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**The "Manufacture" of News
in the 1993 New Zealand General Election**

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for the degree of PhD in Human Resource Management
at Massey University

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ABSTRACT

The news media's role in general election campaigns in New Zealand remains mysterious because few indigenous research antecedents inform the debate about the democratic function of journalists reporting election campaigns. This study analyses the creation of news by reporters during the 1993 New Zealand general election campaign and examines the relationships between journalists, politicians and third party sources which impact on political communication. The analysis leads to a discussion of the role of the news media in reporting election news.

The notions that news is created by journalists and through relationship between journalists, politicians and third party sources are central to the study. The concept that news is "manufactured" or socially constructed is explained in the introductory chapter and linked to theoretical perspectives in the literature review in Chapter Two. The two broad research questions which the study answers are:

1. how was the news manufactured during the 1993 New Zealand election campaign?
2. what does this mean for the "dialogue of democracy" (Taylor, 1992)?

The manufacture of news is examined from three perspectives in the research. These can be called the "doing" perspective which employs action research methodology, the "watching " perspective which uses participant observation methodology and the "measuring" perspective utilising content analysis. The research notes the failure of "any particular holistic paradigm" to sweep the field of political communication and employs "ground-up paradigm building" by carving out broad research problem areas and examining them through the use of appropriate research methodologies (Bennett, 1993, p.182).

The objectives of the action research project were twofold. First, to assist an individual political candidate contesting the election to develop systematic processes to use the news media to raise the candidate's profile. Second, to increase the level of understanding by the political candidate of news media processes and news concepts such as newsworthiness, candidate accessibility and news angles so she could utilise the knowledge to generate news and photographic opportunities. The findings revealed that the political candidate perceived that her level of understanding of news processes

was enhanced through the action research. The study found, too, that a systematic process of source relationship was cultivated between the political candidate and journalist, which in principle enhanced the democratic function of the news media as a platform for political debate. The action research project, was, however, bound by the prevailing climate of political rhetoric with all its shortcomings.

The participant observation methodology explored the nature of the contest between the triumvirate of political candidates as sources, journalists and third party sources such as "spin doctors". A second research question examined whether reporters seek to reassert their role in such a way as to influence the news when traditional journalistic autonomy is threatened. The findings showed a complex, shifting contest for control over knowledge and power in the making of news. This contest was characterised by features such as the increased sophistication of third party sources actively intervening in news processes, by strategic utilisation of "new" news formats by politicians and by journalists vigorously defending their status and enlarging their role. The impact of the findings on democratic journalism were examined using Golding's (1990) suggestion of a revival of the notion of citizenship, "to what degree and in what ways are people denied access to necessary information and imagery to allow full and equal participation in the social order?" (p.98).

The third methodology, content analysis, tested Edelstein, Ito and Kepplinger's (1989) theory of news content using a cognitive construct, the problematic situation. The results confirmed a larger interpretive as opposed to purely descriptive role for metropolitan newspaper journalists reporting news in the 1993 general election campaign in New Zealand. Over 70% of election campaign issues in the period sampled were defined problematically and negatively with a high reliance on references to **loss of value** and **conflict**. The findings have implications for how political candidates could and should tailor their political messages.

Overall the results taken together have fundamental implications for the "dialogue of democracy" (Taylor, 1992). They disclose a powerful dilemma about the manufacture of news in the 1993 New Zealand general election. The expanded influence of the news media has not been accompanied by a reassessment of what it *is* the news media should be doing in election campaign reportage. Reformative suggestions are made in the final chapter of the study and the implications for political journalism in a democracy are discussed.

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