper websites were beginning to modify their news agenda in response to online reader choices. Boczkowski and Peer's (2011) study of four American online news sites found journalists' chosen stories were more often soft in terms of subject matter but not story format and diverged from the choices of consumers, who chose stories that were most often non-public affairs related. Boczkowski and Peer linked this to increased competition in media markets, which prompted media outlets to modify their agenda in favour of reader preference. Their secondary intra-site analysis as part of the same study, found journalists' choices considered by individual website in isolation were more public affairs related, while readers' were non-public affairs news.

Boczkowski and Peer's (2011) study raised implications for understanding at least three sets of developments at the intersection between the choice gap and changes in the media industry and its broader social functions. These were: the potential consequences of an increasing supply of soft content for the news agenda; the growth of consumers' roles as producers of widely circulated news and information; and the future of the media's watchdog function in liberal democracies. These studies indicate a trend towards consumer soft news preferences, while, at least at a time of low political activity, journalists are beginning to make the same soft news selections. The findings presented in this section have emphasised the need for further context-based studies of online news across a range of settings. A wide range of variables require further consideration, including audience preferences and reasons for accessing online news as well as further consideration of the presentation of news online, particularly when compared with other media.

Relatively few studies have considered how consumers make their selection of online news sources. Some studies (Redden & Witschge, 2010; Wu & Bechtel, 2002) suggest online news seekers were applying a bias in seeking their news by visiting sites perceived as more trusted or authoritative in story types. However, other studies (Allan, 2006; Rainie, 2000) suggest readers are less selective, using search engines rather than frequenting specific news sites. Rainie raised concerns that users seeking news through search engines were not necessarily going to receive unbiased and accurate reports, which, he argued, could contribute to a general lack of knowledge or awareness.

#### **2.2.4 Print news reader preference compared with that of online readers.**

While relatively few studies have compared print story reader preference with that of online readers, the ramifications of those who have done are now discussed. Althaus and Tewksbury (2000) found print news readers were more likely to read traditional news first identified as international, national, and political stories. In contrast, online readers of the same publication were not; rather they were accessing soft news options such as entertainment and sport as their first choice. This finding was affirmed by de Waal and Schönbach (2008) and Yang and Grabe (2011), who found news consumers of printed editions were more exposed to, and aware of, public affairs news compared with consumers of online news sources. Further, Althaus and Tewksbury (2000) found readers online were less able to recall what they had read. Althaus and Tewksbury (2002) also found print newspaper readers were more likely to modify their opinions following their exposure to a broader range of public affairs coverage and were consistently more aware of international issues than their online counterparts. Althaus and Tewksbury's (2002) study was replicated in the Netherlands by d'Haenens, Jankowski and Heuvelman (2004), whose findings were less conclusive. D'Haenens et

al.'s study of two online news sites and their associated print editions did not support those that of Althaus and Tewksbury (2000) in relation to print reader news and online reader knowledge trends. However, their study did support the view that online readers were more selective in the stories they read: rather than skim reading many stories they opted to read only a small number (an average of four stories per day). D'Haenens et al.'s research, like that of Althaus and Tewksbury, also identified the limited news recall ability of those who had read news online compared with that of print news consumers. Again, the broad range of findings and the lack of recent research in this field suggest further research in the online news sphere and consumer selections is warranted.

### **2.3 Online News and Democracy**

Research has found people who prefer entertainment abandon news and become less likely to engage in politics. Prior's (2005) survey of 2,358 American residents supported his hypothesis that cable television and internet choice increased gaps in knowledge and poll turnout between people who preferred news compared with those who preferred entertainment. While Prior is in agreement with theorists such as Sunstein (2002), who argued that greater choice allows politically interested people to engage and access more information through greater choice of news sources on the internet, he also argued that those who are less interested are less likely to have chance encounters with any political content. Fewer chance encounters were a result of a greater ability to select what they are exposed to, which led Prior to conclude that the knowledge gap was being widened by greater media choice. This is supported by Iyengar and Hahn (2011), who stated that audience fragmentation brought about through the variety of news sources combined with the ability for consumers to select their own news has increased the number of citizens who are either ignorant or misinformed in terms of

current affairs. An ability to employ selective exposure effectively allows the politically uninvolved audience to remain that way. These views define the online news environment as having implications for the democratic function.

### **2.3.1 What online news could mean for democratic engagement.**

The findings of the studies discussed in the previous section raise questions about the impact of online news provision on the democratic function of the news media. Studies presented in this review found online readers were increasingly selecting soft news options online, and that a gap was emerging in the story preference of readers and journalists online. Further, these studies highlighted the limited selection and recall of online news readers. Considering this research alongside other research that reports an overall decline in newspaper and television news audiences (Williams & Franklin, 1997, cited in Freedman, 2010) would suggest the ability of consumers to select their news online may have significant future ramifications for society. The debate on whether that impact on society will be positive or negative is now considered. Iyengar and Hahn (2011) argued that people who sought news online from sources they considered agreeable were getting a limited perspective on political issues. On this basis, they argued, the new media environment would not nurture participation in the civic environment, rather societal polarisation was likely to occur. Iyengar and Hahn predicted like-minded individuals would opt to operate in communication silos that reflected their own views, making them less able to understand or sympathise with alternative views. Further, Sunstein (2002) and Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2010) believed selective exposure, through self-selection of news and fragmentation of choice, had the potential to create a separation in terms of both public awareness and participation in society.

Several researchers have expressed concern that the ability to select news will lead to a less politically aware and informed public (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; d’Haenens et al., 2004; Prior, 2005; Tewksbury, 2003; van Heekeren, 2005; Iyengar & Hahn, 2011). As outlined in Section 2.1 of this review, the news media is seen to have a duty to society in terms of its contribution to democracy, ideally presenting a range of views and ensuring the public are aware of issues that can affect them (Anderson & Ward, 2007). A comprehensive news media enables the public to engage actively in citizenship. Should consumers select news from online media that does not fulfil this ideal – choosing soft entertainment news rather than engaging in serious and politically orientated news – citizens will be less informed and, therefore, less able to engage meaningfully in society.

However, the view that readers will be less informed through selective news exposure in the online environment is challenged by a number of scholars who see the birth of a new democracy developing through participatory journalism enabled by the internet. Bucy and Affe (2006), Dahlberg (2011), Hutchins (2007), Owens and Palmer (2003), and Singer (2003) believe the public will choose to interact and share opinion, which will ultimately engage readers in public affairs. In an analysis of online newspapers, Nerone and Barnhurst (2001, p. 471), argued that it was a positive that the loss of journalists’ gate-keeping function could replace “the benign dictatorship of the editor” with “the tyranny of the mouse” by giving consumers the ability to web-browse in search of the news and views from a variety of perspectives. From a slightly different angle, Chyi and Lasorsa (2002) predicted internet use would complement, rather than work against, traditional media use in that consumers used internet news sources to seek more in-depth information and viewpoints on topics of interest.

The perceived value of user interaction in fostering democratic participation has been

rebutted by some authors for two reasons. First, studies conducted by Al-Saggaf (2006), Constantinescu and Tedesco (2007), Dahlberg (2011), and Thurman (2008), have found public participation in the online environment is seldom critical or rational and therefore lacks value in terms of encouraging meaningful engagement in public affairs. Al-Saggaf found little debate took place in online discussions, and participants did not disagree with others' opinions. Dahlberg also noted this also, arguing that because people generally joined online communities on the basis of shared interests, their conversations tended to focus on advice and companionship rather than any critical evaluation of issues. Constantinescu and Tedesco analysed forum posts about the kidnapping of three Romanian journalists in Iraq and found that "a high level of interaction between the online readers may produce a cynical outlook" (2007, p. 460).

Further, according to Thurman (2008), mainstream media are concerned about resourcing the moderation of contributions from the public in such forums in order to ensure no legal issues arise. This has seen mainstream media steer clear of opening up every issue for public debate (Thurman). Second, the value of user interaction has been refuted by some scholars because of inequality of access to the internet. Bustamante (2004), Tremayne (2007), and Papacharissi (2002; 2007) argued that because only a small fraction of the world population has access to the internet the environment is elitist. While this may be considered as less of an issue as the technology spreads, current statistics indicate that of the more than seven billion people in the world in 2012, just over two billion had internet access. New Zealand has a high level of internet access: as of December 31, 2011 there were 362,553 internet users in New Zealand, a national penetration of 84.5 percent (Internet world stats, 2013). However, while New

Zealand's penetration rates are high, the lack of high-speed access – or Ultra-Fast Broadband – across much of the country means access to the internet usability is poor.

These studies in essence leave the door open to consider the value of the internet in meaningful societal engagement. While evidence has been presented that online news seekers are beginning to make softer news choices and that participatory online engagement has the potential to be of value, valid points are also raised in terms of equality of access and the need for any engagement online to be meaningful in order to facilitate a democratic function. It is also relevant to consider that online news is only one news medium, and that consumers may be using it differently from other media, perhaps preferring to source more serious news elsewhere. Further studies in the context of online news selection among consumers in particular would add significant value to this relatively untapped, research field.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

This review of the literature has considered theories of media and democracy and addressed those with specific relevance to the online news environment. The theories of social responsibility, democratic participation, and agenda setting have been identified as those most relevant to this study. Dalhberg's (2011) theories attempting to encompass the potential for the online sphere as supporting or negating democratic engagement have been discussed. The value of local news, its importance for community engagement, and its ability to inform community members on key topics (Rosenstiel et al., 2011) and to help mould homogeneous communities (McLeod et al., 1996; Viswanath et al., 2000) has been established. Tabloidisation of the media (McNair, 2009), a consequence of increased competition and concentrated ownership where



large media companies compete to gain audience share, has been addressed (Esser, 1999). According to Sparks and Tulloch (2000), Franklin (1997), Pensar (2006), and Wiltenburg (2004), this tabloidization is evident in the rise of celebrity-focused, infotainment-styled news and the promotion of emotion and sensationalist crime news as a commercial commodity. Specific mention has been made of the New Zealand newspaper environment and recent efforts to economise news operations alongside the reduction in company portfolios, which provide the foundation for this research.

The review has examined the findings of previous research in relation to online news readership and news provision in a digital environment. These studies have found that the majority of online news consumers studied are, overall, selecting less public affairs-related news for consumption and more entertainment-related content. Further, the studies of Boczkowski and Peer (2011) and Tewksbury (2006) have shown the types of news stories being promoted to readers of these websites are being adapted, in some cases, to reflect consumer choices. Other studies (van Heekeren, 2005; Tewksbury, 2003) have found online news readers are opting for soft news content rather than news of political importance. However, a limited number of studies have been conducted in this field, which, when combined with constant changes in technology, means there is still much to be uncovered in this field. This is also reflective of the web as a continually developing market place. Alongside this, the challenges for news providers in meeting the needs of online news seekers have been canvassed. This includes what sorts of news to provide and how to provide it and whether a print product can still exist alongside a free online news service. In the final section of the review the debate regarding online news and democratic engagement has been outlined. Some authors (Dahlberg, 2011; Bimber, 2003; Trippi, 2004, cited in Dylko, et

al, 2012) believe that through engagement and participation the online sector can inform and encourage a new e-democracy; others (Davis & Owen, 1998; Wilhelm, 2002; Mancini, 2013) see the online environment as leading to a more fragmented news audience less able to engage in meaningful ways. There is likely some truth in both sets of beliefs; however, only further research in this media field will reveal whether the web will hinder or support democratic engagement.

The next chapter, Research Design, will describe the two methods employed in this study – content analysis and interviews. It will also provide the rationale for the selection of three websites, *Stuff*, the *Timaru Herald*, and the *Otago Daily Times*. It will explain specifically how this study was conducted and address online content analysis and its value.

## Chapter Three Research Design

The ongoing debate on the online web as a news medium and its ability to foster or hinder democratic engagement has provided the foundation for this study. It has prompted the need to consider online news provision in a New Zealand context to gain a picture of what news was being provided to consumers and what those consumers of news were interested in reading online. This study has used a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods to explore the news choices made by readers and providers of three New Zealand-based newspaper websites. The quantitative content analysis provided the means to investigate and identify the choices made by news readers and providers, while the qualitative interviews allowed these findings to be explored from the perspective of the news providers. The purpose of the investigation was to ascertain what kinds of news stories the readers of the sites were choosing, what kinds of stories were being selected by the news providers, and whether this choice varied between regional and national content-driven sites. The website editors were interviewed for their opinions on the findings of the content analysis and the potential impacts of online news provision on democratic participation. This chapter outlines the content analysis and interview methods used to explore the research questions.

The specific questions directing the research were:

RQ 1. What story topics appear in New Zealand newspaper online-news reader choice sections?

RQ 2. What story topics are selected as lead stories and as Editors' Picks by New Zealand on-line news providers?

RQ 3. What differences (if any) exist between regional newspapers online-news and national newspaper online-news?

RQ 4. What are online editors' perspectives on the online news medium and its content?

To answer the first three questions, this study used a content analysis to assess and compare what types of stories readers and editors were selecting. Research question four provides context by seeking an editorial perspective on news selection and its potential impact, and was investigated through the use of semi-structured interviews.

This chapter will first discuss the use of qualitative and quantitative methods, including the strengths and limitations of both in a combined approach in relation to this research. Both content analysis and semi-structured interviews are explained as research tools and the advantages and drawbacks of each method are discussed. Content analysis of the online material is also considered. Finally, the specific procedures used to carry out the research are outlined. These include the selection of media sampling, content categorisation, coding procedures, as well as interview methods, question themes, transcription, and ethical considerations.

### **3.1 Mixed Method Research**

It is appropriate to acknowledge the debate surrounding mixed methodology research and the value of combining qualitative and quantitative methods in this study. Hansen, Cottle, Negrine and Newbold (1998) claimed that good research considers which combination of methods will provide a deeper understanding of the chosen topic or problem. They described a combination of both quantitative and qualitative approaches as valid in social science research, given that one complements the other. In describing

mass communication as a 'field' rather than a defined discipline, they argued that no one preferred quantitative or qualitative method should be used over another, rather researchers should be encouraged to take a holistic, mixed method approach.

In this study, mixed methods provided the means to study mass communication as a total communication process from production to news reception and also to explore some of the implications of this communication for readers. This mixed method approach was supported by Plano, Clark and Badiee (cited in Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) who encouraged the use of methods that provide the best tools from those available to answer the research questions, as opposed to using methods cited as the most suitable or preferred for the discipline or that fit most comfortably within the researcher's expertise.

A core criticism of mixed methods research lies in the scholarly position relating to the incongruity of the paradigms associated with the methods. As Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010) explained, this debate is centred in the purist belief of research methodology, which asserts the mixing of methods is not possible, given that epistemological and ontological assumptions linked to chosen paradigms (e.g. constructivism, post-positivism) are incompatible. Scholars who link their chosen paradigm with specific methodology traditions of quantitative or qualitative research designs do not accept this as a valid combination because they do not recognise this combination is possible within the one model. However, Morgan (2007 cited in Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) proposed a more pragmatic approach, superseding the position of linking methods to paradigms. He suggested methodology be viewed as "the area that connects issues at the abstract level of epistemology and the mechanical level of actual methods" (p. 14).

Morgan's approach has been applied in this study. However, Bazely (2004) warned that purpose can be unclear when researchers apply mixed methods, and traditional methods can be interpreted as weakened when modified. She also emphasised the validity of research as stemming both from the appropriateness, thoroughness, and effectiveness with which the methods are applied and from the researcher maintaining a commitment to accurate representation of the evidence.

Quandt (cited in Loffelholz & Weaver, 2008, p. 139) described the use of mixed methods research, particularly in journalistic studies, as common practice. The most common approach is to use a content analysis with interviews, as in this study. Singer (2008, cited in Loffelholz & Weaver, p. 154) supported the adoption and application of dual paradigms in the mass communication field as it "allows a scientific method of gathering data combined with a more culturally informed and holistic analysis of data". The selection and use of mixed methods allowed such a holistic approach to this study. This is because, without the qualitative information gathered from the interviews, the study would address neither the "why" questions regarding news selections, nor the wider issues raised in Chapter Two on the potential impacts of internet news on democratic participation. In effect, the content analysis provided the quantitative basis but also informed the structure and gathering of the qualitative material.

### **3.2 Content Analysis as a Method**

Content analysis is defined as a form of textual analysis used to identify and analyse specific messages and message characteristics in texts (Frey, Botan & Kreps, 2000; Hansen et al., 1998). Berelson (1952, cited in Kolmer, 2008 p. 118) described it in a mass communication context as "a research technique for the objective, systematic, and

quantitative description of the manifest content of communication". While the roots of content analysis lie in the 18th century, where it was employed by Swedish scholars to identify the number of religious symbols contained in hymns (Krippendorff, 2004), from the end of the 19th century it has been a favoured method of researchers analysing mass-mediated communication (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2005). In the field of media research, content analysis has typically been used to examine how the output of news, advertising, television programming, and similar content reflects social issues and cultural values (Hansen et al., 1998). The present study lent itself to this method as it provided the means to answer the first three research questions in ascertaining both reader news choices and the news selections made by news providers. Content analysis could also be adapted to the online news environment, an area still under-researched. In 2001 Tomasello (cited in Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2005) called for increased research of the web and Internet on the basis this medium would have a significant impact on people's lives. Yet before 2001, Tomasello found only four percent of scholarly articles concerned the Internet.

### **3.2.1 Strengths of content analysis.**

The advantages of adopting content analysis in research were outlined by Krippendorff (1980), who identified four strengths of the method. First, it is unobtrusive, given the texts analysed already exist. Second, it accepted unstructured material that observers are able to categorise. Third, the content analysis uses material in the context in which it appears, allowing researchers to examine the content of the text accurately. Finally, it enables large quantities of data to be considered. Importantly, Krippendorff (2004) stated that content analysis has additional strength in that it is replicable, allowing comparison between studies. The replicable nature of the method also provides a

means for changes in mass communication to be tracked and monitored over time through replicable studies (Fountain & McGregor, 1999; Frey et al., 2000). Specifically addressing the use of online media as a tool for the content analyst, Riffe, Lacy and Fico (2005) describe the domain as one of “unlimited possibilities” (p. 119). Many of the traditional focal points could be considered online, as was the case with this study, where news story topics were identified in the same fashion as they would be with a print product. However, they also identified further opportunities for consideration, such as the ability to compare online news with print news, and chat-rooms as an area where interpersonal communications can be analysed. Further, because news stories are not removed from online news sites the researcher has the ability to compare trends or coverage of specific issues over extended timeframes with relative ease.

### **3.2.2 Limitations of content analysis.**

Scholars (Frey et al., 2000; Hansen et al., 1998) note all research methods have their individual weaknesses or limitations. The validity of content analysis as a means of analysing mass communication has been debated, given that interpretation is applied to the quantitative indicators. Early definitions of content analysis required such inferences to be drawn strictly based on the frequency with which symbols or themes appeared. Further, the categorising or coding of data into meaningful units of analysis based on definitions applied by the researcher constitutes a subjective judgement that has attracted criticism in relation to ensuring nominal categories are valid and consistently applied (Frey et al., 2000). However, Hansen et al. (1998) pointed out that without such judgement, the content analysis would fail to capture the meaning or significance of the data gathered. In this project, both inter- and intra-coding were carried out to ensure the coding decisions were valid and consistent. Stempel and



Stewart (2000) stated sampling from the Internet required an awareness of how the web works. The authors warned that researchers should take account that indexing methods vary between news sites, and that news presentation online cannot be considered as representative of news in the print newspaper where layout, headline size, and placement may differ. Further, they said the method could be costly, given some news websites charge for access. These factors were considered for this study, hence stories were gathered and stored daily at a regular time to avoid having to use website indexes. Second, as the web as a news medium was being studied specifically no attempt was made to apply print content cues to the online stories. Finally, all the websites were free to access. The specific process undertaken for the study is outlined in the next section.

### **3.3 Content Analysis Procedure for this Study**

Content analysis was employed in this study because it enabled the categorisation of large quantities of data to which a statistical analysis could be applied to identify any trends in reader and editor news selections (Frey et al., 2000). Further, it enabled the use of material in the exact format it was provided to readers because it appeared on free, publically available websites. The chapter will now focus on the specific procedures employed in applying content analysis as a method in this research. The content analysis method was designed to address the following research questions:

RQ 1. What story topics appear in New Zealand newspaper online-news reader choice sections?

RQ 2. What story topics are selected as lead stories and as Editors' Picks by New Zealand on-line news providers?

RQ 3. What differences (if any) exist between regional newspapers online-news and national newspaper online-news?

### **3.3.1 Media selection.**

Three New Zealand-based newspaper websites were selected for this study. The first, Fairfax Media's *Stuff*, is dedicated to national coverage, the others, the *Timaru Herald* and the *Otago Daily Times (ODT)* news websites, are primarily dedicated to regional news coverage. Stempel and Stewart (2000) drew attention to the fact that the internet had an infinite number of news readers and news sites compared with a newspaper sample, where a finite selection could be made. With this in mind, three specific sites were selected to ensure a manageable and finite data set.

The website *Stuff.co.nz* was selected because it is a national online news website providing nationwide coverage. As discussed in Chapter Two, *Stuff* is a division of Fairfax Media, and the site is populated by stories from its newspapers and news agency links throughout New Zealand and internationally. Fairfax was established in New Zealand in 2003 when the Australian division purchased the publishing arm of New Zealand's Independent Newspapers Limited. Fairfax Media has two national and nine daily newspapers, approximately 60 community newspapers and 25 magazines. It also operates the *Stuff* website, which features regional divisions based on the location of its daily newspapers. The website has over two million unique browser hits recorded each month (Fairfax, 2012).

The *Timaruherald.co.nz* was selected because, as a regional division of *Stuff*, the information gathered from this site would be directly comparable with that of

*Stuff.co.nz* in terms of site design, with both featuring the same homepage sections. In contrast to *Stuff*, however, the news carried on *timaruherald.co.nz* relates predominantly to the South Canterbury and Mackenzie regions of the South Island. The *Timaru Herald* daily print edition has an average daily circulation of 28,000 and the news website has approximately 700,000 unique browser hits per month (Fairfax, 2012). In assessing the differences in reader story topic selection, the regional nature of *timaruherald.co.nz* content provided a useful comparison with websites that carry greater national focus.

The *ODT* website features stories from the *Otago Daily Times* newspaper, the major daily newspaper owned by the independent company Allied Press. It is one of New Zealand's largest daily newspapers with an average circulation of 45,000 (ODT, 2012). Allied Press has publications in Dunedin, Gore, Queenstown, Central Otago, the West Coast, South Canterbury, North Canterbury, and Southland. The website, *odt.co.nz*, features news from throughout these regions, with national content supplied in an agreement with New Zealand's second largest news stable, APN. The *ODT* website readership averages 28,000 views per day (ODT, 2012). This website offered a point of difference in that it is not Fairfax-aligned, and provides consumers with national and international news, while maintaining a strong regional focus.

### **3.3.2 Sample.**

One of the aims of content analysis is to ensure a representative sample of data is obtained (Frey et al., 2000); yet in terms of internet news no valid or preferred sample method has been identified because it is a relatively new area of study (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2005). As noted in Chapter Two, there are still a limited number of online news

studies on which to draw. Wang (2000) explored sample sizes for content of online news sites and found consecutive day sampling to be both efficient and effective. With this position in mind, and noting Stempel and Stewart's (2000) earlier points about the pitfalls of relying on website indexes to back track material, the decision was made to adopt a consecutive-day, 3-month sample period, as used by van Heekeren in 2005 in her study of online news trends. Krippendorff (2004) also that warned significant news events could distort findings in a consecutive day sample of the media should a short timeframe, for example, 2 weeks, be adopted. Therefore, to reduce the impact of any such a significant event, this study adopted a 3-month sampling period.

In terms of the sample chosen, concerns raised by McMillan (2000) were considered. First, he recommended those researching web content take into account that the web is interactive rather than linear. This means people use the internet differently from traditional media, as they have a greater opportunity to select which stories to read and which to ignore. Second, it is difficult to apply sampling frames, given content changes quickly. Third, coding is difficult unless content can be captured in some form. Sampling took these factors into account, and they are addressed in the next section. Finally, the multimedia nature of the internet can make coding inconsistent, given the changing nature of sites can make reliability testing difficult. The following section will define and explain the sampling method used in this study.

### **3.3.2.1 Sample gathering.**

Sample gathering began on May 1, 2012 and was completed on July 31, 2012, a total of 91 consecutive days. This timeframe was chosen to mitigate the impact should a significant news event occur and because it replicated the timeframe used by van

Heekeren (2005). As Hansen et al. (1998) argued, any study involving mass communication – and in particular news media – requires the application of knowledge of news media processes, especially an awareness of the nature of coverage and cycles in relation to sampling. The 3-month, consecutive-day timeframe was adopted for two reasons: to gain sufficient information to represent accurately the population of the websites from which the material was gathered; to account for cyclical variations, such as more sport featuring in weekends (Riffe, Aust and Lacy, 1993). So seven days each week were sampled.

Steps were taken to mitigate the concerns of McMillan (2000) about Internet samples. First, McMillan's concern with the interactive nature of the internet was taken into account as one of the core purposes of the study was to collate data relating to reader choices. Hence, the interactivity offered by the web in allowing reader hits to generate a "most popular" news choice section was crucial to sampling. Because content is constantly updated, a consistent midday timeframe was used for sampling across all three sites, as will be explained below. In terms of capturing the data, content screen shots were used to record the home page and links as they were at midday each day. This allowed the recording of the specific moment in time. The categories used to code the news stories were also pre-tested over a 2-week period before the data was formally gathered. Categories were designed to take into account multi-media elements such as interactive news knowledge quizzes, which frequently appear in the reader choice section. While it is accepted these quizzes are not news, they are a popular reader choice, therefore a category was created to record their appearance. Finally, to ensure relatively broad representation within a small sample of media outlets, an example of each of a national, regional, and multi-purpose news website was selected.

News websites allow media companies to update news stories continually during the day. Therefore, for consistency, a fixed time to record the stories was required. The method chosen replicated that used by van Heekeren (2005). The midday recording time was chosen as it reflected the stories read since the morning headlines from the print editions were posted. Van Heekeren found these were more reflective of the morning news agenda of both readers and providers. Further, the sample collection time also took into account the nature of online news readership, given websites receive views from overseas readers. This study sought to discover the news selections of website readers, and while international readership could not be filtered from the sample, steps were taken to mitigate its impact. This was achieved by adopting a midday collection time as this was more likely to reflect the views generated from morning news consumers and less likely to include high numbers of international hits, which, given time-zone differences, will come in greatest numbers at night.

Finally, the sample selection needed to mitigate the effects should a significant news event have occurred during the project. This was highlighted by Shuker, Basset, Watson and Lambourne (cited in Shuker, 2003), whose content analysis of violence on television was affected by the outbreak of the Gulf War. Van Heekeren's (2005) study was similarly impacted by the Athens Olympic Games and an Australian Federal election. During the period sampled for this research, notable news events that dominated coverage were the Scott Guy murder trial, coverage for which began on June 5, 2012 and continued until July 27, and the beginning of the 2012 Olympic Games, with the latter influencing only the final four days of sampling.

### **3.3.3 Development of news content categories.**

Before the coding of the sample a test sample was collated, comprising stories from the three chosen websites (*Stuff, Timaru Herald, ODT*) between April 9 and April 15, 2012. From this information, preliminary story topic categories were developed. It was initially proposed to use story topic categories from the *Pew Research Centre Project for Excellence in Journalism*, adapted by van Heekeren (2005). However, during the trial period it was found the categories did not reflect the New Zealand national and regional news agenda. The categories developed for this study therefore drew on those created by New Zealand researcher Macdonald (2008) whose categories were based on those used by Atwater (1984), Davie and Lee (1995), and Comrie (1996, cited in MacDonald), yet did not replicate these.

At the end of the test sample process 23 story topic categories were selected, as shown in Table 1. These were: Arts and culture; Business/finance/economy; Celebrity/entertainment; Consumer issues; Crime, courts, police, justice; Disaster/accident; Education; Energy; Environment; Health/medicine; Human interest; International politics; Local government/Politics; National government/Politics; Quake stories; Primary industries; Science/technology; Sport; Transport; Trivia quizzes; War/defence; Weather; and Welfare.

**Table 1*****Story Topic Categories***

<b>Story Topic</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Arts and Culture</b>	New Zealand-based stories relating to visual arts, religious festivals, cultural festivals, popular culture, and lifestyle stories (such as gardening, music and book reviews and leisure-related topics).
<b>Business/Finance/Economy</b>	Stories about specific companies, profits, corporate activity and economic activity such as trade. Includes real estate.
<b>Celebrity/Entertainment</b>	Stories referring to people involved in motion picture, television, stage or other entertainment venues. These stories concentrate on individuals or celebrities as an aggregate, and include people in the context of their occupation of entertainer for stage, screen, radio, television, highly celebrated business people and non-show-business celebrities, such as royalty, as well as celebrities accused or convicted of breaking the law where the story treatment of the crime was celebrity driven.
<b>Consumer Issues</b>	Stories that offer consumer advice, advise of product recalls, and consumer complaints.
<b>Crime/Courts/Police/Justice</b>	Stories involving crime incidents, crime trends (such as statistical data on crimes or a national crime survey), criminal investigations and court stories (excluding those involving celebrities), and wider justice issues that do not fall under national government.
<b>Disaster/Accident</b>	Stories that address any natural disasters, along with stories about events that injure, kill or cause damage. Includes “man-made disasters” that are actions that stem from human behaviour such as traffic accidents and natural disasters.
<b>Education</b>	Refers to all early childhood, primary, secondary and post-secondary education. This includes non-sports extracurricular activities that are explicitly connected with schools.
<b>Energy</b>	Stories related to energy companies’ activities and services, alternative energy stories, and fuel.
<b>Environment</b>	Stories referring to all ecological or human-environment topics, including wetlands, pollution, conservation, energy policy, global warming, and land use issues such as regulations, deregulation, and enforcement of land-use issues. Regional Council stories that focus on environmental issues are coded here; however, stories relating to Regional Council policy are coded under local government.



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<b>Health/Medicine</b>	Stories that focus on health matters, including associated lifestyle stories, obesity stories, medical research, etc. Stories of pandemics, epidemics, diseases, medical research, health conditions, and prevention techniques; health policy and public health services.
<b>Human Interest</b>	Stories referring to the activities and concerns of ordinary people or groups, stories relating to pets and animals – not celebrities.
<b>International Politics</b>	Stories relating to political campaigning or policy occurring outside New Zealand with no New Zealand story content.
<b>Local Government/Politics</b>	Stories that involve the working of local government authorities such as district, regional, and city councils (anything that impacts on or involves ratepayers), including meetings. While regional council stories that focus on environmental projects are coded under Environment, stories relating to Regional Council policies are coded here.
<b>National Government/Politics</b>	Stories that involve the workings of Parliament or its associated agencies and policies, such as Bills, as well as stories generated by the activities of national politicians, for example, community visits.
<b>Quake News</b>	Stories specifically relating to earthquakes occurring in New Zealand and follow-up stories pertaining to earthquakes.
<b>Primary Industries</b>	Stories that relate specifically to New Zealand’s primary sector, i.e. the extraction and collection of natural resources, such as copper and timber, as well as by activities such as farming and fishing.
<b>Science/Technology</b>	This category includes any research in which the focus is on the discovery of new knowledge or the discovery of cause and effect relationships. Can include both physical and social sciences, but excludes medical research and health. Also refers to stories about technological developments (such as computers/internet) and how technology affects people’s lives.
<b>Sports</b>	Stories about professional or local sports such as school athletics. This also includes sports as either a spectator or participatory event. Includes sport profiles, except where the primary focus of the story is on the celebrity nature of the individual, e.g. a sports star wedding.

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<b>Transport</b>	Stories relating to all forms of public and private transport and road safety campaigns. Includes stories relating to motoring but not those related to national road policy, which are coded under government. Road accidents are excluded and are coded under accident/disaster.
<b>Trivia Quizzes</b>	Category specifically for the interactive Stuff Daily Trivia Quiz.
<b>War/Defence</b>	Stories relating specifically to war events and defence in New Zealand and overseas.
<b>Weather</b>	All weather-related stories such as trends and weather events. Events that do not meet the disaster/accident definition of “natural disasters” (these refer to weather events that cause injury, death and financial loss which are coded as disaster/accident).
<b>Welfare</b>	Stories relating to Work and Income, unemployment, social welfare, child welfare agencies.

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### 3.3.4 Geographic origin categories.

The geographic origins of the stories gathered were also recorded as discussed. Table 2 presents the coding definitions applied to the three websites. Additional geographic coding was also undertaken in relation to the *Timaru Herald* and *ODT* that focused on the publications' circulation area. This involved identifying which stories were specifically about events or issues in Dunedin and Timaru and which were stories from the wider Otago and South Canterbury regions. The *Timaru Herald* circulation area was defined as within the South Canterbury boundary – between Rangitata in the north and Glenavy in the south and included the Mackenzie District. Stories categorised as being from the Otago district were any stories that originated from South, North or Central Otago.

**Table 2**

***Geographic origin coding definitions***

<b>Geographic origin</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Regional North Island</b>	Content or stories from the North Island that were not about specific events/issues in Auckland or Wellington, e.g. Bay of Plenty, Manawatu, Hamilton.
<b>Auckland</b>	Stories or content about events/issues in Auckland.
<b>Wellington</b>	Stories or content about events/issues in Wellington.
<b>Regional South Island</b>	Content or stories from the South Island that were not written about specific events/issues in the cities of Christchurch or Dunedin, e.g. Marlborough, Southland, Otago.
<b>Christchurch</b>	Stories or content about events/issues in Christchurch City.
<b>Dunedin</b>	Stories or content about events/issues in Dunedin City.
<b>Unknown</b>	National stories or content for which a geographic origin was not identified.
<b>International</b>	Stories about international events or occurrences

### 3.3.5 Coding procedure.

For the purposes of data gathering and coding, the readers' choices, Editors' Picks, and lead stories were recorded each day. For *Stuff* and the *Timaru Herald*, the stories gathered were the five lead stories (labelled in descending order from number one); the lead picture story; the first five Editors' Picks stories; and first five reader-selected stories (Figure 1. *Stuff* and *Timaru Herald*). For the *ODT*, which does not have an Editors' Picks section or a static lead picture, the categories were their the three lead stories and readers' five story selections, again in descending order from one to three and one to five accordingly (Figure 2. *ODT*).

Screen shots were taken each day from the three websites. The selected stories from these were then transferred to a story coding sheet that collated 7 days' worth of stories for each news site. The coding sheet is reproduced in Appendix 1. This recorded the date, publication, headline, story rank in terms of the order in which it appeared, the geographic origin and the story position (readers' selections, lead picture story, a lead news story or editors' selection). The topic category was assigned and the electronic story link was recorded for validation or checking. An additional column was used for recording anything of note, such as the lead being the same across two or all of the sites, or the unavailability of a link because the story was interactive in nature, such as a live question and answer segment with a celebrity. Once collated, this information was entered into a Microsoft Access database (Figure 3) that contained replicated fields from the story coding sheet. The database was used as it provided greater flexibility for analysis, given it enabled query reports to be run comparing dates, categories, and websites as well as the ability to analyse each website individually. Additionally, the

database included a sub-form to record the geographic origin of the story. The categories used to describe geographic origin are presented in Table 2.

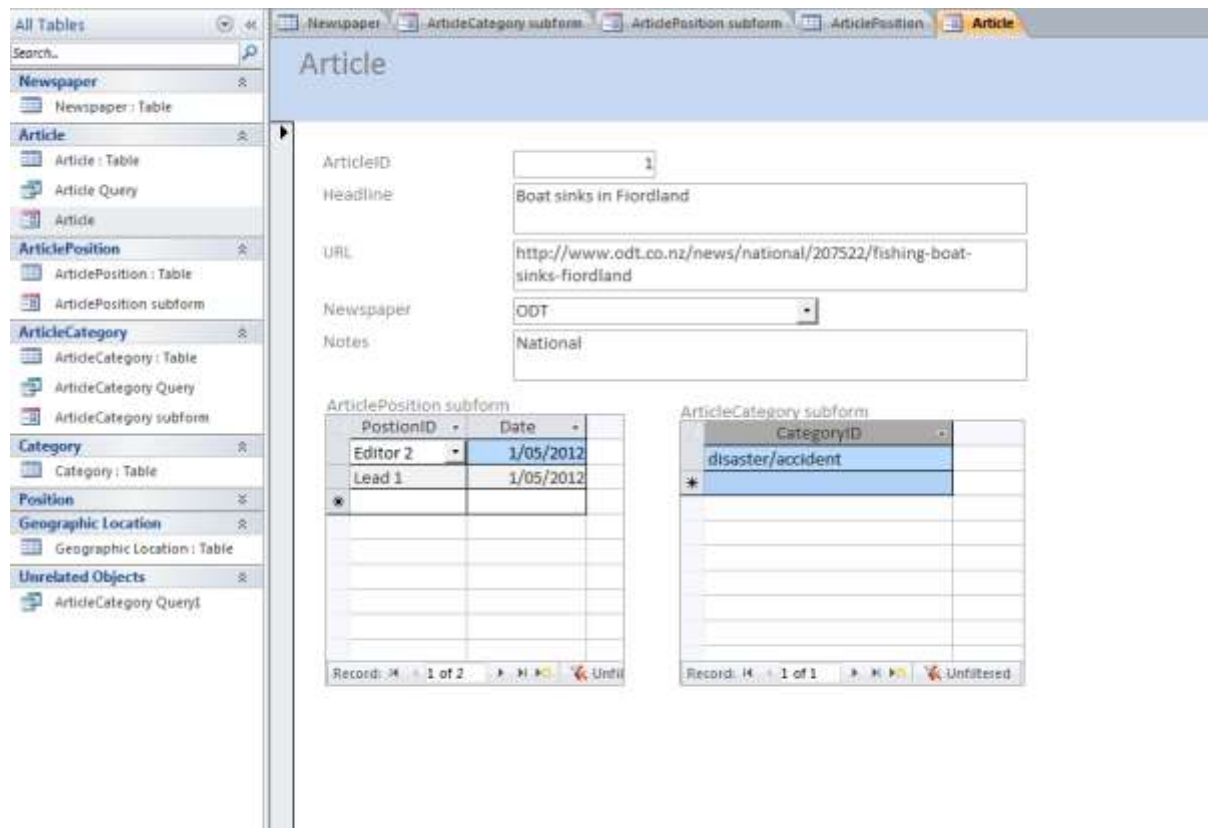
**Figure 1**  
**Stuff and Timaru Herald stories selected**



**Figure 2**  
**Otago Daily Times stories selected**



**Figure 3**  
**Database**



### 3.3.6 Coding decisions.

Decisions on which news subject categories were suitable were based on the findings from the test sample, the nature of the mediums and the news agenda at the time of gathering the data. Because the *ODT* and the *Timaru Herald* feature stories relating to regional concerns, with many focused on their respective district and regional councils, it was necessary to include the story category of local government/politics.

Environment and primary industries categories were included to address the number of stories about farming practice. The quake news category was added in response to the number of stories relating to the Canterbury earthquakes in particular. During the test-sampling period, international stories of a political nature were infrequent on the home pages. However, a specific category was needed to distinguish these stories from

national (i.e. New Zealand specific) political stories to make it possible to measure the number of stories relating specifically to national politics.

Coding decisions were not always straightforward, as evidenced in the following instances. For example, the story *NFL star Junior Seau found dead at his home* (Flaccus, 2012) appeared on the *Stuff* website on May 3, 2012. As little detail was provided about the sportsman's death the story could have been coded as crime, celebrity or disaster/accident. The story met the criteria of celebrity/entertainment as the story would not have made the news if the deceased were not a sports celebrity. It could have been a crime story, could the death have been caused by another person. Finally, the manner in which the story was written suggested suicide, and as a coroner's court would rule this accidental death, the story could have been placed under disaster/accident. However, based on the decision an ordinary person committing suicide would not feature on a national news site I categorised the story as celebrity/entertainment. A similar example involved the former New Zealand rugby representative, Stephen Bachop, entering a guilty plea to an assault charge ("Ex AB", 2012). Again, an ordinary person entering a guilty plea to a minor assault charge would not generally make national news. However, the story did involve a court hearing and a crime. The decision was made to categorise the story under celebrity/entertainment as this fitted more logically with the definition of persons in the news on the basis of their occupation. Yet another difficult decision concerned a story carried on the *Stuff* site, *Driverless car registered* (2012). The story could have fallen into the category of science and technology as the vehicle represented a technological advancement and a first. However, as the context of the story focused on the features of the vehicle, it was included under the transport category as it better fitted the criteria as a motoring story.



Finally, in terms of distinguishing between weather stories and natural events that could be coded as “natural disasters” under the disaster/accident category, the following example is provided. The *ODT* featured eight weather stories in the lead position during the sample period: two were related to snow falls, five to storm predictions and warnings, and one to a wind warning. None of these stories involved any reports of “extensive injury, death or financial loss”, which is the criterion applied to natural disasters that would be coded under accident/disaster. These stories were therefore coded as weather stories. The geographic origin of the stories that formed the sample was also recorded to help address Research Question Three, What differences (if any) exist between regional newspapers online-news and national newspaper online-news? Some coding decisions also proved complex and these are now discussed.

### **3.3.6.1 Geographic coding decisions.**

The news stories sampled were coded according to their geographic origin (Table 2) to enable consideration, first, of what locations featured most often or least on the websites, and then the sources of the stories readers accessed across the three websites. Geographic origin coding decisions were also at times difficult. The following examples demonstrate this and explain the decisions applied. Opinion pieces and editorials written by *Timaru Herald* journalists appeared 44 times in the sample. Where these pieces related specifically to Timaru issues, events or people these were coded, according to the criteria above, as from the South Island regions (of which 40 were). The remaining four were syndicated columns such as the Gordon Brown television review *A Look at the Crewe Case and Coro Carnage* (Brown, 2012) where no geographic origin was evident so they were coded as unknown. Further examples included national stories where a specific geographic origin could not be applied, such as *Fonterra cuts*

*payout to farmers* (Fox, 2012), which was written from a national perspective about the impact of the company decision on New Zealand. While it could be assumed this story had a basis in the Waikato – being Fonterra’s headquarters – this was not explicit in the story nor was the story identified as being from the region in any way, so it was coded as unknown. Similar difficulties emerged with sports stories, for example stories such as *Nonu, Weepu, Williams all dropped to bench* (Lam, 2012), which concerned the selection of the All Black rugby test team.

### **3.3.7 Inter-coder and intra-coder reliability testing.**

Inter-coder reliability testing involves the independent coding of data sets to measure consistency in decision-making (Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken, 2010). Neuendorf (2002) stressed the importance of inter-coding in any research involving content analysis because the goal of this research method is to “identify and record relatively objective (or at least inter-subjective) characteristics of messages” (p. 141), and therefore reliability must be established. High levels of disagreement in inter-coding would suggest a weakness in the research design, or methods, in this instance poor definitions, or story topic categories that lacked clarity. Weber (1990) argued that different people should be able to code the same text in the same way and noted ambiguity often comes when category definitions are not clear. To test the reliability of coding categories Krippendorff (1980) recommended stability be assessed through intra-coding of the decisions made. The measure is whether the same coder achieves the same results by measuring a random sample of decisions made multiple times. Given these concerns, to ensure validity both inter- and intra-coding were used to test the reliability of the coding decisions made for this study.

First, an intra-coding analysis was carried out using two weeks (May 7–19, 2012) of coded stories from each of the three websites. These were re-coded by topic category at the end of the total sample period. This equated to 268 stories, approximately seven percent of the total 3637 stories in the sample. There was a 97 percent agreement with the original coding. Nine stories were identified as being in the wrong category, and these were corrected. None of these nine was identified as incorrect due to the story topic criteria, rather these were identified as data entry errors. As a result of this intra-coding, the story type coding for all entries was re-checked to ensure all data were entered correctly. A further seven entries from the total sample were corrected.

Second, inter-coding of the story topic categories applied was carried out by an independent person; this consisted of the review of 362 (10%) stories selected randomly from the total sample. The random sample consisted of 73 stories from the *ODT* website, 145 from *Stuff*, and 145 from the *Timaru Herald*. The sample included stories from the lead, lead picture, editor, and reader sections of the websites from the 91-day sample period. The coder was provided with the story topic and geographic origin definitions developed for the study. The inter-coder is a trained journalist who carried out the coding unsupervised. She was asked to record the categories in which she would place the stories based on the definitions supplied. The sample was generated randomly and was not the same as that used for intra-coding purposes. The method used to select the sample involved assigning random numbers to each story within each of the three website samples using the random number function in Microsoft Excel. From this total random sample set for each website, 10 percent from each website was selected to be coded by an independent coder. The inter-coder made the same coding decisions as the researcher for 359 of the 362 random stories selected

– an agreement of 99.2 percent. I elected not to re-categorise the three stories about which there had been disagreement. The first was a backgrounder on the Scott Guy murder trial that focused on the nation’s fascination with it. The inter-coder believed this was court news; however, I saw this as a human interest piece, as it did not deal with the trial or crime itself, but rather considered why New Zealanders had been so intrigued by it, and identified similar cases that had gained significant national profiles. The two other stories where disagreement occurred were about aurora lights seen in New Zealand skies. These were initially coded as science/technology. The inter-coder saw these as human interest stories; however, in applying the definition established for this study, which includes physical sciences, I believed the story was scientific in nature. The next section moves from consideration of the content analysis component of this study to the second research methods adopted – interviews with the website editors.

### **3.4 Interviewing as a Method**

The interviews were conducted to address Research Question Four, What are online editors’ perspectives on the online news medium and its content? The participants were three editors from the online news websites studied – *Stuff*, the *Timaru Herald*, and the *Otago Daily Times*. These one-to-one interviews were adopted as a supporting method to the content analysis as they provided the opportunity to explore broad findings of the content analysis from the news producers’ perspectives. Interviews can provide insights that would not be available from quantitative data alone (Denscombe, 2010; Hansen et al., 1998).

Interviews are essentially verbal exchanges where one person, the interviewer, attempts to gain information from the interviewee (Frey et al., 2000). In research, these take three forms: structured, unstructured, and semi-structured, according to Dunn (2000). Dunn defined the structured interview as following a predetermined and standardised list of questions that are asked in the same way and order with no deviation. The unstructured interview is one directed by interviewees where there are often no set questions, rather the participants are allowed to tell their own stories. Drever (1997) defined the semi-structured interview as one that allows the researcher to develop a general structure for the interview in advance, by deciding the ground to be covered and the main themes, yet allows the detailed structure to develop during the interview based on each interviewee's responses in conjunction with prompts or probes from the interviewer. The purpose of the semi-structured interview is varied. However, given its nature, it can yield a combination of fact, opinion, and experience-based information (Denscombe, 2010). Semi-structured interviews were conducted in this research because they offered flexibility in terms of the order in which the discussion topics were addressed and because they enabled the interviewees to consider and speak more freely on the points raised from the content analysis. Further, the interviews were able to unfold in a conversational manner, allowing participants to explore issues that they felt were important, which Longhurst (2010) has described as valuable.

### **3.4.1 Limitations and strengths of interviewing and semi-structured interviews.**

As a research method, interviewing requires the researcher to consider a range of factors to ensure these are effective. For an interview to be successful, the interviewer must maintain professionalism and rapport must be established with the subject to foster effective communication (Frey et al., 2000). Frey et al. also noted the degree to which this rapport is developed influences the kind of information offered by the interviewee. Further, the process can bias responses, producing the researcher personal attribute effect, whereby the way in which the interviewer is perceived may influence the responses. As a former journalist and journalism educator, I knew each of the interview participants professionally. This assisted with making initial contact and building rapport during the interviews. This professional relationship also contributed to my ability to maintain objectivity. Further, my experiences conducting interviews as a journalist enabled me to approach the interviews as I would in a professional setting with no preconceived ideas and with a view to ensuring an accurate and balanced interview was conducted. Recording oral responses accurately while maintaining conversation is also crucial in making sure correct information is gathered. Recording devices can mitigate this to an extent; however, some subjects also find these intrusive and again these can influence the responses (Matthews & Ross, 2010). Because an iPad was used in the face-to-face interview no microphone needed to be placed in front of the participant as iPads can be placed at a distance and still reliably record sound. The second participant, located in Dunedin, was interviewed via telephone and the third, based in Wellington, via e-chat, and in these cases, the visibility of recording device was not an issue. All had consented to being recorded.

Semi-structured interviewing proved effective for this study because the participants, being busy professionals, were still able to provide qualitative, opinion-based responses despite limited time availability. A structured interview would not have allowed this flexibility. Three different methods were used for conducting the interviews for this study. The use of synchronous online chat was described by Matthews and Ross (2010) as a useful method for interviews where the participants are geographically distant from the researcher, and in this study two participants were. It is a successful tool for interviewing participants with limited time opportunities as it allows them to take part when they have time, which encourages participation. The method can, however, be challenging in terms of building rapport because verbal or physical cues are absent from the discussion. Synchronous (live chat in real-time) rather than a-synchronous (interview and interviewer are not online at the same time) chats are preferable because they allow questions to be tailored immediately to responses, as in a live conversation. A further advantage of this method is that the data are already in text form, which negates the need for transcription or recording. Hughes (1996) expressed a similar reservation about the ability to build rapport in telephone interviewing, although he acknowledged its value when respondents were geographically spread. Davies (2007) argued that while face-to-face interviewing was one of the foundation methods of gathering qualitative data, researchers needed to be mindful of personal presentation and manner. The interviewer must at all times remain aware of the impact of the interview on the participant when addressing difficult or sensitive issues, given the interviewer was often not well-known by the interviewee.

### **3.5 Interview Procedure**

This section will address the selection of the interview sample, the development of the interview questions, the interview procedures used, the transcription, and the ethical considerations.

#### **3.5.1 Interview sample.**

The sample consisted of editors of the three newspaper websites that were the subject of the content analysis, the *Timaru Herald*, the *ODT*, and *Stuff*. The participants were chosen because, as editors, they were responsible for the overall content of the website. Moreover, on the Fairfax-aligned sites, the digital editors are also responsible for selecting the stories that will feature in the Editors' Picks on the website. Each of the editors was contacted by telephone, advised of the research, and invited to take part by agreeing to an interview. Their preferred method for interviewing (i.e. face to face, or telephone) was discussed. A follow-up email, containing the information sheet and consent form (see Appendix 3), and suggesting suitable interview dates was then sent. From here the method of interview, date, time, and place were confirmed.

#### **3.5.2 Interview questions.**

The interview questions were developed based on the literature reviewed for this study, with additional material added following the content analysis. The interview questions can be found in Appendix 2. The questions were broad in nature, given the research question did not seek a specific answer or theoretical perspective. Rather, questions were aimed at gathering the editors' opinions or insights of the online news environment in New Zealand, opinions on the broad data gathered from the content analysis, perspectives on the role of the media in democracy in New Zealand, and the



place of web news. The interview questions were therefore consistent with the model proposed by Wengraf (2001), who stated interview questions should be designed to produce material that is relevant to a particular theory without specifically stipulating it. Wengraf said the semi-structured interview allows the participants a degree of openness in their responses that could then be applied by the researcher to the theoretical perspective, or in this case, to the findings from the content analysis.

A consistent order was used for the interview questions, which began with fact finding questions on the history and background of each website. The questions then addressed news selection for the websites, perceptions of the elements of strong web news, and the interviewees' perspectives on web versus print news. Further discussion covered the initial content analysis findings and reader preferences, the value of reader participation online, and the online news environment and its relationship to democratic engagement.

### **3.5.3 Conducting the interviews.**

As discussed, due to time and location constraints, the three interviews were conducted using different methods. The interview with the *Timaru Herald* digital editor was face-to-face and recorded on January 17, 2013. The interview lasted for 90 minutes. The interview with the *ODT* editor was conducted over the telephone and recorded on February 26, 2013. The interview took one hour. The recordings were made using the voice recorder function on an iPad, and were then converted to electronic audio files. The use of the voice recordings made it possible to focus fully on the conversation rather than having to take notes. However, handwritten notes taken during the conversations helped later analysis.

The third interview, with the *Stuff* digital editor, was conducted over two successive days, February 18 and 19, 2013, using the Google Mail live chat function, because she was only available for a limited time on each occasion. The total duration of the interview was 50 minutes. The recorded interviews were transcribed by a third party and I reviewed the transcripts for accuracy, using the recordings. The live chat discussion transcript is a verbatim record of the 'conversation' given it occurred in real time.

#### **3.5.4 Interviewing ethical considerations.**

The research project was approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee as a low-risk ethical study, and is in line with the Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants (2010). Participants were provided with information sheets outlining the nature and purpose of the study. They were also advised of the research process in relation to the transcription and storage of the information gathered. Informed, voluntary consent was sought and recorded. The process undertaken adhered to the Massey Code principles of respect for persons; minimisation of harm to participants, researchers, institutions and groups; informed and voluntary consent; respect for privacy and confidentiality; the avoidance of unnecessary deception; the avoidance of conflict of interest; social and cultural sensitivity to the age, gender, culture, religion, social class of the participants; justice. The information sheet and consent form can be found in Appendix 3.

### 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has described the methods employed for this research. In doing so it has highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of content analysis and interviewing in research. Where limitations were discussed, the steps taken to mitigate these, including those related to sample timeframes, validity of coding categories, and interviewing at a distance, have been canvassed. Importantly, this chapter has identified why mixed methods were used for this study and the value of doing so, particularly with regard to communication and media research. The following two chapters will present the findings from both the content analysis undertaken using stories from *Stuff*, the *Timaru Herald* and the *ODT*, and the interviews conducted with the website editors.

## Chapter Four Content Analysis Results

This chapter presents the quantitative results from the content analysis conducted for this study, showing the online news choices made by both news providers and readers of the three websites studied. As described in Chapter Three, the content analysis involved the collection, coding by story position, and categorisation by story topic of news stories and geographic origin from three New Zealand-based websites, the *Otago Daily Times (ODT)*, the *Timaru Herald*, and *Stuff.co.nz*. (See Appendix 1 for the coding sheet and Chapter Three for definitions of story topics.) Two of these sites, the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald*, are regional providers, while *Stuff* is a national news provider.

The research questions forming the basis of the content analysis were:

RQ 1. What story topics appear in New Zealand newspaper online-news readers' most popular sections?

RQ 2. What story topics are selected as lead stories and as Editor's Picks by New Zealand on-line news providers?

RQ 3. What differences (if any) exist between regional newspapers online-news and national newspaper online-news?

The results are presented in six parts. First, an overview of the sample is presented to provide context. Second, the data that represent the website readers' news choices are canvassed, followed by a breakdown of the stories chosen by the news providers (lead stories, lead picture stories and editor selections). The fourth section compares the news selection of readers with those of providers. The fifth and sixth sections address

the lead stories that appeared in the readers' "most popular" area of the websites and the geographic origins of the samples. Finally, a summary of the findings is provided.

#### **4.1 Content Analysis Sample**

The content analysis phase of this study saw 3637 stories gathered from the homepages of three websites, the *Timaru Herald*, the *Otago Daily Times (ODT)*, and *Stuff*, over a period of 91 days, from May 1 to July 31, 2012. Stories were collected at midday each day. The three websites differed in design (see Chapter Three, Figure 1 and 2) with the *ODT* having a rolling rather than static lead picture, three lead stories on the top left of the page, and a top 10 most popular section that recorded readers' most viewed stories. Both Fairfax websites, the *Timaru Herald*, and *Stuff* feature a static lead picture on the top left of the homepage, five lead stories in the centre of the page, a "top 10" most popular section, which featured the most viewed stories, and an Editors' Picks section where stories are promoted to readers. These stories are generated in order of popularity based on reader hits, being the number of times they are accessed by readers. The top five of the 10 readers' most popular stories were selected to form the sample in order to gather a manageable number of stories. These differing formats mean that, as shown in Table 3, more stories were gathered from each of the Fairfax websites than from the *ODT*. Further, the total number of stories gathered from all the sites does not represent unique stories, because stories frequently appeared as both a lead story and as a readers' choice and therefore may have been included twice on any given day.

**Table 3*****Total Stories Analysed from the ODT, Timaru Herald and Stuff***

<b>Website</b>	<b>Lead picture stories</b>	<b>Lead stories</b>	<b>Editors' Pick stories</b>	<b>Reader pick stories</b>	<b>Total stories</b>
<b>Otago Daily Times</b>	n/a	273	n/a	455	728
<b>Stuff</b>	91	452	455	455	1453
<b>Timaru Herald</b>	91	455	455	455	1456
<b>Totals</b>	<b>182</b>	<b>1180</b>	<b>910</b>	<b>1365</b>	<b>3637</b>

**4.1.1 Otago Daily Times sample.**

A total of 728 stories were gathered from the *ODT* website. Of these, 273 were lead stories (of which there were three each day). The remaining 455 were the top five of the 10 readers' most popular on the site daily. The *ODT* website has neither a static lead picture story nor an Editors' Picks section hence, no data are represented here.

**4.1.2 Stuff sample.**

From *Stuff*, 1453 stories were gathered. The sample consisted of 452 lead stories, 91 lead picture stories, 455 Editors' Pick stories, and 455 readers' pick stories. As with the readers' most popular area, the top five of the Editors' Pick stories were captured, again, to ensure a manageable sample. A reduced number of lead stories featured on *Stuff* because of three days during the sample period where only four stories appeared in this section. This is attributed to three specific news events: the Waihi mine fire on July 17, 2012, the Olympic Games opening ceremony on July 28, 2012, and the All Blacks rugby test against Ireland on June 16, 2012. These three stories featured additional material, including larger images or links to video and audio that reduced the homepage space.

### **4.1.3 *Timaru Herald* sample.**

A total of 1456 stories were gathered from the *Timaru Herald* website. These consisted of 91 lead picture stories, one of which featured at the collection time each day, 455 lead stories, of which there were five each day, and 455 each of the Editors' Picks and readers' most popular, of which the consecutive top five from 10 were selected.

## **4.2 Story Topics**

The 3637 stories that formed the sample were coded by story type based on categories developed for this study. The categories were refined, following the collection of a test sample before the formal sample was gathered, to reflect the New Zealand news environment and, in particular, the nature of the news provision of the three websites studied (see Chapter Three, 3.3.6). For example, in the case of the *Timaru Herald* and *ODT*, the number of stories in the sample related to primary industries justified this category's inclusion. In relation to *Stuff*, a trivia quiz category was also added to capture the appearance of this interactive quiz in the readers' most popular findings. Table 4 presents the number of stories from the sample in terms of story topic and publication, while Figure 4 represents these graphically. The overall findings are now presented from the three sites, followed by the findings from each site individually, before these are discussed comparatively.

### **4.2.1 Story topics overall.**

Table 4 provides a breakdown of the story topics across all the websites. These are discussed in the following five sections. The largest category across the three websites was crime courts, justice and police at one fifth of the total sample (732 stories; 20.1%). The *ODT* carried 162 (22.3%) stories in this category, *Stuff* had 341 (23.5%), and the

*Timaru Herald* 229 (15.7%) stories. Human interest stories ranked second overall, at 12.9 percent or 468 stories. Sport ranked third, at 11.4 percent of the total stories gathered, although this amount was largely attributed to sport coverage from *Stuff* (13.4%; 195 stories) and the *Timaru Herald* (12.6%; 184). In fourth position overall was business finance and economy (8.6%; 311) and in fifth was disaster/accident stories (8.4%; 304). Local government stories ranked sixth (246 stories; 6.8%), with the majority of the coverage coming from the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* sites, and forming just 0.6 percent (eight stories) of the *Stuff* sample. Celebrity/entertainment stories ranked seventh, with 214 (5.9%) stories. Of these, 132 were on *Stuff*. Story topics that featured least in the sample were international politics (0.5%; 15), primary industries (0.4%; 15), and war and defence (0.4%; 15). The majority (13 stories) of primary industries stories were on the *Timaru Herald* site and were farming-related, while all the (15) war or defence-related stories featured on *Stuff*. Of the 23 story topic categories (described fully in Chapter 3), 14 featured fewer than 100 stories, forming 20.3 percent of the total stories captured.

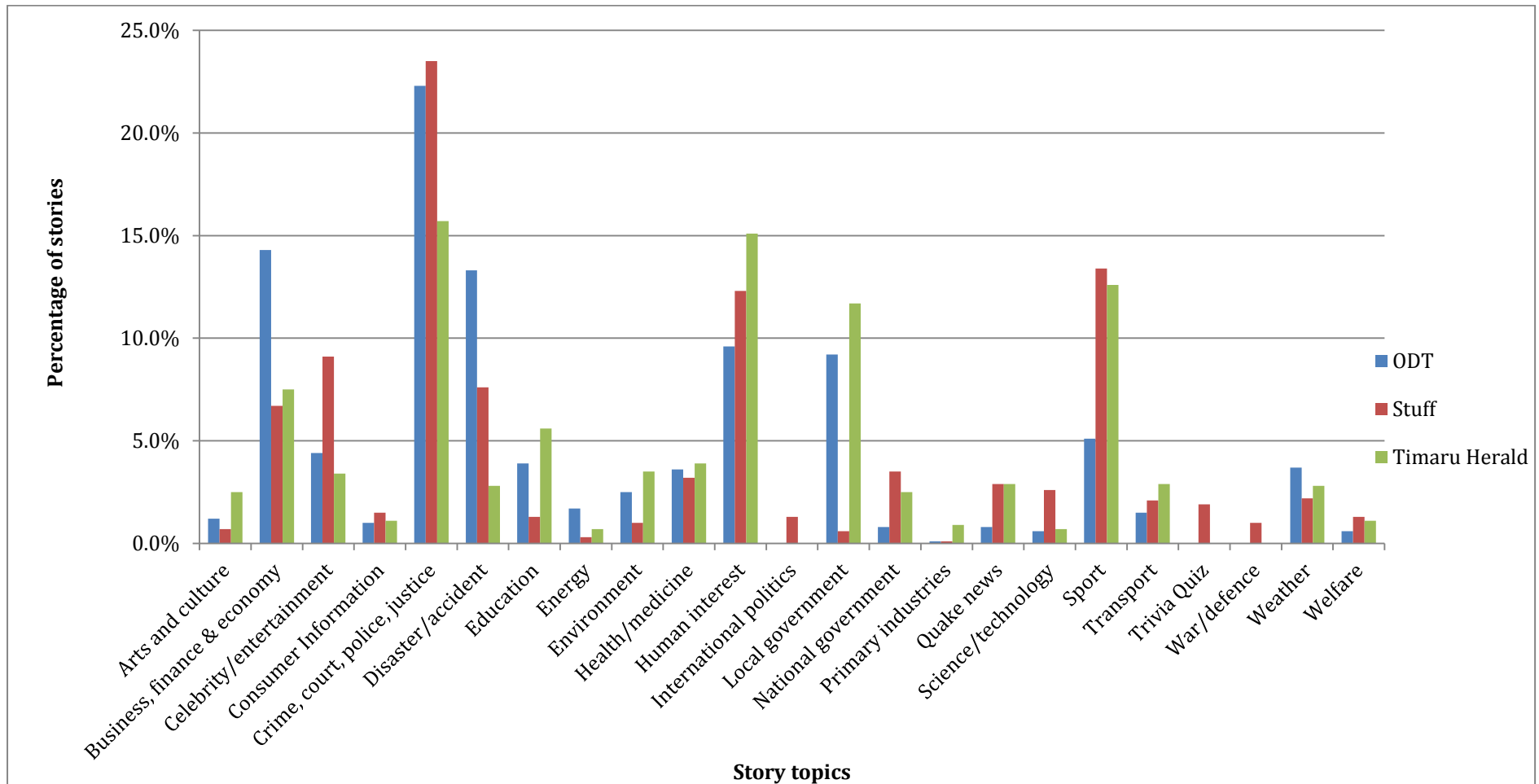


**Table 4*****Total Stories Gathered from the Otago Daily Times, Stuff and Timaru Herald by Story Topic***

<b>Story topics</b>	<b>All stories</b>		<b>ODT</b>		<b>Stuff</b>		<b>Timaru Herald</b>	
Crime, court, police, justice	732	20.1%	162	22.3%	341	23.5%	229	15.7%
Human interest	468	12.9%	70	9.6%	178	12.3%	220	15.1%
Sport	416	11.4%	37	5.1%	195	13.4%	184	12.6%
Business, finance & economy	311	8.6%	104	14.3%	98	6.7%	109	7.5%
Disaster/accident	304	8.4%	97	13.3%	111	7.6%	41	2.8%
Local government	246	6.8%	67	9.2%	8	0.6%	171	11.7%
Celebrity/entertainment	214	5.9%	32	4.4%	132	9.1%	50	3.4%
Education	129	3.5%	28	3.9%	19	1.3%	82	5.6%
Health/medicine	130	3.6%	26	3.6%	47	3.2%	57	3.9%
Weather	99	2.7%	27	3.7%	32	2.2%	40	2.8%
National government	93	2.3%	6	0.8%	51	3.5%	36	2.5%
Quake news	90	2.6%	6	0.8%	42	2.9%	42	2.9%
Environment	84	2.5%	18	2.5%	15	1.0%	51	3.5%
Transport	84	2.3%	11	1.5%	31	2.1%	42	2.9%
Arts and culture	56	1.5%	9	1.2%	10	0.7%	37	2.5%
Science/technology	51	1.4%	4	0.6%	37	2.6%	10	0.7%
Consumer Information	44	1.2%	7	1.0%	21	1.5%	16	1.1%
Welfare	39	1.1%	4	0.6%	19	1.3%	16	1.1%
Energy	26	0.7%	12	1.7%	4	0.3%	10	0.7%
Trivia Quiz	27	0.7%	0	0.00%	27	1.9%	0	0.0%
International politics	19	0.5%	0	0.00%	19	1.3%	0	0.0%
Primary industries	15	0.4%	1	0.1%	1	0.1%	13	0.9%
War/defence	15	0.4%	0	0.00%	15	1.0%	0	0.0%
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>3637</b>		<b>728</b>		<b>1453</b>		<b>1456</b>	

**Figure 4**

*Comparisons of Story Topics across the Otago Daily Times, Stuff, and Timaru Herald Websites*



#### **4.2.2 Otago Daily Times story topics.**

As shown in Table 4, crime, court, police and justice stories formed 22.3 percent of the *ODT* sample consisting of 162 stories. This was followed by business, finance and economy stories (14.3%; 104 stories). In third position were disaster/accident stories (13.3%; 97), fourth was human interest (9.6%; 70), and fifth was local government, with 67 stories (9.2%). Story topics that did not feature in the *ODT* sample were international politics and war and defence. Only one story about primary industries was captured. Science and technology and welfare stories featured four times each in the sample forming 0.6 percent each. National government and earthquake-related stories appeared six times each (0.8%) in the sample.

When comparing *ODT* results with the total or overall sample, crime-related news is seen in first position as it did for all sites. In second position in the overall findings was human interest, although this ranked fourth with the *ODT*. In addition, sport, which ranked third overall, was sixth, and business, finance and economy, which was fourth in the overall findings, was second with the *ODT*. Disaster/accident stories ranked third in *ODT* coverage yet fifth in the overall sample. Local government news was fifth with the *ODT*, but was sixth overall. National government news ranked 11<sup>th</sup> in the overall sample, yet came 16<sup>th</sup> position with the *ODT*, and energy stories were 12<sup>th</sup> compared with 19<sup>th</sup> overall. In summary, the story topics that appeared in the top 10 overall were the same as those appearing in the top 10 for the *ODT*, although they differed in order.

### **4.2.3 *Stuff* story topics.**

As with the *ODT* and overall sample, crime-related news ranked first in the *Stuff* sample at 23.5 percent (341 stories). Sport ranked in second position with 195 stories captured, forming 13.4 percent of the sample. Human interest was third (12.3%; 178), and celebrity entertainment fourth (9.1%; 132). In fifth place were disaster/accident stories (111; 7.6%). Unlike the other websites, all story topics featured in the *Stuff* sample, although that which featured least was primary industries with one story (0.1% of the *Stuff* sample). Energy stories featured four times, being 0.3 percent of the sample, and local government stories appeared eight times, being the third least-represented story topic (0.6%). In comparison with overall sample findings, local government differed: it ranked sixth overall, yet was in 17<sup>th</sup> position on *Stuff*. Celebrity and entertainment stories also ranked higher on *Stuff* than in the overall sample, being fourth as opposed to seventh, and education stories were 14<sup>th</sup> on *Stuff*, despite being eighth in the total findings. National government news did rank slightly higher on *Stuff*, in seventh position, compared with its overall ranking of 11<sup>th</sup>.

### **4.2.4 *Timaru Herald* story topics.**

Again, as shown in Table 4, the top three story topics with the *Timaru Herald* were the same as the overall sample crime (229 stories; 15.7%), human interest (220; 15.1%), and sport (184; 12.6%). This was the only website where the top three story topics were the same as the overall findings. Business and finance was fourth overall, yet ranked fifth with the *Timaru Herald*; where celebrity/entertainment news was fourth (171; 11.7%). Disaster and accident stories ranked 11<sup>th</sup> (41; 2.8%) in this sample despite being fifth in the overall sample. Story topics that did not feature on the *Timaru Herald* site were international politics and war and defence stories. Those that ranked

least in the sample were science and technology and energy (each with 10 stories; 0.7%) and primary industries (13; 0.9%). The majority of the primary industries stories from the total sample featured on the *Timaru Herald* website.

#### **4.2.5 Overall website comparison.**

The graph in Figure 4 compares story topic percentages across the three websites in the study. Compared with *Stuff*, the *Timaru Herald* and *ODT* had a stronger focus on local government news. There were 246 (6.8%) local government stories gathered in the total sample, of which 238 (96.8%) came from the regional news websites and only eight were carried on *Stuff*. Like *Stuff*, disaster and accident stories proved common in *ODT* coverage, being in fifth and third position respectively. This equated to 97 (13.3%) stories on the *ODT* and 111(7.6%) on *Stuff* compared to 41(2.8%) on the *Timaru Herald*. Human interest stories, which were the third most popular story topic with *Stuff* (178 stories; 12.3%), also ranked in the top five with the *ODT* (70; 9.6%) and with the *Timaru Herald* (220; 15.1%). Sport stories featured 195 times (13.4%) in the *Stuff* sample, ranking second most popular for the site, and were third with the *Timaru Herald* (184; 12.6%). However, sport was sixth, with 37 stories (5.1%) in the *ODT* sample. The disaster/accident category ranked fifth in the *Stuff* sample and third in the *ODT*, yet was 11<sup>th</sup> with the *Timaru Herald*. While business and finance stories ranked sixth in the *Stuff* sample, they were fourth in the overall findings. This can be attributed to the story topic's high-ranking with the *ODT*, where it was the second-ranking story topic (104; 14.3%), and fifth with the *Timaru Herald* (109; 7.5%). The celebrity and entertainment category ranked fourth in *Stuff* with 132 stories (9.1%) represented in the sample. Comparatively, the *ODT* had 32 (4.4%) celebrity and entertainment stories and the *Timaru Herald* had 50 (4.3%).

Story types that did not feature strongly in the whole sample included primary industries stories. I had included primary industries a category of importance based on the pre-testing of topic categories. However, primary industries as a topic appeared infrequently, only 0.4 percent of the total stories in the sample: only one story featured on *Stuff*, one on the *ODT*, and 13 on the *Timaru Herald* site. International politics and war/defence stories did not feature at all on the homepages of either the *ODT* or the *Timaru Herald*. However, 19 international politics stories and 15 war/defence stories did feature in the *Stuff* sample. Four of the international political stories were American, and 10 were from Europe and the United Kingdom. The war and defence stories were mainly Afghanistan-related and 10 were of international origin. The following section will address the findings in relation to the stories selected by readers of the three websites.

### **4.3 Readers' Most Popular Story Topics**

The online news environment provides readers with greater power to set their own news agenda by accessing only the story topics that interest them. This was a core focus of the study, as research suggests readers may choose to avoid political or public affairs-orientated material when making their selections of what to read online (Tewksbury 2003, 2006). This avoidance of serious or issues news is deemed to restrict online readers' ability to make informed political decisions and engage effectively in democracy (Althaus & Tewksbury 2002; d'Haenens et al. 2004; Iyengar & Hahn 2011; Prior 2005; Tewksbury 2003; van Heekeren 2005). The most popular stories for this study were gathered from the websites' section that ranks the top 10 stories readers have accessed. The results are presented in Table 5 and Figure 5. The readers' most popular area updates continuously as the number of times a story is accessed increases

its ranking. Of the top 10 ranked on all websites, the first five were captured daily at midday during the 91 days sampled. This meant that from each website, 455 stories were collected. The total number of most popular stories gathered was 1365.

This section presents the overall findings from the readers' most popular sections addressing Research Question One: What story topics appear in New Zealand newspaper online-news readers' most popular sections? Second, it will compare the findings from each individual website in order to address Research Question Three: What differences (if any) exist between regional newspapers online-news (i.e. the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald*) and national newspaper online-news?

#### **4.3.1 Story topic choices of readers' overall.**

The combined findings from the three sites, shown in Table 5 and Figure 5, indicate the most popular topic was crime, courts, police and justice with 292 stories from the total 1365 (21.4%). Human interest ranked second most popular overall with 192 stories, or 14 percent of the stories captured. Readers also indicated a preference for business, finance, and economy-related news, which formed 9.4 percent (128 stories) of the total reader sample. Sport ranked fifth equal with disaster/accident, each with 106 stories (7.8%). Local government featured in sixth position, largely on the back of the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* choices, which consisted of 99 (96.1%) of the 103 stories gathered in this category.

The remaining 17 story topic categories featured less than 100 stories each, equating to 427 stories, or 31.3 percent. Celebrity and entertainment had the highest number of stories with 89 (6.5%). Appearing least were arts and culture (8; 0.6%), war and defence (3; 0.2%), and primary industries (6; 0.4%). Included were 27 *Stuff* trivia

quizzes that formed 1.8 per cent of the sample. While not a news story as such, this category was added to reflect the occurrence of these in the readers' most popular area of the websites (see Chapter Three, 3.3.6). The only story topic not to feature in the overall readers' most popular findings was international politics.

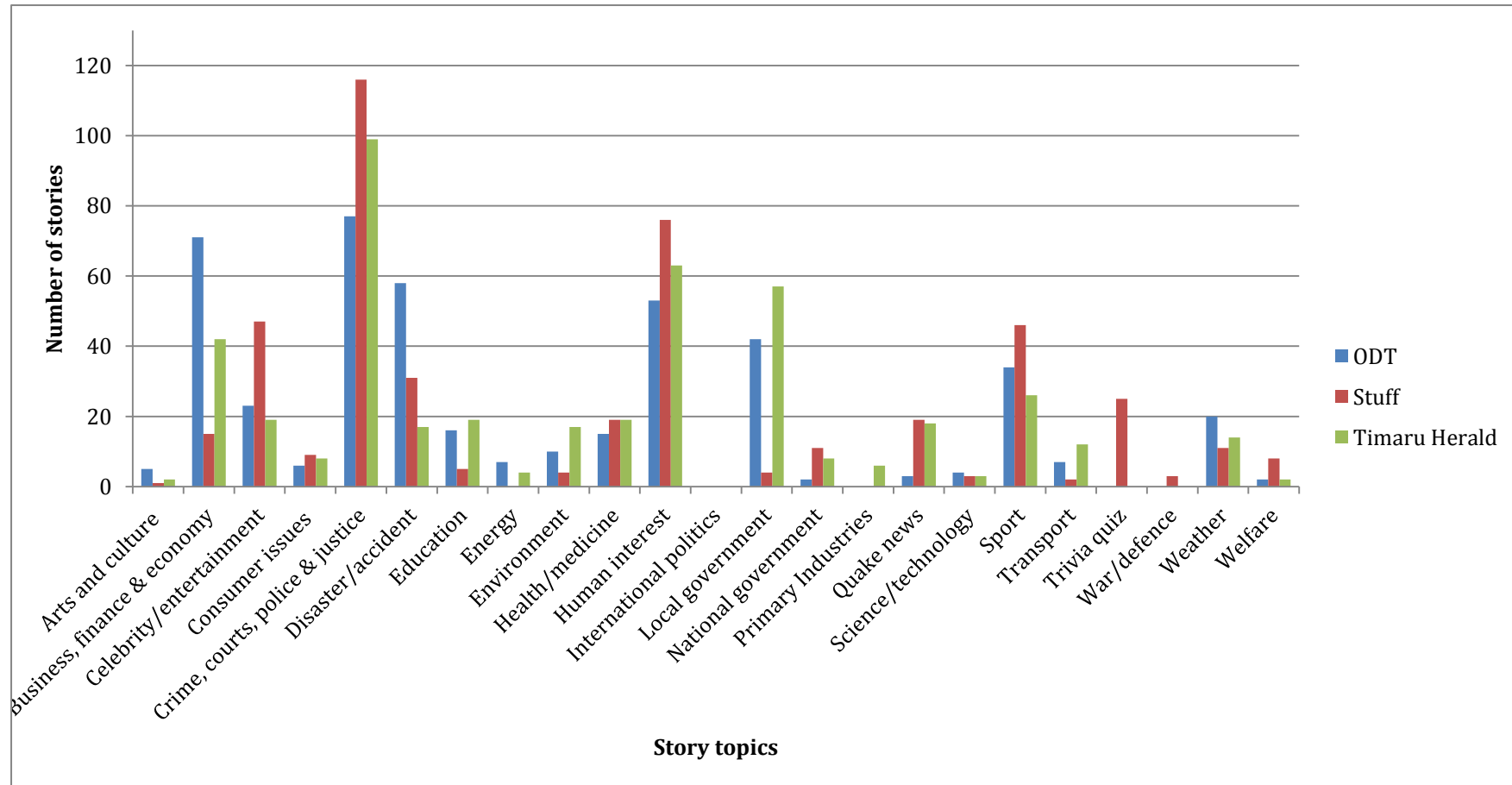


**Table 5*****Readers' Most Popular from the Otago Daily Times, Stuff, and Timaru Herald Websites***

<b>Story Topics</b>	<b>Total Stories</b>		<b>ODT</b>		<b>Stuff</b>		<b>Timaru Herald</b>	
Crime, courts, police & justice	292	21.4%	77	16.9%	116	25.4%	99	21.8%
Human interest	192	14.1%	53	11.6%	76	16.7%	63	13.8%
Business, finance & economy	128	9.4%	71	15.6%	15	3.3%	42	9.2%
Sport	106	7.8%	34	7.5%	46	10.1%	26	5.7%
Disaster/accident	106	7.8%	58	12.7%	31	6.8%	17	3.7%
Local government	103	7.5%	42	9.2%	4	0.9%	57	12.5%
Celebrity/entertainment	89	6.5%	23	5.1%	47	10.3%	19	4.2%
Health/medicine	53	3.9%	15	3.3%	19	4.2%	19	4.2%
Weather	45	3.3%	20	4.4%	11	2.4%	14	3.1%
Quake news	40	2.9%	3	0.7%	19	4.2%	18	4.0%
Education	40	2.9%	16	3.5%	5	1.1%	19	4.2%
Environment	31	2.3%	10	2.2%	4	0.9%	17	3.7%
Trivia quiz	25	1.8%		n/a	25	5.5%	n/a	
Consumer issues	23	1.7%	6	1.3%	9	2.0%	8	1.8%
National government	21	1.5%	2	0.4%	11	2.4%	8	1.8%
Transport	21	1.5%	7	1.5%	2	0.4%	12	2.6%
Welfare	12	0.9%	2	0.4%	8	1.8%	2	0.4%
Energy	11	0.8%	7	1.5%	0	0.0%	4	0.9%
Science/technology	10	0.7%	4	0.9%	3	0.7%	3	0.7%
Primary Industries	6	0.4%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	6	1.3%
War/defence	3	0.2%	0	0.0%	3	0.7%	0	0.0%
Arts and culture	8	0.6%	5	1.1%	1	0.2%	2	0.4%
International politics	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>1365</b>		<b>455</b>		<b>455</b>		<b>455</b>	

**Figure 5**

***Readers Most Popular by Story Topic from the Otago Daily Times, Stuff, and Timaru Herald Websites***



#### **4.3.2 Story topic choices of *Otago Daily Times* readers.**

As in the overall popularity sample, crime, courts, police and justice news ranked first with *ODT* readers, with 77 stories forming 16.9 percent of the site's sample. This was followed by business, finance and economy (71; 15.6%), disaster/accident (58; 12.7%), human interest (53; 11.6%), and local government (42; 9.2%). Topics that did not feature in the *ODT* readers' choice sample were international politics, war/defence, and primary industries. Least featured were national government and welfare (2; 0.4% each), science and technology (4; 0.9%), and arts and culture (5; 1.1%). This at least partly reflects the news provision discussed in the next section as few of these stories were provided on the website for readers to select.

#### **4.3.3 Story topic choices of *Stuff* readers'.**

As with the overall sample and the *ODT*, crime ranked first with *Stuff* readers. Crime formed 25.4 percent of the site's sample (116 stories) and so was more popular than with *ODT* readers. Human interest was second (76; 16.7%) and celebrity entertainment third (47; 10.3%). The three most popular categories formed 52.4 percent of the site sample, with 239 of the 455 stories featured. Fourth was sport (46; 10.1%), and in fifth place disaster/accident stories (31; 6.8%). Topics that did not feature in the *Stuff* readers' choice sample were international politics, primary industries, and energy. Least featured were arts and culture (1; 0.2%), transport (2; 0.4%), science and technology, and war/defence (3 each; 0.7%), environment and local government (4 each; 0.9%). The *Stuff* trivia quiz featured 25 times in the reader most popular area (5.5% of the sample) and ranked sixth most popular with readers in the site sample.

#### **4.3.4 Story topic choices of *Timaru Herald* readers’.**

Again (as with *Stuff* and the overall results), crime, courts police and justice, and human interest ranked first and second most popular story topics with readers of the *Timaru Herald* website. Crime stories appeared 99 times in the reader sample (21.8%). Human interest stories were captured 63 times (13.8%). Local government ranked third with *Timaru Herald* readers (57: 12.5%), business, finance and economy was fourth (42; 9.2%) and sport fifth (26; 5.7%). Three topics featured in sixth position with 19 stories each (4.2%): education, celebrity/entertainment, and health and medicine. The topics of international politics and war/defence did not feature in the readers’ choice sample, and least featured were arts and culture, and welfare (2 each; 0.4%), science and technology (3; 0.7%), and energy (4; 0.9%), as was seen in the *ODT* and *Stuff* findings.

#### **4.3.5 Story topic choices of readers’ most popular by comparison across the *ODT*, *Timaru Herald* and *Stuff*.**

Comparing the findings across the sites highlighted five areas of website coverage worthy of note: coverage of crime-related stories, local government, national government, disaster and accident news, celebrity and entertainment coverage, and those story topics that did not rank highly in the findings. Crime-related coverage was most popular with readers of all three sites, with an average of 3.2 crime-related stories (of a potential 15 choice) each day during the sample period. Crime was highest with *Stuff* at 25.4 percent of the site reader sample, 16.9 percent of *ODT* readers’ choices, and 21.8 percent of *Timaru Herald* reader sample. It is worth noting that the majority of these stories focused on crime and courts as opposed to stories relating specifically to

justice or police issues. After this, variation was seen between the regional websites and the national news site in terms of reader preference.

An example of this was local government news. The story topic ranked highly among readers of both the *Timaru Herald* (57 stories; 12.5%) and the *ODT* (42 stories; 9.2%). However, only four stories (0.9%) are represented in this category on *Stuff*. The stories about local government that appeared in *Stuff* reader selections were not related to core local government activities such as meeting coverage (which featured in the other two sites), rather they dealt with high profile individual or collective disputes with individual councils. The stories carried on *Stuff* concerned a Mongrel Mob gang dispute with the Porirua City Council over the wearing of gang insignias in the city, another two covered an Auckland City Council debtor, and the fourth a Wellington builder's dispute with the council over parking restrictions. A significant news event that dominated the *ODT* local government coverage and reader choices during the sample period was the debt incurred by the city council from building the new sports stadium.

The popularity of local government coverage in the regions did not extend to an interest in the activities of national government. Two national political stories, both relating to government intentions to sell off assets, were in the top five selections of readers of the *ODT* (0.4%). Eight stories (1.8%) were selected by *Timaru Herald* readers, four of which concerned asset sales, while two were satirical pieces about politicians. The remaining two concerned a politician's reaction to an alleged oil spill in Timaru. *Stuff's* national audience did not exhibit a strong interest in national government as a news topic either, with eleven (2.4%) stories featuring in the sample – none of which related to national asset sales rather the focus was on the activities of politicians.

Disaster and accident-related stories were fifth overall, but were the third most popular story choice with *ODT* readers. Of the 58 accident and disaster stories (12.7%) featured in the *ODT* reader sample, 31 (53.4%) related to vehicle accidents. Similarly, disaster and accident stories ranked fifth with *Stuff* readers (31 stories, 6.8%), 18 of which (58.1%) related to vehicle incidents. Disasters and accidents shared eighth place (with environment) with the *Timaru Herald* audience, with 17 stories (3.7%); of these, nine (52.9%) related to vehicle incidents. The number of stories that related to vehicle crashes, fatal or otherwise, indicates readers had a strong interest in this particular news type at both a national and regional level.

*Stuff* readers exhibited a stronger preference for celebrity and entertainment stories compared with their regional counterparts. This topic ranked seventh overall, yet was the third most popular choice on *Stuff* with 47 (10.3%) stories; of these, 30 (63.8%) related to international celebrity activities and events. For example, 14 stories specifically concerned the relationship status of American celebrities such as the marriage breakup of actors Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes (six stories).

Celebrity/entertainment ranked sixth (19 stories, 4.2%) with *Timaru Herald* readers, but none of these stories concerned international celebrities, instead focusing on local activities such as talent quests. Twenty-three stories (5.1%) from this category were ranked in the top five readers' most popular on the *ODT* site during the sample period, placing this story topic in seventh position.

Finally, several story topics did not feature strongly in the sample. Arts and culture-related stories ranked fourteenth with *ODT* readers (five stories, 0.01%), fifteenth (2, 0.4%) with *Timaru Herald* readers, and sixteenth (1; 0.2%) with *Stuff* readers. Overall,

this story topic formed 0.58 percent of the total reader story sample. As mentioned, international politics did not feature in the readers' most popular sample at all. Primary industries stories only appeared in the *Timaru Herald* sample with six stories (1.3%), four of which related to local dairying activities. Aside from those already mentioned, story topics that ranked the lowest in popularity were science and technology with 10 stories overall, or 0.7 percent of the total sample, energy with 11 stories (0.8%), and welfare with 12 stories in total (0.9%). *Stuff* was the only website that had any war or defence stories feature as readers' choices. Three stories appeared here and all were international in origin and related to the same event, an American nurse killed while speaking to his wife via Skype in May 2012. Interestingly, while environment stories were in equal eighth position with disaster/accident stories for *Timaru Herald* readers (17 stories, 3.7 %), these only made up 0.9 percent (four stories) of the *Stuff* reader selections, and 2.2 percent (10 stories) of *ODT* readers' most popular. Again, it should be noted here these story topics were also not well reflected in the news provision samples from either websites that are discussed in the next section.

#### **4.4 Story Topic Selections of News Providers'**

This section looks specifically at the news topics selected for publication by the news providers and addresses Research Question Two: What story topics are selected as lead stories and as Editors' Picks by New Zealand on-line news providers? The stories that formed the news provision sample were the daily lead stories on each site's homepage; the lead picture story on *Stuff* and the *Timaru Herald* (the *ODT* does not have a static lead picture); and the stories in the Editors' Picks section of the *Timaru Herald* and *Stuff* (the *ODT* does not have this section on its website). The findings about story topic are

presented and discussed in sections (lead stories, lead picture stories, and Editors' Picks) before a summary is provided.

#### **4.4.1 Topics of lead stories.**

The stories selected as the leads for a website, newspaper or television broadcast are those the news provider sees as most important or of the strongest news value on any given news day. As explained in Chapter Three and depicted in Figures 1 and 2, these stories feature in the centre middle of *Stuff* and the *Timaru Herald* sites and on the left of the *ODT* homepage with large headlines drawing them to the reader's attention and signifying these as key news events. Therefore, these were chosen for this study as an indicator of the websites' news provision to readers.

A total of 1180 lead stories were captured from the three sites during the sample period (see Figure 6 and Table 6). Of these, 452 were gathered from *Stuff*, 455 from the *Timaru Herald*, and 273 from the *ODT* site. As mentioned earlier (Section 4.1), the difference in number is because the *ODT* has only three daily leads and, while *Stuff* and the *Timaru Herald* usually have five, on three days during the collection period *Stuff* altered the homepage layout thereby reducing the number of leads from five to four.

#### **4.4.2 Topics of lead stories overall.**

In terms of the lead story sample, crime-related news was the biggest across all sites, with 336 stories (28.5% of the sample). Business, finance and economy was second (124 stories; 10.5%), disaster/accident (113; 9.6%) third, local government fourth (106; 9.0%), and human interest fifth (104; 8.8%). The findings in relation to the most popular lead story topics were similar to the overall sample findings in that four of the



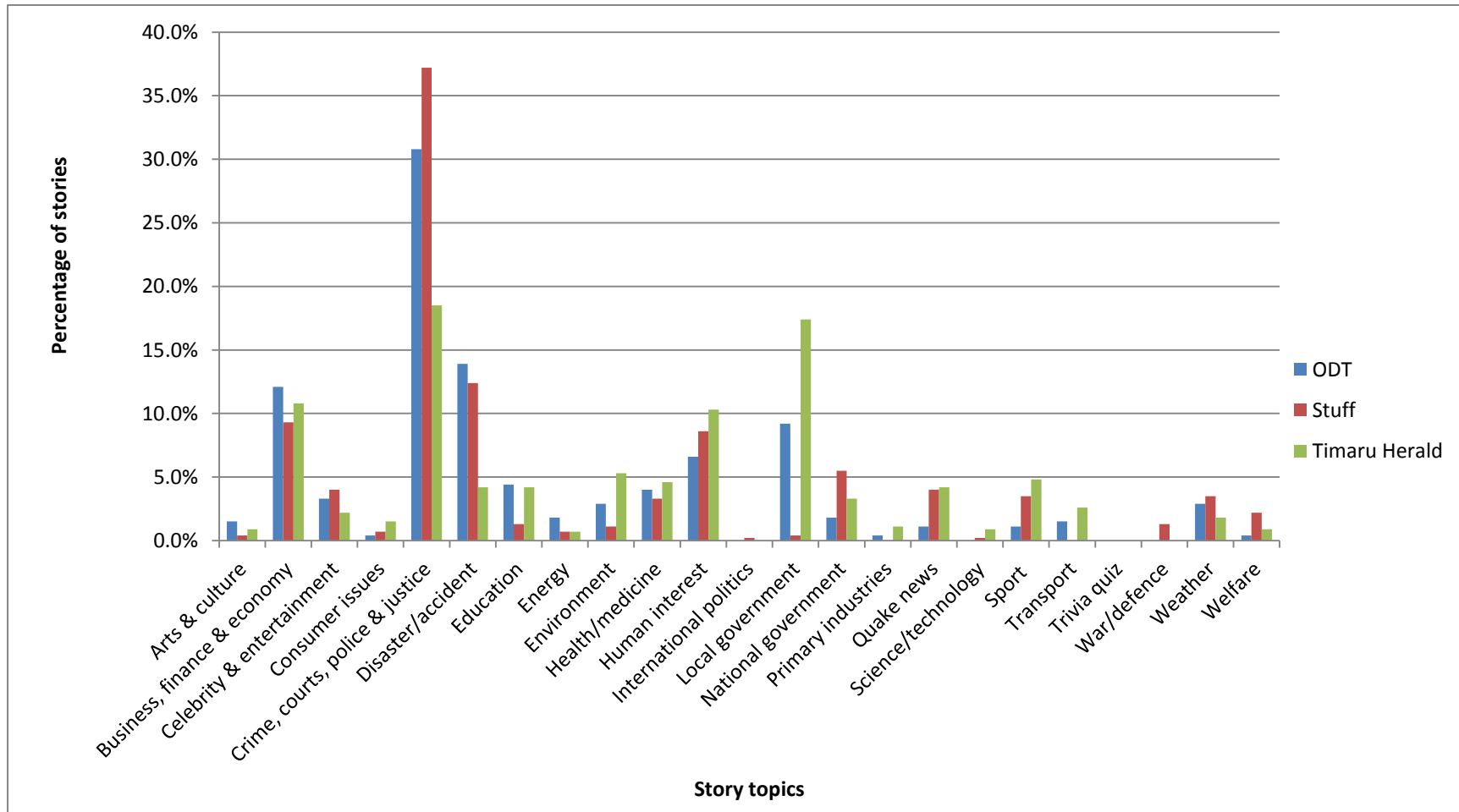
top five story topics also ranked in the top five of the overall sample. The exception was sport, which ranked third in the overall sample yet was ranked 12<sup>th</sup> in the lead story sample. The least-featured lead story topics were international politics (1; 0.1%), science and technology (5; 0.4%), primary industries (6; 0.5%), war and defence (6; 0.5%), and arts and culture (10; 0.8%). While the *ODT* carried only one primary industries story during the sample period, it was in a lead position. All story topics featured as leads in the overall sample, with the exception of the Trivia Quiz category, which, as discussed earlier, was included to monitor the occurrence of this interactive element of the *Stuff* site in the reader pick area of the site.

**Table 6*****Lead Story Comparison from the Otago Daily Times, Stuff, and Timaru Herald by Story Topic***

<b>Story Topics</b>	<b>All stories</b>		<b>ODT</b>		<b>Stuff</b>		<b>Timaru Herald</b>	
Crime, courts, police & justice	336	28.5%	84	30.8%	168	37.2%	84	18.5%
Business, finance & economy	124	10.5%	33	12.1%	42	9.3%	49	10.8%
Disaster/accident	113	9.6%	38	13.9%	56	12.4%	19	4.2%
Local government	106	9.0%	25	9.2%	2	0.4%	79	17.4%
Human interest	104	8.8%	18	6.6%	39	8.6%	47	10.3%
Health/medicine	47	4.0%	11	4.0%	15	3.3%	21	4.6%
National government	45	3.8%	5	1.8%	25	5.5%	15	3.3%
Quake news	40	3.4%	3	1.1%	18	4.0%	19	4.2%
Education	37	3.1%	12	4.4%	6	1.3%	19	4.2%
Environment	37	3.1%	8	2.9%	5	1.1%	24	5.3%
Celebrity & entertainment	37	3.1%	9	3.3%	18	4.0%	10	2.2%
Sport	41	3.5%	3	1.1%	16	3.5%	22	4.8%
Weather	32	2.7%	8	2.9%	16	3.5%	8	1.8%
Transport	16	1.4%	4	1.5%	0	0.0%	12	2.6%
Welfare	15	1.3%	1	0.4%	10	2.2%	4	0.9%
Energy	11	0.9%	5	1.8%	3	0.7%	3	0.7%
Consumer issues	11	0.9%	1	0.4%	3	0.7%	7	1.5%
Arts & culture	10	0.8%	4	1.5%	2	0.4%	4	0.9%
War/defence	6	0.5%	0	0.0%	6	1.3%	0	0.0%
Primary industries	6	0.5%	1	0.4%	0	0.0%	5	1.1%
Science/technology	5	0.4%	0	0.0%	1	0.2%	4	0.9%
International politics	1	0.1%	0	0.0%	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Trivia quiz	0	0.0%	n/a	0.0%	0	0.0%	n/a	0.0%
<b>Total Stories</b>	<b>1180</b>		<b>273</b>		<b>452</b>		<b>455</b>	

**Figure 6**

**Lead Story Choices by Story Topic from the Otago Daily Times, Stuff, and Timaru Herald**



#### **4.4.3 *Otago Daily Times* lead story topics.**

Table 6 also shows crime-related news was the dominant lead story selection on the *ODT* website, forming nearly a third of the site's leads (84 stories; 30.8%). In second position were disaster/accident stories (38; 13.9%), and in third, business, finance and economy (33; 12.1%). Fourth was local government (25; 9.2%), and fifth, human interest (18; 6.6%). The top three lead story topics formed 56.8 percent of the *ODT* sample, with the remaining 20 categories comprising the rest. Story topics that did not feature at all in the *ODT* sample of leads were international politics, science and technology, and war and defence. Topics where only one story featured across the 91-day sample period were primary industries, consumer issues, and welfare, equating to 1.2 percent of the sample altogether.

#### **4.4.4 *Stuff* lead story topics.**

The top three lead story topics on *Stuff* were crime (168 stories; 37.2%), business, finance and economy (56; 12.4%), and disaster/accident stories (42; 9.3%). These were the same as for the *ODT*. Again, these formed more than 50 percent of the websites sample (58.9%). In fourth position was human interest, with 39 stories (8.6%), and in fifth, national government news (25; 5.5%). The story topics that did not feature as lead stories were primary industries and transport. The lowest-ranking story topics that did feature were science and technology and international politics; each featured as lead topics once (0.2% each). Local government and arts and culture featured twice each (0.4% each).

#### **4.4.5 *Timaru Herald* lead story topics.**

Crime, courts, police and justice was the most common lead story choice on the *Timaru Herald* during the sample period. The topic formed 18.5 percent of the sample (84 stories). Local government closely followed at 17.4 (79) percent, while business, finance and economy was third (10.8%; 49). The top three lead story topics formed 46.5 percent of the *Timaru Herald* sample, as shown in Table 6. In fourth position was human interest (10.3%; 47), and in fifth environment (5.3%; 24). International politics and war and defence did not feature as lead story topics. The least featured topic was energy, which featured three times (0.7%), with all stories related to the Mackenzie District hydro-lake levels. Welfare, and science and technology featured four times each (0.9%). Quake news, education, and disaster and accident stories were in equal eighth position with 19 stories each (4.2%).

#### **4.4.6 Comparison of lead story topics.**

Similarities and differences between the lead story topic provisions of the three websites are depicted in Figure 6. A variation is also evident between the lead story choices of the regional websites as opposed to *Stuff*. In terms of similarities, *Stuff* and the *ODT* shared the same top three ranking lead story types, crime, courts, police and justice, disaster and accident, and business, finance and economy. While the *Timaru Herald* findings also saw business and crime in the top three, local government ranked second, with disaster and accident stories ranking seventh. Business, finance and economy stories ranked third across all sites at 12.1 percent of *ODT* leads, 9.3 percent of *Stuff's*, and 10.8 percent of the *Timaru Herald*. On *Stuff*, there were 168 (37.3%) crime-related stories in the lead position and on the *Timaru Herald*, 84 (18.5%). The findings show that for *Stuff* and the *ODT* crime news was the most popular lead choice, with the

nearest story topic being disaster and accident stories for both websites, ranking second at 56 stories (12.4%) on *Stuff*, and second with 38 stories (13.9%) on the *ODT* homepage. Comparatively, coverage in terms of lead stories was evenly spread on the *Timaru Herald* website because, while crime was a strong lead choice, other story types followed closely. For example, crime was followed by local government (79 stories; 17.4%).

In relation to variations in the news provision findings, Figure 6 and Table 6 depict this as most obvious for local government news, where both the *Timaru Herald* and the *ODT* focused strongly on local government in lead coverage. Local government came in fourth position for the *ODT* (9.2%), and second for the *Timaru Herald* (17.4%), yet only two stories (0.4%) of a local government nature appeared on *Stuff* during the 91-day sample period. Of the two local government lead stories on *Stuff* one was an Auckland Council report on road conditions following a cyclist's death and the second a report on Wellington's bureaucracy. Transport stories featured 12 times (2.6%) on the *Herald* website as a lead, yet none appeared on *Stuff* and only four (1.5%) in the *ODT* sample. *Stuff* also had more national government stories in the lead position (25; 5.5%) compared with the *ODT* (5; 1.8%) and the *Timaru Herald* (15; 3.3%). *Stuff* carried five stories (1.1%) related to the environment, with this topic ranking tenth, the *ODT* carried eight stories (2.9%), ranking ninth, yet the *Timaru Herald* featured 24 stories (5.3%), with this topic ranking fifth in the site's sample. Sport featured as a lead 16 times on *Stuff* (3.5%) and 22 times on the *Timaru Herald* (4.8%), yet only three sports stories (1.1%) made the lead position on the *ODT*. Of these sport stories on the *ODT* two were rugby-related and the third on Otago Olympic athletes. Stories relating to welfare issues

featured 10 times on *Stuff* (2.2%), but only one (0.4%) appeared on the *ODT* and four (0.9%) on the *Herald* website.

Lead story topics that rarely appeared on the sites were similar across all three websites, for example, *Stuff* carried one (0.2%) story related to international politics, about the Spanish Government financial bailout on June 11, 2012, the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* none. While primary industries stories did not feature as a lead for *Stuff*, the *ODT* had one story (0.4%), on Fonterra payout cuts, and the *Timaru Herald*, five (1.1%). Four (0.9%) science and technology-related stories were collected in the *Timaru Herald* lead sample, none on the *ODT* and one on *Stuff* (0.2%), which looked at a study of the benefits of the internet to society. *Stuff* featured six (1.3%) war/defence-related stories in lead position; the other two sites had none. However, quake news, which featured three times (1.1%) as an *ODT* lead, featured 18 times on *Stuff* (4.0%) and 19 (4.2%) on the *Timaru Herald*.

Similarities and differences are noted in these findings and are now summarised.

The core differences between the websites in the lead story findings include the strength of local government news in the regions. The strength of environment news in the *Timaru Herald* sample is also noteworthy, given such news did not perform well on either the *ODT* or *Stuff*. It could be well linked to location, given South Canterbury's reputation for outdoor recreation. The fact sport barely featured as a lead on the *ODT* is also interesting, given that, while it was not a strong lead story on any site, it did feature more often on the Fairfax-owned websites. Overall, the *ODT* carried less sport coverage than the Fairfax sites on its homepage. All sites shared crime-related news as a dominant story topic. Business and finance were also popular story types, although it is

noted the angle of the stories taken differed between the regional and national websites. Disaster and accident news stories were more popular with the *ODT* and *Stuff*; this is perhaps reflective of the larger geographic coverage area of the sites. Human interest stories ranked at a similar position across the three sites. The next section will address the findings in relation to lead picture stories on *Stuff* and the *Timaru Herald*.

#### **4.4.7 Topics of lead picture stories on the *Timaru Herald* and *Stuff*.**

Visualness, the use of images in news, is a core news value of the modern era (McGregor, 2002), because strong images provide context to words and enhance the news value of an event or issue. Further, images attract audience attention. Images feature on the *Timaru Herald* and *Stuff* website to the left of the lead stories and occupy the same space allocation as the lead story list (as shown in Chapter Three, Figure 1). The size and placement of the image is designed to attract readers. A total of 182 lead pictures formed the sample, one from each site, each day. Hence 91 lead picture stories were gathered from each of the *Timaru Herald* and *Stuff* websites. Data about the topics of these visuals are presented in Table 7 and Figure 7.

#### **4.4.8 Topics of lead picture story overall.**

Human interest formed 23.1 percent of the lead picture story sample, making this the first ranked topic across the three websites. It was followed by celebrity and entertainment (34; 18.7%), crime, courts, police and justice (18; 9.9%), sports (19; 10.4%), and transport (8; 4.4%). The top five ranking picture story topics formed 66.5 percent of the lead picture sample; 103 of the 182 stories captured. The remaining 79 stories came from 15 story topic categories with only three not represented in the sample: energy, war/defence, and welfare. Least represented was consumer issues,



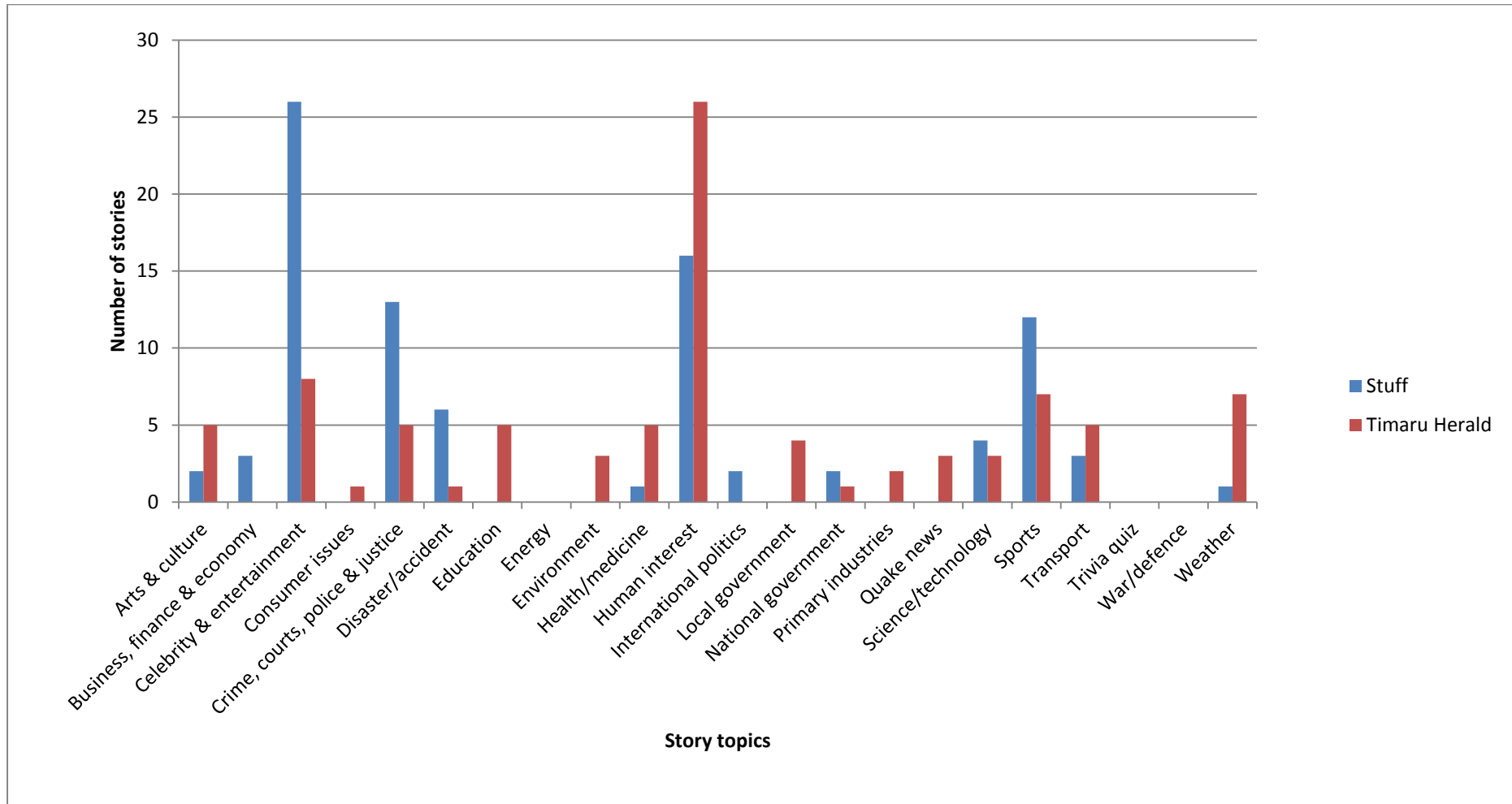
which was a lead picture story topic on only one (0.5%) occasion. Primary industries and international politics appeared just twice each (1.1%).

**Table 7*****Lead Picture Story Comparison from the Stuff and Timaru Herald Websites by Story Topic***

<b>Story Topics</b>	<b>Total Stories</b>		<b>Stuff</b>		<b>Timaru Herald</b>	
Human interest	42	23.1%	16	17.6%	26	28.6%
Celebrity & entertainment	34	18.7%	26	28.6%	8	8.8%
Crime, courts, police & justice	18	9.9%	13	14.3%	5	5.5%
Sports	19	10.4%	12	13.2%	7	7.7%
Transport	8	4.4%	3	3.3%	5	5.5%
Weather	8	4.4%	1	1.1%	7	0.0%
Arts & culture	7	3.8%	2	2.2%	5	5.5%
Disaster/accident	7	3.8%	6	6.6%	1	1.1%
Science/technology	7	3.8%	4	4.4%	3	3.3%
Health/medicine	6	3.3%	1	1.1%	5	5.5%
Education	5	2.7%	0	0.0%	5	5.5%
Local Government	4	2.2%	0	0.0%	4	4.4%
Environment	3	1.6%	0	0.0%	3	3.3%
Business, finance & economy	3	1.6%	3	3.3%	0	0.0%
Quake news	3	1.6%	0	0.0%	3	3.3%
National Government	3	1.6%	2	2.2%	1	1.1%
International politics	2	1.1%	2	2.2%	0	0.0%
Primary Industries	2	1.1%	0	0.0%	2	2.2%
Consumer Issues	1	0.5%	0	0.0%	1	1.1%
Energy	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Trivia quiz	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
War/defence	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Welfare	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
<b>Total Stories</b>	<b>182</b>		<b>91</b>		<b>91</b>	

**Figure 7**

***Comparison of Lead Picture Stories by Topic from the Timaru Herald and Stuff Website***



#### **4.4.9 Topics of *Stuff* lead picture stories.**

Celebrity and entertainment stories were the single biggest category in the lead picture position on *Stuff* (26 stories), forming 28.6 percent of the sample. This topic was followed by human interest (16; 17.6%), crime, courts, police and justice (13; 14.3%), sports (12; 13.2%), and disaster or accident stories (6; 6.6%). These topics made up 80 percent of the lead pictures story topics. Of the 22 story topics, 13 featured as lead picture stories on *Stuff*. No lead picture stories appeared relating to welfare, war/defence, energy, consumer issues, primary industries, quake news, environment, local government or education. Only one story (1.1%) appeared for each of health/medicine, and weather. International politics and national government stories appeared twice each (2.2%), and transport and business and finance appeared three times, each being 3.3 percent each of the *Stuff* sample.

#### **4.4.10 Topics of *Timaru Herald* lead picture stories.**

The top three lead picture topics on the *Timaru Herald* website were human interest (26; 28.6%), celebrity and entertainment (8; 8.8%), and sports and weather (7 each; 7.7%). In fourth equal position were crime-related stories, transport, arts and culture, health/medicine, and education, each of which had five stories (5.5%). The lead picture story topics were more widely spread than those on *Stuff*, in that of the 22 story topics, only five did not feature in the sample: welfare, war/defence, energy, international politics and business, finance and economy. Those that featured once were consumer issues, national government, and disaster accident (1.1%).

#### 4.4.11 Topics of lead picture stories comparison.

Figure 7 shows celebrity and entertainment-related images and associated stories were popular with *Stuff* (26; 28.6%). On the *Timaru Herald*, there were only eight (8.8%). Stories in this category varied on *Stuff* from a performing bear being killed overseas to a story querying who the best looking Olympian was, two stories about the Royal family, and four about the marriage break up of Katie Holmes and Tom Cruise and scientology. Comparatively, the celebrity entertainment stories on the *Timaru Herald* were all concerned with local celebrities or events such as the brass band national championships in Timaru, local people competing for selection on television show *X Factor*, and local musicians achieving accolades. These stories are differentiated from human interest because they involved celebrities, or were in the context of entertainment fields. Human interest stories focused on ordinary persons or activities, pets or animals, which were not entertainment related. Human interest stories (26; 28.6%) were the most popular lead picture selection for the *Timaru Herald* site and the second most popular lead picture selection for *Stuff*, with 16 stories (17.6%), as depicted in Figure 7. The *Stuff* stories included five lifestyle pieces, including one on how to become the life of the party and a look at the top 10 worst Mother's Day gifts. The *Timaru Herald* human interest lead picture stories varied from local students making their own ball gowns to a story about a ladder with a local history to four stories that included video as part of a campaign against suicide.

Lead picture stories on *Stuff* were featured from only 13 of the 22 topic categories used for this sample, by comparison, 17 of the 22 topic categories featured as lead picture stories on the *Timaru Herald* homepage, thereby providing a greater spread of topic choices in this category. Story topic categories that did not feature on either site were

welfare, war/defence or energy. Compared with lead stories, lead pictures tended to focus on human interest and celebrity/entertainment stories, forming 41.8 percent of the total sample, whereas lead stories were dominated by hard news items such as crime, business, disaster/accidents, and local politics (Table 6, Figure 6). For example, crime-related stories were 14.3 percent of the *Stuff* lead picture sample compared with 37.2 percent of the lead story sample.

#### **4.4.12 Topics of Editors' Pick Stories *Stuff* and *Timaru Herald*.**

Both *Stuff* and the *Timaru Herald* feature an area where editors' selections are highlighted for readers' interest. Both sites feature eight stories at any one time, and of these the first five were captured daily at noon. The sample totalled 910 stories, 455 from each site. The *ODT* does not have a dedicated section for this so does not feature in the findings presented in Table 8 and Figure 8. Views of the editors about the selection of the Editors' Picks are reported in Chapter Five, Interview Findings.

#### **4.4.13 Topics of Editors' Pick stories overall.**

Sports stories formed 27.6 percent of the overall Editors' Picks sample, followed by human interest, with 131 stories (14.4%). Together these categories formed 42 percent of the total sample. In third position were crime-related stories, with 87 overall (9.6%). In fourth and fifth respectively were business, finance and the economy (56; 6.2%) and celebrity/entertainment (55; 6.0%). Least featured were primary industries (1; 0.1%), energy (4; 0.4%), war/defence (6; 0.7%), quake news (7; 0.8%), and consumer issues (9; 1.0%).

#### **4.4.14 Topics of Editors' Pick stories on *Stuff*.**

Sport was the most popular Editors' Pick story topic featured on *Stuff* (122; 26.8%). This was followed by human interest (47; 10.3%), crime, courts, police and justice (46; 10.1%), celebrity, entertainment (42; 9.2%), and business, finance and economy (38; 8.4%). Science and technology was in sixth position with 29 stories (6.4%); transport was seventh (26; 5.7%). Car reviews formed the majority of transport stories. All story topics featured in the *Stuff* Editors' Picks, although least-featured were primary industries, energy, and welfare (each appearing once; 0.2%).

#### **4.4.15 Topics of Editors' Picks stories on the *Timaru Herald*.**

As on *Stuff*, sports stories featured the most in the *Timaru Herald* sample (129; 28.4%), followed by human interest (84; 18.5%). These two categories formed 46.9 percent of the *Timaru Herald's* Editors' Pick sample. In third position was crime, courts, police and justice (41; 9.0%). The top three selections, therefore, were the same as those on *Stuff*. In fourth place on the *Timaru Herald* was education (39; 8.6%), fifth was local government (31; 6.8%). No science and technology stories featured, nor did international politics, consumer issues, primary industries or war/defence. Least featured were quake news (2; 0.4%), energy (3; 0.7%), and disaster/accident (4; 0.9%). Overall, the *Timaru Herald* had a narrower range of topics selected for the Editors' Picks area of the website than *Stuff*.

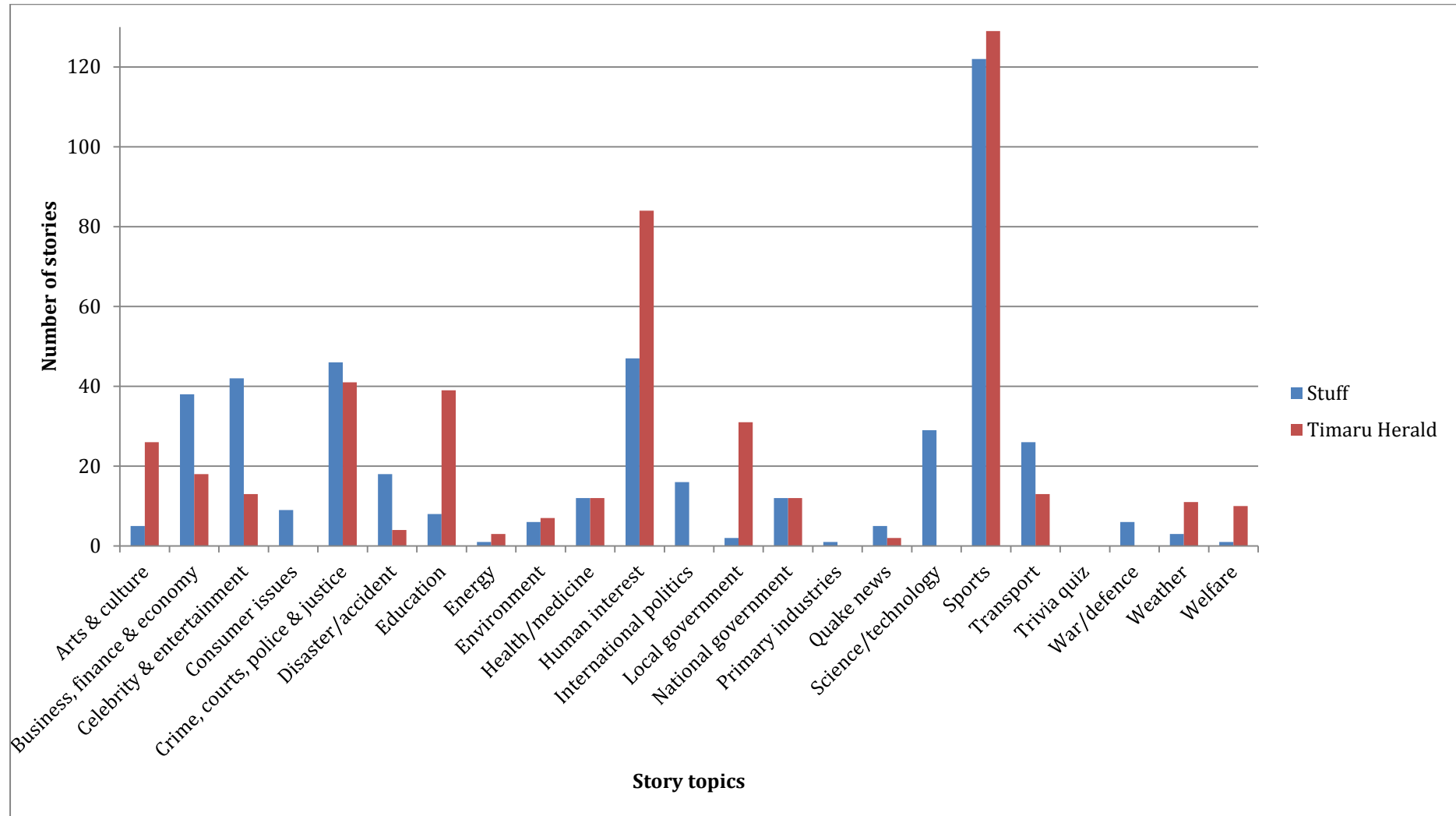
**Table 8*****Editors' Pick Story Comparison from the Stuff and Timaru Herald Websites by Story Topic***

<b>Story Topics</b>	<b>Total stories</b>		<b>Stuff</b>		<b>Timaru Herald</b>	
Sports	251	27.6%	122	26.8%	129	28.4%
Human interest	131	14.4%	47	10.3%	84	18.5%
Crime, courts, police & justice	87	9.6%	46	10.1%	41	9.0%
Business, finance & economy	56	6.2%	38	8.4%	18	4.0%
Celebrity & entertainment	55	6.0%	42	9.2%	13	2.9%
Education	47	5.2%	8	1.8%	39	8.6%
Transport	39	4.3%	26	5.7%	13	2.9%
Local Government	33	3.6%	2	0.4%	31	6.8%
Arts & culture	31	3.4%	5	1.1%	26	5.7%
Science/technology	29	3.2%	29	6.4%	0	0.0%
Health/medicine	24	2.6%	12	2.6%	12	2.6%
National Government	24	2.6%	12	2.6%	12	2.6%
Disaster/accident	22	2.4%	18	4.0%	4	0.9%
International politics	16	1.8%	16	3.5%	0	0.0%
Weather	14	1.5%	3	0.7%	11	2.4%
Environment	13	1.4%	6	1.3%	7	1.5%
Welfare	11	1.2%	1	0.2%	10	2.2%
Consumer Issues	9	1.0%	9	2.0%	0	0.0%
Quake news	7	0.8%	5	1.1%	2	0.4%
War/defence	6	0.7%	6	1.3%	0	0.0%
Energy	4	0.4%	1	0.2%	3	0.7%
Primary Industries	1	0.1%	1	0.2%	0	0.0%
Trivia quiz	0	0.00%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
<b>Total Stories</b>	<b>910</b>		<b>455</b>		<b>455</b>	



**Figure 8**

*Comparison of Editors' Pick Stories by Topic from the Timaru Herald and Stuff Websites*



#### **4.4.16 A comparison of the Editors' Pick stories on *Stuff* and the *Timaru Herald*.**

A new dominant story topic emerged in the Editors' Picks website area with sport the dominant topic on both sites making up 251 of the 910 stories or 27.5 percent. This finding can be seen clearly in Figure 8. The strength of sport indicates an average of 1.3 sports stories appeared across the sites each day of the sample period. Human interest was the second-ranked category in both samples, with 47 appearances on *Stuff* and 84 on the *Timaru Herald* (14.4% of the Editors' picks stories). Crime was third on both web sites, with 46 (10.1% of the site sample) of these stories on *Stuff* and 41 (9.0%) on the *Timaru Herald*. Celebrity and entertainment featured strongly on *Stuff*, with 42 picks compared with only 13 on the *Timaru Herald* site.

Stories that featured in the Editors' Pick area on the *Timaru Herald* site were often not updated daily; for example, a story about the national brass band championships being held in Timaru featured for five consecutive days was the second Editors' Pick story. On *Stuff* this was updated daily. The *Timaru Herald* also used this area to feature opinion pieces from columnists and the daily editorial, with 59 of these features gathered in the sample, 43 of which were editorials. The editorials ranged in topic, relating both to local events and national issues such as environmental concerns about dairy farming and national child abuse statistics. Of the 37 science and technology stories that featured on *Stuff* during the sample period, 29 were in the Editors' Pick section. None related to this topic appeared in the *Herald* editors' sample. Further, 16 of the 19 international politics stories from the total *Stuff* sample appeared in the Editors' Picks category with the

remaining three appearing in the lead and lead picture position. There were no international politics stories in the *Timaru Herald* editors' sample. The lack of international news and national news on the Timaru Herald website is further discussed in the interview findings chapter.

The Editors' Picks area on the sites had a similar "soft" focus to the lead picture area, for example, sport and human interest formed more than half the sample. Hard news story types such as business, and crime and politics formed 48.0 percent of the lead sample (Table 6). The key difference was in the number of sports stories featured in this area of the websites compared with celebrity/entertainment in the lead picture area. Sport featured in third position in terms of the total sample (Table 4) and in thirteenth position in terms of the total lead stories sample (Table 6, Figure 6), yet it was the top selection of the Editors' Picks site area. Crime-related stories again appeared in the top three story categories as they did with the overall sample, lead and lead picture story findings. A summary of the findings in relation to news providers' sections is now provided, followed by presentation of the data showing the lead stories appearing in the readers' most popular section of the websites.

#### **4.4.17 Summary of news provider selections.**

The stories selected by news providers – lead stories, lead picture stories, and Editors’ Pick stories – are now summarised. Crime-related stories featured in the top three of all the news providers’ stories sampled. The other commonality was human interest stories, which ranked first in the lead picture area, second in the Editors’ Pick area, and were a popular lead story choice on all sites. Of note is that all these topics are soft news choices that are either intended to entertain or are dramatic, such as crime.

For the *Timaru Herald* and *Stuff* sport was a popular choice as a lead picture story and an Editors’ Pick selection. Sport was ranked fourth ranked in the lead picture sample, although there were only 19 stories, and first in the editor area (251 stories). Both website areas (lead picture and Editors’ Picks) were dominated by soft, entertaining and people-related stories, for example, human interest, celebrity and entertainment, and sport. Story topics that consistently ranked low across the *Timaru Herald* and *Stuff* were international politics at 0.1 percent (22<sup>nd</sup> position) of the lead sample, 1.8 percent of the editor sample (14<sup>th</sup> position), and in 17<sup>th</sup> position in the lead pictures story sample or 1.1 percent of the sample. Primary industries stories, which featured more strongly in the *Timaru Herald* sample, ranked 21<sup>st</sup> in terms of leads, 22<sup>nd</sup> in terms of Editors’ Picks with just one story, and 18<sup>th</sup> in lead pictures. The category was not a popular story topic overall.

Regional variation was most apparent in relation to local government coverage, which was stronger in the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* areas than nationally. The topic also ranked

in the top five of the lead provision sample. National government coverage was also stronger with *Stuff* than on the regional websites. However, it still did not rank in the top three lead provision selections overall, with just 45 stories from the sample period during the 3-month timeframe. In comparison, there were more than 300 crime stories. Of the lead story findings, 55.6 percent of the national government sample was generated from *Stuff*, yet this equated to just 25 stories. It is of note that hard news has not ranked highly across any of the samples. Both readers and providers are indicating a preference for news topics that entertain rather than advise. The following section examines the content analysis findings that compare reader story selections with those of providers across the three websites.

#### **4.5 Comparison of Reader News Selections with Selections of News Providers**

A comparison for the reader findings and those news choices made by the website editors raises several points of interest. Crime, courts and police again appeared strongly, at 21.4 percent of the total reader sample. This formed 28.5 percent of the lead story sample and just under 10 percent of the editor and lead picture samples.

Human interest is again highly ranked, remaining in the top five across the four samples. While business and finance stories did not feature strongly in the lead pictures stories, they did featured in the top five in terms of leads, editors', and reader news selections. While sport was not a popular lead story selection, ranking 12<sup>th</sup> overall at 3.5 per cent of the sample, it is one that readers prefer, in-line with its first ranking as an Editors' Pick and fourth as a lead picture choice. The similarity in story topic findings between readers and news providers suggests readers audiences are following the news agenda as dictated by the media outlets.

Regional variation in lead stories also appears in the choices of readers. For example, local government formed 9.2 percent of the *ODT* reader sample and 12.5 percent of the *Timaru Herald* sample but only 0.9 percent of *Stuff's*. Comparing this with the lead story findings, we can see readers adopting a similar agenda to the news provider, given local government formed 9.2 percent of the *ODT* sample and 17.4 percent of the *Timaru Herald's*; again, it was only 0.4 percent of *Stuff's*. This can also be seen in a comparison of the business-related stories, where lead provision is strongest on the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* sites (12.1% and 10.8% respectively) and also strongest as a readers' most popular on these sites (15.6% and 9.2%). Business and finance formed only 9.3 percent of the *Stuff* lead story sample and 3.3 percent of the readers' most popular sample.

The following section will consider how many of the lead stories and lead picture stories appeared in the most popular sample as a means to investigate the previous findings in further detail and explore whether the news agenda set by providers is similar to that that of readers in terms of actual stories.

#### **4.6 Lead Story Selections Appearing in Readers' Most Popular**

This study sought to explore whether there was similarity between the news selections of providers and readers. To address this, the number of lead stories that also became one of the top five readers' most popular were counted. These findings, presented in Table 9, were achieved by counting the number of lead stories that appeared in both lead position and in the reader top five selections from each website sample. These stories were identical in headline and content because the readers' most popular area is generated by the number of hits a story receives, regardless of where it appears on the website. The more people who read a story, the higher in ranking the story will appear in the readers' most popular area. Although this sample provides only a "snapshot" of the position at midday, and stories will have been on the websites for varying times, the length of time a story is on site also has an impact on the chances it has to become a readers' most popular. The findings show the numbers of stories that appeared in the readers' selections were considerably lower on *Stuff* than on the *Timaru Herald* and the *ODT*. They are discussed by individual website and then comparably.

**Table 9**

**Lead Stories from the Otago Daily Times, Stuff, and Timaru Herald Websites Appearing in Readers' Most Popular by Story Topic**

Story Topics	ODT			Stuff			Timaru Herald		
	ODT lead stories	Lead stories in readers' most popular	Percentage of lead stories appearing in readers' most popular	Stuff lead stories	Lead stories in readers' most popular	Percentage of lead stories appearing in readers' most popular	Timaru Herald lead stories	Lead stories in readers' most popular	Percentage of lead stories appearing in readers' most popular
Arts and culture	4	3	75.0%	2	0	0.0%	4	0	0.0%
Business, finance & economy	33	21	63.6%	42	5	11.9%	49	25	51.0%
Celebrity/entertainment	9	7	77.8%	18	5	27.8%	10	9	90.0%
Consumer issues	1	0	0.0%	3	0	0.0%	7	4	57.1%
Crime, courts, police & justice	84	33	39.3%	168	32	19.0%	84	52	61.9%
Disaster/accident	38	24	63.6%	56	8	14.3%	19	6	31.6%
Education	12	5	41.7%	6	2	33.3%	19	4	21.1%
Energy	5	2	40.0%	3	0	0.0%	3	1	33.3%
Environment	8	6	75.0%	5	2	40.0%	24	6	25.0%
Health/medicine	11	6	54.5%	15	4	26.7%	21	11	52.4%
Human interest	18	12	66.7%	39	15	38.5%	47	17	36.2%
International politics	0	0	0.0%	1	0	0.0%	0	0	0.0%
Local government	25	15	60.0%	2	0	0.0%	79	23	29.1%
National government	5	1	20.0%	25	3	12.0%	15	4	26.7%
Primary Industries	1	0	0.0%	0	0	0.0%	5	3	60.0%
Quake news	3	2	66.7%	18	3	16.7%	19	8	42.1%
Science/technology	0	0	0.0%	1	0	0.0%	4	0	0.0%
Sport	3	3	100.0%	16	6	37.5%	22	7	31.8%
Transport	4	4	100.0%	0	0	0.0%	12	6	50.0%
War/defence	0	0	0.0%	6	1	16.7%	0	0	0.0%
Weather	8	7	87.5%	16	7	43.8%	8	6	75.0%
Welfare	1	1	100.0%	10	2	20.0%	4	1	25.0%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>273</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>55.7%</b>	<b>452</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>21.0%</b>	<b>455</b>	<b>193</b>	<b>42.4%</b>



#### **4.6.1 *Otago Daily Times* lead story topics appearing in readers' most popular.**

The *ODT* website had the highest percentage of lead stories that were also in the top five reader selections. Over half (55.7%), or 152, of the 273 lead stories that formed the *ODT* sample were also in the readers' most popular. Of the 84 crime-related lead stories, 33 (39%) appeared in the readers' most popular, and of the 33 business, finance and economy stories, 21 (63.6%) appeared. In relation to disaster and accident there were 38 lead stories of which 24 (63.6%) featured in the readers' top five selections. Of the 25 local government stories, 15 (60.0%) were in the most popular area of the site (Table 9). Human interest also fared well with 12 (66.7%) of the 18 stories appearing in both areas. While the number of arts and culture lead stories were small, (four stories) 75% of these appeared in the readers' area. Similarly, seven (77.8%) of the nine celebrity and entertainment stories, and seven of the eight (87.5%) weather stories were in readers' most popular. The three sport stories gathered were ranked in the readers' area, as were welfare and transport; however, only one of the five national government stories appeared in the readers' picks. Consumer issues was the only story topic for which a lead story was published where the topic was not shown in the readers' most popular section.

#### **4.6.2 *Stuff* lead story topics appearing in readers' most popular.**

*Stuff* had 95 stories that appeared as both lead stories and in the top five of the readers' most popular (21.0% of its total lead stories). Again, this can be viewed as 79 percent (357 stories) of *Stuff* leads did not feature in the readers' top five at the sample gathering time. This suggests that *Stuff* had less influence than the other websites studied; however, its more diversely spread audience should also be considered. Table

9 shows weather proved the story topic most appearing in readers' choices in terms of percentages: of the 16 lead weather stories, seven (43.8%) were also in the readers' most popular. In contrast with the *ODT*, crime featured as a lead 168 times, but only 32 (19.0%) of these were in the readers' most popular at the time of sample gathering. Of the 42 business, finance and economy stories, just five (11.9%) also featured as readers' most popular. Eight (14.3%) of the 56 disaster and accident stories appeared in the readers' most popular, and 15 (38.5%) of the 39 human interest stories. Six of the 16 sport stories showed in the sample, 37.5% of which were lead stories, while three (12.0%) of the 25 national government stories appeared. Neither of the two lead local government stories appeared in the readers' most popular.

#### **4.6.3 *Timaru Herald* lead story topics appearing in readers' most popular.**

The *Timaru Herald* had 193 lead stories (42.4%) also appearing in readers' most popular. Therefore, 57.6 percent (262 stories) of *Timaru Herald* lead stories did not appear in the top five choices of readers. While lower than the *ODT* results, this figure shows a much higher number of lead stories appearing in readers' selections than in *Stuff*. Of the 10 local celebrity/entertainment stories that featured as leads, nine (90.0%) appeared in the readers' most popular, together with six (75.0%) of the eight weather stories. Of the 84 crime, court, police and justice lead stories, 52 (61.9%) were also in the readers' section, and of the 79 local government stories 23 (29.1%) appeared. Four (26.7%) of the 15 lead stories covering national government news appeared in the readers' most popular section; three (60%) of the five primary industry stories showed in the readers' sample; as did four (57.1%) of the seven consumer issue stories. As Table 9 shows, none of the four arts and culture or four science and technology stories appeared.

#### 4.6.4 Comparison of lead stories appearing in readers' most popular.

Lead stories appeared more often in the readers' most popular section of the regional news websites than in those of *Stuff*: 55.7 percent of the *ODT* leads and 42.4 percent of *Timaru Herald* leads ranked in the top five spot compared with 21 percent of the leads on *Stuff*. Of the 25 local government stories in the lead position on the *ODT*, 15 (60.0%) were also in the readers' choices. Of these, 10 covered the council's financial shortfall resulting from the city's new sports stadium development. For the *Timaru Herald*, 29.1 percent of local government stories (23 of 79) featured in the readers' most popular; of these, 14 related to the town's new aquatic centre development, the remainder to everyday council activities, including rates and dog bylaws. An exception was three stories related to a Waimate councillor's stand on the legalisation of cannabis. Neither of the local government lead stories on *Stuff* appeared in the readers' most popular area at the time of sampling.

Celebrity and entertainment stories were well received by regional readers. For example, of the nine lead stories in this category seven also appeared in the *ODT* readers' most popular. Of the 10 on the *Timaru Herald* website, nine were in the readers' area. The *ODT* stories were varied, including a story about television show *Masterchef* struggling for competitors, a local celebrity sentenced for drunk driving, an Auckland story about an All Black formerly having been a hairdressing apprentice, and an international indoor rodeo event to be held in Otago. Three of the seven stories were not about Otago events. Two stories that appeared in both site areas on the *Timaru Herald* were not local – a story about the New Zealand rich list and another on the death of Sir Brian Talboys. The remainder were local and included two about the South Canterbury health board chair being photographed using a beer bong. Of the remaining

five, four concerned music talent quests and the final covered a local racing car driver securing a tourism ambassador role.

The *ODT* was the only website where 100 percent of stories in specific story topic categories appeared in the readers' most popular. This occurred with the four transport stories carried as leads, the three sports stories, and the one welfare story. Of the three sport stories, two were rugby-related (e.g. a story about Graham Henry's match fixing comments in his book, the second the selection of the Otago rugby team). The third story named Otago athletes set to compete at the Olympics. The welfare story was international in origin, being Bill Clinton's claim modern slavery was occurring in New Zealand. Of the transport stories, one was about funding being secured to fix nine crash spots in the region, another on the reintroduction of Barnes Dance crossings, another on costs of highway realignment, and the last story, headlined *Evil little things scooting about Mosgiel*, about mobility scooters being a hazard on footpaths.

It is interesting to note the comparisons; for example, of the 33 business and finance stories captured as leads, 21 (63.6%) were also in the readers' most popular for the *ODT*, and 25 (51.0%) of the 49 on the *Timaru Herald*. Yet of the 42 on *Stuff* only five (11.9%) appeared in the readers' most popular. The business stories on the regional sites were varied, but the majority that appeared in readers' choices were those signalling positive developments for the regions. For examples, stories on the *ODT* included new retail and hotel developments, the rise of real estate prices, suburban redevelopments, and airfare cuts. The less positive stories were mainly related to the Otago Rugby Football Union's financial woes. The same positive news trend was seen in the *Timaru Herald* findings, where lead stories most selected by readers' included port

redevelopments, new city businesses, increased regional spending, and business expansions. Those that were negative concerned the collapse of a South Canterbury-based finance company. Only five of the business lead stories appeared in the *Stuff* readers' most popular area. These were a story about a new free-to-air television channel, the news All Blacks jersey sponsorship deal, a story about the national economy, and Destiny Church's Hannah Tamaki standing down from her business interests. The final story was about the cost of lazy employees to businesses. Four of the five of these stories involved degrees of conflict.

Weather stories often appeared in the readers' most popular across all the websites, with seven (87.5%) of the eight *ODT* weather stories in the reader top five, and six (75.0%) of the eight on the *Timaru Herald* site. For *Stuff*, seven (43.8%) of the 16 weather stories appeared, which, while lower than the other websites it was the story topic that appeared most in both readers' and providers' most popular. Given the time of the year, May–July 2012, these stories were all related to bad weather events like snow, rain, and freezing conditions. The only variation in these stories occurred in terms of origin. The *Stuff* stories covered national weather events, whereas those on the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* concerned local weather trends.

Finally, national government news is worth noting. While there were fewer of these stories on the regional websites in lead position – five on the *ODT* and 15 on the *Timaru Herald* – compared with *Stuff*, which had 25, these were not well shown in readers' choices on all the websites. Only one of the five stories, about planned government asset sales, appeared in the *ODT* sample, which was the lowest extent of overlap on the website. The four stories in the *Timaru Herald* findings were also on asset sales. No

stories on this topic appeared at all in the overall *Stuff* findings, and of the three national government stories that did appear in the readers' most popular, two were about the Prime Minister losing his appeal to voters and one about civil servant phone accounts.

These findings would suggest the stories being promoted of importance as leads on the regional sites are more often being considered as such with their readers. Yet *Stuff's* readers appear to adopt a more individual agenda in their news selection, choosing stories that feature less frequently as lead news.

#### **4.7 Geographic Source of News Stories**

This section compares the geographic source of stories featured on the website homepage. To measure provider and reader selections in terms of story origin, the samples selected were the lead stories from each website (Table 6) and the readers' most popular stories from each site (Table 5). The geographic origin findings are presented in Table 10. The criteria used for coding stories geographically can be found in Chapter Three. These were regional North Island, Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin, regional South Island, unknown origin, and international. The geographic origin of the news stories carried on the sites provides additional information for addressing the following research questions:

RQ 1. What story topics appear in New Zealand newspaper online-news readers most popular sections?

RQ 2. What story topics are selected as lead stories and as editor's picks by New Zealand on-line news providers?

RQ 3. What differences (if any) exist between regional newspapers online-news and national newspaper online-news?

#### **4.7.1 Lead story sample geographic origin.**

The 1180 lead stories gathered consisted of 273 from the *ODT*, 452 from *Stuff*, and 455 from the *Timaru Herald*. Before the findings from each website are presented, the overall geographic origin findings are provided.

**Table 10*****Geographic Origin of Lead Stories from the Otago Daily Times, Timaru Herald, and Stuff***

<b>Geographic origin</b>	<b>Total Stories</b>	<b>Percentage of total stories</b>	<b>ODT</b>		<b>Stuff</b>		<b>Timaru Herald</b>	
Regional North Island	89	7.5%	11	4.0%	78	17.3%	0	0.0%
Auckland	107	9.1%	7	2.6%	100	22.1%	0	0.0%
Wellington	140	11.9%	22	8.1%	106	23.5%	12	2.6%
Regional South Island	523	44.3%	76	27.8%	27	6.0%	420	92.3%
Christchurch	54	4.6%	3	1.1%	38	8.4%	13	2.9%
Dunedin	149	12.6%	143	52.4%	6	1.3%	0	0.0%
Unknown Origin	50	4.2%	4	1.5%	38	8.4%	8	1.8%
International	68	5.8%	7	2.6%	59	13.1%	2	0.4%
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>1180</b>		<b>273</b>		<b>452</b>		<b>455</b>	



#### **4.7.2 Overall sample geographic origin.**

As depicted in Table 10, regional coverage from the South Island dominated the lead story samples (523 stories; 44.3%), reflecting that two of the websites are South Island based. This is also a factor for the high number of Dunedin stories featured (149), as 140 (94.0%) of these came from the *ODT* website. A total of 140 stories were from Wellington, 45 (32.1%) of these on the activities of government or politicians. Auckland coverage mainly featured on the *Stuff* website, with 100 (93.5%) of the 107 Auckland stories appearing there.

#### **4.7.3 Otago Daily Times sample geographic origin.**

Of the 273 lead stories from the *ODT*, 143 (52.4%) were from Dunedin City, and of the 76 (27.9%) stories from the South Island regions, 55 were from Central, North, and South Otago. The majority of the lead stories, 222 or 81.3 percent, were from the South Island; 40 stories were from the North Island. The seven international stories carried as leads all concerned New Zealanders overseas. The five stories of unknown origin were two national celebrity events, two financial matters, and one accident story.

#### **4.7.4 Stuff sample geographic origin.**

*Stuff* featured the highest number of leading international stories, 86.8 percent of the international lead stories carried across the sites. Wellington coverage was marginally stronger on the *Stuff* website overall, with 106 stories (23.4%) coming from the city, closely followed by 100 (22.1%) from Auckland City. *Stuff* has dedicated online newsrooms in both Auckland and Wellington, which may also contribute to the dominance of North Island coverage – 284 (62.8%) – of the 452 story sample. In

comparison, 71 stories (15.7%) were from the South Island, and 38 stories were of unknown origin. Two of these stories were national stories where location details were suppressed by the courts.

#### **4.7.5 *Timaru Herald* sample geographic origin.**

The majority of coverage on the *Timaru Herald* was from the South Island, 97.4 percent (443 stories) of the lead sample. The vast majority, 414 of the 455 stories forming the *Timaru Herald* lead story sample, covered events or activities in South Canterbury. The remaining 41 website lead stories included 12 from Wellington, one from the Chatham Islands, 13 from Christchurch, two international stories and eight (five of which related to Fonterra dairy pay outs) which were coded as unknown in origin. Another five were from South Island regions other than South Canterbury.

#### **4.7.6 Comparison of geographic origin of lead stories.**

The vast majority of coverage on the regional websites, the *ODT* and the *Timaru Herald*, was from their local regions rather than from wider New Zealand. The majority of *Stuff's* coverage was from Wellington and Auckland, and the least was from Dunedin and the regional South Island (33 stories; 7.3%). As seen in Table 10, *Stuff* had the most Christchurch coverage. *Stuff* also carried more international news (59, 13.1%) than the *ODT* (seven, 2.6%) and the *Timaru Herald* (two, 0.4%). *Stuff's* reporting of the regional north was also greater than the two South Island sites, with 78 of the 89 stories (87.6%) captured from North Island regions appearing on *Stuff* compared with 11 (12.4%) on the *ODT* and none on the *Timaru Herald*. Of the 107 stories from Auckland, 100 (93.5%) appeared as leads on *Stuff* and the remaining seven were on the *ODT* website.

Similar findings presented for Wellington-sourced stories, with the majority (106 of 140; 75.8%) appearing on *Stuff*, followed by the *ODT* 22 (15.7%) and the *Timaru Herald* 12 (8.6%). Table 8 also shows that while overall *Stuff* had wider national and international coverage, it had the least number of stories from the South Island. The *Timaru Herald* findings indicate a strong local news focus, as does the *ODT*. However, all New Zealand regions were represented in the *ODT* findings, which was not the case with the *Timaru Herald*. This finding can be linked to the *ODT*'s content-sharing agreement with APN, which is discussed in the next chapter, and to *Stuff* being Fairfax's national news provider, which allows the *Timaru Herald* to focus solely on the local news product.

#### **4.7.7 Geographic origin of readers' most popular sample.**

As with the lead stories, the geographic origin of the readers' most popular stories was identified (Table 11). A total of 455 stories gathered from each website were coded as to the geographic origin of the story. First, results from the overall sample are presented before the findings from each website individually. Finally, these are compared.

**Table 11*****Geographic Origin of Readers' Most Popular Stories from the Otago Daily Times, Stuff and Timaru Herald Websites***

<b>Geographic origin</b>	<b>Total Stories</b>	<b>Percentage of total stories</b>	<b>ODT</b>		<b>Stuff</b>		<b>Timaru Herald</b>	
Regional North Island	91	6.7%	9	2.0%	82	18.0%	0	0.0%
Auckland	57	4.2%	2	0.4%	55	12.1%	0	0.0%
Wellington	107	7.8%	14	3.1%	84	18.5%	9	2.0%
Regional South Island	546	40.0%	97	21.3%	22	4.8%	427	93.8%
Christchurch	61	4.5%	2	0.4%	48	10.5%	11	2.4%
Dunedin	308	22.6%	306	67.3%	2	0.4%	0	0.0%
Unknown Origin	72	5.3%	9	2.0%	57*	12.5%	6	1.3%
International	122	9.0%	16	3.5%	105	23.1%	2	0.4%
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>1365</b>		<b>455</b>		<b>455</b>		<b>455</b>	

*\*includes 27 Trivia Quiz selections*

#### **4.7.8 Overall geographic origin of readers' most popular.**

The findings on the geographic origin of the readers' sample are consistent with those for the lead sample, with the South Island regions and Dunedin sharing the first two rankings. Again, this largely reflects the sample, with coverage from the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* forming two thirds of the sample. International stories were third, Wellington fourth, and regional North Island stories were in fifth position. Stories coded as of unknown origin ranked sixth, Christchurch seventh, and stories from Auckland ranked eighth. As explained earlier, the 72 stories from an unknown origin were from New Zealand but could not be assigned a definitive source location.

#### **4.7.9 Otago Daily Times readers' most popular geographic origin.**

Local content was most popular with readers of the *ODT*, with 402 (88.5%) of the 455 reader selections coming from Dunedin or the Otago region. Of the remaining 53 stories, 19 were from elsewhere in the South Island, 18 from the North Island (of which seven were from Wellington), one was unknown origin, and 15 were international. Two stories appeared from Christchurch – one a rugby match report, the other the naming of a dead teen from huffing Butane. Two readers' choice stories also originated from Auckland, one about a hairdresser-turned-All Black, the other an announcement on the All Black training squad.

#### **4.7.10 Stuff readers' most popular geographic origin.**

Of the 455 stories in the readers' most popular area on *Stuff*, 221 (48.6%) were from the North Island. Of the 234 remaining, 57, including 27 *Stuff* trivia quizzes, were of unknown origin, while 72 stories (15.8 percent) were from the South Island. The

number of stories from the South Island that ranked with readers is comparable to the geographic lead coverage, as discussed in the previous section, where 71 lead stories came from the South. *Stuff* had the largest number of internationally sourced stories in its reader sample, with 105 of the 122 in the total sample. The story location that featured least in *Stuff's* most popular top five was Dunedin, with only two stories – one a rugby match report, the second the naming of a sailor killed in the region.

#### **4.7.11 Timaru Herald readers' most popular geographic origin.**

For the *Timaru Herald*, as with the lead stories, the majority 422 (92.8%), of the 455 readers' most popular stories were local (from Timaru and the South Canterbury regions). Stories from Christchurch were second, while Wellington ranked third. No stories from Auckland, the regional North Island or Dunedin were selected as reader's choices. Of the nine stories from Wellington, four were political in nature, one an obituary, one health, two accident related, and one crime.

#### **4.7.12 Comparison of readers' most popular geographic origin.**

In comparison with *Stuff*, the southern regional news readers accessed more news stories related to their immediate and wider regions. *Stuff* featured 72 (15.8%) stories from the South Island compared with 221 (48.6%) from the North Island. As a national news website therefore, the *Stuff* reader sample showed a wider geographic preference than readers from the other two websites, although this nationwide focus did not extend to Dunedin, where only two stories featured in the readers' choice. The *ODT* readers' sample also featured stories from all parts of New Zealand and international news; however, the numbers of these were limited. For example, only two *ODT* stories were from Christchurch and two from Auckland. Compared with the *ODT* site, the

*Timaru Herald* reader sample featured no stories from Auckland, the regional North or Dunedin. *Stuff* also had the largest number of international news stories, 105 (23.1%), compared with the *ODT's* 16 (3.5%) and the *Timaru Herald's* two (0.4%). This is likely a reflection of the website's wider audience.

## **4.8 Chapter Summary**

This section summarises the content analysis findings presented in this Chapter from the overall story topic, the lead and picture story topic, the Editors' Pick stories, and the readers' most popular findings. Further, the lead stories that appeared in the readers' most popular and the geographic origin of the stories gathered are reviewed.

### **4.8.1 Story topics overall.**

Crime, courts, police and justice was the dominant story topic overall in terms of the total sample of lead, lead picture stories, and editor- and reader-selected stories. Crime-related stories formed one fifth of the total sample. This was seen in each of the individual websites, where this topic was also first ranked. Human interest stories and sport ranked second and third in the overall sample, which was also the case on the *Timaru Herald* website. The placement of human interest and sport was different on the *ODT* and *Stuff* websites. Second with *Stuff* was sport, and human interest was third, while in the *ODT* sample business, finance and economy was second, and disaster/accident third. Topics least featured in the overall sample were war and defence, international politics, and primary industries. Least featured in the *ODT* sample were primary industries, science and technology and welfare, while international politics and war/defence did not feature at all. Least featured on *Stuff* was primary industries and energy. However, all story topics were represented in the *Stuff* sample.

War/defence and international politics did not feature in the *Timaru Herald* sample, and least featured were science and technology, and energy. Therefore, *Stuff* had the broadest coverage in terms of story topic and the number of stories in each topic category, which likely reflects the site's broad audience base. The regional publications had less spread, which can again be seen as catering to their direct market focussed on local news.

#### **4.8.2 Lead story topics.**

Variation was seen between *Stuff* and the two regional websites in the lead story topics. While crime-related news was the first ranked lead choice overall as well as for each website by a wide margin, disaster/accident stories were second with the *ODT* and *Stuff*, while local government took this position for the *Timaru Herald*. Only two local government stories appeared on *Stuff* during the sample period compared with 25 on the *ODT*, and 79 on the *Timaru Herald*. Business, finance and economy featured strongly in all three samples, ranking third most popular lead story topic on the *ODT* and *Stuff*, and second on the *Timaru Herald*.

#### **4.8.3 Lead picture story topics *Stuff* and *Timaru Herald*.**

Human interest stories were the first-ranked lead picture story topic with the *Timaru Herald* and second with *Stuff*. The first ranked *Stuff* story topic in this website area was celebrity/entertainment stories, which were ranked second with the *Timaru Herald*. This indicates people-related stories, particularly with entertainment value, were considered most relevant for this website area. This is discussed further in Chapter Five, which covers the interviews with the site editors'. Crime-related news was third with *Stuff* but was fifth on the *Timaru Herald*. A wider range of story topics featured as lead



picture stories on the *Timaru Herald* website than on *Stuff*, with 17 of the 23 topics in this position on the *Timaru Herald* compared with 13 on *Stuff*.

#### **4.8.4 Editors' Pick story topics *Stuff* and *Timaru Herald*.**

Sport featured most in the Editors' Picks area both overall and for each website. The two websites operate under the Fairfax umbrella, which may be the reason for this commonality. Further, the findings for both these websites were similar, with human interest the second-ranked story topic and crime-related news third. For both websites, human interest and sport combined to form more than 40 percent of the Editors' Picks sample.

#### **4.8.5 Readers' most popular story topics.**

Reader findings were similar to the lead sample in that crime was the highest-ranking story topic across the three websites. Human interest news also ranked highly with readers across all of the websites studied. Business, finance and economy, and local government were story topics also frequently selected by readers of the regional websites (*Timaru Herald* and *ODT*), yet this was not the case with *Stuff*, where business ranked poorly with readers, and local government news was just 0.9 percent (4 stories) of the *Stuff* readers' sample. Overall, arts and culture were not popular with readers of any of the websites studied, nor were primary industries, science and technology or welfare stories. However, it is important to note that this reflected the few stories covering these topics in the leads, or editors' picks sections of the websites.

#### **4.8.6 Lead stories appearing in readers' most popular.**

Readers of the regional news websites were more likely to select lead stories than readers of the *Stuff* website. Considering *Stuff* offers a broader range of story topics and categories on its website, such as entertainment, lifestyle, and dedicated sports sections, readers may access stories directly from those areas rather than from lead stories. This is likely linked to *Stuff*'s broader audience market. Across all websites there was considerable difference between the number of lead story published in a topic area and the number of these appearing in the readers' most popular sections. In all cases fewer of these stories appeared in the readers' choices. As noted previously, these stories may have been on the website since early morning and therefore may have been in the readers' choice area before the midday sample period.

#### **4.8.7 Lead story geographic origin.**

The findings indicated local and South Island news was strongly favoured as lead stories by both the *ODT* and the *Timaru Herald*. The majority of this local news covered events in the websites' traditional newspaper circulation areas, as opposed to the wider South Island. In comparison, *Stuff* featured more news from the North Island main centres (Wellington and Auckland) than from anywhere else in New Zealand. Compared with a broad range of story topic coverage in the North, stories on *Stuff* from the South Island typically related to major accidents or crime events.

#### **4.8.8 Geographic origin of readers' most popular.**

As with the lead stories, local content ranked highest with readers of the *ODT* and the *Timaru Herald*. The *Timaru Herald* reader sample did not feature any stories from Auckland, the regional North Island, Dunedin or any international stories. While the

*ODT* readers' choice sample did feature stories from throughout the country, only 18 of these were from the North Island. This spread of readers' selections reflects the greater geographic spread of *ODT* stories on its website, compared with the *Timaru Herald*, while *Stuff* readers can be noted for the number of international stories that featured in their choices. All the readers' selections largely reflected the geographic origin of lead stories appearing on the website.

#### **4.8.9 Conclusion.**

This chapter has presented the quantitative findings from the content analysis that formed the first part of this mixed-method study. It has addressed the findings in relation to the story types that featured on the homepage of the three websites studied in terms of the story topics being provided to consumers and the story topics these readers are accessing. It has also considered the geographic origin of these stories and addressed the appearance of lead stories as readers' most popular topics. These findings are discussed in Chapter Six. The next chapter, Chapter Five, Interview Findings, will present the qualitative information gathered for this research from interviews conducted with the three editors of the websites. This chapter will address the fourth research question: What are online editors' perspectives on the online news medium and its content?

## Chapter Five Interview Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews carried out for this study. The specific research question being addressed by these interviews was:

RQ4: What are online editors' perspectives on the online news medium and its content?

Three interviews were conducted in 2012 with the editors responsible for each of the three websites. The participants were Fairfax group digital editor Sinead Boucher, representing *Stuff*, Fleur Cogle, the then digital editor with the *Timaru Herald*, and Murray Kirkness, the editor of the *Otago Daily Times*. The three interviewees have differing experiences of the news environment. Boucher has been employed in the digital news environment since 1999, first in London before returning to New Zealand to work in a range of senior roles with Fairfax Media. Kirkness' journalism career began in 1986 in Australia; since then he has had a variety of senior roles in print journalism. Cogle, at the time of conducting this study, had recently been appointed web editor at the *Timaru Herald*, but had been working in newspaper journalism since 2005.

The presentation of the interview material in this chapter is based on topics that emerged from the interviews, which in turn are linked to the overall purpose of the research – to identify the news selections being made by providers and consumers of New Zealand newspaper websites. The interview questions that formed the basis of the semi-structured interviews can be found in Appendix 2. The interviews were conducted after the content analysis for this study was carried out, with to explore the wider issues surrounding online news production in this country. The findings are arranged under the following seven headings: the selection of news for the websites; the needs of the

specific audiences for each site; the editors' perceptions of the news values needed for web news; audience needs and the value of reader participation; the news selections of online audiences and the impact these have on selection decisions; the New Zealand online news market in terms of competitiveness, commercialism and resourcing and the editors' perspectives on the online news environment and democratic engagement in New Zealand. Before the interview findings are presented the chapter provides a synopsis of the background and history of the three websites studied, as explained by the interviewees.

### **5.1 Background and history of the websites**

The news websites sampled have been in existence for between 10 and 16 years, albeit in various forms. All three interviewees described the early years of the sites as effectively content repositories for the print arm of the news provider. However, the sites have evolved to varying degrees.

Fairfax group digital editor, Sinead Boucher, explained that the former owner of the Fairfax news group, Independent Newspapers Limited (INL), created the *Stuff* site to aggregate content across the company's newsrooms. At that point, about 12 years ago, although the web was recognised as a necessity, no one really knew what future role the internet would play in terms of news provision. Boucher said the site has developed over the years from a repository for Fairfax group content to an independent news site in its own right: "The early days of *Stuff* were very different to now – a daily upload of newspaper content and very little 'live news' during the day".

Digital editor of the *Timaru Herald*, (also Fairfax-owned), Fleur Cogle, said the *Timaru Herald* site, while initially managed internally, was handed back to the Fairfax web curators for a time before her appointment to the role. This decision was initially based on lack of dedicated staff available to resource the web within the *Herald* newsroom. This transition to managing this internally, she noted, was requiring a mind shift among the journalists at the publication:

If you ask them to say it aloud most would be on board with digital. I think that, operating subconsciously, they still feel they are predominantly producing a print newspaper, that is a habit we are trying to break and it is not broken yet. I think there is a recognition that we can't go on that way, but how do we get ourselves out of that pattern? I think we have come a long way though, and I think that is because management have employed someone in this role which has given digital a lot more credence, or push, in the newsroom.

The *Otago Daily Times (ODT)* had the earliest web presence of the three sites, launching its online site in 1996, according to editor Murray Kirkness. At that time, the site provided a limited number of stories from the newspaper, available to paying-subscribers only. Kirkness was in the editor role in 2008 when the site was re-launched with a wider selection of content including world and breaking news and both local and national stories. The decision to 'go live' (available to all web users with no pay-per-view charge) was largely because most other publishers were already in this market. In hindsight, Kirkness said, they, like most other publishers, should have thought through the implications and gone with a pay-wall approach from the outset. The *ODT* still offers a complete digital edition of the print paper online to paying-subscribers. This paid-for version includes all the print newspaper content, including advertising and classified

advertises, which are not available on the free website. It also includes full court coverage, which is not available on the free news website. While the *ODT* is independently owned by Allied Press, it does have a content-sharing agreement with APNZ for national and world news. APNZ is a news-sharing service owned by Fairfax Media's main New Zealand competitor, APN. It shares news content around the 50 newspapers owned by the company as well as the *ODT*, which, remains independently owned.

## **5.2 The Selection of News for the *Otago Daily Times*, *Stuff* and *Timaru Herald* Websites**

Both Cogle and Kirkness, representing regional websites, indicated a strong preference for local news on their website homepages. However, their approaches varied. Cogle supported publishing all news on the *Timaru Herald's* website immediately as opposed to holding some news stories back for the next print edition, which was the approach the *ODT's* Kirkness supported. Boucher, on the other hand, said, *Stuff*, which remains independent from Fairfax's print editions, takes a strong position on web first and in terms of providing varied content to meet a wide range of reader preferences.

Cogle took the role of digital editor in 2012, since which time editorial decisions for the *Timaru Herald* website have been largely made onsite with a preference for local content. She said decisions were made with the input of the senior editorial team, and largely reflected the news choices made for the print edition. Cogle attributed the fact web news provision was similar to the print edition to the small size of the editorial team. There was a push within the organisation to move away from writing solely for print and for the journalists to treat web content as a separate entity. The focus on local

content required the *Timaru Herald* team to have a degree of autonomy from *Stuff*, with decisions made by those with local knowledge to provide for local readers' needs.

In terms of selection of web content at the *Timaru Herald*, the majority of print news was carried online, Cogle said. However, with greater internal capability, news decisions now include the provision of web visual elements such as video, photo galleries and audio. National news is regarded as less important, because the front page of the website links to Fairfax's *Stuff* national, international and world sections anyway. This also allows the *Timaru Herald* staff to focus solely on producing local content:

If you had asked 12 months ago I would have said it was an extension of print – that is things appear in print then they go online. We have been actively trying to move away from that. And obviously, the first thing we did was employ someone to go on the web. The aim is for people to not just think “I am writing a story for tomorrow's paper”, it's to ask what medium will suit this story best to start with.

Because only one staff member was assigned to the website on a full-time basis, Cogle said, the *Timaru Herald* was limited in terms of what could be used as stand-alone web content. The focus at this point was ensuring local breaking news or events that could be covered live were updated throughout the day. An example of this during the study was the *Timaru Herald's* coverage of the *New Zealand's Got Talent* auditions, where video interviews with local contestants were posted at regular intervals during the day.

In contrast, a large team was involved in the daily decision-making and provision of news at *Stuff*, with section editors managing different areas of the site. Boucher said this included the commissioning of stories from newsrooms, or selecting stories from other



sources such as international news organisations. Choosing what news to provide readers, and when to provide it, was largely governed by guidelines set across the sites by management; again, these varied from hitting peak traffic times to a broad-brush approach that provided a variety of news types. For the *Timaru Herald* the goal, as also set by Fairfax, was to provide new news to meet the peak traffic times of between 8 and 9am, 12 noon and 1pm and 4 and 5pm. Cogle noted that, while it was attempted, the peak time goal often proved impractical. As a geographically limited regional website without an online news team, there was often no new regional content to add. She said the alternative position has been to look at ways of refreshing content, such as re-angling stories or adding additional visual elements to these as the day progresses. At *Stuff*, Boucher explained that the website guidelines reflected the aim to give readers more than they were expecting. She highlighted the use of social media at *Stuff* as integral in ensuring two-way participation between reader and news provider. Further, the increasing use of new technology in story telling was crucial in terms of developing a “richer vein of data journalism”. Data journalism is the process where journalists analyse and filter large data sets into easily understood story formats. An example is the local body election campaign coverage in 2013 and the publication of the 2013 census results, where the findings were presented in easy-to-read formats rather than presented in complex statistical terms.

While the *ODT* also ran the majority of its newspaper content online, Kirkness expressed a different view from *Timaru Herald's* Cogle, stating the *ODT* was prepared to hold news back for the print edition. The company did not have a “digital first credo”. Instead, the focus still remained on the print publication. While breaking news, such as

car crashes, would be uploaded, a strong local news story would be held for the following day's newspaper:

If it is something we know nobody else has and isn't timely in that it needs [to be] immediately published, we'll hold it back. For us the *ODT*, the print product, is still our premium product. It is our premium brand both for news and the commercial aspects of the company. The newspaper is what drives the commercial heart of this company, so we feel by diluting that, by putting everything straight online, even though it's still under the *ODT* brand, you run the risk of diluting that commercial success of the *ODT*.

As a larger metropolitan newspaper, the *ODT* had a steady flow of content from its wider regions, Kirkness said. However, his view was that the website should be used as a repository and a means of offering audio and video as variety for readers rather than a unique product. Because the most newspaper content was loaded online in its print format, the web editor role at the *ODT* was performed by a content up-loader who also had responsibility for releasing breaking news as it came in. The *ODT* did hold back some content from its website. For example, as a newspaper that still covers all local court hearings, these did not feature online because of concerns with potential legal ramifications. Columns, letters to the editor, and court news were reserved for the customer who subscribed to the paid online edition. He also said the *ODT's* stance on news online was different from that of other sites, where the tabloid culture often dominated:

Examples from around the world of what's most popular [online] often relate[s] to things that would be slightly more risqué than you would see in print newspapers, or things that are presented slightly different – so often to do with sex and

celebrity. It's often to do with trivialities that are interesting rather than what most people would describe as in-depth current affairs. We are a bit different to that, as most days our top five [stories online] are local stories that are on the front page of the print edition.

This finding was supported by the content analysis findings and is discussed further in Chapter Six.

### **5.2.1 Selection of News for the Editors' Pick Section**

The selection of specific news stories to feature in the Editors' Picks area of both the *Timaru Herald* and *Stuff* sites was discussed in the interviews. This was specifically addressed as it had been identified during the content analysis that individual stories in this area were not closely reflected in readers' picks. As the *ODT* does not feature this area on its website, these questions were not raised with the *ODT* editor. Cogle explained that, rather than identifying stories of note by editors for readers, the Editors' Picks area on the site was used to promote more local content on the upper section of the web page. This area gives readers a one-page visual of the local stories, negating the need to scroll down the web page:

I'd love to say we are choosing key things to highlight to our readers but often it is a purely practical thing. If we were larger, had more staff and were generating more constant local content I would like to think that would change. For now it is a practical reality about making as much visible as possible in the small space that we have.

For example, Cogle explained, sports stories often featured in this area because the actual sport section of the site was near the bottom of the homepage. She elected to

feature editorials in the editors' picks area as she had noted these proved popular with readers and gained a lot of comments. "People are looking for that [opinion] on the net and sometimes I don't think we promote it enough." Conversely, at *Stuff*, Boucher said this area was populated by the section editors within the site each day to promote content they liked or felt reader attention should be drawn to. The selection of news for this area was "fairly random", as some web editors used it more than others, although the goal was to maintain a varied mix of stories to entice readers to the editors' own website sections:

It is intended to showcase interesting content that might not necessarily merit being in our top five or six but that we do want to make the reader notice. Section editors work to get as much content on the homepage as they can from their section, as the homepage is by far the biggest driver of traffic to their areas.

The fact these stories were not well reflected in the *Stuff* readers' area was attributed by Boucher to the fast moving nature of the stories rather than a disconnection with readers. Boucher said she found the stories promoted there did feature in the Most Popular reader area but by the time they featured they had often been removed from the Editors' Pick section.

### **5.2.2 The Newsworthiness Elements of Good Web News**

Boucher, Kirkness, and Cogle were asked what specific elements they considered made a good news story for the web. Their opinions were similar; they agreed that fundamentally a great web news story still needed to be a strong news story. Cogle commented on this based on her own observations of reader choices online:

We have noticed this with splash stories, where splash is the main picture, it does not matter how good that photo is it doesn't mean the story will be well read. The old thing was if it was a great photo people will click on it but it doesn't really pan out that way. We have found the stronger the story is the better traffic it will get. However, Boucher's definition of a great web story also included consideration of web elements. It was a story that was rolling, had all the elements of live news, and used all the tools available in terms of web news provision – live, visual, allowing for regular updating, and including participation: "It's a swiftly developing story, a great video, perhaps a live stream, pictures and lots of opportunity for reader contribution. The newsroom loves those days". Her comments support *Stuff's* greater resources in terms of technology and staffing. Kirkness did not discuss specific web elements as being important in a good web news story, rather he commented that a good news story in general involved a focus on the human element, which he felt attracted readers.

### **5.3 Identifying and Meeting Audience Needs**

The interviewees had identified the needs of their specific audiences and how they met these needs. Both the *Herald* and *ODT* were committed to catering for their local readership, while *Stuff's* focus was the national audience. Boucher said *Stuff* had a mass, as opposed to local, audience with varied tastes for content. This was reflected in the site's editorial goal, which was to be seen as a "credible and serious source of hard news – but one not afraid to have a bit of fun", she said.

We do want people to feel that *Stuff* is their home for everything they need to know – be it New Zealand, international, sport or entertainment. One of the most important factors in our success is that our content is drawn from a large network of newsrooms around the country. We can provide richer and more relevant local

and hyper-local content [content that is primarily directed towards addressing the concerns of its audience in terms of a relatively small geographical location] than any other media site, as well as all the big national and overseas stories.

*Stuff* was its own brand, Boucher said, and ran to its own news agenda, as opposed to being a centralising point for content from its wider Fairfax news stable. While it started out daily with a selection of key news events from New Zealand, taken from Fairfax's dailies, it evolved during the day, focusing on live and breaking news working in conjunction with newsrooms nationwide:

We have moved away from the print versus web tensions that permeated newsrooms even a couple of years ago. All of our journalists now know the focus is on publishing the story when and where the audience wants it. Increasingly, that is digital first.

The *Timaru Herald* was "still learning" about its online audience, according to Cogle. She said statistics showed a core of people was still accessing the *Timaru Herald* before they accessed *Stuff*, which was positive for the brand. The focus was remaining local, which was important in maintaining an identity for the masthead online:

We are all one stable [Fairfax], but it's hard to break the mentality of the masthead versus *Stuff*, which is what we are working towards. The ultimate goal is not seeing ourselves as different, but I think that creates a tension, because once again our brand is the *Timaru Herald*. So this is a watch this space situation. How do we function cohesively but still manage to keep our identity at the same time?

Because the *ODT* entered the free online news market in 2008, later than most publishers (the 1996 digital version was a full print edition for subscribers only as opposed to an interactive news site), the website and the print edition have always been identified as distinct markets, Kirkness explained:

There are two different audiences. There are certainly people that read the paper and read online – I suspect they read online just to keep in touch, like we used to do with a radio and the news on the hour. Now I think people at work have access to some form of digital technology, whether it be computer laptop, iPad or iPhone, are, during the day, tuning in less to radio and instead going online to have a quick scout around and then go back to work again.

Kirkness went on to say the strong focus on local news was in line with the *ODT's* historical product, a view that was supported by the content analysis findings. This included stories relating to all local government activities, including regional community boards, as opposed to an exclusively metropolitan focus. He said this reflected the *ODT's* traditional position as a newspaper of record for the Otago region. While national and world news were available as sections on the site, they seldom warranted the lead position. Kirkness likened this to the layout of the daily newspaper, where national news is traditionally carried on page three:

The *ODT* is 151 years old, and has pretty much always been parochial. We don't ignore national news at all; however, as there are now so many options or alternatives for readers to find news and in terms of national coverage I'm not sure that people's first thought is to turn to the *ODT* for that. In 151 years we have always taken the view we are about Otago.

#### 5.4 The Value of News Websites and Reader Participation

According to the Fairfax's Sinead Boucher and Fleur Cogle, the value of news websites compared with a print news product is their ability to provide reader participation.

From a regional news provision perspective, Cogle felt the *Timaru Herald* site offered readers more content, given the print product was restricted by the number of pages and the advertising space required. Conversely, the web was not limited in terms of the number of stories that could be displayed because it was non-linear. It also provided the opportunity for readers to be involved in their local news provision:

In terms of serving the local community it's [the website] ideal. More and more people are going online and getting the news from the *Timaru Herald*. A lot of it is via Facebook and other social media sites and that brings in another element to it. We get people posting on our site, "I've heard the sirens going by or my dog has run away". People obviously feel they can and I wish people did that more. To be honest it is another news gathering source for us.

The website was also a means of finding out what types of stories the community were interested in: "We will put a link to a story up and it will either generate comment or it won't... that will give us a good idea of what things are being talked about".

In terms of the Facebook following, Cogle said this only represented a small section of the wider community. Therefore, the *Timaru Herald* encouraged other means of interaction with readers through more traditional means such as email, telephone and letters to the editor. While the *Timaru Herald* Facebook page has had success, becoming a focal point for the community, the Facebook function was removed from *Stuff* recently with the development of the *Stuff Nation* area across the Fairfax websites. The *Timaru Herald* had retained its own Facebook presence because Cogle believed readers within



the local community were more comfortable with Facebook than commenting live on the website:

I still think people feel more comfortable in this community commenting on a story on Facebook rather than having it directly on the story. I think that's a plus. If you want to comment on *Stuff Nation* you have to sign in. Whenever you are asked to sign into something it feels quite formal. People are familiar with Facebook, their friends are on Facebook. I think they trust it.

Cogle commented that more could be done to encourage reader participation online, such as providing areas on the site for community group news and sports information – reports that would not usually be covered in the newspaper. She believed this would encourage a greater sense of ownership and community for the website and in turn for the *Timaru Herald* brand. For the site to be viable it needed to be useful; therefore it needed to contain the news the local readership both wanted and could use.

Digital editor Sinead Boucher attributed *Stuff's* point of difference for the reader to its position as an online-only brand as opposed to being a site associated with a print edition. This provided more freedom to develop the site in ways that reflected a digital product as opposed to an online newspaper. An example of this was the development of the *Stuff Nation* concept, which allowed readers to contribute to the site and gather news on behalf of *Stuff*. Newsgathering took the form of news challenges posted on the site requesting reader input, photographs, and video related to specific news issues. An alternative were fun activities such as the Harlem Shake challenge in 2012, which asked readers to send in videos from their workplace of staff dancing to a popular song:

*Stuff Nation* was born out of our desire to make something more tangible out of the massive community that has built up around *Stuff*. We have tens of thousands of comments a month – 70-80,000. People love to engage and we wanted to make the site a much more participative place.

Boucher said *Stuff Nation* was intended to take the participatory concept further to allow the audience to follow other contributors and cluster in communities of common interests. Boucher saw reader participation as providing value in terms of bringing different perspectives and experiences to the news coverage. *Stuff* aimed to be a participative site as opposed to a broadcast site. Reader input gave the newsroom access to content that could not be produced internally and allowed for the formation of sub groups of interest. Neither Boucher nor Cogle were concerned this reader-produced content would detract from, or replace, news produced by trained journalists. Boucher said any reader contributions were vetted before publication and clearly labelled as reader-supplied material. The view that reader-produced material would not detract or replace journalist-produced content was shared by *ODT* editor Murray Kirkness.

Kirkness' view of the web news medium is that it is just another delivery method. Rather than the site offering readers a better service, it offered an alternative source for news. "It no longer matters how we provide it to people, it's just that we provide it when they want it and how they want it." The *ODT* web coverage was "not as sexy" as that offered by other news distributors, but was rather aimed at providing broad coverage through a combination of print and digital means, which also ticked "the commercial boxes". Kirkness believed reader input and participation was nothing new to the news industry, saying the web was just another mechanism for getting it:

It's [the online reader participation environment] just another option. In the old days, someone would ring up and say have you heard about this? Whereas nowadays you tend to get that sort of inquiry or submission through the email or online.

Both Boucher and Cogle identified the main advantage of web news as the ability both to get breaking news to an audience quickly, and to engage the reader through the participatory medium. Cogle and Kirkness also highlighted the ability to engage readers through the use of video and audio, giving the traditional print media the ability to engage with an audience they would not normally attract.

### **5.5 The News Choices of Online Readers**

The content analysis findings about what types of stories dominated the readers' most popular area of each site were discussed with the participants. None of the interviewees was surprised that crime, courts, police and justice, and human interest in particular, rated strongly with readers.

Fleur Cogle said the *Timaru Herald* reader choice findings (which identified the most popular categories as crime, courts, police and justice, followed by human interest and local government) were what she would expect based on her own informal observation. Both Cogle and Boucher highlighted stories of an immediate nature, such as breaking news, as those that performed well with readers of their respective sites online, regardless of the story type or topic. On a typical news week, they said, story topics that proved popular were human interest and sport. Boucher said stories with human elements were the most popular with readers across the board whether they were hard

or soft news. While she did not tailor the news according to what worked well with readers, Cogle informally assessed what was gaining reader attention to identify the news elements popular with the audience.

Boucher shared a similar view, saying that while *Stuff* editors did take into account stories that rated well with readers, this was only one factor in content provision. *Stuff* reader preference findings presented to Boucher showed crime, courts, police and justice as the most popular choice, followed by human interest and celebrity/entertainment news. In response, Boucher said her team tried not to focus on crime, unless it merited prominent coverage; instead the aim was to give readers a broad mix “because they are a broad group, not a niche group”. While she agreed crime, human interest, and celebrity news often featured highly on the site, she also pointed out that politics, education, and health often ranked well on the site, depending on the news day:

Our editors are very savvy at knowing what our readers like, but this is only one aspect they consider when placing stories. We get a lot of audience data and it would be easy to slip into the habit of editing by numbers but we try hard to avoid this. We pick a mix of stories that we think are important, interesting, relevant or just fun. There is skill in getting the balance right and it is rewarding when you can see the readers agree and the traffic reflects editing choices.

The *ODT* news website findings presented an anomaly in that while crime, court, police and justice were again the most popular choice, business and finance featured in second position. Accident- and disaster-related stories were the third most popular selection, closely followed by human interest. Murray Kirkness agreed the findings were what he

would expect and were similar to what was most popular in the print edition. He said he would have expected local government (which was in fourth position) to have ranked higher than business, given its popularity with the print audience. The strength of human interest was attributed to online reader preference for easily digested content. The *ODT* did pay attention to readers' picks as a means of online provision, a process that Kirkness likened to the traditional newspaper practice of highlighting stories that would grab attention above the fold of a broadsheet to encourage casual sales. He said the lead stories in readers' most popular would give the production team an idea of what readers wanted, which they combined with what they felt readers needed.

## **5.6 Competitiveness and Commercial Viability**

The online news environment in New Zealand is still evolving, according to the interviewees, and still faces challenges, particularly in terms of profitability and resourcing. *ODT* editor Murray Kirkness' core concerns were based on the profitability of the online product:

The web is likely to become more important to business than less important given so much of life these days is digital. The key issue is how to monetarise that. To me it's the single biggest challenge to news media today.

Expanding on the commercial pressures involved in the web environment, Kirkness cited the performance of *The Guardian* newspaper in Britain, which, while it was a publication he respected, had faced significant commercial challenges:

As far as the website goes it's tremendously successful but there is a company commercially that has lost hundreds of thousands of quid – not dollars, quid – in the last few years and that clearly is not sustainable.

Like most industry players, the *ODT* was considering the possibility of a paywall approach for the website, where readers will have to pay to access the full stories online. As the web was likely to become more important to business because of consumers' growing digital lifestyle, it must be commercially viable. He said that while he wore an "editorial hat" and made decisions on that basis, rather than for commercial reasons, he also accepted, as "every editor must", there was a commercial imperative to what he did:

Newspapers are interesting, and particularly those privately, by that I mean non-government, private businesses that do our business every day in public. We still make our decision on public good or community good... but at the end of the day, we have to pay the bills.

Kirkness commented that, while he felt Fairfax's online coverage was excellent, the company's public financial performance suggested it could do better. When he compared the level of Fairfax's online resourcing with the *ODT*'s, Kirkness questioned whether Fairfax had "thrown too much at it". Comparably, the *ODT* had one content uploader for its website and no dedicated online journalists, as opposed to Fairfax's large stable of newspapers and a team of journalists dedicated to online news production:

I am just considering the figures. But what would concern me would be *The Guardian* experience, whereby they have enormous resources, for instance silly things, a British football team will play on the continent and within minutes of fulltime there's match reports, there's videos, but they are still losing hundreds of thousands of pounds a year – how can that possibly be sustainable?

Kirkness said the New Zealand web environment was competitive because all publishers sought to be first with the news. His only concern with it was the impact on accuracy as publishers concentrated on being first with breaking news, rather than taking the time to consider facts – while being first with the news was important, it should not come at the cost of not being correct.

*Timaru Herald* digital editor, Fleur Cogle, shared Kirkness' opinion on the competitiveness of the New Zealand environment, although she saw the competition as more collegial in nature. "I think the days of jealously guarding your site and trying to keep people on your site are over. I think we realise it's not how the web works". The local news environment was collaborative, with any competition for news "largely friendly". The *Timaru Herald* had no daily news competition in the South Canterbury region, the only other news provider is an Allied Press weekly tabloid:

We do have some competition in terms of us having masthead competition. We have an interesting relationship with *The Press* [also Fairfax owned]. Obviously we still co-operate and share stories. Sometimes there is a little friendly competition between newsrooms in terms of gathering information but at the end of the day we can all share it so that's okay.

Just as Kirkness noted with the *ODT*, Cogle said the trusted brand associated with the *Timaru Herald* enabled a loyal readership to be maintained both in terms of the print edition and the website. However, she also warned this did not mean the news provider was not at risk in the future:

We are fortunate in that we have a brand name that people recognise and they [readers] recognise online as well and that has carried over. We would be foolish to

think that it was going to save us. If they [Fairfax] ever came to the point that they looked at the mastheads and said why have we got reporters in all these places? I don't think we can rest on our laurels.

Cogle also believed the print product in general was suffering from falling sales, in which the web played a part:

At this point, it seems unavoidable that print is suffering, for a variety of reasons, but being able to access information online obviously does have an impact on print everywhere.

Boucher saw New Zealanders as well served by the online environment, with competition a positive factor in this. Competition for *Stuff* included all national websites such as the *New Zealand Herald*, the television network websites, and the blogging and debating community.

## **5.7 Resourcing of News Websites**

Cogle also raised concerns about resourcing websites and the loss of experienced journalists who were being replaced by young journalists who often lacked the confidence to do the job well. As the only staff member at the *Timaru Herald* dedicated to the website, she felt that, should the site become more of a focus, it would require more staffing devoted to it. The lack of staff also created difficulty in ensuring fresh content was available at peak viewing times, as required by Fairfax and discussed earlier in this chapter. While she said her employment in the role had given the site more credence in the minds of the existing print team, it was still intertwined with the print edition, rather than being seen as a separate news vehicle: "I think that would



change if we had more staff [dedicated to the website] because it is essentially me...we are limited in that I can only do so much.”

The adjustment at the *Timaru Herald* to producing an online product had also involved continuing re-education of staff, for example, encouraging the reporters to think about interactivity and specific visual elements for the web, such as graphics:

I’ve had people come up to me and say “I’ve got this graphic for the story” and then I look at it and I say, “I’m going to show you what this looks like online and you tell me if you think it should run”, and it will be tiny font that you can’t enlarge because it’s not an okay web format to use.

Boucher saw other challenges for new reporters entering the trade, particularly the need for specialist skills. Journalists need much broader skills and backgrounds than they did in the past:

We absolutely expect a reporter to be able to file comfortably for any platform as and when we need – from breaking news to a longer read. Some of these people may be able to take photos and video – a lot do now on their iPhones. But we also need to develop more specialist skills that fit the digital age. I am a strong advocate of developers in the newsroom, of bringing together the storyteller and the technical person to create new forms of storytelling. My goal is a newsroom that has journalists, developers and designers all working together to produce the best journalism, using all the resources that the web allows us to have.

## 5.8 Democratic Engagement in the Online Environment

The value and impact of the online news environment and its role in democracy was discussed with interviewees, who felt that, broadly, New Zealanders were well served by the online news environment. All, however, believed readers were also responsible for ensuring they were informed on matters of importance.

Cogle said readers' needs in general were being met by New Zealand online news sites, but still saw potential for the development of the digital environment. While the news sites were providing readers with all the information they needed to be informed, Cogle, along with *Stuff's* Sinead Boucher, still argued that the onus was on the individual:

The thing with digital is it does provide people with avenues to access more information more easily. So, when we add a link into a story, we are providing another avenue for a person to research something. You could argue that it's providing another source for people to use, not necessarily making them better informed. That's up to them.

The *ODT's* Murray Kirkness based his perception of readers being better informed on his own experiences as a reader of news online, saying it provided more browsing opportunities. He felt the page impressions, or amount of time spent on a page, would be greater for a print publication than online and that online readers were more likely to tailor their reading to their own individual preferences:

I think most people will turn just about every page of the paper. Some people might say "sport I'm not interested", and skip a few pages, but online I think people will click on the home page, have a quick scan and maybe see a story or two and then move on.

This is supported by the literature presented in Chapter 2 where Tewskbury (2002) found readers were more likely to have chance encounters with news in print than online where they would often search for specific areas of interest.

Kirkness said this changing environment was not necessarily for the better, because those who wanted to be well informed actively needed to read widely. In terms of the media and specifically the online media role in democracy, Kirkness reiterated that fundamental to democracy was a free and unhindered media, although he qualified this by saying media still required some regulation. Self-regulation in New Zealand was still largely effective, he said. The web did not impact on regulation, as it was just an alternative delivery method, not a separate product. The impact he predicted the web might have on news and democracy was in terms of reader choice, and whether choices made by browsers consisted of material that had been published with insufficient checks and balances being applied:

Traditional news media have always carried out those [checks and balances], but some blogs or news aggregators may just throw that material up. I think, by and large, reader scepticism about some of those sites from consumers will help, as they are looking for the trusted news brand, whether it be the *Stuffs* or the *BBCs* or the *ODT*, as they believe what we are telling them.

Kirkness's concerns lay with a younger generation of readers who were more susceptible to believing everything they saw in print or read online:

There is process for not just news organisations but society in general to teach scepticism. People need to learn to stop and think: Does this actually smell right?

Does it sound right? Where have I accessed this information and do I trust this source?

Cogle did not believe readers were solely using online resources to make decisions; rather they were making decisions or forming opinions based on a variety of sources.

She felt the media still took the role of watchdog seriously:

I think we are still aware that it's part of our role; it needs to be. Whether or not we always live up to that expectation, I think possibly we don't, but we are not sitting here going, "Right our job is to get people to click on stories because we want to sell advertising". Part of our job is that we are here to let people know what is happening in our community.

New Zealanders had access to a wide range of news sources, Boucher believed, which encouraged and informed participation in a democratic society:

I think New Zealanders are very well served by news media sites in terms of helping inform and educate them on issues and what is happening locally and nationally, and have ample access to information and opinion to help them engage in a democratic society. I am not just referring to Fairfax sites – we have dozens of regional and local sites right down to neighbourhood level.

Boucher also believed New Zealanders were well catered for, given all mainstream media in New Zealand continued to act responsibly and ethically in producing news and content with the addition of "a very vigorous" blogging and debating community.

## 5.9 Summary and Conclusion

The key areas explored in these interviews were: the history of the websites, the selection of news for the online news medium and the elements of good web news; identifying audience need, the value of reader participation; the preferences of readers and the impact this has on selection; the challenges facing the news media in relation to the internet, including commercial and competitive aspects; and the skill set of emerging journalists, and the impacts on democratic engagement. These findings are now summarised. The three sites varied in terms of history and development. *Stuff* is an online-only brand, drawing on the Fairfax newspaper stable, which has evolved to having a dedicated online editorial team. The *Timaru Herald* site is one of these Fairfax sites on which *Stuff* draws, having one member of its editorial team tasked with overseeing the website. The *ODT* presented a similar picture to that of the *Timaru Herald*, in that while it was one of the earliest subscriber content sites, it was one of the latest free online news sites to develop in New Zealand. It also has only one dedicated web staff member and draws on content from its wider regional publications.

In terms of news provision, the interviewees have highlighted both similarities and differences in terms of the online news selection employed by three sites studied. This can be seen in the differences in approach of the regionally orientated news sites and the national website, where the focus for the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* is strongly local, as opposed to *Stuff*, which has a national focus. *ODT* editor Murray Kirkness saw the website as just another vehicle to offer the same news, rather than seeing the website as having the potential to offer readers more, or something different from the newspaper. While the *ODT* would hold stories back from the website for the morning paper, the practice of the two Fairfax sites, where possible, was to update stories and feature

breaking news as they came to hand. Digital editor Sinead Boucher also explained that while *Stuff's* focus was strongly national, it also aimed to provide a mass readership with varied content which included entertainment news.

The core difference noted here between the *Timaru Herald*, *ODT*, and *Stuff* was the regional providers' aim to meet local needs compared with *Stuff's* national focus. As a division of *Stuff*, Cogle noted the tension in differentiating between the *Timaru Herald's* masthead as a local online news provider, as opposed to being part of a larger stable. The focus of the *Timaru Herald* site remained that of the print edition, being local first. This view of the primacy of local news was shared by Kirkness, who recognised while there were two audiences – the online and the print audience – the *ODT* retained its historical position as Otago's newspaper of record.

The online environment's potential for enhancing reader participation and community engagement was being embraced by Fairfax, according to the interviewees. Boucher and Cogle saw participation as an advantage of the web news environment though Cogle said getting this buy-in from the South Canterbury community had proved difficult. While readers were content to post on the *Timaru Herald's* Facebook site, they were not so inclined to post on the news site, which involved joining the *Stuff* Nation group. Reader engagement had become an increased focus at *Stuff* where a specific area had been set up to foster online community groups of interest. Murray Kirkness' view differed, as he saw reader engagement as nothing new for the industry, commenting that this had always occurred and citing examples that did not involve an instant engagement as telephone or letters.

According to Kirkness, challenges facing the New Zealand online news industry involved the monetarising of the product in response to commercial pressures. This included considering a paywall approach. He also cited accuracy, as publishers sought to be first with the news as a concern. Cogle saw competition as less of an issue, describing the environment as collegial. However, she said the web environment presented risks for regional newspapers as print sales were reduced.

In terms of the digital news trend and democracy, the editors all felt there was an onus on readers to ensure they were informed. The interviewees believed the media still played a role in ensuring readers had access to the news with which they needed to engage, but they accepted that the web did offer greater opportunity for readers to avoid important news. The concerns raised by the interviewees varied from the younger generation's inability to apply scepticism, the inaccuracy of information on the web and how this could impact on mainstream news sites as competition increased, and the inability of young journalists to ask the hard questions or dig deeper for information

### **5.9.1 Conclusion.**

This chapter has presented the results of the interviews conducted with editors from the three New Zealand news websites, the *ODT*, *Stuff*, and the *Timaru Herald*, which were the subject of this study. The findings presented here sought to address the fourth Research Question adopted for this study: What are the online news site editors' perspectives of New Zealand's online news environment? The interviews have identified the variations between the three websites in terms of target audience, resourcing, ownership, and history. In terms of provision, both the *Timaru Herald* and *ODT* are locally focussed compared with *Stuff's* national stance. Compared with the

regional websites, *Stuff* has significant resource both from its wider newspaper stable and in terms of staffing of the web division. Making money from the web was a core concern of *ODT* editor Murray Kirkness, while Fleur Cogle from the *Timaru Herald* was concerned with retaining an identity independent of *Stuff*. In terms of the online news environment's potential impacts on democracy, all believed their coverage was sufficient to ensure readers were informed, although all felt readers need to take responsibility to ensure they remained informed.

Chapter Six, Discussion, will consider the perspectives raised here and the findings from the content analysis (Chapter Four) with reference both to the research questions and to the literature presented in Chapter Two.



## Chapter Six Discussion

The purpose of this research was to consider the online news choices made by readers and providers of New Zealand newspaper websites *Stuff*, the *Otago Daily Times (ODT)*, and the *Timaru Herald*. The news choices made by both providers and readers online are important for two reasons. First, journalists are generally the main source of information about the world beyond our immediate environment (McNair, 2009). Further, a core role of the media is communicating the information the public need to engage in democracy (Anderson & Ward, 2007). Second, the advent of the digital news environment has prompted debate about the impact on society and on democratic engagement of consumers' ability to select their own news diet, as opposed to following the news agenda traditionally set by news providers. Therefore, this discussion examines the results of the content analysis and interviews (Chapters Four and Five) with reference to findings of similar studies and to literature on the democratic role of media and the impact of the internet. The chapter is structured around five main areas of investigation in the thesis: reader news choices, provider news choices, discussion of whether a choice gap exists between readers and providers, commercialism and tabloidisation, and online news and democracy.

The two research methods used, content analysis and interviews, combined to form a picture of what story topics were being selected by both readers/news consumers and news providers of online news and provided an insight into how these decisions were made. The interviews also provided perspective on the online news environment as it is in New Zealand, because interviewees discussed the commercial and competitive

environment as well as content selection. The findings from both the qualitative and quantitative research conducted for this study will be discussed in line with themes in the literature presented in Chapter Two. This will serve to address the Research Questions posed for this study:

RQ 1. What story topics appear in New Zealand newspaper online-news readers' most popular sections?

RQ 2. What story topics are selected as lead stories and as Editor's Picks by New Zealand on-line news providers?

RQ 3. What differences (if any) exist between regional newspapers online-news and national newspaper online-news?

RQ4. What are online editors' perspectives on the online news medium and its content?

The content analysis findings, alongside those from the interviews with the editors, will also stimulate assessment of online news and the role it may play in democratic engagement, particularly social responsibility and democratic participant theory. The chapter will also examine the competitive news environment, and the commercialism and tabloidisation of news as linked to the findings. Finally, it will consider whether a divergence in choice is emerging in the online news sphere between the news selections of providers compared with those of readers.

## **6.1 What People Read Online**

This section addresses the first research question: What story topics appear in New Zealand newspaper online-news readers' most popular sections? It discusses each of the three websites individually in terms of what its audiences chose to read online, these will be compared with previous research findings and considered in the light of

social responsibility and democratic-participant theory alongside the commercial imperative and increase in tabloidisation. News websites provide readers with greater opportunity to select the news they want to read and avoid that which they do not (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002). Unlike the daily newspaper, where a wide range of stories are provided and can be scanned, online users select their news diet by clicking to access stories on specific sites of interest, or by signing up to news feeds based on topic preference. There is also evidence for divergence between online and print news media readers. Althaus and Tewksbury (2000) found print newspaper audiences were more likely to engage with international, political, and national stories than those who read online. De Waal and Schönbach (2008) affirmed this finding, as did Yang and Grabe (2011), who found consumers were more aware of public affairs news if exposed to print news sources as opposed to online news sources. Previous studies of online readership preferences indicate audiences are making soft or non-public affairs news choices, which may have an impact on society's ability to engage in the democratic process (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; d'Haenens, Jankowski & Heuvelman, 2004; Iyengar & Hahn, 2011; Prior, 2005; Tewksbury, 2003; Van Heekeren, 2005).

### **6.1.1 Summary of reader choices.**

Of the 21 story categories, the top five choices for *Stuff* readers were crime-related stories, followed by human interest, celebrity and entertainment, sport, and disaster/accident stories. These findings indicated *Stuff* readers were showing a preference for soft news in particular, given three of the categories were soft in nature (sport, celebrity news, and human interest). It was observed during the coding process that stories on justice or police policy matters were a very small part of the crime category; the majority of stories were about criminal activities (across all websites).

Therefore, the story topics that ranked highest with readers can be identified as those that aim to entertain or are emotive, as opposed to public affairs stories that have specific relevance to society and its functions, such as politics, war, and economics (Boczkowski & Peer, 2011). This preference becomes clearer when the popularity of public affairs news stories in *Stuff* is considered. For example, stories relating to national government activities represented 2.4 percent of readers' choices; business, finance and economy was 3.3 percent; and international news was not represented at all in reader choices. In comparison, *ODT* readers were engaging with a greater number of public affairs news stories, with business and finance, and local government in the top five. Like *Stuff* crime, courts, police and justice stories were top ranked by *ODT* online readers, disaster/ accident and human interest also ranked highly, but entertainment and celebrity stories were just 5.1 percent of reader selections (ranking in seventh position), indicating the readership had considerably less interest in this topic than the *Stuff* audience did. However, *ODT* readers' stronger interest in public affairs news did not extend to national, politically orientated stories, and international political stories did not feature at all.

As with the other two websites, the most popular story choice among readers of the *Timaru Herald* was crime, courts, police, and justice. This was followed by human interest, local government, business, finance and the economy, and sport. Again readers of the *Timaru Herald* website were very like those of the *ODT*, in that the top five choices indicate a mixture of public affairs-related and non-public affairs-related news story preferences. The *Timaru Herald* site findings were comparable with the *ODT* stories in relation to national political events – these stories were ranked eleventh equal with consumer issues at 1.8 percent of the stories read. The website editors were generally

not surprised at the readers' top five news selections. Murray Kirkness of the *ODT* and Fleur Cogle of the *Timaru Herald* said the reader selections reflected the print coverage that catered to their local audience. Kirkness did admit to expecting local government would be a more popular topic than business in the findings.

### **6.1.2 Soft news choices.**

The findings indicate that, with the exception of local government news on the *Timaru Herald* and *ODT* websites and business news across all three websites, readers prefer soft news topics in their news selections. Findings for the *Stuff* website support those of van Heekeren (2005), and Tewksbury (2003): readers were found to be opting for more soft news. Van Heekeren's analysis of *Sydney Morning Herald* reader choices also found entertainment and sports stories ranked within the top five reader story selections online. Unlike her study, however, national politics and international news did not rank highly on the websites sampled for this thesis. Tewksbury's 2003 study of American online reader choices discovered hard or serious news was not as popular as soft news choices with readers. He found sports news the most frequently read story type, across 13 online news publications, followed by business, arts and entertainment, and feature stories. It is interesting that business was also a popular reader choice for this study across all three websites. The tendency in this study for readers to make softer news choices more frequently is consistent with the studies of Althaus and Tewksbury, (2002), Boczkowski, Mitchelstein and Walter (2011) Boczkowski and Mitchelstein, (2010). The soft news selections made by *Stuff* readers' give rise to concerns that the ability to select news online will lead to a less politically aware and informed public, as argued by several authors (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; d'Haenens, Jankowski &

Heuvelman, 2004; Prior, 2005; Tewksbury, 2003; Van Heekeren, 2005; Iyengar & Hahn, 2011).

### **6.1.3 Crime news.**

It is accepted that crime as a story topic cannot be easily labelled as a sensationalist news type. As discussed by Grabe, Zhou and Barnett (2001), crime stories are often labelled as sensationalist based on their ability to invoke strong emotion. Yet, as noted by other scholars, the prominent reporting of crime has value in maintaining society's shared notions of decency and morality (Erickson, 1996; Francke 1995, both cited in Grabe et al, 2001). A second consideration of crime, and specifically the reporting of crime, is the distorted picture of reality that can be created by the over reporting of crime in general and more specifically, of violent crime. Because crime is used frequently as a lead to attract readers suggests that in readers' perceptions there is more of a crime problem than police statistics support (Williams & Dickinson, 1993). As a result of this over-reporting, an unrealistic fear of crime can be created in communities. As the most dominant story topic in the overall content analysis findings, lead provision and readers' choices it is important to note, as stated by Pensar (2006) and Wiltenburg (2004), that the promotion of crime can serve a commercial function in its ability to attract readers. When we consider the popularity of the Scott Guy murder trial coverage in the *ODT*, despite the story not being local, which editor Murray Kirkness maintained was the website's main focus, the story's prominent publication on the website's home page can be seen as more about attracting readers than serving to inform local people about local matters. While *Stuff* digital editor Sinead Boucher said the website's editors tended not to focus on crime unless it merited prominent coverage, the findings from the content analysis show 341 crime-related stories

featured on the site during the sample period and 116 crime stories were in the readers' choices. The findings are similar in both the dominance of crime coverage across the other two websites and its popularity with readers. Further, none of the website editors was surprised at this story topic's top ranked placement in their readers' choices. As this study only considered the quantitative representation of crime across the websites, to label the dominance of the story topic as evidence of sensationalist coverage would be unsupported. However, the story topic's dominance overall does support the use of crime reporting as a means of attracting audiences.

## **6.2 News Provider Selections**

The changing nature of the news consumers and the commercial drive for newspapers to gain their audience share has been highlighted by a number of authors (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; Carpenter, 2010; Rainie, 2000; Salwen, Garrison & Driscoll, 2005). Other writers have pointed to a gap between news choices of online news publishers and their readers (Boczkowski & Peer, 2011). Therefore, a major focus of this study was to compare the news decisions being made by the news publishers with those of readers to see if there was a gap between selections and preferences. This section addresses Research Question Two: What story topics are selected as lead stories and as Editors' Picks by New Zealand on-line news providers? It also considers Research Question Three: What differences (if any) exist between regional newspapers online-news and national newspaper online-news? The stories that represented the news provider selections gathered for this study were the lead stories from each website and the lead picture and Editors' Pick stories from the *Timaru Herald* and *Stuff*.

Crime-related stories were the dominant lead selection across the three websites

studied, with human interest, business, finance and economy, and disaster and accident news also featuring in the top five ranked story topics for all websites. For the regional publications, local government news was also strong at 9.2 percent of the *ODT* lead story selections and 17.4 percent of the *Timaru Herald* lead stories. National government news ranked higher with *Stuff* at 5.5 percent compared with the regions, where it was 1.8 percent of the *ODT* lead stories and 3.3 percent of the *Timaru Herald's*. Featured least across the sites were international politics, primary industries, war and defence, and science and technology. Human interest and celebrity and entertainment news proved the most popular lead picture story topics, while the Editors' Picks section saw sport and human interest stories the highest ranked topics.

### **6.2.1 Provider story topic choices.**

As mentioned above, crime was the most popular lead story selection for all three websites studied, and disaster and accident also ranked in the top three selections for the *ODT* and *Stuff*. Both meet the accepted definition of a hard news story type (Media Monitoring, 2011) given they are often breaking news events. It is accepted that some reporting of crime is highly routine, but, based on observations during coding, those that make the homepage online in particular are more often prominent crime events or activities. However, as noted by McNair (2009), these story topics also align with a tabloid approach in that they are negative and at times sensationalist, which links them with a commercial imperative. Crime was also the most popular story topic choice with readers. Further, Pensar (2006) cited the reporting of human tragedy and sorrow as typical of tabloidisation where grief is made a matter of public concern. Alternatively, Hindman (1996) and Shah et al. (2001) argued that the reporting of crime could be perceived as serving to reinforce society's norms, values and social arrangements – an



important community news function. However, while the majority of crime coverage on the *Timaru Herald* website was local in origin – which can be seen as serving a community function – that on the *ODT* and *Stuff* was broader, suggesting the publication of crime news was often serving a different agenda, that of attracting audiences through sensationalist news. This was evidenced in the content analysis findings, which show national crime coverage featured on the *ODT* and crime coverage from both New Zealand and overseas appeared on *Stuff*. In comparison, no national or international crime stories made homepage coverage on the *Timaru Herald*.

Joy Wiltenburg (2004), in her historical study of crime reporting, describes the sensationalism of crime as a commercial product that had been successfully presented by the media to “mould common responses to extreme violations of social norms” (p. 1378). On this basis it can be argued crime fulfils a more sensationalist news market than one aimed at responsibly reporting public affairs. *ODT* editor Murray Kirkness maintained the *ODT*'s stance on news online was different from that of other sites, where the tabloid culture often dominated:

Examples from around the world of what's most popular [online] often relate to things that would be slightly more risqué than you would see in print newspapers, or things that are presented slightly different – so often to do with sex and celebrity. It's often to do with trivialities that are interesting rather than what most people would describe as in-depth current affairs. We are a bit different to that, as most days our top five [stories online] are local stories that are on the front page of the print edition.

Yet the amount of minor crime coverage on the site alongside the dominance of human interest would suggest some “trivialities” do warrant publication in the *ODT* and do

support a more commercial stance in attracting readers. Arguably then, given the competitive nature of the internet news environment, the prevalence of crime coverage in the lead stories is primarily to fulfil the providers' desire to attract audiences. This can be seen as having some success, given the story topic was also the most popular with readers of all sites.

The disaster and accident stories, which featured strongly as lead stories on the *ODT* and *Stuff*, could be seen as offering an element of sensationalist or tabloid news value. These support the popular culture saying "if it bleeds it leads" (Pooley, 1989). Pooley, a journalist, said "The thoughtful [news] report is buried because sensational stories must launch the broadcast: If it bleeds, it leads." As McQuail (1992) stated, the typical logic of mass media, particularly in a competitive news environment, is to offer sensationalist news to attract readers. This detracts from the more important issues of daily domestic or international politics. At a local level in particular, many of the accident and disaster stories were not about deaths, rather some were reports on everyday road accidents, or workplace injuries. For example, 31 of the 58 accident/disaster stories in the readers' area of the *ODT* were identified as car crash stories. Yet these lead stories involved images that align with McGregor's (2002) concept of visualness as the dominant news value of our time. Further, these images meet a sensationalist human fascination with gore, as described by Wiltenburg (2004). The lead stories on *Stuff* described accidents throughout the country and formed the basis of many of the stories that appeared on the site from areas that receive little coverage, such as the regional South Island, as evidenced in a cross-analysis of the geographic origin where 12 of the 22 stories from southern regions were about accidents. The purpose in selecting these for publication agrees strongly with the views of the authors presented in this section.

### 6.2.1.1 Local and national government news coverage.

Shah, McLeod and Yoon (2001) described local media as key to informing their communities on political happenings at a local government level. Comrie (2009), Atkinson (2011), and Lacy, Fico, Baldwin, Bergan, Wildman, and Zube (2012) also agreed the provision of local political news was an important public service for local communities. These views are supported by the findings, where the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* promote local government news comparatively strongly on their websites (e.g. 13.9% of *ODT*'s leads; 17.4% of *Timaru Herald*'s). In contrast, local government coverage was only 0.4 percent of *Stuff*'s lead stories and Editors' Picks. Further, the *Stuff* local government stories that did feature tended to be sensationalist, focussing on conflict with local government authorities, while those on the regional sites were more often focussed on daily local government activities. The findings also indicated national political news featured more often, though still not highly, as *Stuff* lead stories than they did on the regional sites. This raises the question as to where, or if, regional news consumers are accessing national political news? This is particularly true when we consider that only five of these stories were published in the lead position for the *ODT*. Tewksbury (2005) found audience were becoming increasingly selective of their news sources online and opting to refer to specialist news sources for specific topics. Based on this view, regional audiences may be seeking political news elsewhere, a conclusion that supports George and Waldfogel's (2006) view that community newspapers would opt to increase local coverage and reduce national coverage in order to attract target audiences.

During the sample period of this study a significant political issue that featured in the television media was the National government's plans to sell off New Zealand assets.

Three stories relating to this were published in the lead position on the *ODT* and five on the *Timaru Herald*; all eight stories covered the issue from the perspective of local group protests. Not one story related to the asset sales featured in a lead position on *Stuff*. Of the 25 political stories that featured in lead position on *Stuff*, 10 focused on the non-political activities or behaviour of specific politicians. The fact these stories focused on the “players” or the elite persons (Pensar, 2006) rather than political issues, supports the claims of McNair (2009). He criticised the dumbing down of media content as infotainment and the increased focus on the competition between individuals particularly in political journalism as detracting from important political issues. Only five of the leads on *Stuff* actually concerned political policy. Further, reflecting their avowed focus on local news, international political stories did not feature on the *ODT* or the *Timaru Herald* in the lead story position and only one featured in *Stuff*. Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2010), in their study comparing reader and news provider story topic choices, said that during times of heightened political activity, political coverage would increase. Because this study was not conducted at such a time this assertion cannot be tested, although this would provide an interesting future area for study, particularly during a national election campaign.

#### **6.2.1.2 Local news for local people.**

Supporting the value of local media in playing a role in community involvement (McLeod, Daily, Guo, Eveland, Bayer, Yang & Wang, 1996; Viswanath, Kosicki, Fredin & Park, 2000) are the findings from the *Timaru Herald* and *ODT*. While human interest news and entertainment and celebrity news ranked highly on all sites, the difference those stories carried on the regional websites compared with the national *Stuff* site was that the stories were about ordinary people, local celebrities, and events. Hindman

(1996) described this connection to persons, events and issues within the community as creating allegiance and ties to the community, because these local publications reflect local agendas. Sport, which was the most popular Editor's Pick on the *Timaru Herald*, can be viewed as serving the same function in a local context. In contrast, the human interest and celebrity news carried on *Stuff* was often concerned with the activities of American celebrities. This style of coverage was more in-line with Pensar's (2006) view on the rise of infotainment. The findings also support the view of Bakke (1999, cited in Currie n.d) that news of social importance was being overlooked in favour of trivial rarities.

Business, finance and economy ranked consistently across all sites in third position as a lead story. More than half these stories in the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* covered positive developments in their respective regions. Many of these stories were pseudo-events that offered elements of public relations or advertising spin. Harcup and O'Neill (2001), who first noted this trend toward advertising as news, cited the lack of resource in the newsroom, the competitive market, and changing news values as contributing factors to this spin emerging as news. Despite the concerns of Harcup and O'Neill of the growing presence of PR-based news, others, such as Viswanath et al. (2000), have maintained such positive coverage draws attention to local events and has power in creating homogenous communities. *Stuff's* approach to business coverage was different because a minority of the business-related stories were positive. Many business stories were concerned with economic downfall, job losses, share falls, and serious financial inquiries. Here, while the stories were still categorised as 'business and economy' there was a difference in the news values. A different picture is being painted at a national level by *Stuff* compared with that at a local level; while we see less of the public

relations spin as Franklin's (1997) asserts, news providers are taking a more commercially orientated and dramatic angle in coverage.

### **6.2.2 Comparisons with previous research of online news choices.**

The story topic choices from the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* support Rosenstiel, Mitchell, Purcell and Rainie's (2011) findings. These authors identified 11 local topics for which readers looked to their local newspaper: crime, local politics, community events, arts events, taxes, schooling, housing government activities, jobs, zoning and development, and social services. The story topic choices from the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* reinforce these findings, when we consider crime, business, and local government all rank highly. The stories do not support an interest in arts, education or social services (welfare). It may be that at the time of sampling these issues were not of high news value and arts stories would be more likely carried in the newspapers' community weekly editions.

Combined across all sites, the popularity of soft, entertainment-related and sensationalist news topics does not align with findings from previous research where Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2010) and Boczkowski et al. (2011) found journalists overall were promoting more public affairs than non-public affairs news in the lead story position. Only local government politics in the regions, local court news, and business could be defined as of public interest value, yet the nature of the stories addressed above is questionable in terms of this value. National politics, in comparison, ranked poorly across all sites in terms of the number of featured stories. In their studies, Boczkowski and Mitchelstein and Boczkowski et al. also noted a general tension between consumer wants and journalists who still adhered to the function of media as watchdogs, yet this is not apparent in this study, where the news topic choices are

consistent between readers and providers. However, in 2011, Boczkowski and Peer, using four American news sites (two of which were online divisions of daily newspapers), found journalists on all sites were opting to promote more non-public affairs news stories, which is supported by this study. This is further reinforced by the findings in relation to the Editors' Pick section and the lead picture section on the two Fairfax websites, which took a softer, and in *Stuff's* case, a more tabloid, news approach.

### **6.2.3 What makes news online?**

This section considers the views of the editors of the three websites in terms of what makes news in the online news environment and the focus of each site in terms of what they selected as news. The differences in focus of news provision extended from what topics make news to how it should be presented online. The editors' definitions of what makes a good web news story indicate *Stuff* has a more multimedia focus, while the *ODT* and the *Timaru Herald* editors are "sticking to their knitting" in terms of what makes news, lacking the capability and staff resource to produce online video, live reader participation, and live feeds. *Stuff's* Sinead Boucher described such stories as "rich with web elements", including opportunities for reader participation and video; a view that is consistent with Tapas' (2006) concept of multi-mediality. Her view is likely reflective of her significant experience and history working in the online news market. Whereas both Kirkness of the *ODT* and Cogle of the *Timaru Herald* saw good news stories online the same as those in print, identifying a human element as the key news values which would be core in any news story. The editors' definitions of what makes a good online news story are important in teasing out the difference between the regional and national news sites. Additionally, they reflect the nature of the websites, with the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* arms of print editions and *Stuff* being a stand-alone web news

provider. This difference in opinion of web news, at least partially, reflects the resourcing in the associated newsrooms. *Stuff* has two dedicated online newsrooms and the ability to draw on news from Fairfax publications throughout the country. The *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* have one member of the parent publication staff dedicated to populating their websites. Further, *Timaru Herald* digital editor Fleur Cogle noted the transition from being a print product to a multi-platform product, which involved a consequent change for staff from just producing a print product, had taken some time to embed in the newsroom, as had the associated skill development. Readership and resourcing was also noted by the Fairfax editors in the selection of the Editors' Picks stories for the two Fairfax websites. While Cogle said the *Timaru Herald* used the Editors' Picks to promote more local stories in the top half of the viewing page, Boucher said *Stuff* used Editor's Picks to direct traffic to other areas of its website. However, the *ODT*, which does not feed its own national online news service, had a different approach to online local news selection. Murray Kirkness said the *ODT* would hold back a strong story from the web until the next day's print edition. Here the *ODT* is adopting a different position from the Fairfax websites in that print, not web, remains the focus for its news product. This links to concerns noted by Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2010) who found online news sites were not attracting significant advertising revenue.

Resourcing tensions were apparent within the Fairfax stable and identified at the *ODT*. As noted by the *Timaru Herald's* Cogle, meeting the internal company deadlines for updating of news content is not feasible in the regional newsroom, given there is not a supply of news content available to refresh content for peak traffic times. In 2011, Myllylahti said Fairfax and APN News Media were undertaking a process of economising, digitising, and monetising. This process has continued, with regional



newsrooms in particular expected to deliver the same product and factor in online news provision with fewer staff (Venuto, 2013). Myllylahti described the cutbacks as leading to decreased diversification in the news product. This study found coverage on *Stuff* was dominated by Auckland and Wellington stories where *Stuff's* dedicated online newsrooms are located. This finding, combined with limited resourcing for online news provision in the regions, leaves in doubt the ability of New Zealanders to be widely informed about the nation. This reduction in diversity of news product was raised by both Rosenberg (2008), who saw dominated ownership as reducing content range, and Van Gompel et al, (2002) who said that while sharing news across companies lowered production costs it resulted in less diverse news coverage.

Unsurprisingly, none of the editors said they were using readers' most popular choices as a sole factor in determining what news they placed online. The editors all said they monitored what was popular with readers online but mixed popular story types with news it was felt readers needed. In 1992, McQuail called for shift in research from analysing provision of news to studying audience reception and response, stating the "personalized mass media diet is no longer a fanciful notion" (p. 313). McQuail based this view on the rise of interactive and consultative communication made possible by new media. Mullainathan and Schleifer (2005) predicted news providers would respond to the competitive news market by slanting news to serve audience wants, including offering more sensationalist content in order to outsell rivals. Understandably, the editors interviewed had a vested interest in maintaining a stance that suggests the news agenda is not dictated by audience hits, although the regional editors did acknowledge the informal value of monitoring reader interest. *Stuff's* Sinead Boucher said the aim was to pick a mix of stories for publication rather than "editing by numbers". Cogle

informally assessed reader most popular choices on the *Timaru Herald* website to see what readers were interested in. So too did the *ODT's* Kirkness, although he said while the most popular choices gave staff an idea of what readers wanted, they continued to provide what they felt readers needed. In 2011 Boczkowski and Peer said the agenda-setting premise was being contested online because consumer preference had the potential to dictate provision in the competitive news environment. Evidence from the editors interviewed for this study suggests they still adopt a gatekeeper function in ensuring the news readers needed is available. However, this news is also mixed with what readers want in order to maintain an audience share.

#### **6.2.4 Geographical coverage and localness.**

As George and Waldfogel (2006) maintained, rather than compete with expanding national providers, American local and community newspapers were returning to their roots – increasing local coverage and decreasing national coverage. The findings in relation to the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* websites support their view, because the majority of both websites coverage related to their regions. Local news, from the immediate regions of Otago and South Canterbury, dominated the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* websites respectively. More than 88 percent of provision was from the Otago region and Dunedin city on the *ODT*, for the *Timaru Herald* 92.8 per cent was from South Canterbury. Hindman (1996) described the importance of local newspapers reflecting local issues, persons, and agendas as creating allegiance and ties to the local community.

The regional website editorial representatives, *ODT* editor Murray Kirkness and digital editor Fleur Cogle of the *Timaru Herald*, stated the selection of news was directly linked to their specific market needs and expectations. For the regional publications, this was

local, which is clear in the findings. Wu and Bechtel (2002) took the view that online news providers should specialise in coverage to find niche markets. Opting to maintain specifically local coverage, they said, would also decrease the impact of competition. This strategy is likely of benefit to both the *ODT* and the *Timaru Herald*, given they have no direct competitors. In terms of competing at a national level as a division of *Stuff*, the *Timaru Herald* is likely not a first point of call for national news from its readers, given the site is hosted under the Fairfax umbrella. Yet the *ODT*, while providing national news, would be in a position to stand alone as a national or South Island and local news provider, still maintains its traditional stance as a provider of Otago news. Editor Murray Kirkness explained the *ODT* was about Otago and would retain that position regardless of the medium used. Another point of note in terms of the regional website coverage is that, despite the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* being neighbouring news providers, the only boundary crossover noted between the two publications occurred with Waimate coverage where there were two news events, the murder of a tourist and a local councillor seeking to legalise cannabis. However, this does raise concerns about the lack of online diversity of view available to consumers in these regions (Rosenberg, 2008).

*Stuff*'s stance was strongly national, and editor Sinead Boucher said the site aimed to offer a varied selection of news to meet a wide, national audience that is supported by the content analysis findings in terms of topics but not in terms of geographical coverage. The findings did show a preference for North Island coverage. However, the geographic difference noted in coverage could also be linked to New Zealand's population, as the majority of New Zealanders live in the North Island. Further, there was limited coverage from outside Christchurch city in the South. In view of the noted

trend toward news that attracts readers, the news selections at *Stuff* are serving a more commercial rather than a directly relevant purpose. Comrie, Fountaine and Cheyne (2005) found national news producers in the television industry also failed to offer coverage of regional New Zealand. They found coverage was Auckland-centric, suggesting providers had lost connection with the heartland. The authors saw retaining this connection as important for national identity and reflecting New Zealand's diversity. Similarly, resourcing should be considered, as *Stuff* has dedicated online news teams in Auckland and Wellington, while it relies on coverage from Fairfax print newsrooms in the South. Boucher said *Stuff* sought to be its readers' "home for everything they needed to know", therefore, stories published were in the interests of meeting a diverse rather than specific audience. Boucher's stance was not evident in the findings. While *Stuff* is specifically positioning itself as a national news provider, despite its broad national pool it is not serving to connect all of New Zealand.

### **6.3 Is There a Choice Gap Between Online News Providers and Readers?**

The difference between what news providers promote to readers and what their audiences choose to read was described by Boczkowski and Peer (2011) as the choice gap. The authors said this gap had emerged as result of changes in the media industry, in particular increased competition and the drive to gain audience share. However, this study found there was little variation between the news topics selected by readers and the story topics being promoted to them – the news agenda adopted by readers did not differ significantly from that of the news providers.

The *ODT's* most popular lead story selections were crime, disaster and accident, business, finance and economy, and human interest, in that order. These story

selections were closely comparable with reader preferences in that the top three reader categories were the same as the top three news provider choices. Similar findings were seen in the *Timaru Herald* analysis, where the top four lead story choices (crime, local government, human interest, and business and finance) were identical to the top four reader choices. On *Stuff*, the topics were similar, but human interest stories were readers' second most popular selection and the providers' fourth. Differences were apparent in the number of specific lead stories, which also appeared in the readers' most popular section. This indicated that while 57 percent of lead stories appeared in the reader choices for the *ODT* and 44 percent for the *Timaru Herald*, only 17 percent of these appeared for *Stuff*. This suggests that while the news category choices of readers and providers were similar, the actual stories selected were not necessarily directly from the promoted lead stories. These findings could also suggest *Stuff* readers are more diverse and use the website for different things, while the regional site readers are specifically seeking local news.

Rice (cited in McQuail, 2005) said the ability of readers to select their news and take more of a position in setting the agenda of news providers was concerning because providers would alter their news agenda to meet reader demand. Rice maintained there was still a demand for the gatekeeping function of traditional news outlets; while individuals had more choice it proved a paradox. To exercise choice, readers needed prior knowledge and the desire to make an effort to integrate and make sense of the communication. While Rice was concerned about the problem in principle, Boczkowski and Peer's study (2011) found journalists were beginning to respond to readers by providing more non-public affairs or soft stories in prominent positions on news websites. The authors emphasised this was a critical moment in the emergence of the

'choice gap', the difference between what providers and consumers are selecting as news, because of changes in the media. They saw their findings as critical in terms of the media's function in society, particularly in relation to fostering democratic participation. Boczkowski and Peer believed their findings raised implications for understanding at least three sets of developments at the intersection between the choice gap and changes in the media industry and its broader social functions. These developments were the potential consequences of an increasing supply of soft content for the news agenda, the growth of consumers' role as producers of widely circulated news and information, and the future of the media's watchdog function in liberal democracies. The views of these authors (Rice cited in McQuail; Boczkowski & Peer) raise key issues for the media to consider in relation to its role in the digital era.

There are two potential reasons why this study has not identified a significant choice gap between readers' and providers' selections of story topics. Have the news providers already adapted their news agenda to that of readers? Or are audiences simply following the agenda set by the news providers? This question cannot be answered on the basis of this research alone, given we have no earlier comparative New Zealand study of online news provision. However, indirect support for an adjustment in news priorities is based on the noted increase of tabloidisation or sensationalist news provision in the New Zealand broadcast media as documented by Edwards (2002) and McGregor (2002) as a result of both deregulation and increased competition. Further, Boczkowski and Peer's (2011) findings in the American online news environment demonstrated a shift toward providing softer news to meet audience demand. One could expect, drawing on Boczkowski and Mitchelstein's (2010) study, that during times of heightened political activity, such as an election, news providers would prioritise

political activity and readers would adopt the same agenda. This study found that news providers were not promoting national political stories, and that readers were following the agenda of the news producers; therefore, using Boczkowski and Mitchelstein's (2010) theory, if providers published more of these stories prominently, readers would select these more often. When we consider this study found *ODT* readers accessed 60 percent and *Timaru Herald* readers 29.1 percent of the local government stories carried as leads, this theory could hold true.

#### **6.4 Commercialism and Tabloidisation**

Commercialism is impacting on the nature of news, requiring reconsideration of whether the news is what people need to know, or what people want to know (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2002; Baker cited in McAllister & Proffitt, 2009). This study has identified evidence supporting a commercial focus in online news provision as highlighted in the types of news being promoted by news providers. This is seen in the dominance of both soft news choices, such as human interest, sport, and celebrity news, and negative news choices, such as crime and accident reporting. McNair (2009) significantly described an increase in negative news reporting as symptomatic of tabloidisation in the media. The coverage of human interest, celebrity, and sport on the sites also raises the question whether there has been an increase in entertainment news, as identified by Sparks and Tulloch (2000) and Franklin (1997). This cannot be ascertained from this study as there are no previous in the New Zealand context on which to draw. The findings also support McQuail's (1992) theory that news media competition makes it more difficult for media to give due attention either to world affairs, which ranked poorly on all sites, or to daily domestic politics, which ranked badly in the *Stuff* findings in particular. While stories appeared that were of a national political type, they were more often about

politicians than political issues or policy. The regional websites are noted as providing relatively more public affairs content, particularly in relation to their coverage of local government. However, the environment they operate in is less competitive than *Stuff*'s. *Stuff* is the national online news provider for conglomerate Fairfax Media, in terms of national provision it competes with the television network news websites (TVNZ, TV3) and the APN News and Media owned *New Zealand Herald* website. Hence, this website can be seen as operating in a highly competitive environment, unlike the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald*, which have no direct online regional competition for local news provision. As a result this becomes their focus rather than trying to compete in the national news environment. Further, as a member of the Fairfax stable, the *Timaru Herald* is not in a position to compete within its own masthead.

The *ODT* and the *Timaru Herald*, through coverage of local government in particular, are providing democratically supportive coverage as defined by Anderson and Ward (2007). Yet, because of their almost exclusively local focus, coverage of national politics barely features nor is any international political news in high profile positions on their websites. Additionally, each of these sites gives equal, if not more, emphasis to commercially attractive and popular crime and human interest stories. To cater to their distinct audiences the regional websites can be seen as adopting this local position as a means of dealing with a nationally competitive provision (George & Waldfogel, (2006); Becker, Hollifield, Jacobsson, Jacobsson & Vald (2009). While the *Timaru Herald* and the *ODT* do offer national news, this is not their core focus so it does not feature highly in the sample. They cannot be seen as competing with national news providers.



#### **6.4.1 Competition and commercialism in the New Zealand online news environment.**

The editors agreed the New Zealand news environment as a whole was competitive, especially in terms of being first with the news. Each site, though, competed in different ways and markets. For the *Timaru Herald*, Cogle described competition as about retaining independence within the Fairfax stable. This meant maintaining a masthead presence distinct from *The Press* and a direct online readership distinct from the *Stuff* brand. Cogle said retaining a local readership through providing local content was crucial. However, she identified the drive for local content as being ultimately a decision of the company in terms of retaining its regional papers:

We are fortunate in that we have a brand name that people recognise and they recognise online as well and that has carried over. We would be foolish to think that it was going to save us if they ever came to the point that they looked at the mastheads and said “why have we got reporters in all these places”? I don’t think we can rest on our laurels.

With the closure of Fairfax-owned *D-Scene* in Dunedin, the *ODT* has no direct competition in its region in the traditional sense. Further, the content analysis findings indicated there is little circulation boundary cross-over with the *Timaru Herald*.

Therefore, the only other competitor is the Fairfax-owned *Southland Times*, which mainly competes with the *ODT* in the Queenstown District. It is accepted that geographical boundaries as applied to print do not exist when it comes to online news provision, yet, as noted with the *Timaru Herald* and the *ODT*'s coverage, these boundaries still seem to have some hold on the New Zealand news environment. Again this may be attributed to having reporting staff available to cover news outside traditional regions. The *ODT*'s preference for local content on its website, combined

with the lack of Otago news carried elsewhere, means the website does not compete with national news providers. Both regional websites therefore rely heavily on retaining local and loyal readership in retaining their market share. Becker et al. (2009) and George and Waldfogel (2006) predicted this specialisation as more likely in the competitive news environment that had a limited number of news players. Yet this focus on local news is supported by authors (McLeod et al., 1996; Viswanath et al., 2000) for its ability to mould homogeneous communities through building connections with local people, news, and events.

In contrast to the findings from the regional news websites, *Stuff* carries content from all Fairfax publications throughout the country. The ability of *Stuff* to compete at a national level is far greater because the number of newsrooms from which it draws enables a wider selection of content to be carried. Further, *Stuff* competes more directly with television and radio websites where readers are also viewers and have greater expectations in terms of multimedia content. This is evidenced in *Stuff*'s commitment to reader participation and multi-media provision as explained by digital editor Sinead Boucher. *Stuff*'s presentation also emphasises visualness, which McGregor (2002) proposed as a key modern news value. While newspapers can provide still images, the internet and television have the ability to share moving images with their audiences. The difference in news provision as evidenced in the content analysis also indicates *Stuff* is taking a different tack in attracting readers by providing more celebrity and entertainment and sensational news, which both McQuail (1992) and Fox and Gangl (2011) describe as usual in a competitive environment. Because *Stuff* competes in a wider, national news environment (i.e. with television news websites), the previously

noted increase in tabloidisation in the New Zealand television media (Edwards, 2002) is potentially a catalyst for this trend in *Stuff's* web coverage.

However, because the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* do not seek to compete in a national news environment, their consumers are limited in terms of diversity of view. The *ODT* sources its national news from APN News Media, while that of the *Timaru Herald* is sourced from Fairfax. This limited news sourcing is typical of the concentrated ownership structure in the New Zealand media scene (Myllylahti, 2011). Deuze (2004) described such ownership patterns as typical of the current commercial media environment. He also stated that while this had commercial benefits it had a detrimental impact on democracy and diversity of view. New Zealand already operates under the constraints of being a small country and has allowed media mergers and overseas ownership to a greater extent than almost any other country (Rosenberg, 2008). Myllyhati (2002), in writing about New Zealand, said, "Democracy is threatened if individual media owners, with the power to propagate a single viewpoint, are allowed to predominate over the supply of media" (p. 7). In this instance we can see two companies dominate the mainstream print-news media market and their associated websites in New Zealand. This does not provide sufficient diversity in news coverage to allow the public to make informed decisions, which Siebert, Paterson, and Schramm (1963) saw as a prime function of news media.

#### **6.4.2 The financial challenges of online news provision.**

The online news environment presents challenges, particularly in relation to making money from the product. Bustamante (2004) and Chyi (2005) found people did not want to pay for online news, while Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2010) found that

before 2005 at least a few online news providers were making a profit. Advertisers were slow to warm to the product and advertising rates were often less than those for print. At the time of writing, all three news websites studied are free to access online. Murray Kirkness from the *ODT* identified free access as the core issue ahead facing the media when he said:

The web is likely to become more important to business than less important, given so much of life these days is digital. The key issue is how to monetarise that. To me it's the single biggest challenge to news media today.

As explained above, both the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* have limited staffing to resource their websites and rely on their traditional print coverage staff to populate them. The websites remain free to access because at the time this study was conducted no other news provider in New Zealand is charging for access, and free online news is undercutting print sales as Cogle said:

At this point, it seems unavoidable that print is suffering, for a variety of reasons, but being able to access information online obviously does have an impact on print everywhere.

To compete in the news market the newspapers must have a web arm; however, this creates financial strain if the news is free and readers will not pay for the newspaper. Further studies have shown readers do not want to pay for online news content (Bustamante; 2004; Chyi, 2005). The associated decrease in print readership is of additional concern. Althuas and Tewksbury's (2000) study found print readers were more likely to be exposed to and read public affairs news than those who read online. As the *ODT's* Kirkness said, the company must have a website because of the increasing digital lifestyle, but the commercial element of running a business profitably also needed

to be taken into account. This agrees with the view of Allan (2006) who said news consumers now had different concepts of how and when news should be available:

We need to realise that the next generation of people accessing news and information, whether from newspapers or another source, have a different set of expectations about the kind of news they will get. This includes when and how they will get it, where they will get it from and who they will get it from. (p. 3)

Therefore, based on the research conducted in this area, the increasing demands of readers, together with the need to make a financial return from web news provision, mean editors will soon face decisions on the move to pay-wall and in regard to ensuring the online news product is one readers will pay for.

### **6.5 The New Zealand Online News Environment and Democratic Engagement**

The onus to be informed democratically sits with the reader, according to the editors. While all felt their selection of news coverage ticked the boxes in terms of providing a wide range of content aimed at informing as well as entertaining, they also saw an onus on readers to choose to be informed. In expressing this view Cogle said:

The thing with digital is it does provide people with avenues to access more information more easily so, when we add a link into a story we are providing another avenue for a person to research something. You could argue that it's providing another source for people to use, not necessarily making them better informed – that's up to them.

Boucher stated New Zealand has access to a wide range of news sources that encourage and inform participation. While Kirkness agreed, he also felt the online environment meant people had to read more widely and apply consideration of the sources of their news rather than blindly trusting what they read online. Examining the editors' views according to the social responsibility theory (Siebert et al., 1963), the interviewees said they accept their obligation to society in providing well-contextualised, comprehensive, and diverse news. Yet their view that the onus was on the reader in the digital environment supports the view of McQuail (2005), who sees readers as being able to adopt their own news agenda's regardless of those set by media operators. As has been discussed, the findings from this study do not support the interviewees' contention of providing comprehensive news coverage that serves to inform readers on the website home pages. To ensure democratically supportive information sharing, the media must refrain from shifting their news agenda to meet reader demand – this is not evident from this study.

The online environment offers increased opportunity for reader participation, as defined in McQuail's (2000) democratic-participant theory, which was based on two-way communication between reader and news provider. The value of participation increasing awareness also formed the basis of Dahlberg's (2011) liberal-individualist digital democracy theory. All the editors spoken to are, to varying degrees, attempting to encourage reader participation. *Stuff* has developed the *Stuff Nation* concept in which readers interact and offer news and perspectives, while the *Timaru Herald* relies on Facebook to engage readers with news. Cogle described the purpose of this Facebook reader engagement as allowing the newsroom to find out what stories people were talking about; therefore it is a newsgathering tool. This suggests a more commercial

purpose than just one of fostering reader discussion on important topics. Further, the value of reader participation for the *Timaru Herald* was seen as providing a community-hub online that again could be linked to retaining a loyal audience in a competitive news environment rather than fostering democratic engagement. This fits with Hindman's (1996) view of the media as a local community-building network. The *ODT* has limited reader participation opportunities, with Kirkness saying the participation offered was effectively only via email and was used as a mechanism for newsgathering rather than for engagement. Only *Stuff*, therefore, can be seen as offering a service that could foster such engagement and debate. Some authors (Bucy & Affe, 2006; Dahlberg, 2011; Hutchins, 2007; Owens & Palmer, 2003; Singer, 2003) have supported this participative environment as able to engage readers in public affairs. Yet others (Al-Saggaf, 2006; Constantinescu & Tedesco, 2007; Dahlberg, 2011; Thurman, 2008) have argued that unless this engagement and debate are rational and involve open critical evaluation they would be of little benefit. Further, Thurman maintained that sufficient staffing was also an issue in some newsrooms in terms of the ability of the provider to moderate public contributions which neither the *Timaru Herald* nor *ODT* have. For the websites studied to accept a socially responsible role in online news provision these providers would need to adequately resource and create strategies to encourage a level of interaction that fostered meaningful debate. This would only succeed if readers bought in to the concept and were comfortable expressing views in the online sphere.

### **6.5.1 News and Democracy**

The news provided by the websites in this study is mixed in terms of whether it encourages democratic engagement in the manner suggested by McQuail (2000) and others (Bimber, 2003; Dahlberg, 2011; Trippi, 2004, cited in Dylko, Beam, Landreville, &

Geidner, 2012). Provision at the regional level in terms of overall stories is noted as including a significant amount of local government news, a positive finding in terms of providing information to support political decision-making. However, national politics does not fare so well. Although national political news was fifth most popular in terms of provider in terms of the numbers of stories, there were far fewer national political items than the first four topics (of crime, human interest, sport, and business and finance). The dominant top four story topics overall were arguably not ones that would encourage democratic awareness of important issues as envisaged by theorists who believe political news must be paramount. In terms of lead stories just two topics could be deemed political – local government on the regional sites, and business, finance and economy on all sites. Peterson (1956; cited in d’Haenens & Saeys, 2001) stressed it was the media’s duty to society to adopt a socially responsible position once it adopted the role of an authority. Editors interviewed for this study stated the onus was on the reader to ensure they were democratically informed, and argued their coverage did provide for this. Yet, national political coverage directly relating to policy issues did not feature once in the lead stories in the sample. The stories that feature on the front page of a newspaper serve the same function as those on the home page of an online news website. McCombs (1972) maintained front page stories were highlighted as of most importance to the reader by placing them foremost as the most important news events of the time. For example, the key political issue at the time of sample gathering was the National government’s plan to sell assets. As already noted, no stories appeared at the midday sample time about this on *Stuff*, and while they did appear on the regional websites, they were concerned with local reaction not national policy.



The impact of the greater individual choice available to readers of news online, combined with the commercialisation of the news environment, poses a concern for society (Althaus & Tewksbury 2002; Boczkowski & Peer, 2011; Champlin & Knoedler, 2002; Dahlberg, 2011; McNair, 2009; McQuail, 1992). Considering the overall reader findings from this study in relation to the potential democratic impact the story choices, *Stuff* readers in particular, are not accessing news that will help democratic participation. As readers are choosing to read stories relating to human interest, celebrity and sport, instead of stories that inform, such as national political or economic items, the ability of these readers to engage in society an informed manner could be judged as limited. Prior (2005) found people who preferred soft news abandoned more serious issues and were less likely to engage in politics. Further, Iyengar and Hahn (2011) found those consumers with increased ability to select news often turned away from serious issues and were less informed of current affairs. As McQuail (2005) stated, the balance of power has shifted, with readers able to select their own news in an interactive news environment. Regardless of what providers promote for readers, news consumers have the ability to exercise a choice and, as Rice (cited in McQuail, 2005) stated, they should have the desire to seek news that informs democratic participation.

In contrast, the findings from the regional sites indicate their readers are engaging with politically relevant news at a local level. It is therefore important to question whether New Zealand online news consumers as a whole are differentiating within news sources based on content preference. Readers could be accessing *Stuff* for less public affairs-related national news, but instead are turning to their regional news sites for local public affairs content. In considering these findings, the studies of Redden and Witschge (2010) and Wu and Bechtel, (2002) could offer some guidance. These studies suggested

online news seekers were applying a bias in seeking their news by visiting sites perceived as more trusted or those specialising in story types. Findings from these studies would suggest readers accessing the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* are motivated to do so to access local or regional news specifically from local sources. The findings raise a further question, however, as to where, or if, these regional site readers are accessing national and international news stories.

The discussion so far has examined reader news selections and the news choices being made by providers for their homepage coverage. Examination of social responsibility, and how these findings align with it, follows. The social responsibility theory (Siebert et al., 1963) provides a framework against which media performance can be judged. The theory calls on the media to accept its obligation to society by providing contextualised, comprehensive, and diverse views that go beyond entertaining consumers. Baran and Davis (2006) described this theory as optimistic as it relied on individual responsibility and did not consider the motivation of power and profit or the competitive news market. This study has identified *Stuff* in particular as leaning toward a more tabloid style news provision overall where stories are being selected on the basis of their ability to draw audience attention as defined by Sparks and Tulloch (2000) and Franklin (1997). *Stuff's* coverage was dominated by crime, accidents, celebrity news and human interest, and sport rather than news of specific value to inform and educate its audience politically. The emphasis on the sensationalism of criminal activities and trauma has a commercial imperative (Wiltenburg, 2004); the focus on crime and trivialities has the ability to marginalise serious issues (McNair, 2009). As a national news provider, *Stuff's* position can be seen as seeking a larger audience share in a competitive market (McQuail, 1992), which, based on these findings, is at the expense of ensuring its

audience are informed about issues that matter. *Stuff's* position as a national news provider therefore contrasts with the position of the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* who target a specific audience and have no national competition for their product. While crime is still dominant on the regional news sites they offer comparably more public-affairs stories.

In 1983, McQuail's (2000) democratic participant theory suggested that increased opportunities for reader and news provider engagement would foster democratic engagement. This theory relied first on increased engagement, and second, on providers adopting a socially responsible function in order to promote reader engagement in politically relevant news. His theory did not anticipate the commercially driven use of technology allowing providers to gain an instant picture of readership preferences in the online environment and adjusting their news provision to meet audience tastes. Dahlberg's (2011) reconstruction of Siebert et al. (1963) four theories of the press placed a similar reliance on a socially responsible position that would involve attempts to engage audiences specifically on topics of democratic importance. This study has found many of the story topics selected by news providers to feature on their web homepages are those that have news values which align with a commercial imperative. Further, the selections of readers are similar to those of the news providers in terms of story topic. As discussed, stories with sensationalist news values attract readers, and it seems readers want these in their news diet. Further, we can see a standardisation across publications in terms of what topics feature most and least in news coverage.

## 6.7. Summary

This chapter has drawn together the literature on which this study was based and the findings from both the content analysis and interviews conducted. It has identified New Zealand readers as making similar selections both to those described in previous research and to those of the news providers, which could be seen as negating the concept of the media's agenda-setting premise being contested by online audiences (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2001). It has documented a trend toward soft and sensationalist news choices on three New Zealand websites, which is more pronounced on the national site. This is in line with themes presented in previous studies. News can no longer be defined as clearly hard or soft, or public or non-public affairs because the lines have become increasingly blurred in relation to fact and emotive news portrayal. This will be discussed further in the concluding chapter.

Regional news has been recognised as filling a valuable local community purpose and readers in these communities have greater access to politically relevant and informative news on their regions. In terms of coverage it is clear providers of regional news in New Zealand operating in their distinct niche markets are choosing to meet their immediate audience needs. In comparison, *Stuff*, which operates in a highly competitive national market, is striving to meet the needs of a broad audience. Arguably, this more competitive news environment is reflected in the more sensationalist nature of its story topics.

When considering the model of a socially responsible news media, the findings indicate that online news is not fulfilling this ideal, particularly in relation to national political news. Further, the editors' views that the onus to be informed belongs to the individual

suggests disengagement with the theory of the social responsibility of media.

Additionally, while the democratic-participant theory has been heralded as the future of democratic engagement in a digital world, this study has also identified that at least the regional news providers studied are financially constrained in their ability to encourage informed reader feedback and participation. Finally, in relation to the challenges facing the New Zealand media the editors have highlighted concerns about the financial viability of the web as a news medium linked to the decrease in print sales. Resourcing constraints are a direct result of this environment. Further, these resourcing constraints impact on the providers at a regional level, limiting their ability to provide an engaging and constantly updated online news service. The next and final Chapter, Conclusion, will consider what these findings mean; it will also discuss the limitations of this study and highlight potential for further research in this field in the New Zealand context.

## Chapter Seven Conclusion

This study has sought to identify what it is consumers are seeking from online news and whether the choices made by both providers and readers will impact on democracy in the future. The link with democratic engagement lies with the premise that the media plays a key role as the communicator of that information the public need to engage constructively in democracy (Anderson & Ward, 2007). Alongside this, however, are the commercial and competitive pressures inherent in contemporary news production and the ability for readers to set the agenda and take more control in the selection of their news online (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2001).

### 7.1 Implications of the Findings

The content analysis conducted for this study found crime-related news to be the dominant story selection of both news providers and readers at one fifth of the total sample. While local government news was strong in both regional websites (*ODT* and *Timaru Herald*), national government news was strong in neither. While national government news received some coverage on *Stuff*, it was more often focussed on individuals than policy or political events. Overall, the most popular news selections on all sites were more often soft news, which served to entertain rather than inform. The study also found readers were making similar news selections to the news providers in terms of story topic on the regional websites, yet were less inclined to do so on *Stuff*.

The editors from the three websites gave a practitioner perspective to the content analysis, and provided valuable insights to the rapidly changing online news

environment. At the outset, it was clear differing news audiences were targeted. Both *ODT* editor Murray Kirkness and *Timaru Herald* digital editor Fleur Cogle stressed the importance of meeting local needs. *Stuff's* Sinead Boucher believed the website aimed to be “something for everyone”. Their stance was also different in terms of what makes news online and could be linked to the differing staff resource between the regional and national websites. On this basis, the regional news sites could not offer the same degree of web interactivity and multi-mediality as *Stuff*. The online environment offered future challenges – for *ODT* editor Kirkness this was about making money from the web, for the *Timaru Herald's* Cogle it was about maintaining a masthead independence from *Stuff* and a local identity and presence. *Stuff's* focus, according to Boucher, was more about building the site’s capability to allow reader engagement and participation to create communities of interest.

This study suggests the online news environment has the potential to impact on democratic awareness should it become a sole or preferred news medium with audiences. Both readers and publishers have been found making soft news selections at both local and national levels. Further, both regional providers, the *Timaru Herald* and the *Otago Daily Times (ODT)*, choose to focus on local coverage on their websites’ homepages, and this is reflected in the news choices of their readers. *Stuff* offers a greater selection of national coverage, which fits with the site’s goal to offer a wide selection of news. However, findings suggest this is at the expense of political news coverage, which it seems does not rank as highly as softer news topics or crime. To a lesser extent this trend toward less informative news is also reflected in the *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* coverage, both of which had a strong crime and human interest focus. Politically, regional consumers were well informed on local government, but neither the

regional nor national audience were exposed to significant coverage of national government matters on the site homepages. As discussed in the previous chapter, the lack of national government coverage, particularly relating to the issues, rather than the political players, begs the question, where are New Zealanders to turn for their political news? Of course, this study has only addressed one news medium and it has been accepted that readers may see the online news website as meeting an entertainment rather than a public affairs need, turning to other news sources to meet the latter need. Tewksbury (2005) found audiences were being selective of their news sources based on the sites' perceived area of expertise or credibility.

Considering these findings and drawing on previous research, this study indicates a commercial approach is being taken to news most particularly at a national level, which can be seen in the increase of attention-grabbing news to attract consumers (McQuail, 1992; Fox & Gangl, 2011). This study has also supported the views of George and Waldfoegel, (2006) and Rosenstiel, Mitchell, Purcell and Rainie, (2011) both on news providers seeking to target audiences and on the value of local news to communities as seen in the reader findings. The strength of local and community-orientated coverage that occurs at a regional level is the true "bright spot" in this study. Local and community coverage has been noted as valuable in promoting homogeneous communities (McLeod et al., 1996), and in terms of democracy, the strong focus on local government politics provides an important public service (Atkinson 2011; Comrie, 2009).

Elements of tabloidisation in the provision of online news coverage are identified in this study; however, further study with a different methodology (as discussed in the next



section) would be needed to confirm this finding. Anecdotally, however, tabloidisation can be seen on *Stuff* in the greater promotion of celebrity and entertainment news; while across all sites it can be seen in the dominance of soft news and the amount of crime coverage. With no comparative data, it is unclear how new this phenomenon is in the New Zealand online news media, although a UK study (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001) did note this trend in the broadsheet newspaper market. Drawing on Althaus and Tewksbury's (2001) position, which has been a core concern of this study, the online news environment raises the question of whether news is what people need to know or what people want to know.

This study has also brought the contemporary relevance of the social responsibility theory into question, in particular its position in a competitive and commercial news environment. While still relevant as an ideal, it is questionable whether increased competition, commercialism, and greater reader demand for specific news types support socially responsible news provision. Baran and Davis (2006) argued that a core weakness of the social responsibility theory was that it did not consider the motivation of power and profit for the news media. In a competitive environment, they concluded social responsibility often "came second" (p. 117). Interviews with two of the editors identified concerns about the profitability of the web and the impact on the commercial news environment. Alongside this, the content analysis findings show that while most story topics are represented, some are poorly covered, which demonstrates a lack of diversity in news and does not align with social responsibility. These points, combined with the editors' views that the onus is on the individual to be informed raise concerns for democratic awareness.

Alternatively, online participation has been heralded as having the potential to foster a new democratic engagement through increased opportunities for meaningful debate and interaction (McQuail, 1992). Bucy and Affe (2006), Dahlberg (2011), Hutchins (2007), Owens and Palmer (2003), and Singer (2006) believed that public choice to interact and share opinions online will ultimately engage readers in public affairs. Yet others (Al-Saggaf, 2006; Constantinescu & Tedesco, 2007; Thurman, 2008) believed online participation would only involve like-minded individuals and would be unlikely to produce rationale debate on important issues. The only website studied where this engagement is being encouraged is *Stuff*. However, the interaction being encouraged via *Stuff Nation* is still more social in nature, seeking to build shared interest groups, rather than seeking to foster meaningful debate on matters of national significance. The *ODT* and *Timaru Herald* are using email and Facebook, but mainly as news gathering tools rather than to encourage reader debate. As noted by Thurman (2008), online communities require moderation, which requires dedicated staffing, which neither of the regional websites have in numbers.

Considering the impact on democratic awareness, this study found readers and providers at a national level, at least, were not seeking political news or public affairs news. Prior (2005) found people who prefer entertainment news abandon public affairs news and become less likely to engage in politics. Sunstein (2002) also found a greater choice of news, while allowing politically interested people to engage, also gave people less interested in political happenings a greater opportunity to avoid political content. Further, greater news selection online reduced the opportunities for people to have chance encounters with political news. Iyengar and Hahn (2011) expressed a similar view, saying greater choice allowed readers to employ selective exposure, which

enabled the politically uninformed to stay that way. While local government news is well covered and received regionally, national news is not. Therefore, this study supports the concerns raised and itself does raise concerns about the political awareness and engagement of online audiences on national news matters.

## **7.2 Contribution of the research**

This is the first analysis of online news provision and reader selections conducted in New Zealand. It has built on previous studies conducted in Europe, America, and Australia regarding the online news selections of readers and providers. Further, it has contributed to an understanding of how news providers in New Zealand are approaching the online news market – particularly when we consider the dominance of local news in the regions and the trend towards soft and celebrity coverage on the national website studied. While *Stuff* aims to be something for everyone, according to editor Sinead Boucher, the *ODT* and the *Timaru Herald* aim to be everything for their region’s readers. Finally, as this study is the first analysis of online news content on New Zealand websites, its contribution lies in its providing a foundation for replication. The large sample gathered, which included geographical source consideration, adds in-depth information to an under-studied area of New Zealand news provision where sample sizes have often been small. The interviews provided have also added depth and captured a key transition in New Zealand news provision as the shift to digital news is embraced.

## **7.3 Limitations of the Study**

This section will outline some of the limitations of this research, which relate to both study design and research into online news selections and preferences. It is accepted

that all research has limitations. This study used mixed methods – both qualitative and quantitative – which both Singer and Quandt (both cited in Loffelholz & Weaver, 2008) supported, particularly in mass communication studies for its holistic value. Content analysis was chosen for its unobtrusive nature because it made it possible to examine large quantities of data and because it was replicable (Krippendorff, 1980; 2004). However, a limitation of content analysis is that its interpretation is tied to quantitative indicators and/or to coding units that require subjective judgement (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). Both the large quantities of data and the coding units applied were areas where the methodology could be refined.

The rationale for the three-month time sample was to replicate the sample gathered by van Heekeren (2005) and was supported as a reliable content analysis method. While Riffe, Lacy and Fico (2005) and McMillan (2000) have differing views on the appropriate sampling method and duration in relation to internet news, it was considered that the timeframe needed to be long enough to gather sufficient data for meaningful analysis and validity within resource constraints. However, Wang (2000) found a consecutive day sample over two weeks sufficient for internet news story sampling. This also, in terms of researcher time, would have potentially enabled a wider range of websites to be compared. In hindsight, it would have been useful to sample a website providing national coverage with which to compare *Stuff*, and also one that caters to a North Island audience. This study has provided simply a “snapshot” in time. Three months of stories from the homepages of only three websites were gathered, and just one of these websites was national in terms of target audience.

A second limitation lay with the nature of the story topic coding. While the definitions employed for this study were based on categories previously applied in the New Zealand news environment (Macdonald, 2008), this coding method only considered the story topic rather than the qualitative aspects of the stories. These aspects could have included exploration of the tabloid or sensationalist nature of the news stories. For example, two stories that featured on *Stuff* during the sample period were local government coverage by definition, but more pertinent to this study was the news values associated with these stories – which were conflict related and published to serve a more sensationalist function in attracting readers – in terms of why they were published on the website. These stories were not comparable to the local government stories published on the regional websites, which were written in an informative and objective manner to inform readers of political activities at a local level. Such differentiation or additional coding could have been achieved by developing qualitative coding definitions that categorised stories with consideration of the newsworthiness of elements such as conflict, proximity to audience, titillation factors, and impact. Through descriptive analysis I have attempted to overcome this with this study; however, it was clearly a limitation.

This research has also highlighted difficulties in applying commonly accepted definitions of news. As noted by Baum (2002), the distinction between hard and soft news is blurring. While news stories may fit into a generic category such as crime or politics, Baum's argument in describing the distinction between hard and soft news as blurring and being one of "degree rather than kind" (p. 92) is important. These story categories only consider the subject matter of the story, not its tone, presentation or the angle taken, as outlined in the Media Monitoring (2011). Greater information could be

gained if factors were considered that took account of the angle taken by the journalist, the positioning, the accompanying images or footage, and, importantly, the news value of the stories.

#### **7.4 Potential Future Research**

The value of this study will lie in its comparison with future research of the New Zealand online news environment. This will identify any changes in the nature of new provision or reader selections since 2012. It is hoped this will provide a benchmark for any such future studies.

This study has addressed the what, but not the why. It has not identified why readers are selecting specific news topics, or specific sites, online as opposed to others. Further research into the reasons behind reader news selections of sites perceived as more trusted or authoritative in terms of specific news types would be of value. In 2005 Tewksbury found, based on gender, demographic and income level, that distinct audiences were being selective with their news source. He maintained audiences were visiting websites based on the individual websites strengths; for example, he found the BBC rated highly with readers for international news but not for national news. He also found websites were seeking to specialise in niche areas. He noted that while this fragmentation of audiences could have value in moving news outlets away from homogenised content, it could also separate audiences into isolated knowledge clusters.

In 2000, Althuas and Tewksbury, by assessing the recall of newspaper readers and online news readers on current events issues, found newspaper readers were more informed than online audiences. The authors' study is now 14 years old and significant

technological developments (Tablets, Smart phone) have occurred, as has an increase in available news sources online. A similar study of reader knowledge alongside a comparison of what stories are promoted in print as leads as opposed to those online would be of value as it would allow consideration of whether online news is more tabloid-orientated than the broadsheet edition.

Finally, 2014 is election year, and, drawing on Boczkowski and Peer's (2011) assumption that journalists increase public affairs news provision at times of increased political activity, it would be valuable to replicate this study in such a situation. To consider media coverage of political news and the nature of that coverage (whether it focuses on the issues or the players) during heightened political activity and the response of readers to this coverage would be a useful comparison. At this time it would be vital to develop broader story analysis criteria that not only coded stories selected by topic but also considered whether the nature of the reporting was truly public affairs in nature or whether the stories focussed on the political actors rather than issues.

Lawrence (2000) said scholars and journalists have grown concerned with the "game" or "strategic" news frame. This is where journalists tell stories about politics focused on the competition as a game or strategy as opposed to focusing on the political issues. For such a study, a criterion would need to be developed for a New Zealand context based on that used by Fountaine (2002) to code issues rather than game frame political news.

In conclusion, the online news environment and its potential impacts on society offer significant opportunities for further study. This chapter merely provides starting points. As the web increasingly becomes the first choice for news, given the rise in hand-held and accessible digital devices, the manner in which news is presented online and what

news is promoted as worthy of interest will have significant impact on how informed New Zealanders are about the issues that matter in society today.

The New Zealand media is in a state of flux and faces increasing financial challenges – a theme that has recurred throughout this thesis. At the time of writing this conclusion, Fairfax New Zealand is currently undertaking a mass restructure in a bid to offset the Australian-owned company's \$16.4 million loss, including a 4.7 percent drop in revenue from its New Zealand arm (Venuto, 2013). As a result, Fairfax New Zealand talks of the increased digitisation of its product and does not deny the possibility of introducing some sort of pay wall approach to its online content. This study, with its emphasis on online news in New Zealand, is a timely one. If it should be replicated in coming years, the national online news market under analysis is likely to be very different.





## Appendix 2 Interview Questions

1. Just for some background what is the history of your news website and how did it all come about?
2. Can you tell me about your paper's position in relation to online news content and provision?
  - (a) How do you decide which stories will feature on the website each day?
  - (b) Who is responsible for making the decisions? (specific web editor?)
  - (c) Do you see your website as an extension of your print edition or as a separate news vehicle?
  - (d) **Fairfax only:** How does the editor's pick section of the site work? How are the choices of what will go here made? And who by?

*I found these don't reflect the readers' picks and they are dominated by sport – why do you think this is the case?*

3. Given not all of the news in the print edition can be carried online how is the selection of which stories will feature online made? *(Possible factors to consider - pictures, video, local, national content.*
4. Are there organisation i.e. Fairfax, Allied, guidelines in relation to web news content? If so, can you tell me more about these? If not why not?
5. What, in your opinion makes a good online news story?
6. Do you see your site as offering a point of difference for readers in that it offers your readers something different to the print edition or in that it offers something other news sites don't?
7. **Regional sites only:** Do you think the website offers greater opportunities for local news provision and meeting the needs of regional communities than the print edition? *(Why/why not?)*
8. The regional sites featured no international coverage and a small percentage of national coverage on the website front page – why do you think this is the case?
  - (a) Is it policy to focus on local news on the site?
  - (b) What sort of national or international story would take preference to local news?

9. I also found national political type stories also ranks relatively low on the sites why do you think this is?
10. Do you think readers' are better informed by online news offerings? (*Why/why not?*)
11. What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of online news sites?
12. What value do you place on the opportunity for reader participation via the online news medium?
  - (a) What do you do with the reader feedback?
13. Do you have any concerns about how this could influence content? In addition, could this influence have the potential to weaken the watchdog function of the media?
14. My research found the online reader picks indicated a preference for soft news i.e. human interest, celebrity, sport is this what you would have expected? (*Why/why not?*)
15. Do readers selections, or picks, on your site factor in deciding what to publish online? (*Why/why not?*)
16. Overall, I found the front page of each website was dominated by crime, human interest and sport, based on this do you think online readers are getting the sorts of information that would encourage them to vote and take an interest in important local and national issues?
17. In general, I am also interested in getting an idea of what do you see as the role of the media in democracy in today's society? And, whether you see this as reflected in your news website coverage? (*why/why not*).
18. Finally, I am also interested in your opinion on whether you see the web news environment in New Zealand as one where websites are competing for readers, as is the case elsewhere in the world? Does this impact on story choice or the way they are written?

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

## Appendix 3 Participant Information and Consent Forms



**MASSEY UNIVERSITY**  
COLLEGE OF BUSINESS  
KAUPAPA WHAT PAKIHI

### INFORMATION SHEET

#### *Online News Reader and Provider Choices*

##### **Researcher Introduction**

My name is Janine Burgess, this year I am working toward my MA endorsed in Communication Management with Massey University. The focus of my research is online news provision in New Zealand and your organisation's website has been the focus of my analysis this year. I would like the opportunity to share these findings with you and discuss your views on these.

##### **Project Description**

This study has looked at three New Zealand online news website, one national, one regional and one which is a combination of both. It has involved the collection of three months' worth of home page story selections made by both readers and the news organisations with a view to identifying the most popular choices, or selections made by these groups. International studies in this field have found reader choices and provider choices vary therefore, this study seeks to identify the New Zealand position. Further, research has suggested the ability for readers to select news may impact on democratic participation in society.

##### **Participant Identification**

You have been invited to participate as you have been identified as the editor of one of the three websites studied.

##### **Project Procedures**

- If you agree to take part you will be interviewed in person, or on the telephone by Janine Burgess. The interview will take about an hour. There may be follow-up questions by telephone or email.
- If you have any questions, thought or comments following the interview you are encouraged to contact the researcher.
- The interview will form part of the researcher's thesis into online reader and provider news choices which, if accepted, will be published and held in the University Library and/or academic files. This is expected to take another year.

- The interview may also be part of research published in a peer-reviewed academic journal.

### **Data Management**

- The interview will be recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed manually into a word document. The original recording will be deleted at the end of the project, and the transcripts will be held in a secure file for five years.
- The transcripts will be made by the researcher, Janine Burgess.
- Given the identity of the publications studied will be published the editors could be identified by associated therefore; confidentiality of the interviewees cannot be assured. With permission the researcher would like to be able to use your names in the final document.

### **Participants Rights**

- If you decide to participate you will have the right to:
- Decline to answer any particular question
- Withdraw from the study before it is written up
- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation
- Be given access to a summary of the content analysis findings associated with your news website for your organisation's future use
- Ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview

### **Project contacts**

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### **Ethics Committee Approval**

This project has received approval from the Massey University Research Ethics Committee.



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## CONSENT FORM

### *Online News Reader and Provider Choices*

I (insert name) .....

of (insert address) .....agree to take part in the above research, as outlined in the information provided to me by the researcher, Janine Burgess.

I understand that:

- I do not have to take part in the research
- I can withdraw from the research at any time up until reporting
- If I withdraw, I can ask for any information collected from me to be returned or destroyed
- Information collected by the researcher during the research and this signed agreement will be held securely for a period of five years

I have read this consent form, and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give my consent to participate in this research.

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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