

‘Local Heroes: Can smaller papers make a difference to coverage in a national election?’

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Abstract

New Zealand’s MMP system, reducing loyalty to political parties and the nature of modern campaigning, all combine to centre national media attention on party leaders and the party vote to the neglect of local electorate seats. Meanwhile, political campaign coverage is becoming tougher for smaller local daily papers as they struggle to survive the challenges traditional media face in the networked society.

Palmerston North’s Manawatu Standard, however, invested significantly in local coverage of the 2011 election, devoting a senior reporter and a quarter of its output to local perspectives. This article – based on a content analysis of all issues in the month of the official campaign – examines the nature and extent of the newspaper’s reporting and editorial team coverage of election 2011. The paper also reflects on the wider civic and democratic place of smaller dailies in the current media and political environment.

Introduction

The challenges facing traditional media in the perfect storm of global recession, competing digital outlets and shrinking audiences are well known. Newspapers have been the hardest hit, as mass closures in the United States and continuing cutbacks and restructuring in print media organisations attest. According to the OECD (2010: 6), “newspaper publishers in most OECD countries face declining advertising revenues and significant reductions in titles and circulation”. Furthermore, if large newspapers shiver in the winds of recession, local dailies are in danger of frostbite. With their already small circulations and tight budgets, a fall-off of relatively few readers can mean a punishingly large percentage circulation drop and reconsideration of a paper’s future. In New Zealand, figures from the Audit Bureau of Circulation (2012) show circulation continues to decline almost across the board.

However, newspapers are far from dead. Indeed in the fast-growing Indian and Chinese economies they are growing. Also, while circulation is down, New Zealand figures from Nielsen Research indicate readership remaining steady and in some cases increasing (Mace, 2012). Blaming the Internet for newspaper woes is simplistic; circulations in the ‘developed’ Western world have been declining for several decades. Much Internet news originates from newspapers’ on-line sources and companies like Fairfax now report in terms of their multi-platform ‘audience’ figures and stress the growing on-line figures (Fairfax, 2013).

Further, a survey from across the USA reveals the Internet is not simply replacing traditional media when it comes to political news (Gaskins and Jerit, 2012). Television remains the major source of political information and newspapers are still vital despite the Internet. In the United States, the Pew Center’s survey following the 2010 mid-term elections showed 67% of people getting their campaign news from television, 27% from newspapers and 24% from the internet (Smith, 2011). Furthermore, newspapers are a vital channel for citizens to get local news, although the picture is not simple. Another Pew Center study shows the variety of sources citizens use to learn about their local community. While the majority said the loss of a local paper would have little impact, the report states:

newspapers play a much bigger role in people’s lives than many may realize. Newspapers (both the print and online versions, though primarily print) rank first or tie for first as the source people rely on most for 11 of the 16 different kinds of local information asked about—more topics than any other media source. But most of these topics—many of which Americans [read] on a regular basis (Rosenstiel et al., 2011: p.2).

This is particularly the case for local or city government coverage. Research by Lacy, et al. (2012) of 138 local dailies and 83 weeklies in the U.S. found city government was an important aspect of coverage of both daily and weekly/community newspapers. However they concluded, “daily newspapers, whatever their growing weaknesses and the competition facing them, continued to do the ‘heavy lifting’ when it comes to informing citizens about matters affecting them” (2012: 35). Examining coverage of Philadelphia’s mayoral campaign by the city’s two dailies and four community papers, Shaker (2011) concluded that dailies concentrated more on strategy coverage, ran longer stories and gave more mobilising information than community papers, while community papers gave more issue information. He argued for the continued importance of newspapers in democracy as a mediated source of local political information.

Research on the democratic importance of local papers concentrates on their role in reporting local politics. However, national politics also have a local dimension and local issues can impact on electoral votes. The case study presented here, of the 2011 General Election campaign coverage by the *Manawatu Standard*, therefore investigates a rarely-examined role of local papers. Further, in

New Zealand, where regional coverage on television and radio is largely absent and local or regional papers are struggling, the rich coverage of issues in local electorates revealed by this analysis can be regarded as a significant democratic contribution.

New Zealand newspapers and the media environment

New Zealand has no national daily newspapers and the main metropolitans provide international, national, local and regional news. Daily newspaper numbers in provincial cities have been dwindling, but currently 16 dailies perform a vital local reporting role in a media scene where there are no regional television programmes, at least 60% of primetime news comes from Wellington and Auckland (Fountain et al., 2005) and where local radio news has been gradually approaching vanishing point (Norris and Comrie, 2005).

Like Australia (Donovan, 2011), New Zealand's media is highly concentrated. Additionally, the ownership of New Zealand papers reflects deregulation in a small economy. A duopoly of two Australian-owned media companies – APN NZ (part of Australia's APN News and Media) and Fairfax (an important player in the Australian media market) – dominates the industry. APN also owns the TRN radio network. Between them these companies have more than 90% of New Zealand's daily and weekend circulation and also own most community newspapers (Ellis, 2010).

Fairfax (the *Manawatu Standard's* owner) owns two of the four largest circulation dailies, seven of sixteen regional dailies and two of the three Sunday papers (ABC, 2012). The *Standard*, based in Palmerston North, a city of 80,000, shares considerable and increasing content with other Fairfax mastheads and is host to sub-editors who form part of the Fairfax hub serving New Zealand and Australian publications. According to Nielsen CMI Surveys in 2011 and 2012 the *Standard's* readership is 42,000 with its weekly coverage reaching 74,000. Circulation figures for 2011 were 16,293 (down 7.5% on the previous year). Its distribution area is in Manawatu and Rangitikei, and includes the two smaller towns of Feilding and Levin.

At the time of the 2011 general election, the *Manawatu Standard's* circulation area included part or all of five electorates. The Palmerston North electorate, covering most of the city, had a Labour Party (central-left) incumbent. Rangitikei, a safe National Party (central-right) seat, included some of Palmerston North city and a wide surrounding rural area. Also in the circulation area was part of the Otaki electorate to the south and the Wairarapa electorate to the west. New Zealand's Parliament also contains Māori electoral seats and those of Māori descent can choose to vote for their general electorate MP or the representative of one of seven Māori seats. Of these seven, Te Tai Hauāuru (with its incumbent Māori Party MP) encompassed the *Standard's* circulation area.

Since the advent of proportional voting in New Zealand (through an MMP system with voting for both a local representative and a political party), local electorate outcomes have become less significant than the overall party vote in determining the future government. Media coverage has reflected this change (Craig, Hayward and Rudd, 2009). Further, any marginal seats have tended to be in the bigger cities with the smaller centres and provinces containing a large number of 'safe' national seats. However, in 2011 Palmerston North was the lone Labour-held seat outside the main centres; it was also considered winnable by National in an election where incumbent National Party Prime Minister John Key enjoyed high levels of popularity.

Media, elections, newspapers and public journalism

New Zealand has followed trends in advanced industrial democracies where party membership has fallen and "people are less attached to parties... few people talk about politics or attend political

meetings” (Craig et al., 2009: 4). This throws the onus of informing the public about politics more strongly on the news media. However, political journalism in a media industry hungry for readers and audiences has been long under fire. For instance, Picard (2008: 222) argues that issues are neglected for “scandals, conflicts, mud-slinging”. Capella and Jamieson’s (1997) findings that news concentrates on the strategic game of politics have been reproduced in many studies including New Zealand (Comrie, 2009; Hayward and Rudd, 2009). Long-term political columnist Jane Clifton (2012: 216) argues “voters are increasingly looking over reporters’ heads... Looking at the declining influence of the mainstream media in New Zealand it would be hard to overlook the media-political antics of the 2011 campaign as a major turnoff factor”. Clifton’s critique is focused on the coverage of political journalists based in Wellington and echoes Atkinson’s (2006) condemnation of cynicism and mockery in Kiwi journalists.

Election coverage on television is overwhelmingly centred on the campaigns of leaders, with relatively little attention given to national issues. Local electorates and issues feature hardly at all (Comrie, 2009; Atkinson, 2004). There has been less analysis of newspapers, but Rudd and Hayward (2009) found the largest dailies also concentrate on the national contest.

However, when New Zealand voting shifted to MMP in 1996, three key New Zealand newspapers (*The Press*, *Waikato Times*, and *Manawatu Standard*) experimented with a public journalism approach to general election coverage, as a method of shifting away from politician-led, horse-race-style coverage (McGregor, Comrie and Fountaine, 1999). These newspapers conducted polls on what readers considered to be the issues, devoted considerable space to these issues, hosted debates and solicited public participation and debate. This had a noticeable impact on their coverage, and research showed these papers ran more issues and policy stories and fewer horserace stories, more neutral stories and fewer negative stories and had “a different, more constructive framing of the news” (McGregor et al.: 75). The papers trying public journalism were part of the INL media company subsequently bought by Fairfax. While the approach was generally abandoned for national elections, aspects of it remain entrenched in local body election coverage in the *Dominion Post*, the *Waikato Daily Times* and the *Manawatu Standard* (Comrie and Venables, 2010). The *Manawatu Standard* drew on this heritage in its coverage of the 2011 general election.

Method

The content analysis covered political coverage during the official 2011 election campaign from Tuesday, October 26 (Writ Day, when party advertising begins), through to election eve on Friday November 25. All 27 issues of the *Manawatu Standard* during this period were examined in hard copy. The paper has no Sunday edition. The study was concerned only with copy written by *Manawatu Standard* staff, so stories about the election written by reporters from other Fairfax papers, or widely syndicated columns, were not included. Items studied were: news stories, including short one-paragraph news briefs; features; editorials, including the occasional Letters from the Editor; and relevant opinion columns from staff member Grant Millar. Items were coded for size, placement, author, geographic or electorate focus, main topic area and issue or strategic framing (Capella and Jamieson, 1997). A final decision was whether the item overall showed any particular party (its policies, candidates and prospects) in a positive or negative light, thus arguably promoting or frustrating the agenda of that party.

Results

Table 1 summarises the main statistics of election coverage by *Manawatu Standard* staff. What stands out is the sheer amount of content in relation to the newspaper’s local output. A total of 87

items, 28,394.5 sq cm of locally produced copy and accompanying visuals, appeared in the newspaper during the campaign period. This was about a quarter of total local coverage during that time.

Table 1: Size, number and front page placement of locally produced political items

Item Type	Number	Total Size (sq cm)	Average Size	Page 1
News items	49	16364	334	17
News briefs	7	232.5	33	-
Electoral information	2	316	158	-
Features	7	6063	866	-
Editorials	20	4636	231	-
Opinion	2	783	391.5	-
Totals	87	28394.5	326	17

The 49 news stories made up more than half the published items and 57% of the total space devoted to election coverage by the *Standard's* team. A third of these news items were on the front page. While this placement reflects the importance afforded to the election by the paper, it should also be noted that local news coverage in the *Manawatu Standard* generally, as well as during the campaign, is restricted to the first three pages and it is rare for anything else but local coverage to appear on the front page.

The seven features formed a prominent part of the election coverage. The newspaper published a feature on each of the five electorates in the circulation area with maps, electorate statistics, profiles of major candidates and discussion of key issues. There were two other politically-focussed features during the campaign. One, by senior reporter Jimmy Ellingham, covered the local issue of the threatened passenger rail service and included a section on candidates' views. The other, written by rural reporter Jill Galloway as part of the *Inland* newspaper section, was the largest of the seven features and dealt with responses of Rangitikei candidates to a variety of rural issues.

Importantly, the editorials were a recurring feature of political coverage and central in the paper's own fourth estate-style 'branding' as a key player in the democratic process. On almost two out of three days during the study period an editorial focussed on aspects of the election campaign, while two 'Letters from the Editor' drew attention to how the newspaper planned to cover the election and what service it would offer readers.

Authorship

The *Manawatu Standard* has a policy of by-lining most of its local material and, more unusually, naming the authors of editorials. It relied heavily on political reporter Matthew Grocott who wrote 37 of the 49 election news items and three of the five electorate profile features. A handful of other reporters contributed election news, with Stacey Kirk the only other journalist writing more than one election story. Kirk also wrote the electorate feature on Rangitikei, while Jimmy Ellingham contributed the Otaki electorate feature. Both letters from the editor and six of the editorials were written by editor Michael Cummings; nine editorials came from deputy editor Warwick Rasmussen and three from chief of staff Jonathon Howe. As mentioned above, Grant Millar wrote the opinion pieces.

Geographic focus

News coverage focussed heavily on the Palmerston North electorate with 54% or 30 of the news stories and briefs falling into this category. Just eight of the 56 news stories and briefs concentrated on Rangitikei alone. However, a further seven concerned both electorates, while two items focussed on the Otaki electorate. Finally nine news items had a national focus.

However, most editorials (13) were nationally-focused. Four addressed aspects of the Palmerston North electoral race; one briefly mentioned Rangitikei and the two letters from the editor described the newspaper's election coverage plans.

Framing and Topics

Over half of the items (45 of 87) were categorised as focussed mainly on the 'game' or strategic frame of political news rather than issue or policy coverage. This included six items covering local 'meet the candidates' gatherings and centred on candidate performance; six news stories on visits from senior party members to local electorates; the five local electorate features; four items on local candidates' campaigning activities, three items focussing on local candidate personality or behaviour; three editorials discussing campaigning at the national level, and an opinion piece that examined Phil Goff as Labour leader. There were nine items on staged political debates, seven of which were about the debate organised by the *Manawatu Standard*, and two items (both editorials) which concentrated on the televised leaders' debates. Eight items focused on poll results: three on the paper's Versus poll of the Palmerston North electorate, two about online tool iPredict's results for Palmerston North and three on nation-wide polls and surveys. While there were slightly more strategy-focused items their combined coverage was a little under half (48.4%) of the total square centimetres of local campaign coverage.

It was decided to separate the five locally-produced items on 'Cuppa-gate', which dominated the national news media agenda late in the campaign. Controversy flared after the unauthorised recording of a discussion between PM John Key and minor party ACT leader John Banks following their photo opportunity in an Auckland café. The *Sunday Herald* was denied permission to use the material. Key accused the media of *News of the World* tactics and a police investigation, including newsroom raids, was initiated. The incident highlighted MMP rules allowing ACT to gain several seats in Parliament if it won the Epsom electorate. It prompted discussion of media ethics and freedom of the press, as well as speculation about Key's strategic responses and the ensuing political opportunity seized by NZ First leader Winston Peters. Most of the *Standard's* coverage came from Fairfax sources, but *Manawatu Standard* staff contributed four editorials and a news story where game and issues framing mingled. The editorials were all critical of the National Party and Key. The first deplored the 'charade' of the meeting where Key endorsed Epsom's ACT candidate so "ACT can piggyback their way into Parliament and nod whenever the Government needs a vote" (Rasmussen, 2011a: 10). The second argued it was "laughable to compare a microphone left on a table to phone-hacking the relatives of dead soldiers and murdered schoolgirls" (Howe, 2011: 8). Next, editor Michael Cummings (2011b) argued the Epsom debacle showed up the flaws of MMP. Then Rasmussen (2011b) argued that Key had only himself to blame for Cuppa-gate and the meeting had backfired. The news story arose when Labour's David Parker visited Palmerston North and said the Prime Minister had something to hide in his discussion with the ACT leader.

Manawatu Standard readers were, however, well served for issues coverage. Fifteen stories written by local journalists covered national political and policy issues (such as welfare reforms, state housing, education, the Emissions Trading Scheme and general rural issues). Seven items focussed on particular local issues. These included the planned relocation of the Linton army camp near Palmerston North, the protracted closure of a key state highway (the Manawatu Gorge), the future of the passenger train service to Wellington and rehabilitation services at the local hospital. These 22 items of issue and policy coverage amounted to 34.4% of total coverage.

The remainder of the items could be described as citizenship-focussed in the general public journalism mode. Nine items covered aspects of voting, including lists of candidates and voting booths, election legislation, details about a voting guide for students, and voter enrolment figures.

On election day, voters were also faced with a referendum on retaining the MMP system. Four items (one an editorial) covered the referendum, reflecting the scant attention paid to the referendum by the media as a whole (Johansson and Levine, 2012). Finally two items (both letters from the editor) described the *Manawatu Standard's* coverage and online service, and encouraged electoral participation.

Who benefitted?

Forty-two items were judged neither positive nor negative in relation to any party. In terms of the minor parties, the feature on the Te Tai Hauāuru seat was positive for the Māori Party because it emphasised the popularity of the Party's candidate. Two smaller items reporting a gaffe by a Rangitikei Mana Party candidate were judged as negative for that party. An item on NZ First leader Winston Peters' stealing the spotlight in a local debate was judged positive, two editorials on Peters balanced out; one reporting his resurgence following cuppa-gate and the other criticising his use of the MMP system. Of the two main parties, Labour had more items judged as supporting its agenda (16). The National Party had a mixed result with 11 items coded as positive and seven negative. The results for Labour reflected the Palmerston North candidate's incumbency, political experience and continued campaigning for a number of local issues. When local issues were reported, Lees Galloway arguably benefitted as having long been associated with fighting for a number of local needs. Here, the National Party candidate, generally reflecting the government's lack of action, failed to gain traction. There were two exceptions to this: when National decided to shelve the plan to close Linton camp and when it pledged to improve the Manawatu Gorge highway. Both parties got positive coverage when senior party members visited. However, while there were three visit stories for each party, National was arguably the winner, as it produced more visiting political 'stars' than Labour, whose visitors also tended to visit industries or foodbanks and talk about issues. The reports of city visits by National's Judith Collins and Paula Bennett were accompanied by large positive pictures. When Key arrived he attracted front page coverage and an unprecedented crowd of local fans (reflecting his buoyant position in the polls).

Perhaps the most interesting question was whether the newspaper 'talked up' the closeness of the Palmerston North race. Particularly questionable was the October 29 front page dominated by a huge question mark. Of the two candidates' headshots, Lees-Galloway's was clearly unflattering and the dominant headline read *Race is wide open*. The newspaper's poll had revealed 17% of voters would vote for Lees-Galloway and 15% for Hapeta. However, 61% were undecided. In a box headlined *Leading candidates neck and neck*, the first sentence read, "The 61 per cent undecided voters cannot be ignored, but when they are, the race is close". Thereafter the contest was regularly referred to as tight, or hard fought, and a further iPredict result where the candidates were one percent apart kept the tension high. In the event, Lees-Galloway won by 3285, improving his previous minority.

Discussion

The content analysis shows the *Manawatu Standard* demonstrated newspapers' 'heavy lifting' in political news as found by Lacy et al. (2012) in the United States. The quantity of coverage represented a considerable investment of resources and tied up a full-time reporter (one of about 12) for some time before the official campaign and through the succeeding week. Further, the paper invested in its own polling and hosted a debate. The paper's online coverage was also considerable and supplemented the hardcopy newspaper, providing a service to local people unmatched by any other medium. The frequency of editorials in the election compares closely to that found by Rudd and Hayward (2009) in the larger dailies, *The Press* and *Dominion Post*, during the 2008 election campaign. The newspaper concentrated overwhelmingly on the Palmerston North electorate, serving its urban audience (only half of its readership base) ahead of the more rural readers,

although the other electorates were not neglected. Palmerston North was, however, the most significant electorate politically and had the additional news value of being a potentially closely fought race.

However, the *Manawatu Standard* can be proud of the level of policy and other information it provided. This concurs with Rudd and Hayward's (2009) conclusion that newspaper readers received enough information to make an informed choice in 2008. The *Standard* had a relatively low volume of 'game' or strategy coverage (52% of the items) compared with two-thirds of the stories in the *Otago Daily Times* and the *New Zealand Herald* (ibid). Further, while the *Standard's* electorate features were classified as strategy coverage because of their horse-race element, each one also contained substantial information on the electorate and main issues as identified by candidates. Just as local electorates are virtually ignored by all but local newspapers, the depth of local issue coverage was again not available in other media, and rural election issues are generally neglected by national and metropolitan media (except for public service National Radio).

Similarly to Rudd and Hayward's (2009) findings for metropolitan papers, there was an absence of partisan bias. More positive items related to Labour, but a number of National's positives were more prominent. The paper was careful not to undermine either of the two main candidates. Indeed it could be charged with being kindly to National's Leonie Hapeta, a novice and weak performer in the *Manawatu Standard's* debate. An exciting race was presumably to the *Standard's* advantage and in hindsight the knife-edge reportage of the electoral race seems overblown. Hapeta who had been transparent about the hurt of losing said "I think we didn't know... I just carried on doing what I was doing" (personal communication, 2 March 2012). Lees-Galloway was inclined to blame the poll design, "Normally the question is 'If it was election day today or tomorrow who would you be mostly likely to vote for?' The question they asked is 'Have you decided who you are going to vote for yet?' So it was much easier to say 'No' and I think that skewed it and it created a story for them" (personal communication, 22 February 2012). Both candidates, though, judged coverage overall as both detailed and fair and said the electorate had been well-served by the newspaper.

Conclusion

In the rapidly changing media environment it is difficult to draw general conclusions from this small case study. Newspapers are particularly vulnerable in the latest financial crisis (OECD, 2010) and are struggling for a new Internet-era business model (Macnamara, 2010). Fairfax wrote down the value of its New Zealand mastheads in August 2012 (Mace, 2012b). However, citizens still need local newspapers for a whole range of information that impacts on their area, although it is less clear they understand that need (Rosenstiel et al., 2011; Shaker, 2011). This requirement for regional coverage is especially crucial in New Zealand with its highly-centralised, regionally-blind broadcasting industry.

Whether traditional media are still willing to focus on providing the 'heavy lifting' required for the Fourth Estate's civic commitment when these topics are less popular is another question. The media's general response to slipping audiences has been to increase commercialised content and spice up political coverage with game framing, scandals and cynicism (Atkinson, 2004, 2006; Clifton, 2012; Comrie, 2009; Picard, 2008).

In this environment the *Manawatu Standard* deserves congratulation for its election coverage. However, there is little guarantee it can invest in a repeat performance in 2014, unless the next local electorate race promises significant excitement. The *Standard* is an award-winning paper, established in 1880, but its future is far from certain. Being part of Fairfax offers it some shelter. It continues to retain a strong pool of local reporters and has recently appointed a digital editor. However, its hardcopy readers are older, buying the paper for its local news. Younger people are more likely to turn to its online services and, moreover, are transnational in their media grazing habits. While circulation continues to slip and online content cannot turn a profit, in-depth local issues reporting is an endangered species. As the *Standard's* 2011 coverage shows, this may be more of a loss to the public sphere than is generally acknowledged.

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