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## 'Broad consensus across the divide': rhetorical constructions of climate change in mainstream news media

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### ABSTRACT

The links between science and policy are navigated prominently in the media. The internet provides a forum for discussion of climate change, allowing lay people to enter the debate. In this paper, rhetorical analysis was used to analyse online news articles and comments from the public following two major climate-related decisions in New Zealand. This analysis demonstrates how arguments regarding climate change are built and defended. Identifying strategies invoked by those that occupy a majority or minority position within public discourse on climate change reveals how such arguments take on rhetorical force, providing the basis for establishing claims and counter-arguments. Understanding the rhetorical constructions of such positions can reveal why particular arguments might gain power, opening the way for a more knowledgeable and informed positioning of individuals, organisations, and scientific knowledge to emerge in public debates on climate change.

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Climate scientists continually produce findings showing not only support for anthropogenic climate change (ACC), but also its likely devastating effect on Earth's ecosystems (IPCC 2014). As a result of this research, climate models have become increasingly accurate and reliable over time. Consequently, overall scientific consensus does exist about the severity of climate change (Swyngedouw 2013). Although an academic consensus exists on ACC, a degree of scientific uncertainty remains about, for example, the ways in which atmospheric factors (e.g. clouds), ocean acidity, and the melting of icesheets will be affected by increases in global warming, about the precise nature of future climate-related impacts in particular regions, and the speed with which impacts will unfold. This uncertainty can provide a rhetorical opening for those who wish to dispute climate change. In particular, debate continues in news media about the reality of climate change, the extent of human responsibility for it, and what changes, if any, should be made. This paper contributes to this debate by examining rhetorical claims in the media regarding climate change.

Climate change is debated not only in scientific terms, but also in everyday discussion among lay people (Brace and Geoghegan 2011). The media is an important channel for conveying and creating knowledge (Frewin et al. 2009; Weathers and Kendall 2015).

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Mainstream media accounts are not objective; they promote stories for ‘newsworthiness’ and through this process influence dominant frameworks of understanding (Rozanova 2010). The media do not simply reflect or reproduce simplified scientific knowledge for wider audiences; they actively engage audiences in accepting a version of reality. Media portrayals represent a crucial site in which meanings associated with climate change are defined and re-defined (Scheufele 1999; Carvalho 2005) and play an important role in influencing public response to climate change (O’Neill and Nicholson-Cole 2009; Weathers and Kendall 2015). The public portrayal of climate change has important implications for climate policy (Kurz et al. 2010). As such the media provide a forum through which the reality of and responsibility for climate change are negotiated by both readers and writers.

Media portrayal of climate change provides the framework within which the public can engage with the argument presented. In the United Kingdom, media portrayal of climate change has increasingly focused on impending catastrophe, lacking more subtle discussions of scientific uncertainty (Doulton and Brown 2009). Conversely, scientific uncertainty has been used to frame media discussion of climate change in the United States (Zehr 2000). Media reporting of climate change can be viewed as strategic attempts to manage public awareness. For example, an Australian study found that newspapers reported minimal detail or failed to report on international climate change negotiations (McManus 2000), providing tacit support of the Australian government’s increase in emissions, while negatively influencing public awareness of climate issues (Zehr 2000). The media has also presented developing countries as weak and in need of support from Western countries against the threat of climate change (Doulton and Brown 2009). Consequently, the media have the capacity to frame the debate on climate change at many levels, in terms of the position of countries as international players in climate change, in terms of political vested interests at the national level, and in terms of the extent of scientific consensus which underpins this debate. These different patterns of reporting point to systematic differences in focus for public engagement with climate change.

Within media climate change discussion, the internet provides an opportunity for the public to both access and contribute to the debate. Anonymity of the internet encourages discussion (Dietz-Uhler and Bishop-Clark 2002), promoting freedom and diversity of discussion. Through the internet, lay people can publicly comment on climate change news, directly participate in the discussion and influence the creation of climate change knowledges. The recursive influence of lay people on the media is important for understanding the creation of climate change knowledge.

### ***Understanding climate change inaction***

Differences in understanding climate change also result in a lack of climate action. This may be partially related to the abstract nature of climate change; people are unable to experience the danger of climate change as spatially or temporally close (Lorenzoni et al. 2007). The idea that the climate, carefully measured and averaged over time, may be changing is inconsistent with personal experience (Brace and Geoghegan 2011). Instead, interactions with nature suggest that overall the climate is a relatively trustworthy constant across weather variations (Stehr 1997). This mismatch between personal experience and scientific evidence may lead to a lack of support for or participation in climate action; van der Linden (2015) show that experiential factors play a greater part in

determining beliefs about climate change than cognitive factors. As with other behavioural changes, climate action is largely dependent on perception of costs and benefits, as well as emotional responses (Haden et al. 2012). Lack of direct experience of climate change can create apathy, resulting in little public support for action on climate change (Brace and Geoghegan 2011). This can influence broader climate action via the impact of claims made in the media on policy makers. Media discussion is often taken to represent public opinion by policy makers (Hodgetts and Chamberlain 2006), suggesting that changing climate change perspectives in media can be a useful forum for bringing about change in policy.

### ***Rhetorical context***

This project captures a moment in time in the climate change discussion in New Zealand media. In November 2012 the New Zealand government made two important decisions related to climate change. Firstly, the government announced on November 9th that it would not sign up to the next phase of the Kyoto protocol at the end of the year (New Zealand Labour Party 2012). Then, on the 13th of November the government passed the Climate Change Response (Emissions Trading and Other Matters) Amendment Act (2012) which made considerable changes to the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS). The act removed a start date for agriculture to enter the scheme, the exclusion of which meant that only half of New Zealand's emissions are covered under the ETS (Bullock 2012; Richter and Mundaca 2013). Somewhat ironically, in October 2016 the National Government ratified the successor to the Kyoto Protocol, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (Ministry for the Environment a) although this had little impact on government policy and climate action at that time. In late 2017 a new Labour-NZ First-Green coalition government was sworn in, which had campaigned on a promise to address the challenges of climate change. Initiatives have included a commitment to generate all electricity from renewable sources by 2035, a determination to reduce national carbon emissions to zero by 2050 (the Zero Carbon Bill, Ministry for the Environment b), the establishment of a Climate Change Commission, and the setting of a timeframe for agriculture to be included in ETS. In April 2018, the government also announced that it would not grant any new offshore oil and gas exploration permits in New Zealand territorial waters.

These decisions, taken together, represented a shift from a cautious but affirmative recognition of climate change and the need for government measures to mitigate it, to a less emphatic view of climate action as an urgent responsibility of the New Zealand government. It positioned New Zealand as less committed to climate action on a world stage, in contrast with countries at the time, such as Australia. Due to this change in policy direction, New Zealand was awarded 'fossil of the day' at the Climate Action Network talks in Qatar that year, highlighting its lack of commitment to climate action (Burgess 2012). These shifts from previous support of the Emissions Trading Scheme and Kyoto Protocol sparked considerable discussion in the media, thereby providing a valuable moment to study climate change dialogue. Media reporting of specific initiatives to address climate change provide an opportunity to focus on strategic attempts to manage public understanding of climate change. This study aims to identify rhetorical strategies used in discussion of climate change appearing in the media, and to examine the ways they might influence climate action and belief.

## Method

Articles in online news sources are often opened for public comments, which can form an important part of the rhetoric on climate change. In this research, both articles and comments were collected and analysed. We examined the rhetorical strategies used and the implications of these strategies for addressing climate change.

News articles were collected online using two main search engines: the Newztext plus database and [www.google.co.nz](http://www.google.co.nz) news section. Searches used the keyword 'climate change' and were limited to articles from New Zealand newspapers accessible online, written between 1 November and 30 November 2012. Following this, we limited the articles to those that contained the keywords 'Kyoto' or 'Emissions Trading Scheme' (ETS) to provide a focus on discussion in response to these two climate change-related decisions. One hundred and sixty two articles were identified on the Newztext plus database that fitted these criteria. We subsequently searched for an online version of the articles that might contain comments. Articles from newspapers and websites with large readerships were included, in particular [www.stuff.co.nz](http://www.stuff.co.nz) and The New Zealand Herald Online ([www.nzherald.co.nz](http://www.nzherald.co.nz)). According to HorizonPoll, each website is visited by 52% and 43.9% of New Zealanders over the age of 18 each month respectively (HorizonPoll 2011). Overall [nzherald.co.nz](http://nzherald.co.nz) attracted 1,775,000 visitors a month, which is 64% of the total online audience (Fahy 2011). The original spelling and grammatical constructions used in the comments are reproduced in the analysis.

Online media sources have broad readership and consequently play an important role in the discussion of climate change. In addition, they uniquely introduce the opportunity for lay contribution through comment facilities. To exploit the interactive aspect of climate change discussion, articles were chosen that contained public comments. The use of articles with public commentaries allowed for analysis of journalistic representations of climate change alongside public response to those representations. Opinion pieces tended to generate the most comments, as their journalistic style invited commenters to respond. Consequently, from the original set of articles we selected four opinion pieces that addressed climate change strategies and contained the largest number of online comments. Each of these four articles included between 8 and 51 comments from lay readers, resulting in a large sample of data. Some readers commented on more than one article or repeated ideas from one article when commenting on another. Thus, it made sense to analyse these four opinion pieces and their comments as a set because they present similar ideas and themes. In the analysis below, we distinguish between passages written by *authors* (the people who wrote the main opinion piece article) and *commenters* (members of the public who produced online responses to the article) by citing the author and date of the article for the former (e.g. Small 2012) and the using the online display name followed by the citation for the article associated with the comment for the latter (e.g. jepo, in Duncan 2012).

## Rhetorical analysis

The data were analysed using rhetorical analysis (Billig 1991), which focuses on how individuals formulate arguments and construct self, others, objects, and occurrences. Arguing is viewed in two ways. Firstly, arguing is a process of thinking which can occur both within

an individual and with others. Secondly, arguing is a product of the wider environment; as part of an ideology. Thus, the context of such arguments – their time and place – must be taken into account throughout analysis. Rhetorical analysis also emphasises how people position themselves and others in their writing (Potter and Wetherell 1987). The attributions that people make construct responsibility for both the speaker and the subject of the discourse (Potter and Wetherell 1987). For example, the writer may deflect responsibility by highlighting facts that seem to place responsibility with another party. This is important in the area of climate change, as attributions do not simply reflect objective causes of climate change, but actively construct or deflect responsibility for such change.

Making claims is a recursive endeavour; commenters make claims, and comment both on the claims of others in terms of their content and in terms of their rhetorical force as claims. We use the term *claim* to mean a statement that asserts some truth about some state of the world (e.g. ‘humans are not responsible for recent climate change’). An *opinion* refers to a personal belief or value statement (e.g. ‘the economy is more important than the environment’). For our purposes, an *argument* is a rhetorical strategy for justifying or establishing a reason to believe a claim or an opinion. In this data set, the rhetorical strategy of majority consensus is regularly used to shore up arguments for climate change by claiming that if most people believe a state of affairs, it is likely to be true. This position is also called into question by those utilising a minority-based rhetorical strategy, such as in this excerpt: ‘Oh yeah, the manufactured consensus as held by who. The media? ... The best way to sell the fraud is to claim consensus’ (jepo, in Duncan 2012). Here it is acknowledged that majority consensus is a rhetorical strategy to ‘sell the fraud’ of climate change, rather than evidence of real majority belief that the climate is changing due to human action. According to this account, the public have been duped, not by any evidence, but by a rhetorical strategy used by a few individuals. In this way, claims both provide content for evaluation and use strategies to undermine or support the claims of others.

To analyse the discussion of climate change in the media, the articles were initially examined for gist, then coded into themes using paper copies of the articles. Coding was then checked and transferred to Atlas.ti 7 qualitative data analysis software to ensure consistency in coding. The coded extracts were analysed in terms of how various arguments for and against climate change action were constructed. These arguments were organised into a table, illustrating how the positions were constructed. This created a visual representation of rhetorical strategies, which was then checked against the data. This table also provided an opportunity to examine the data for similarities, differences, and ambiguities in various arguments for and against climate change action. Table 1 is an illustrative example of this table, containing examples from each position. Flexible rhetorical strategies were emphasised at this stage – in particular those strategies used to promote both pro- and anti- climate action positions. These strategies were the focus of analysis, highlighting rhetorical strategies themselves as key drivers of climate change argument, rather than the content of the claims. Two strategies were prevalent in the arguments; that of majority and that of minority. The majority rhetorical strategies suggest that most people agree with a statement, or such thinking is in line with that of the majority of people. In contrast, using a minority rhetorical strategy suggests that thinking or agreement with an argumentative position is uncommon, or that a particular position accords only with the thinking of a minority.

**Table 1.** Majority and minority positions illustrated with data extracts.

	Pro climate action	Anti climate action	
		Anti ETS / Kyoto	Anti- climate science
Majority	While there is still a strand of scepticism running through some sections of the National Party – and a mile-wide streak in the ACT party – there is by and large broad consensus across the divide. Now the political debate is not about whether we should act, but how and what cost we should bear.	The Govt action is at last common sense. The only reason to commit any further in a flawed process is because of fear of not looking good. The Europeans have nothing to lose because they have or are busy exporting there dirty industries. The major players have not signed up to the process. We should be a follower. Sanity prevails.	There is no human induced global warming. Global temps have been declining for the past 18 something years. The only global warming is from Kyoto style talk fests. Thank heavens a little commonsense has entered the political conciousness.
Minority	The rest of the world is racing forward with green technologies. But we are stuck with National who still think coal mining is clever. We need a government with 21st not 19th century thinking.	NZ Should never have signed up in the first place when the industrialised countries did not ... All encouraged by a Nobel Prize winning ex US Vice President who's home just happens to consume 12 x the average US house energy consumption and who also has a 5 billion dollar carbon credit trading company on the side ... Go figure!	NZs emissions are insignificant when compared to the world and damaging our economy just to join hands with a small minority of the worlds minor emitters would be foolish. That is aside from the fact that the planet will continue to warm and cool as it has always done regardless.

## Results

The four articles analysed covered similar content relating to the Kyoto agreement and the ETS, with similar emphasis and arguments. Small (2012) in his article *Backtracks on Climate Change Cause Little Heat*, highlighted the lack of concern from the public regarding New Zealand's climate change action. The New Zealand Herald's (2012) *Editorial: Abandoning Kyoto an Act of Timidity* discussed New Zealand's international reputation on climate change and future prospects. Peter Hardstaff's (2012) opinion piece *Govt Climate Change Policy Lacks Foresight* criticised the government's climate policy. Finally, Philip Duncan's (2012) article *Girl Guides Have the Right Idea: Be Ready* was focused on preparation for global warming. Several themes were common across the four articles: the role of the government in addressing climate change; the predictability of the future; understanding and interpretation of scientific evidence; New Zealand's environmental reputation; and the impact of climate change action and policy on the economy.

## Rhetorical strategies

A variety of rhetorical strategies were used including the need for climate change action, New Zealand's position on the Kyoto agreement, the importance of the ETS, as well as about climate science more generally. All of the rhetorical strategies were used by both article authors and the commenters to garner support for their views, and were often used to make assertions about the lack of veracity of opposing positions. In this analysis, we examined the ways that the commenters and authors described a view as having the support of the majority or of reflecting a minority standpoint. In the following sections, we outline the rhetorical strategies, and examine how they were used to construct various (often competing and contradictory) positions.

### ***The majority strategy***

A writer uses a majority strategy when they characterise their views as being in line with the views of most people. By using this strategy, the writer signals that their views are shared by a larger, unified group. When discussing scientific views, the majority strategy draws on the idea that such a large number of individuals cannot be, or are unlikely to be, wrong. For example, widespread acceptance of climate change as demonstrated by agreement between ‘90 percent of actively publishing North American climate scientists and most governments worldwide’ (Duncan 2012). When used in this way, the majority become a large group of sensible people with common views; aware, informed and actively thinking for themselves.

The majority strategy was most commonly used by those – particularly the article authors – promoting climate change action. In this context, this rhetorical strategy claims climate science is settled, now agreed upon by the majority who understand its importance and wish to take action to minimise the effects of climate change: ‘there is by and large broad consensus across the divide’ (Small 2012). Taking the position that most people accept the reality of ACC, the writer must then account for current lack of climate action by the majority. They account for inaction by signalling current majority agreement as reflecting a recent convergence of views.

Both Small (2012) and Duncan (2012) begin by acknowledging previous division in views on climate science:

Just a few years ago you could spark a political row by asking whether humans were partly to blame for climate change. (Small 2012)

For over a decade I’ve been on the fence about climate change ... but lately ... (Duncan 2012)

This locates their arguments temporally, which serves two purposes. Firstly, current arguments are characterised as separate from earlier arguments; therefore, any previous arguments made against the writer’s current points are discredited. Secondly, climate debate is characterised as outdated. This suggests that current thinking has evolved from an earlier stage of naive doubt. For example, Duncan (2012) claims that, ‘[i]t’s time to stop fighting the mounting science.’ This pre-emptively discredits those who wish to re-establish debate on the validity of ACC, suggesting that their arguments are obsolete.

Taking the current accepted position as having progressed from earlier uncertainty, the authors present the current situation as a united and informed one. In this unified opinion, the majority share the view that the climate is becoming warmer due to human behaviour and that action is required to prevent this worsening.

There is by and large broad consensus across the divide. Now the political debate is not about whether we should act, but how and what cost we should bear. (Small 2012)

Climate change – it’s time to stop fighting the mounting science and to start seeing how we can gain economically from it by being better prepared ... Evidence is mounting that global warming really is happening - not just from much of the scientific community, but also from business, like insurance companies. (Duncan 2012)

Duncan characterises the majority group as becoming better informed and more united in their views because of the influence of the ‘mounting science’. The views of climate scientists are characterised as truth through this process of increasing information. Similarly,

Small characterises the majority group as one that has grown over time, from individuals fighting the science and having rows with one another, to a unified majority which has embraced the science behind climate change. Here a metaphor of struggle is drawn upon to suggest that consensus has been achieved through active engagement with the scientific evidence that underpins this majority point of view. It suppresses the notion that majority believers in climate science are unquestioning in their belief; avoiding the stereotype of a sheep-like majority. Struggle to gain support suggests active debate, intelligent thought, and initial scepticism on the part of the majority.

In these accounts of majority agreement regarding climate change, those who disagree with climate science are positioned as a minority.

Lately ... I've been wondering why, with 90 per cent of actively publishing North American climate scientists and most governments worldwide now embracing the science behind climate change, minority dissenters are getting an equal voice? (Duncan 2012)

This minority are portrayed as backwards or naïve in their beliefs. They are described as 'dinosaurs' (Navman, in *The New Zealand Herald* 2012) and 'mad climate change denier [s]' (Simon Johnson, in *Hardstaff* 2012). Disbelieving ACC is linked to other discredited or unrealistic beliefs. For example:

We no longer believe the sun revolves around Earth. We no longer believe the Earth is flat. Dinosaurs did exist. But, as US liberal comedian Bill Maher said on HBO this week: "How can we convince people who believe the Earth is 9000 years old that climate change is real?" (Duncan 2012)

Disbelief in climate change is linked to outdated beliefs, which are used as a marker of extremist views. However, like climate change, none of these characteristics of the natural world can be established through personal observation. The opposite is frequently observed: the sun appears to rise in the sky, the Earth appears flat, and dinosaurs are not encountered. Likewise, climate change cannot be established through observation of the weather and consequently cannot be verified or refuted by individual experience. In comparing climate change to these well-known examples of scientific knowledge, Duncan gives weight to the notion that scientific evidence should outweigh personal experience and individual observation. Thus, Duncan characterises direct observational evidence used by climate deniers as unreliable evidence and their conclusion that climate change is untrue, as erroneous.

Minority group disbelief of climate change is also attributed to unethical motives. Accusations of vested interests are used to denounce anti-climate action minority views. Evidence against climate change is dismissed as being biased, false, and funded by corrupt companies:

Climate sceptics get their funding from oil companies, right wing think tanks, etc. But who cares as the real problem is they consistently misrepresent the science on every level. (Gandalf, in *Hardstaff* 2012)

Climate sceptics are characterised as 'lying climate denialists [who] destroy science' (Gandalf, in *Hardstaff* 2012). This paints a picture of a deliberate attack on evidence and truth. 'Gandalf' and others use a metaphor of a war waged with ideas, in which the truth of the majority is being undermined by a minority of corrupt scientists and big business. This is illustrated in this extract from 'liz':

Ninety-seven percent of climate scientists are concerned that our global climate is destabilising thanks to human generated increases in greenhouse gas emissions ... This is pretty solid science ... yet a minority of self-appointed experts (sometimes with funding links back to the oil and gas industries) do their best to create confusion in the public mind ... (liz, in Hardstaff 2012)

First, liz gives ‘climate scientists’ status as knowing truth, because they construct ‘solid science’. Against this solid evidence, a corrupt minority of ‘self-appointed experts’ intervene to manipulate this evidence because of their vested interests in fossil fuel industries. This powerful minority can thus ‘create confusion’ in the general populace. The fact that there is a strong consensus among scientists about the human causes of contemporary climate change redefines what counts as a valid majority – it is a majority of those who have access to truth via science. A large part of the general population may be mistaken or misled by others with vested interests because they lack access to scientific information. Thus, by framing climate scientists as a majority (rather than requiring the majority to apply to the general populace) writers can draw on the strength of the majority strategy to argue for the reality of ACC while, at the same time, explaining why there still exists debate and disagreement amongst the general public.

A majority strategy is rarely used by those arguing against climate action or the reality of ACC; however, there were noteworthy instances in the articles. When it occurred, the majority against climate action were characterised as covert; a sizeable, silent group of individuals who simply have not had the time, made the effort, or lack the capacity to have their say. As is often the case for majority arguments, the majority opposing climate action is framed as intelligent evaluators of the evidence who are fearless in the face institutionalised dogma. In the following example, these ordinary people are signalled through appeals to them as citizens with rights to speak as ‘voters’. This majority are set against extremist minority groups such as environmental groups:

The rot that Green will be better for our economy is one reason that the Greens have so little political traction. Such stupidity is not attractive to voters. (“Mark Waikato” in Hardstaff 2012)

The assertion that the Green Party’s pro-environmental policies are opposed to economic growth, ‘stupid’ and unattractive to voters suggests that economic growth is what voters’ value. The unqualified use of the word ‘voters’ suggests that a majority of voters share the writer’s view.

Conversely, the majority is sometimes portrayed as disinterested, while still holding the same opinions as the commenter. For instance, one commenter notes:

The authors opinion is: Our way or the Highway. The reality is this. Outside of his own political organization. Who really cares a toss for Kyoto? The vast majority of our population can’t even spell the name. If he believes that countries will refuse to trade with NZ if we don’t ratify Kyoto, then that’s delusional. However. Lets get real here. (Rodney, in Hardstaff 2012)

Here Rodney makes the claim that most New Zealander’s do not or cannot engage with the Kyoto protocol, and therefore New Zealand has no business being involved with it. Rodney’s argument rests on the idea that majority opinion is valid simply because it is held by a majority. This challenges the assumption that an intelligent majority is better than a simple numerical majority. The notion that the opinion of the majority should

be given more weight is used to deny the importance of further considerations, such as how informed that majority are (see Tuffin 2008).

The majority rhetorical strategy is used flexibly throughout the data set to support views both for and against climate action. When used in favour of climate action, the majority are positioned against a backwards minority who hold antiquated, unscientific, or unethical beliefs. The majority may not be an overall numerical majority, but a majority of a group ‘that counts’ such as scientists or other relevant experts. This argument suggests that an informed majority holds more weight than an uninformed one. Conversely, where the majority strategy is used to argue *against* climate action they are characterised as unconcerned, uneducated, or disengaged. Nevertheless this kind of majority’s moral and rhetorical weight is used as the basis for climate inaction.

### ***The minority strategy***

The antithesis of the majority strategy, a minority strategy, is also widely used throughout the texts. In this rhetorical strategy, the minority are constructed as being intelligent, active thinking, and tireless. Minority rhetorical strategies often characterise the climate change dispute as a David-and-Goliath battle. The minority is framed as having a more difficult job because they have few resources available to fight a larger opponent; the minority are the plucky underdog. The minority are characterised as fighting for a higher moral good, which the majority does not or cannot aspire to. The minority strategy is often used flexibly to argue against both climate action and against the reality of ACC. In a few cases, it is also used to argue in support of climate change action.

There are two variants of the minority argument used against climate action in this data set. Firstly, it is used by climate sceptics who view themselves as independent, critical thinkers who resist simply accepting what they are told to believe by the media, governments, or academia. Under this reading the majority, who believe in climate change, are characterised as sheep-like, thoughtlessly allowing themselves to be herded into accepting climate change through ‘fear tactics’ (Kirk, in Hardstaff 2012) or ‘emotive drivel’ (the old sage, in Hardstaff 2012). Climate change is constructed as a temporary fad, a ‘bandwagon’ (Douglas I, in The New Zealand Herald 2012) for the majority to jump on; a kind of, ‘blind hysteria over greeny red herrings’ (Davedog, in The New Zealand Herald 2012).

The lemming like acceptance to the emotive drivel driven by the UN and sucked up by the lazy media does not justify the huge financial burden being imposed on the workers of this country. Lets see some honesty here instead of blind faith. (the old sage, in Hardstaff 2012)

Here, ‘the old sage’ characterises the majority believers in climate change as ‘lemmings’ who accept the ‘emotive drivel’ of climate change science ideology on ‘blind faith’. Reference to ‘lemmings’ epitomises thoughtless and self-destructive acceptance of ideas by the majority (Childs 1968). ‘The old sage’ constructs majority agreement as unthinking mass acceptance of dogma rather than acceptance of proper evidence.

Another minority argument focuses on a different minority; that of New Zealand as a minority within the world. This argument side-steps any claims regarding the scientific evidence for climate change by suggesting that New Zealand’s contribution is insignificant on the global stage. ‘Rodney’s comment exemplifies this argument:

There are about 7 Billion people on earth. That means that Kiwis number about 0.06% of the world population. And for some reason we are going to help save the planet? Spare me ... it would make no measurable difference to climate change. (Rodney, in Hardstaff 2012)

This ‘small things can’t make a difference’ argument is effective for a variety of reasons. It is a very accessible argument for most readers. As New Zealand is a small country, this makes it unlikely that the country’s contribution to climate action would make any ‘measurable difference’. Because it holds regardless of the validity of ACC, the reader and writer do not have to engage with complex scientific knowledge, making the position accessible. This argument negates ethical discussion on climate action.

An argument conspicuously under-used in this data set is that of the minority who *support* climate action. It appears in only a few subtle instances and highlights a different kind of minority not previously discussed: the minority who are willing to accept and take action on climate change. This argument frames a superior moral position, providing the grounds for a powerful narrative of heroic personal action. ‘Cimino Cole’ contrasts Duncan’s acceptance of climate science with ‘many’ who disbelieve:

I salute your embrace of the science. Many continue to cling to the hope that global warming is a hoax because they oppose the measures contained in the Kyoto Protocol. (‘Cimino Cole’ in Duncan 2012)

It is insinuated that disbelievers have alternate motives for their position, namely in avoiding ‘the measures contained in the Kyoto Protocol’. This both accounts for widespread disbelief despite scientific consensus and subtly characterises the ‘many’ as intellectually dishonest or even immoral. Similarly, Mooloo (in The New Zealand Herald 2012) writes:

I am amazed at how many of those commenting on this thread dispute the science around man made global warming ... It is just about as sure as it gets is in the world of science. I suggest that those of you that think otherwise may be getting your information from politically tainted sources.

This characterisation of the pro-climate action minority as morally and intellectually superior to the anti-climate action majority appears several times in this data.

In other instances, the majority are characterised as climate change believers who do not engage in climate action. Small (2012) argues that the government’s decisions regarding Kyoto and the ETS are negative and that the majority disagree with them. He writes, ‘the technicalities of emissions trading schemes, carbon units and Kyoto protocol commitments are eye-glazing for most voters’ (Small 2012). Small characterises ‘most voters’ as incapable of or unwilling to engage with the climate change decisions that are being made, again characterising them as less intellectually rigorous. This explains why, ‘the Government’s serial backtracking on climate change over the past few weeks has sparked so little political heat’ (Small 2012); even though the government’s new measures may go against the public’s wishes, few actively oppose them.

Of course we don’t need an ETS - as Kiwis we are such a sporting bunch, we can just rely on everyone to do their bit at the individual level. No worries mate? (Bob Fossil in Small 2012)

With regard to climate action, the minority are therefore positioned as the under-dog, fighting not only the government’s decisions, but also the weight of a silent majority

who do not appear to care, and therefore will not affect the government or its choices. The majority are positioned as lazy or ignorant; by contrast the minority who are willing to act are motivated and informed. As climate change is viewed as a global issue that will dramatically affect everyone, this argument has the strength of suggesting that the minority fight not only for themselves, but also for this silent majority who, by their own lack of action, are endangering the future of the Earth.

## Discussion

Claims about climate change in the media were either bolstered by majority agreement or represented as a minority view. These strategies were used flexibly to advocate both for and against climate action and climate science. The majority rhetorical strategy relied upon the 'common-sense' notion that the majority opinion is more likely to be true, and that, by implication, a minority opinion is inferior (Augoustinos et al. 2002; Tuffin 2008). Often this majority strategy was used to characterise the views of the author or commenter as being aligned with a majority of scientists, who were portrayed as in agreement about climate change.

This use contrasts starkly with Zehr (2000), who examined talk of scientific and lay knowledge of global warming in the popular American press. He found that scientific knowledge was depicted as being uncertain, and this was explained as part of the inherent nature of scientific inquiry. In contrast, lay knowledge was constructed as being naïve and alarmist, but also as being more consistent and certain (Zehr 2000). In the current study, the general trend that emerged was that lay knowledge was inconsistent. In contrast, scientific knowledge is rhetorically justified in terms of consistency, truth and, in some cases, alarmism. This characterisation of scientific opinion presents the opportunity to frame the majority of climate scientists agreeing with the need for climate action as an alarmist conspiracy. That opportunity was not present in the data presented by Zehr (2000).

The majority of the populace was portrayed as being constrained by a lack of access to scientific knowledge, and by ignorance and apathy. Everyday constraints on action are part of the rhetorical justification for inaction among the general public (Phillips 2000). Phillips investigated discourses of ecological and political risks and found that speakers kept their political beliefs and personal lives separate. This separation warranted minimal personal action on political or ecological issues they supported, based on difficulties managing their everyday lives in a consumerist society. In the current data set, lack of action was justified either by ignorance or by simple apathy. The lack of acknowledgement of difficulties in changing climate-damaging practices in the current data may be due to the focus on the veracity of claims about the causes of climate change and the role of wider government strategies. When the majority are ignorant of the need for action, or believe that their actions will not influence climate change, there is less need to justify a lack of climate action on the basis of personal circumstances.

To date, discursive studies of minority and majority rhetorical strategies have largely focused on racism and minority cultures in society (e.g. Wetherell and Potter 1992; Augoustinos et al. 2002; Tuffin 2008). In this context, such rhetorical claims suggest that commonly held views should prevail in terms of educational values, or balanced approaches should favour a numerical majority viewpoint. Majority rhetoric, alongside

commonsense notions of reasonableness, is effective in supporting status quo positions in racist discourse (Augoustinos et al. 2002).

Majority arguments are drawn upon very differently in the context of climate change discussions. Recourse to a majority position does not support action to combat climate change with the same strength as that used to justify societal inaction to address racism. One explanation of this is that climate change action does not involve a continuation of the status quo. Rather, climate action requires potentially drastic changes to one's way of life. The difference between these two ways of using the majority strategy suggests that a majority strategy is much more effective as a justification for inaction, to maintain the status quo, than as a justification for action that disrupts the status quo. The rhetorical force of a majority strategy used to justify maintaining the status quo is a powerful technique for resisting climate change action.

Recognising that majority agreement may not have great force in challenging the status quo, it is worth considering how the minority rhetorical strategy can be effective in inspiring climate change action. Minority arguments tend to focus on seeing climate change as the responsibility of a tireless minority struggling against big business and vested interests. The minority position pro-climate action accepts the majority consensus on climate science and explains lack of action towards mitigating climate change as majority inaction, rather than majority disagreement. The writer or speaker aligns themselves with a minority who both accept the existence of climate science, and are willing to take action to mitigate it. The minority argument can be used to position the majority as threatening the planet's future. The minority acting to address climate change are positioned as protectors of an 'uncertain future'. This creates a powerful narrative of heroic personal action, which can be used to assuage defeatism (Russill 2011). This narrative is particularly salient regardless of the size of the country, because no one country is wholly – or even mostly – responsible for climate change. A heroic narrative counters the claim that any individual's or country's climate change action are irrelevant. This rhetorical strategy can be utilised widely to address apathy or disbelief in the role of individuals and countries in making significant changes to address climate change.

## Conclusion

The media discussion of climate change has tended to focus on establishing the truth of claims being made in support or refutation of climate action. In this analysis, we focused instead on the ways that arguments are constructed rhetorically to position action to mitigate climate change as either necessary or misguided through the deployment of minority and majority arguments. Unpacking the way these arguments are used enables critical reflection on the strategies deployed to give arguments weight. Other researchers have examined discourses deployed by experts, activists, and governments or politicians. For instance, Fleming et al. (2014) identify several important discourses in the academic literature on climate change that 'may hinder rather than advance action in responding to climate change' (p. 410). These discourses include the following: that there is a need for more science before action can be taken, recognition of the confusion people face when confronted by the science of climate change, and resistance to the radical social change required to combat climate change.

Alongside these discourses, the rhetorical strategies we have identified can assist in unpacking the ways that such discourses are strengthened or undermined. Drawing attention to the ways in which such strategies ‘do their work’ it may be possible to weaken their potentially harmful effects. For instance, simply claiming that a position is held by a majority can create a sense of that position having extra moral authority, or additional empirical veracity. Identifying this rhetorical strategy opens up possibilities for resisting problematic discourses and promoting more helpful ways of framing climate change action. This approach should spark further consideration of the basis upon which particular strategies and calls for action are built, resulting in a more knowledgeable and informed positioning of individuals, organisations, and scientific knowledge. The kind of analyses conducted here provide possibilities for constructing more effective arguments in climate change discussions in order to influence climate action policy makers.

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