

“Just doing their job?” Journalism, online critique and the political resignation of Metiria Turei

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Abstract

When Metiria Turei resigned as co-leader of the Green party of Aotearoa New Zealand in August 2017, there was clear disagreement about the role played by journalism in her resignation. The controversy began after Turei confessed to not disclosing full information to the authorities about her personal situation as a welfare recipient in the 1990s. Journalists insisted they were simply “doing their job” by interrogating Turei’s story, while online supporters accused the media of hounding her. This paper examines the media politics of the controversy by putting Carlson’s concept of metajournalistic discourse into theoretical conversation with Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, especially their concept of antagonism. We explore what the case says about traditional journalistic authority in a media system where journalism is increasingly vulnerable to online critique from non-journalists.

Keywords: Antagonism, discourse theory, metajournalistic discourse, opinion journalism, New Zealand politics, social media, online critique.

Introduction

On July 16 2017, Metiria Turei, the co-leader of the Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand, gave a speech to the party's annual general meeting that outlined "radical" (Davison, 2017a) welfare reform policies ahead of the country's September general election. The speech committed the party to increasing welfare payments for "every single beneficiary by 20%", which Turei (2017) described as "the first universal increase in benefits in over 30 years". It also promised to remove sanctions for welfare beneficiaries, including penalties for women who do not declare changes in their relationship status. What galvanised journalistic interest in the speech, however, was Turei's revelations about her own experience of the welfare system as a single mother and law student in the 1990s. Most dramatically, Turei (2017) revealed "the lie I had to tell to keep my financial life under control" by not informing the authorities about the flatmates she had when receiving rent support payments.

Less than four weeks later, Turei resigned as Green co-leader and effectively from parliament by removing herself from the party's list of electoral candidates. The resignation came after a sustained period of media coverage of Turei, much of which focused on interrogating the "gaps" (Watkins, 2017b) in her story or simply condemning her for welfare fraud (Soper, 2017a). Concurrently, the case mobilized her supporters on social media, as illustrated by the emergence of the Twitter hashtag #IamMetiria, where people shared their own punitive experiences of the country's welfare system since the neoliberal policy upheavals of the 1980s and 1990s.

This article examines how journalism and media were represented in commentary and opinion journalism about the Turei controversy. We propose that the case offers a good illustration of what Carlson (2016) describes as "metajournalistic discourse", where contestation about the role of journalism in constituting a news story is treated as inseparable from the substantive story itself. Turei's case was marked by strong claims about the role of media in structuring the controversy. Indeed, this much was anticipated in Turei's (2017) original speech, when she described her younger self as "one of those women, who

you hear people complain about on talkback radio". Drawing on a discourse theoretical approach (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001; Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Phelan & Dahlberg), we discuss the antagonisms that emerged between a professional journalistic rationalisation of the case that argued journalists were simply "doing their job" by holding Turei accountable, and online discourses that attributed significant responsibility to the media for her political demise. We conclude by reflecting on the theoretical significance of our case study as an illustration of metajournalistic discourse mediated by the concept of antagonism. While our empirical focus is on a specific New Zealand case, we see the paper's main contribution as capturing an antagonistic dynamic between journalism and social media (and especially Twitter) publics that clearly has wider resonances (for one personal reflection, see Haberman, 2018) and which has become a key horizon for staging the politics of journalism.

Contextualising the Turei case

The case was the focus of sustained media coverage from the moment of Turei's original speech to the aftermath of her resignation. The coverage was energized by journalistic interrogation of Turei's personal details, including questions about where she lived as a beneficiary, who she lived with, her political activism, and personal relationships. In a drip-feed fashion, different details emerged that intensified the media and political scrutiny of Turei and, to her critics, cast doubt on her integrity. Most significantly, a NewsHub investigation of electoral role addresses found that Turei was registered at the address of her daughter's father in 1993, rather than the address she was living at. Fuelling speculation that she hadn't been eligible for welfare support as a single parent, Turei released a statement claiming that she didn't live at the address of the father of her child, but only registered there in order to vote for a friend who was running as a candidate in the 1993 election for a satirical party with no chance of being elected. Nonetheless, despite some sympathy (see, for example, Cooke, 2017) for Turei's attempt to explain away the anomaly as a minor indiscretion – a "mistake" that "I, like many other people, made as a young person" (Green Party, 2017) – the news that she had done something formally designated as "electoral fraud" further

stoked the controversy, particularly as it became part of the political dynamic that saw the appointment of Jacinda Ardern as leader of the New Zealand Labour Party.

When the original story broke on July 16, the response of New Zealand's two main political parties was relatively subdued. The most strident response came from David Seymour, the sole parliamentary representative for the right-libertarian ACT Party (NewstalkZB, 2017). The Labour Leader, Andrew Little, commended Turei's speech, describing it as "a brave thing for a politician to do" (cited in Davison, 2017c), and expressed support for parts of the proposed policy. The Greens even gave Labour a heads-up about the speech (Casinader, 2017), a gesture consistent with a 2015 memorandum of understanding signed by both parties that anticipated the prospect of a future coalition. Two Ministers in the ruling National Party, Minister for Finance Steven Joyce, and Deputy Prime Minister Paula Bennett, described Turei's revelation as "disappointing" (Davison, 2017c; Satherley, 2017b). However, neither suggested she should pay back the money and, as a former beneficiary herself, Bennett refrained from condemning Turei.

However, the political context changed dramatically when Andrew Little resigned as Labour leader on August 1, and was immediately replaced by his erstwhile deputy Ardern. Little's decision was influenced by a succession of poor polling results, culminating in a poll that indicated Labour support had dropped to a "demoralising 24 per cent – the [party's] lowest result in more than 20 years". The same poll recorded a significant increase in Green support, scoring their "highest result ever" at 15 per cent. The media narrative contrasted the diverging fortunes of both parties, with some journalists crediting the "calculated risk" over Turei's admissions for boosting the Greens' appeal among hypothetical Labour voters. As one headline put it, "Labour bleeds while Greens profit from Metiria Turei's 'fraud bomb'" (Watkins, 2017a).

The appointment of Ardern as Labour leader was therefore textured by a media perception that the party needed to quickly regain electoral support and that Ardern needed to assert leadership authority by taking a decisive stance on Turei.

As an opinion piece by one prominent political reporter put it: “if Jacinda Ardern is to be a strong leader, then she must rule out Metiria Turei from any meaningful role in a Labour-led Government” (Gower, 2017a). Turei conceded to these pressures on August 4 when she ruled herself out of a ministerial role in any future Labour-Green government, though Ardern indicated she would have ruled Turei out in any case (Davison, 2017b). However, instead of marking the end of the controversy, events took another dramatic turn on August 7, when two Green MPs, Kennedy Graham and David Clendon, resigned from the party because of Turei’s refusal to resign as co-leader. The remaining Green MPs initially affirmed Turei’s position, but two days later she announced her resignation. Turei cited personal reasons for her decision, reportedly “saying the intensity of attacks on her has become too much for her family” (1 News, 2017). Opinion polls were again cited by journalists as decisive, with some claiming the real reason for Turei’s resignation was a poll result showing a drop in Green support to eight per cent, “its lowest in a very long time” (1 News, 2017). Conversely, the same poll recorded a bump in Labour support to 33 per cent, illustrating a public enthusiasm for Ardern’s leadership that journalists had taken to calling “Jacindamania”. The contrast in political fortunes three months later was stark. With Turei no longer in parliament, Ardern was installed as New Zealand’s youngest ever Prime Minister in a coalition with New Zealand First supported by the Greens.

Now that we have given an overview of the case, we turn to our specific argument about journalism. The media coverage was a site of discursive contestation animated by disagreements (which cannot be comprehensively illustrated here) about the place of honesty in politics, the relationship between a politician’s public self and younger private self, and New Zealand’s welfare system. Our argument proceeds by first discussing our use of Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) notion of antagonism. The concept helps us grasp the media dynamics of the controversy and can, we argue, be combined productively with the concept of metajournalistic discourse. It also sensitizes us to other aspects of the case, including the symbolic annihilation of the class-dimensions of Turei’s story (Timperley, 2017), and pejorative representations of welfare claimants that were given a gendered and

racialized inflexion because of Turei's identity as a Māori woman (Aoake, 2017; Pihama, 2017).

Political antagonism and metajournalistic discourse

The concept of antagonism is central to Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) discourse theory and their understanding of human subjectivity. It assumes that *all* social identities are partly constituted by their discursive differences from other identities. These antagonisms take their most explicit form in strong "us versus them" dichotomies when some positively avowed identity is constructed in opposition to some denigrated Other. The mediation of the representation between self and Other assumes a fantasmatic dimension. Glynos and Howarth (2007) conceptualize the fantasmatic as fantasy-based logics that energize an individual or group's affective identification, or disidentification, with a particular identity or discourse. Flattering fantasy-based representations of our identity are articulated alongside horrific representations of the Other.

However, social antagonisms also operate in less explicit ways that are not tied to the performance of sustained hostilities between one identity and another. Grasping this point necessitates an appreciation of the importance of the category of universality to Laclau and Mouffe, especially as theorized in Laclau's later work (Laclau, 2004). Contrary to post-structuralist stereotypes sometimes projected onto discourse theory, Laclau and Mouffe did not renounce the concepts of universality and social objectivity. Rather, they recast them as products of hegemonic and political struggle, where alliances of different social actors work, consciously and unconsciously, to give particular discursive constructions of the world the guise of an objective universal horizon. When successful, these discourses become institutionalized to a degree that becomes commonsensical, and finds concrete material expression in different social practices. These universalized discourses give a fixity to social life that is only ever partial, for the simple reason that the foundations of any social order are never immune from contestation and challenge.

For example, let's consider the discourse of journalistic objectivity, which historically has had a normative authority in New Zealand journalism similar to other Anglo-American journalism cultures. Objectivity emerged as a doctrinal norm for shaping professional journalistic identities at a particular historical moment and in a particular cultural context (Schudson, 2001). It did not have the status of a strict universal - i.e. something taken to be true outside the context of its historical emergence. Rather, it was a product of contingent circumstances that were partly shaped by a relational dynamic where journalists needed to articulate a clear distance between their identities and the work of public relations practitioners and advertisers. Nonetheless, for much of the 20th century, the concept of journalistic objectivity assumed an objective social authority among liberal democratic publics that it does not seem to have for contemporary news audiences. It had the standing of a "hegemonic universal" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001); it was something taken to be intersubjectively true by most people, and materially embodied in different journalistic practices and conventions.

Laclau and Mouffe's axiomatic assumption about the antagonistic nature of identity therefore comes with important caveats. On the one hand, it signals the potential for different conflicts over the question of how society should be organized. But, on the other, it suggests that social practices are often organized in a way that obscures their contestability, because of the naturalized authority of a particular way of understanding the world. The journalistic objectivity example is again illustrative. Even during the heyday of the "high modernist" (Hallin, 1992) paradigm in journalism, it is inconceivable that nobody would have questioned the concept of journalistic objectivity, or wondered what might be excluded from a professional doctrine that presented itself as universal in mainstream media spaces. However, our imagined critic would have been voicing these criticisms in a context where it would have been more difficult to be heard, because of the taken for granted social authority of a particular way of thinking about and doing journalism. To cite Foucault's memorable phrase, she would have been speaking truth from a place of "wild exteriority" (quoted in Howarth, 2002), at odds with the general assumptions that policed understandings of journalism.

We can now clarify why it might be productive to put Laclau and Mouffe's work into conversation with the concept of metajournalistic discourse, because the latter can be reformulated as signaling a world of increasingly visible antagonisms about journalism. Indeed, to exaggerate the point, we might say that, unlike the era of high modernism, someone insisting on the truth of journalistic objectivity today risks sounding hopelessly naïve to many people, akin to believing in Santa Claus or the tooth fairy (Hirst, 2009). Carlson (2016) defines metajournalistic discourse "as public expressions evaluating news texts, the practices that produce them, or the conditions of their reception" (350). He suggests these public expressions cannot be adequately grasped if we limit our focus to assessments of journalism articulated by journalists themselves. We also need to consider the "talk about journalism" (p. 357) that is produced by non-journalist publics, especially in a digital media ecology that makes it easier for such talk to be circulated as critiques of the representational practices of mainstream media – or what is sometimes constructed as the "MSM" Other (Gerbaudo, 2018).

Carlson's (2016) identification of the division between journalists and nonjournalists as a key fault-line gives us a clear steer for mapping the concept of metajournalistic discourse onto the concept of antagonism. The notion of antagonism resonates with different aspects of Carlson's argument, including his discussion of the role of "definition" struggles in determining "who is a journalist" (359), the place of journalistic "boundary setting" in shaping what is, and isn't, seen as "appropriate knowledge" (359-60), and journalistic narratives that delegitimize or legitimate different identities and news actors (361). Laclau and Mouffe (2001) suggest antagonisms are formed through the construction of "chains of equivalence", where different signifiers are rendered logically equivalent through their common opposition to an Othered identity. One set of signifying associations construct a favorable representation of our identity (we are "rational", "factual" and "objective") in contrast to signifiers that construct a critical representation of "them" as "emotionally excessive", "ideologically partisan" and "politically naïve". The impression of an absolute clash of identities again simplifies the theoretical picture considerably; as we've already suggested, antagonisms can also operate through disavowal and their enactment does not

preclude potential points of agreement between otherwise opposed identities. The division between journalists and non-journalists can be reframed as a site of relatively latent or overt antagonisms, whether in the form of vague everyday complaints about “the media”, or in explicit contestation about how particular stories are represented. These antagonistic logics were clearly evident during the Turei controversy, so let us now consider the media dynamics of our case more closely.

The Turei controversy and media-centered antagonisms

Our analysis focuses on a marked antagonism between professional journalistic rationalizations of the media coverage and online critiques that were primarily articulated by either (loosely defined) “alternative”ⁱ journalistic identities or nonjournalist supporters of Turei. To reformulate the antagonism in terms used by some of the actors themselves, the controversy illustrated a clear division between those who insisted journalists were simply “doing their job” versus those who likened the media coverage to a “witch-hunt”.

In today’s “hybrid media system” (Chadwick, 2017), framing the case according to a clear-cut division between mainstream media and online media representations simplifies the empirical picture in some obvious respects. As elsewhere, the thing we call New Zealand “mainstream media” is increasingly reliant on online practices and distribution mechanisms, and different online news organisations have recently emerged - such as *Newsroom* and *The Spinoff* - that illustrate the digitization of professional journalistic identities. Journalists’ regular use of online platforms like Twitter belies any strict demarcation of mediums, enabling them to articulate a more playful public persona beyond the traditional boundaries of a professional journalistic identity (Berglez, 2018). And sweeping claims about “the media” and “social media” can obscure the capacity for diverse opinions in both universes. This was evident in corporate media representations of the controversy that were sympathetic to Turei (see Cooke, 2017), and in Twitter, Facebook and blog posts that condemned her.

Nonetheless, in narrative representations of the controversy that were articulated

at the time, there was clearly a division between how the case was talked about in mainstream media and how it was regarded by supporters of Turei who rallied around the #IstandwithMetiria and #IamMetiria hashtags on Twitter. These antagonisms intensified when different journalists responded directly to criticisms of the media coverage, sometimes in pointed ways that criticised Turei's supporters for their ideological partisanship and naivety about journalistic norms. Conversely, some on the online left criticized journalists for their ideological complicity with the welfare regime that Turei's initial intervention sought to challenge.

The next two sections examine how the role of journalism and media was represented by actors aligned with both sides of the antagonism, before the final section considers the theoretical implications of our case study. Our analysis focuses on journalistic or online commentary that either explicitly discusses the role of journalism and media or which refers to mediated dynamics in a more coded way. Our journalistic examples are primarily taken from analysis and opinion genres produced by journalists themselves where, as convention allows, gives them freedom to write evaluative commentary that would be frowned on when writing strict reportage. We don't aim to analyse the general news coverage of the case, we don't attempt to analyse a wider corpus of media commentary, and we don't limit our focus to commentary produced by nominal political journalists. Unlike discourse analytical approaches informed more by linguistics that analyse specific texts in detail, our use of discourse theory (see Phelan and Dahlberg, 2011) orientates us towards analysing how the general media-centred antagonisms of the case were constructed by highlighting texts and fragments of text where media and journalism are either critiqued or such critiques are rebutted.

Journalistic rationalizations

The initial media response to Turei's welfare reform speech was mixed. One former political journalist called her a "benefit cheat", and implored voters not to "be hoodwinked by the humbug being uttered by those fool enough to be making excuses" (Armstrong, 2017) for her. Another political journalist described Turei

as a “self-confirmed benefit fraudster” (Kirk, 2017) before moving to a more sympathetic assessment of the case. Isaac Davison (2017a) in the *New Zealand Herald* commended Turei for “refocus[ing] attention onto what is an ambitious policy to address poverty in New Zealand”. Most stressed the political and legal riskiness of Turei’s admission, interpreting it as a “bold play” (Kirk, 2017) to increase the Greens’ election vote.

Consistent with political journalism’s well-known focus on the strategic dimensions of politics, some of the early assessments of Turei’s intervention pointed to a latent antagonism about the place of mediated dynamics in the Greens’ strategy. Turei’s admission of past personal failings was read as a strategic move to gain media visibility and present herself as more human, honest and authentic to voters (Garrick, 2017; Watkins, 2017b). Some political journalists even suggested the Greens were engaging in a political branding maneuver akin to Jeremy Corbyn in the UK and Bernie Sanders in the US, with Turei self-positioned as the New Zealand embodiment of a disruptive left radicalism (Watkins, 2017b).

These antagonistic dimensions were expressed overtly in a July 26 opinion piece by Patrick Gower (2017b), the political editor of the Television and Radio network Newshub. Gower accused Turei of “political fraud” and engaging in an electoral strategy that “needs to be called out as nothing but a calculated political move by the Green leadership and spin doctors to get attention”. Perfectly aligning the identity of journalists and the public, he suggested Turei was attempting “to use her benefit fraud to manipulate the media *and* [italics added] the public eight weeks before an election”. Gower’s article was a key moment in the media politics of the controversy, and attracted strong online critique (see below). It recast the case more forcefully within an accountability journalism framework that demanded interrogation of the veracity of Turei’s story. “Metiria Turei and the Greens are playing a game with the New Zealand public” for which they must “be held accountable”. “Now it’s time to front up” and “tell the taxpayer the truth about what happened all that time ago”.

The figure of “the twitterati” became a proxy for what some journalists saw as the adulation of Turei by an implicitly unrepresentative public and her supporters’ intolerance of journalistic conventions. Barry Soper (2017b), political editor of Newstalk ZB, suggested “the twitterati has become apoplectic, fuming at the audacity of anyone posing a provocative question to the patron saint of the poor Metiria Turei”. The interplay of online and journalistic representations was suggested more indirectly in an article by the *New Zealand Herald’s* Deputy Political Editor, Claire Trevett (2017). Written in an unadorned fact-checking rhetorical style, the article purported to clarify “the facts” about Turei’s case, in light of “comparisons” – unattributed in Trevett’s article but clearly articulated online (see Macskasy, 2017) - which suggested that Turei had been subjected to “much more [media] scrutiny” (Trevett, 2017) than previous revelations about Prime Minister Bill English and former Prime Minister John Key. Trevett concluded that claims made by Turei’s supporters did not stand up to factual scrutiny, thus implicitly casting the media coverage within the framework of objective journalists doing their regular job (for critiques, see Pihama, 2017; Tiso, 2017).

The role of journalism became a more salient feature of media commentary in the lead up to Turei’s resignation and in the immediate post-mortems. This was sometimes articulated as ironic dismissals of discourses that “blame the media” for the controversy. Two forceful defenses of the media coverage stand out, both authored by journalists that transcended the image of a right-wing media attack. Both voiced sharp criticisms of Turei and the Greens, while also expressing aversion to a “heartless” (Macdonald, 2017) social welfare system where “beneficiaries are often treated like the shit on someone’s shoe” (Stewart, 2017).

The first was an August 9 article in the *New Zealand Herald* by Rachel Stewart (2017) that was published under the headline of “Greens can’t blame media for shooting themselves in the foot”. Winner of the 2016 “Opinion Writer of the Year” award at the New Zealand journalism awards, Stewart was perhaps an unlikely Green antagonist given her trenchant writing on the environmental damage wrought by intensive dairy farming in New Zealand. Written in a hyperbolic style,

her article clearly articulated the media-centric antagonisms of the controversy. It constructed Turei's "partisan supporters" through an unflattering chain of equivalences that referenced her own experiences of observing "Turei's social media adherents abuse anyone who disagrees". Turei's supporters had elevated her to the status of a religious icon: "Metiria Turei is not Jesus". They were violently unreflexive in their responses to any contrary perspective: "It has become apparent that if anyone questions the ethics, the timing, or the premeditation of it all, they are verbally pitchforked"". Her supporters made spurious claims that "the media have gone lightly" on other cases of political misdemeanor ("what planet are these people on?). And they had "written off" anyone who disagrees with them as "racists, misogynists, haters of the poor, lovers of the rich, white, privileged". Stewart's assessment of the case appealed to simple moral precepts ("nobody should steal from taxpayers") and an unpretentious Kiwi sensibility that "pretty much said 'yeah, nah' to the political acceptability of what [Turei] did". In dismissing those who blamed the media for the controversy, she invoked a pointed naturalistic metaphor for understanding journalistic motivations:

Blaming the media - or anyone - for a political misfire of the Greens' own making, is *about as pointless as expecting sharks to stop liking blood* [italics added]. Not going to happen. (Stewart, 2017).

The second article was published on the same day at the website of the public service broadcaster Radio New Zealand. It was written by Finlay Macdonald (2017), a former editor of *The Listener* magazine and another previous winner of a New Zealand media award for opinion writing. Macdonald refrained from a similarly expressive depiction of Turei's supporters, and didn't explicitly refer to social media. Nonetheless, his reference to "the current hurt mewling...from offended Green supporters" suggested a similar target to the one identified by Stewart. Macdonald highlighted what he saw as the Greens' poor "political management" of the case. Turei's attempt to set herself up as "the embodiment" of all that is wrong with the welfare system "failed...spectacularly" because of the

party's construction of a "morality tal[e]" that "turn[ed] out to be messy, missing crucial elements, subjective and all too human". Macdonald rejected the image of journalism as a morally indifferent, even sociopathic practice (see Bradbury, 2017 below), quipping that "yes" journalists "with a conscience...do exist". Nonetheless, he also highlighted the need for journalistic skepticism, observing that "I long ago learned to be sceptical of any story that seems too neatly emblematic of a great wrong". Macdonald avoided distancing himself blanketly from Turei's supporters, expressing his solidarity with arguments that lament the image of politics as "a blood sport" and a media culture that "is often willfully shallow in its coverage of complex issues". Nonetheless, he insisted that in Turei's case this critique "misses the point entirely" and described the cries of "it isn't fair" as "just plain pathetic". Therefore, despite recognizing the limitations of how media cover politics, Macdonald ultimately offers a depoliticized assessment of the media coverage: "that's how it is, and if you're not ready for the counterpunch, you shouldn't be in the game".

Reversing the antagonism online

The media politics of the case wasn't a central feature of the commentary that initially emerged around the #IstandwithMetiria and #IamMetiria hashtags. Criticisms of media became more salient over time, in part as a response to journalistic discourses that accused Turei of media manipulation.

For example, the Patrick Gower (2017b) article discussed earlier attracted substantial online critique, including 84 mostly negative replies to a Twitter post he sent that included the link. Many made no reference to media, but most that did were critical and attributed different motivations to Gower. He was accused of blatant political partisanship; "Toryboy: is doing a "hit job" for the National Party. Gower's commitment to professional journalistic norms was questioned: "you need a serious brush up course on impartiality before the election". Other tweets characterized his article as "clickbait", emblematic of a sensationalist media culture where journalists "have to write trash cause [sic] they need clicks /jobs" and "manipulate[e] the NZ public to get ratings". One tweeter indicted both Gower and another broadcaster, Mike Hosking by asking: "Does everything have to be

turned up to 11? You and Hosk[ing] determined to turn NZ journalism into US news theatre?”.

Gower was also criticized in a satirical piece written by Hayden Donnell (2017) for the online media outlet *The Spinoff*. Parodying the genre of investigative journalism, Donnell mocked Gower’s attempt to represent the Green’s desire for media publicity as “political fraud” by pointing to other humdrum examples of politicians seeking election publicity. The piece captured the theatrical excesses underpinning the performance of accountability journalism, suggesting Gower’s “take is in line with his longtime position as our political journalist most viscerally disgusted at people doing politics”. Gower’s role in the controversy was prominent in other online critiques (see Tiso, 2017; Macskasy, 2017), not least because of a live television interview he did with Greens co-leader, James Shaw, hours after Turei’s resignation which suggested poor poll results for the Greens - published by Gower’s own company, Newshub - was the “real reason” behind her resignation (see Satherley, 2017a). Gower’s attempt to take credit for Turei’s political “scalp” (Manhire, 2017) was described as “unedifying” by one political journalist, who suggested Turei “can take all the credit for herself” (Young, 2017). Conversely, a Martyn Bradbury (2017) article on *The Daily Blog* website on August 13 castigated Gower for obscuring his role in the controversy, after he formulated a question in a subsequent interview with Shaw that made generic reference to the unnamed forces that “had slapped down and destroyed” Turei, before then suggesting she “was taken down by her own party”. Recalling his “absolute bewilderment” at watching the interview, Bradbury asked: “is [he] Gower a sociopath?” given that he “has been at the front of the pack in the racist, sexist and classist attack on Metiria”.

One strand of online critique emphasized the colonial dimensions of the media coverage, echoing arguments often made in New Zealand media research (see Nairn et al., 2017). This perspective was most forcefully captured by Māori writers and framed the journalistic treatment of Turei as emblematic of how the “predominantly Pākehāⁱⁱ media establishment” (Aoake, 2017) have represented Māori perspectives historically. Writing on her blog, the education academic

Leonie Pihama (2017) suggested the coverage had been driven by a “punitive, vindictive...media pack”, led by “entitled white male journalists [who] have been relentless in their desire to affirm their pack behaviour and to prove that they are rightfully engaging in acts of journalism”. Stressing the theatrical dimensions of the media coverage, she pointed to a moral hollowness behind the ritualistic performance of journalistic accountability:

They [the journalists] are asking questions, they are probing, they are seeking answers. And some of them even speak with lulled voices that give an illusion that they give a shit. When they don't.

Miriama Aoake (2017) explored similar themes in a piece for *NZ Vice*, suggesting Turei was “persecuted by media agents with no concern for her hauora or that of her whanau”.ⁱⁱⁱ She reversed a metaphor typically attributed to social media during the controversy (Newshub staff, 2017a), describing mainstream media as “an *echo chamber* [italics added] cloaked in the dominant, Pākehā worldview”. This worldview conspired to “shut” Māori voices with “lived experience...out of the conversation”, and “used every possible opportunity to *avoid* talking about poverty” and “acknowledge the demography for whom Turei speaks” (Aoake, 2017).

The most comprehensive critique of the media coverage was articulated by Giovanni Tiso (2017) in a piece for the online publication *The Pantograph Punch*. A prominent figure in the New Zealand blogosphere and twittersphere, and co-editor of a recent book on New Zealand journalism (Johnson et al., 2016), Tiso doesn't claim the identity of journalist, though, interestingly, a *Guardian UK* article on the controversy that praised his essay (Williams, 2017) assumed he was. Tiso's article incorporated a response to the critiques of Stewart and Macdonald. The former was implicitly referenced through a rebuttal of the journalist-as-shark metaphor, while Macdonald was explicitly criticized for reducing the case to a strategic PR frame that obscured journalism's culpability.

Belying the one-dimensional image of a ring-wing media assault, Tiso began by

focusing on the interview that Turei did with John Campbell (Radio New Zealand, 2017) on the day of her resignation. A journalist generally admired by left-liberals, Campbell prefaced the interview by announcing that his show had been contacted by an unidentified person claiming to be “close to” Turei in the past, who expressed their annoyance that her story had omitted the “significant support” she had received from her daughter’s grandparents. Characterizing Campbell’s “line of questioning” as no different from that pursued by other journalists, Tiso (2017) suggested it “is sadly appropriate that Turei’s last stand happened” on a “show hosted by the media personality with the greatest reputation for socially committed journalism”.

Tiso’s central target was a common sense journalistic discourse that obscured the role played by media in Turei’s “political assassination” and which disavows journalism’s general complicity with “the dominant ideology”. Instead of enacting the official journalistic mythos of speaking truth to power, he accused journalists of “speaking power to the truth” by staging a form of journalism that is “the mirror image of realpolitik” and which has “no ethical grounding in the wellbeing of the polity”. Rejecting Macdonald’s framing of the case as a failure by the Greens to “control the narrative” within the established conventions of political journalism, Tiso suggested “there is in fact nothing natural, inevitable or necessary about this narrow understanding of journalism which has no regard for social value”. Pointing to how the case could have been covered differently, Tiso lauded the reportage of the Māori journalist Mihingarangi Forbes (a RNZ colleague of Campbell), who “provided context for Turei’s revelations and for the welfare reform proposal they were originally meant to introduce”. Not only did this reporting bring “the thousands of deeply moving personal stories that appeared on social media” under the hashtag #IamMetiria into “the orbit of the official journalism”, it also departed from a dominant media discourse that dismissed “Turei’s supporters on social media”.

The politics of metajournalistic discourse

Our analysis highlighted how the Turei controversy was represented from two opposed perspectives that – at its simplest – either attributed, or didn’t attribute,

significant responsibility to media and journalism for her political demise. These differences took the general form of an antagonism between professional journalistic identities and different online critics. We conclude by reflecting on the theoretical significance of our case study as an illustration of the politics of metajournalistic discourse.

Our case study illustrates how “talk about journalism” (Carlson, 2016) is constituted through argumentative claims that circulate between journalistic, quasi-journalistic, and non-journalistic actors and sites. By drawing on Laclau and Mouffe, our analysis gives a sharper political emphasis to Carlson’s theory. Metajournalistic discourse is reconceived as a site of antagonistic disputes between actors operating in different sub-universes of a hybrid media system. Some New Zealand journalists may dismiss the “twitterati” as a celebrified and non-representative public, or conversely lament the mob-like rule of social media. Nonetheless, they are forced to confront – at least indirectly – critiques of their practices articulated in online platforms that, yes, can sometimes be wild and misdirected but, as our analysis showed, can also be thoughtful and considered, and bring attention to structural aspects of New Zealand journalism that are invisible in everyday media discourse. Likewise, some online supporters of Turei partly construct their own identity in opposition to “MSM”, even if their interpretations of the controversy are still dependent on journalistic texts produced by mainstream media. Our case study illustrates an antagonistic dynamic that is an increasing site of tension between traditional forms of journalistic authority and representations of journalism circulating on Twitter (see Haberman, 2017) and which in its most fantasmatic form involves a projection – from both perspectives – of all the unsavory elements onto the Other identity. In mainstream media representations of the Turei case, such projections were disproportionately attributed to the figure of an ideologically blinkered “social media” public (Newshub staff, 2017a) that obscured its capacity to produce perceptive critiques of journalism. Simultaneously our case illustrates the enduring communicative power of traditional media outlets to shape the general category of “public opinion”, even in a media ecology where journalism’s capacity to monopolize the identity of the public is clearly challenged. This power was

evident in the strategic importance of polling data to the media narration of the Turei controversy, which conceivably played a significant role in shaping the actions of different political actors, not least Jacinda Ardern and Turei herself. The making of public opinion becomes a site of tensions between journalistic identification with the assumed reasonableness of quasi-scientific polling instruments and journalistic ambivalence about social media. The easy journalistic citation of Twitter posts as a proxy for public opinion morphs into a more antagonistic relationship when journalistic representations themselves are the object of online critique.

In a similar vein, our case study illustrates the enduring capacity of the dominant journalistic identity to insulate itself from meaningful critique within its own institutional spaces (One exception not examined here is the RNZ media critique programme Mediawatch. Its review of the Turei case cited some of the journalistic examples cited in this article, without considering the general critiques being articulated online (Peacock, 2017)). This tendency found clear manifestation in journalistic commentary that ironically referred to discourses that “blame” the media for the Turei controversy. In one sense, this journalistic defensiveness is understandable. Journalists are justifiably wary of discourses that make “the media” sound like a single agent, rather than a banner term for a complex field of internal differences and hierarchies. Moreover, in a world where Trump is president, we are not short of current examples of the deep cynicism that can animate critiques of journalism. At the same time, kneejerk dismissals of “social media” discourses highlighting the agented role of journalism rest on a similarly reductive logic. They reformulate any critical assessment of the media coverage as a dull, one-note argument that “blames the media”, as if all the other actors involved in the case are suddenly devoid of agency. Journalistic acknowledgement of media critique becomes entangled in its simultaneous delegitimisation, dismissed as a form of political stupidity by a journalistic common sense that knows you “shouldn’t blame the messenger”. In the Turei case, this defensiveness was captured by an on-screen interview Green MP Julie Anne Genter did with journalists on August 8, the day before Turei resigned (Bracewell-Worrall and Hurley, 2017). After Genter suggested that “the media's focus on what happened

25 years ago in a kind of punitive way is a distraction”, an unidentified journalist followed up with the question: “Okay, so is it the media’s fault that this is happening?”. Three days later, the broadcaster and columnist Duncan Garner awarded Genter the “tizzy fit of the week award”, suggesting she embodied an “angry” women wing of the Greens who “blame the Pākehā media” for the Turei controversy (Newshub staff, 2017b).

The Genter illustration brings us to a final point about what can and cannot be said about journalism in the middle of a mediatized political drama like the Turei controversy. Garner’s suggestion that Genter needed to “calm her organic farm down” was given a further gendered inflexion, when he simultaneously lauded James Shaw (the Greens co-leader) for “keep[ing] his cool”. The reason why Shaw was the subject of praise was captured in an interview he did the same day, where he suggested he had “absolutely no hard feelings” for the media. He added:

In my view, the media have just been doing their job. Some of the interviews have been really tough, but they should have been tough... People should just calm down and realise everyone's just doing their job. (Shaw cited in McCulloch, 2017)

Read literally, Shaw’s comments affirmed the dominant journalistic rationalization of the controversy. However, in a media atmosphere that reformulates any critique of the journalistic coverage as the argument of a sore loser, we might ask: what else could Shaw say if he wanted to recharge the party’s 2017 election campaign after the trauma of Turei’s resignation? Shaw offered a more convincing account of his thoughts about the role of journalism in the controversy in an election interview he did on RNZ a month later, after the drama of the case had dissolved. Prompted by Guyon Espiner’s question of “do you think she [Turei] was treated fairly?”, in a conversation that up to that point had made no reference to journalism, Shaw’s hesitant reply tellingly cited the agency of “the media”. “No, I don’t... I think that there were moves...in some parts of the media...which kind of really went beyond reasonable bounds”, later adding they were “not founded on anything other than rumour and hearsay” (Espiner, 2017).

The normative dimension of our case study – how *should* journalists have represented the Turei controversy? – hasn't been the focus of our argument. Nonetheless, we think Shaw's second answer points to a more accurate diagnosis of the case, against the glibness of an official journalistic ideology that insists there is nothing to see here other than journalists "just doing their job". The job descriptions of New Zealand journalists are not decrees from the heavens. Nor are they encoded in DNA scripts that compel journalists to act like sharks. Rather, as different online critics suggested, they are the earthly products of the economic, political, social, cultural and historical forces that go into the making of the thing we call New Zealand journalism, and which much like the country's welfare system cannot be clearly understood independently of the neoliberal upheavals of the 1980s and 1990s. The presentism of media time inhibits this kind of critical structural analysis in mainstream media discourses. But that it is conceivably even more difficult to articulate when *talking* about journalism says something about the nature of media representational power and its vulnerability to forms of online critique that – notwithstanding the limitations of today's digital culture – ultimately democratize the terms and scope of public discourse.

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ⁱ While we are aware of the extensive literature on alternative journalism, we use the term here in a deliberately loose way to signal a range of online journalistic identities that, for whatever reason, are contrasted with mainstream or establishment media.

ⁱⁱ Pākehā is the Maori word for New Zealanders of European descent.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hauora is a Māori word for health or vigour. Whanau is the Māori word for extended family or family group.