

# **A Real Alternative? – How Alternative News Media Coverage Compares to the Mainstream in New Zealand**

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## ABSTRACT

The public receives most of its information about important national and international events through the news media. Since the advent of the internet, mainstream news media has experienced a decline in its audience as the number and popularity of alternative media outlets has dramatically increased. What the mainstream and alternative news media include in their stories and how they frame these stories has implications for citizens and society. This study compares how news is covered by online text-based alternative and mainstream news in New Zealand using quantitative content analysis. Article length, Context Factors, Number, Type, and Balance of Sources, as well as Dominant Media Frames were measured in coverage of 25 news events across four mainstream and four alternative New Zealand news outlets.

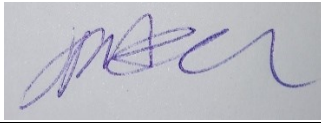
The research showed that, compared to the alternative news media, the mainstream news was more consistent, and slightly longer in average article length; used approximately 25% more context factors; relied heavily on government sources versus alternative news reliance on expert sources, and used approximately 30% more sources overall; were 30% more ‘balanced’ in their use of sources, and approximately seven times less likely to run a story using an unopposed source. Furthermore, the research showed that the ‘conflict’ frame dominated mainstream media news stories – wherein two or more sides to a story are presented - while the dominant frame in alternative news media stories was that of ‘attribution of responsibility’.

While the results of some of the measures – including article length, context factors, and number of sources – proved difficult to interpret, the mainstream media’s more balanced use

of sources, reliance on official government sources, and use of the *conflict* media frames were explainable in that it reflects the appearance of professional journalism's values of balance and objectivity. The results showing alternative news media's less balanced use of sources and their predominant *attribution of responsibility* framing was supported by much of the literature around alternative journalism describing it, in part, as oppositional, justice-seeking, and 'activist' journalism. However, while these results highlight some clear differences between the two types of media, it is worth considering the following; that historically, the mainstream news media, in a sense, emerged from what can be considered a proto-alternative oppositional news media; that the two have thereafter functioned in a complex relation to one another; and that with both alternative and increasingly mainstream news media moving to the internet, they may be in a relatively convergent period.

## ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.



**Signed:**

**Dated:**

**10/04/2019**

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Why Compare the Alternative and the Mainstream News?

Our understanding of important local and international events, occurring outside the range of our own senses, relies largely on reporting by news media, and the social dissemination of this reporting. With the advent of the internet, a major shift has occurred as to how we consume news, as well as the breadth of news outlets we can consume news from. No longer are we confined to the local newspaper or the nightly news; we now can access countless online news sources at any time, from virtually any place. While this abundance of news media choices may seem like a blessing, it is arguably a mixed one. A social polarisation seems to be taking place, fuelled, at least in part, by media consumption. Social media algorithms, designed to keep consumers on their platforms, feed individuals' personalised news feeds based on what they have *liked* and interacted with previously. This can lead to a kind of media 'bubble' within which the individual finds their previously held views on any given matter confirmed, or exacerbated, with no opposing or differing views offered that might have a moderating effect or offer middle ground for discourse with those outside the bubble. The outcome of this polarisation, so the argument goes, is phenomena such as Britain's vote to exit from the European Union and the Trump presidency in the United States.

One could suggest that the differences highlighted within the content of 'left' and 'right' mainstream news in the United States (MSNBC vs Fox News) and in the United Kingdom (*The Telegraph* vs *The Guardian*) also contribute to the polarisation mentioned above. Such content differences between these outlets, however, are not as stark as they might seem.

Herman and Chomsky, in their seminal work first published in 1988, *Manufacturing Consent*, proposed a model to explain how the mass media are bound by political economy pressures

they call the five filters. The first two of these are ownership and advertising and restrict how radical public discourse can become. This conceptualisation was intended to support the authors' understanding that the mainstream media is ultimately there to serve the interests of the wealthy and the powerful (Herman & Chomsky, 2008).

If consumption of news media is polarising the public, whether due to social media algorithms or supposed stark differences between 'left' and right' outlets (or a combination of both), it is imperative to look closely at the news media and how it covers important issues and events. Furthermore, if mainstream media serves the interests of power, it stands to reason that we must look elsewhere for news that might not have this supposed bias: the alternative news media. From there, it follows that we sense to ask if the alternative media is any different from the mainstream in how it covers news and, if so, how so?

## 1.2 The Media and the Social Construction of Reality

Berger and Luckmann's seminal work *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) posited that humans are interacting knowledge-carriers, who arrive in the world with little to no knowledge, and, predisposed towards sociality, acquire knowledge as they become members of society (p. 149). The authors went on to describe how, within a multitude of societies, different knowledges are shared and sustained, thereby creating multiple socially constructed realities.

Many communications scholars have been influenced by the work of Berger and Luckmann (1966), developing the idea of the mass media as an element of a socially constructed reality. McCombs and Shaw (1972) and Gerbner (1973, 1998) presented the notion of agenda setting

- how the mass media dictate the significance of events and issues to the public. This research showed how the public's views of reality are aligned with those presented in the mass media, starting a study of the news coverage of the 1968 American presidential election where a strong correlation was found between what the sample of 100 Carolinian residents thought were the important election issues and what the news media presented as the important election issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). As the research revealed, the more frequently and prominently a news issue is covered, the more the audience will regard that issue as important.

Noelle-Neumann's (1974) concept of the spiral of silence suggested that the news media marginalises deviant individuals and views, discouraging those individuals from expressing those views for fear of being isolated by society, and thus creating similar content across media outlets pushing the dominant view or culture. Bagdikian (1985) proffered the inherent constraints of media outlet ownership and advertising revenue as the reasons for uniformity of media content, given a handful of owners and the common advertising dollar being fought over by the mass media outlets. This was echoed by Herman and Chomsky in the first two filters of their propaganda model (2008), namely ownership and advertising, which will be discussed in detail in the literature review chapter 2.6.

Broersma (2010 p. 25) argued that "news is a social construction that constitutes reality." He envisaged journalism as a performative rather than a descriptive discourse, which "transforms an interpretation into truth" (2010, p. 26). Thus, we can understand the news media as a powerful force in reality construction, as the implication is that whatever is left out of the

news may be left out of our socially constructed reality, and, conversely, what is presented within the news contributes to its construction.

### 1.3 Censorship and Propaganda

In the modern geo-political era, it has been commonly assumed that western democracies have a more or less ‘free’ press, thus, as consumers of news in western democracies, we usually associate censorship and propaganda with developing countries, military governments, and authoritarian regimes. However, across the globe, including in western democracies, various forms of censorship keep people uninformed about events that are in the public interest and propaganda pushes narratives that are in the interests of power. These forms of censorship and propaganda range from the overt, blunt kind employed by openly authoritarian governments, to the subtler forms of structural censorship and self-censorship at work in western democracies. Examples of countries using overt censorship and propaganda will be given in the following paragraphs, before considering media control in western democracies.

In China, examples of censorship and propaganda include the state propaganda offices directing journalists about what, and what not, to write (Simon, 2012). As of 2018, 47 journalists had been imprisoned for their work – the second-most in the world behind Turkey’s 68 (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2018). Bribery of journalists to not publish stories is common in China and carried out by large companies and wealthy interests (Brandurski & Hala, 2010). The internet in China is heavily censored. According to tests by the website Pro Publica (Wei, 2014), the Chinese government blocks many websites including international news sites such as the BBC, Bloomberg, *The New York Times*, Reuters, *The Wall Street Journal* as well as popular online social media such as Facebook and

Twitter. On popular Chinese forums and websites, the government has an army of internet trolls, ready to shout down anyone who voices dissent (Simon, 2012).

In the Philippines, violence against journalists in recent times has risen to one of the highest counts in the world. In 2009, 58 people were killed, 34 of them journalists, in the Maguindanao massacre, which occurred in President Duterte's home state. The perpetrators of the massacre have still not been brought to justice. An average of eight journalists have been killed every year for the past 27 years (Robie, 2014). Although journalists, editors and bloggers are ostensibly free to write and print what they want, it is the high level of violence against journalists in the Philippines that causes many to self-censor. As Freedom House noted in their 2013 report on internet freedom, "... many news websites are online versions of traditional media which self-censor due to the level of violence against journalists in the Philippines." Since the election of Duterte, challenges to press freedom continued with the killing of a journalist, Mario Contaoi, in the first week of 2017, and that of Larry Que three weeks before that. Earlier, in May 2016, when asked about his policy towards investigating journalists' deaths, Duterte sent a chilling message with his answer: "...the reason most journalists were killed because they extorted, accepted bribes, took sides or attacked their victims needlessly" (seapa.org, 2016).

In Russia, the government used tax threats and prosecutions to bring the television networks under state control, and retains the right to block the internet. Killers of journalists are rarely brought to justice (Simon, 2012). Recently, Russian propaganda or 'fake news' has been held to blame, by the Democratic Party, United States (U.S.) intelligence agencies and the majority of the U.S. mainstream media, for misleading U.S. voters in the run-up to the 2016

general election. The Russia Today 24 hour English language news channel, commonly known as RT, has been fingered as one of the culprits (“Intelligence report on Russian hacking”, 2017).

With these harsh, overt forms of censorship and propaganda at work in authoritarian states, those of us who consume mainstream news media in western democracies might feel we escape the scalpel of censorship and the distortions of propaganda. However, while there might be plenty to be thankful for regarding the perceived rule of law and freedoms of speech and expression, the academic literature suggests that various forms of censorship and propaganda are at work in the western world, including the form of propaganda described by Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model, as discussed in more detail in chapter 2.6.

#### 1.4 The Propaganda Model in New Zealand

Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model (2008) informs this study through its political economy approach to theorising the forces that act upon a piece of mainstream news before it is published. Called *filters* by Herman and Chomsky, these forces are categorised as ownership, advertising, sources, flak, and dominant ideology. While Herman and Chomsky’s argument was formulated with the U.S. mainstream media in mind, it arises from a conceptual political economy model that can be deployed to analyse media control in other western nations, including New Zealand.

New Zealand’s media landscape, dominated by commercially run outlets owned by a mix of government, and domestic and international businesses is somewhat similar to the U.S. conglomerate-dominated media landscape (this is explored further in chapter 2.6.1 Media

Ownership) Therefore, it stands to reason that similar political-economy forces, in the shape of the five filters of the propaganda model, would be at work here, too.

### 1.5 Comparing the Mainstream and Alternative Media

In comparing the mainstream and alternative news media in New Zealand, this study seeks to understand the difference, if any, in their news coverage of events that are sensitive to the socio-economic power structure of New Zealand. Ideally, the mainstream press in New Zealand would cover important events that are sensitive to the power structure courageously and expansively, even when it could harm their very existence. If it is reasonable to think that the mainstream media might naturally operate in a way that is self-preserving, then perhaps one result of this self-preservation ‘instinct’ would manifest in a comparison of the mainstream news media to the alternative news media, which are not reliant on the same ‘hand’ to feed them. Furthermore, in light of the vast scholarship on the matter, the premise that the mainstream news media would operate in a way that aids their own perpetuation, appears to be reasonable indeed.

### 1.6 Thesis Structure

Following this introduction chapter, the literature review chapter will examine the following: definitions of – and the historical relationship between – alternative and mainstream media, the political economy effects on alternative news media, news selection models, the propaganda model as well as critiques and amendments thereof, and finally media framing. Chapter 3 will detail this study’s research questions, give definitions, outline base studies, and explain the research methodology used to analyse New Zealand news media content. The results of the study will be presented in Chapter 4, and analysed and discussed in Chapter 5.



## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Introduction

Before embarking upon a comparative study of alternative and mainstream news media, a review of the relevant literature is a necessary undertaking. This Literature Review will survey the various definitions of alternative news media, its historical relationship with the mainstream media, and the political-economic pressures that have acted upon it. Following that, in order to understand how news is shaped in a mainstream context, this section will examine Galtung and Ruge's (1965) news values and Herman and Chomsky's (2008) political economy approach to propaganda and censorship in the mainstream news media. Their five-filter propaganda model will be explored in depth, and its significance and applicability to New Zealand's news media considered. Finally, the concept of framing will be discussed, with the introduction of Neuman, Just, and Crigler's (1992) five common media frames as well as Mattis' (2014) model for the integration of the propaganda model's five filters and media frames.

### 2.2 Defining the Alternative to the Mainstream News Media

When describing the news media that is the alternative to corporate or state-owned mainstream mass media outlets, a range of terms have been used in the academic literature with varying meanings. *Radical media*, as introduced by Downing (1984; 2000), emphasises political and goal-orientated activism. Similarly, *oppositional media* (Jakubowicz, 1990; Haillin, 1984) specifically challenges the state, government of the day, or a particular range of policies, while *activist media* (Waltz, 2005) encourages readers to get actively involved in social change. Rodriguez (2001) uses the term *citizen's media* to refer to media that has open

access to the citizenry, contests social and institutional norms, and empowers communities to the point of social change. These categorisations of media outside of the mainstream media, all fit under the umbrella term alternative media.

If the term alternative media is to be taken literally, it can be defined generally as *not the mainstream media* where the mainstream media is corporate or state-owned media. However, various components of a media outlet might not be uniformly alternative or mainstream. The organisational structure, the business model, the content itself, the medium, the distribution, and the media effect are all parts of the media as a whole which in themselves might be either alternative or mainstream. This makes the distinction between mainstream and alternative media difficult to make.

Atton (2002) laid out a comprehensive list of attributes based on the cultural forms of an independent, that is not state or corporate owned, media outlet of which alternative media by his definition (2004, p. 27) should have at least some. The first three attributes he categorises as products: politically or culturally radical content, the use of modern technology, and aesthetically compelling form. Radical content for Atton is content that emphasises social change and favours movements over institutions. Writing in the early 2000s and drawing on 1990s zine culture, Atton referred to the modern technology of that time - photocopiers, mimeographs, and IBM computers. Now, one might see modern media technology as smartphones, tablets, websites, blogs, social media platforms and messaging apps, and live streaming. Again drawing on zine culture and, before that, the hippie underground press of the 1960s, Atton identified the aesthetic form of such publications, which were not bound by traditional newspaper or magazine forms, but instead allowed for individual creative

expression through, for example, handwritten illustrative headlines, differing font types, and creative column orientation. Depending on the platform, modern day multi-media digital alternative news outlets have a wide scope for exploring even more aesthetically compelling forms.

Atton's last three attributes of alternative media, which he termed *processes*, are: new and independent modes of distribution, deprofessionalised organisational structure, and lateral communications. While previous hardcopy forms of alternative print media utilised innovative distribution, including underground mail catalogues and secret drop locations, present day new and independent distribution modes for online alternative media may be as simple as email lists and link sharing on social media. Deprofessionalised organisational structure refers to a dissolution of specific professional roles that enable individuals to contribute at any and all levels of production if required, and thus breaking from a profit-driven capitalist model to an amateur model driven by the free flow of information, creativity and ideas. Lateral communications is a model of media and audience relations which is not the traditional top-down one-way communication of most traditional media to its audience; it is a more collaborative model where the audience is encouraged or actively involved in media creation, transforming the old model, somewhat akin to a lecture, into a conversation (Atton, 2002; 2004). Kenix (2011) argued that in a convergence of mainstream and alternative media spheres that are both rooted in commercial ideology, mainstream media are starting to emulate these aforementioned attributes. For Kenix, therefore, this definitional framework needs rethinking if it is to offer a distinction between the alternative and mainstream news media.

Downing envisaged alternative media as “generally small scale and in many different forms, that express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives” (2000, p.V). For Downing, the alternative media does not need be opposed to the mainstream media; it is the “chief bearer of democratic communications structures, more than the mainstream media, despite their meagre resources and the fact that they are flawed, varied and not always oppositional” (2000, p .43). Similarly, for Dowmunt and Coyer (2007), opposition to the mainstream is not the central feature as they defined alternative media as “media forms that are on a smaller scale, more accessible and participatory and less constrained by bureaucracy or commercial interests than the mainstream media and often in some way in explicit opposition to them” (2007, p .1). However, Couldry and Curran (2003) placed alternative media’s opposition to mainstream media as a defining characteristic, claiming it is “media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power” (2003, p. 7).

Atkinson (2006) viewed alternative media as distanced from mainstream media and opposed, however, to power rather than mainstream media per se, defining it as “any media that are produced by non-commercial sources and attempt to transform existing social roles and routines by critiquing and challenging power structures” (2006, p. 252). As Kenix pointed out, the aforementioned social roles and routines that Atkinson saw alternative media as transforming through the critique and challenge of power “generally stem from capitalism, consumerism, patriarchy, and the nature of corporations”, and these same forces are “implicit in the creation of a mainstream, corporate press” (2011, p .19). Contrastingly, Hamilton (2000) defined alternative media as producing an alternative communication that creates different social roles, values, traditions, and social relationships.

Atton and Hamilton's study *Alternative Journalism* (2008) cast its net wide in its survey and discussion of a variety of concepts and practices, many mentioned above, under the umbrella term of alternative journalism. The primary commonality they identified amongst these concepts and practices is that they are informed by a critique of dominant practices not only in covering certain issues and topics, but also with the conventions and structure of professional journalism. Atton and Hamilton concurred with Curran and Couldry, as cited above, that the defining characteristic of alternative journalism is that it challenges dominant media power, regardless of whether it is politically radical or socially empowering.

### 2.3 The Dance of the Mainstream and Alternative Media

If we define the alternative media literally as the challenge to mainstream media, an exploration of what the mainstream media is and its historical relationship to the alternative media is critical to a deeper understanding of both of these terms. The two have shaped each other over the course of the last few hundred years (Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Williams, 1978); they have borrowed from each other, absorbed and then birthed each other, and so are entwined in a kind of strange dance; at times apart and in defiance of one another, at other times converging into one (Kenix, 2011).

#### 2.3.1 *Bourgeois Journalism and the Public Sphere*

Prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the church and crown ruled over Europe and its colonies with absolute authority over claims of power and knowledge. However, out of this era, the developing merchant class with burgeoning capital began to use cultural forms of empiricism, essays and commentary, reportage, and the standards of legal disputation in its journalism – challenging the authority on established truth claims and helping “validate plural, secular and individual routes to knowledge” (Atton & Hamilton, 2008, p .7). Atton and Hamilton labelled

this “bourgeois journalism” in reference to the emergent property-owning class whose resources and influence are accumulated through capital and an expanding capitalist economy rather than from royal decree. Given its novel forms and practices and the challenge it posed to established truth claims, this emerging bourgeois journalism could also be called a prototype of alternative news media.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, truth claims via bourgeois journalism gradually gained acceptance for use in debate in what Habermas (1989, p. xvii) called the “bourgeois public sphere”. For Habermas, this was a forum for public discourse amongst private individuals separate from the power of church and state to which all citizens had unfettered access; debate could be had over the general rules governing power relations, and public opinion could be formed ideally with the power of steering a democratic government’s laws and policies (1989).

Habermas described the emergence of this public sphere in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, often located in French salons, British coffee houses, and German *Tischgesellschaften* (dinner parties), as a place where people could gather to talk on the preconditions of three common institutional criteria: *a disregard of status* as an ideal – not fully realised though still consequential; *a domain of common concern* – a theretofore privately defined set of discursive parameters by church and state, henceforth opened to public interpretation; and *inclusivity* – a forum open to all. Habermas emphasised the public sphere’s accessibility; “everyone had to be able to participate ... it did not equate itself with the public but at most claimed to act as its mouthpiece, in its name, perhaps even as its educator – the new form of bourgeois representation" (1989, p. 37).

Nevertheless, not everyone enjoyed this decentralisation of power that bourgeois journalism enabled; there were severe restrictions on participation in the public sphere. Despite Habermas's inclusive characterisation, groups already marginalised due to class, race, and gender were restricted from participation (Fraser, 1990). Furthermore, in the European colonies, bourgeois journalism was used as a tool for control of the colonised by powerful interests. Bourgeois journalism, although it had emerged to challenge the power of the church and crown, and initially performed a radical popular journalism, was "tied to a particular kind of social order, in this case the rising bourgeoisie that supported and worked within the emerging systems of capitalism and imperialism" (Atton & Hamilton, 2008, p. 7).

As the capitalist system grew with industrialisation in the 19th century, bourgeois journalism continued to serve the bourgeoisie, now the dominant class. Harnessing the commercial power of wide scale advertising and modern technology of the time dramatically increased output frequency and distribution. Bourgeois journalism's reach was ever-growing and large scale professional organisations were necessary. Also, to cater to widening audiences the principle of objectivity was emphasised and power was no longer challenged. Atton and Hamilton presented this as the "corruption of the promise of bourgeois journalism due to commercialisation" (2008, p. 9). Instead of being an 'alternative' radical-popular journalism, bourgeois journalism morphed into a dominant commercial-popular press or 'mainstream media'.

Habermas saw this consolidation and transformation of bourgeois media by the power structure into the mass commercial media as the beginning of the end of the bourgeois public sphere as it became a tool of political forces and a medium for advertising:

The public sphere, simultaneously restructured and dominated by the mass media, developed into an arena infiltrated by power in which, by means of topic selection and topical contributions, a battle is fought not only over influence but over the control of communication flows that affect behavior while their strategic intentions are kept hidden as much as possible (Habermas, 1992 p. 437).

With the public sphere severely compromised and bourgeois journalism a servant of state and commercial power, bourgeois journalism would now face challenges to its own power.

### *2.3.2 Challenges and Critiques of Bourgeois Media*

As the commercial popular press was serving the bourgeoisie, an oppositional journalism emerged to serve the working classes. The 19th century oppositional presses were rooted in labour, foreign language, suffrage, and human rights interests in the United Kingdom (U.K.) and the U.S. Community and small town presses served to resist urban mass culture (Atton & Hamilton, 2008). Separate communities were bound together structurally in localism; whereby popular control of the press contrasted with the dominant commercial consolidation and centralisation of media industries (Stavitsky, 1994).

At this point, the bourgeois press itself was not the object of challenge as it was conceptually relied upon by the oppositional press; the target was the “coin of the realm for legitimate public discourse and debate” (Atton & Hamilton, 2008, p. 9). The oppositional press differed in perspective from the bourgeois press, but mirrored all its commercial aspects. As Shore (1985) pointed out, “models for the radical press to follow while seeking to develop a large audience sometimes came from the successful mainstream press” (1985, p. 158).



The 20th century saw bourgeois journalism challenged directly. The era of modernism had brought massive changes from industrialisation, urbanisation, the rise of consumer culture, and the advent of electronic communication to the world wars, and the threat of nuclear weapons. With these changes came challenges to the ways of “addressing publics and establishing claims of authority... from challenging a single, discrete political position, to also challenging the very forms that knowledge can take” (Atton & Hamilton, 2008, p. 10). An alternative journalism now challenged the established journalism not only in perspective, but also in its procedures and forms.

Professionalisation of media outlets with hierarchical and commercial bureaucratic structures were seen increasingly as under the sway of their advertisers and the power elite. In contrast, alternative forms for organising journalistic work such as radical republicanism, socialist workerism, anarchism and various other forms of collective and egalitarian structures were seen as viable and frequently preferable options (Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Downing, 2000; Lasch, 1991).

A broad post-colonial critique of Eurocentrism and its mainstream media by extension included positions on colonialism, which called out the expansion and fortunes of the West as built on the subjugation and exploitation of non-western populations; capitalism, in which European derived knowledge is both the method and justification for domination; patriarchal society, as an unchallengeable authority which has taken the forms of professionalisation and bureaucracy; racist society, in which large portions of populations are marginalised and disempowered; and mass culture and consumer society, seen as a distraction from globally catastrophic issues such as severe resource depletion (Atton & Hamilton, 2008).

### 2.3.3 New Forms in Alternative Media

Given the view that empiricism was an insufficient approach to describing things as they really are, the suggestion followed that deeper realities could be represented only via other means (Atton & Hamilton, 2008). Forms like the 1950s documentary novel merged fact and fiction as well as the 1960s ‘new journalism’ which borrowed narrative techniques pioneered in fictional prose. The *Crónica* in 1960s Latin America blended journalism with popular cultural traditions from song to television. Underground presses developed alternative modes of factual writing and continue in service of a variety of new social movements (Atton & Hamilton, 2008).

Professionalised elitism was set aside in the popular correspondents’ movement in revolutionary Nicaragua during the 1980s. Dissident media in 1970s Iran adopted “small media” which included audio cassettes, photocopied leaflets, and grassroots composition and circulation. This helped “foster an imaginative social solidarity, often as a precursor for actual physical mobilization” (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi, 1994, p. 24).

Eastern European *samizdat*, “the distribution of uncensored writings on one’s own, without the medium of a publishing house and without permission of authorities” (Skilling, 1989, p. 3) widened political engagement beyond the realms of established journalism. Production of *samizdat* employed the use of typewriters, carbon copiers, mimeographing, photography as well as hand-copying. Samizdat in 1970s Poland included worker correspondence, and in 1980s Czechoslovakia “novels, short stories, poetry, plays, literary criticism, historical and philosophical essays, and, more rarely, political essays or studies” were used (Skilling, 1989, pp. 11–12). ‘Clandestine propaganda’ had similar importance in pre-revolutionary South Africa (Sibeko, 1983; Atton & Hamilton, 2009).

‘Developmental journalism’, established to aid nation-building in the wake of decolonisation, eschewed bourgeois journalism’s objectivity in favour of one-sided promotion of consensus around government programmes of modernisation, often at the expense of robust public discussion and debate. To counter these issues, non-western journalism has more recently reformed into ‘participatory journalism’, providing a stronger organisational critique (Shah, 1996). This form of journalism often relies on indigenous oral traditions as well as ensuring people have access to recorders and cameras so that they can produce their own media (Rodriguez, 2001; Atton & Hamilton, 2008).

As outlined above, the historical relationship between mainstream and alternative journalism has been a complex and ever-changing one. The two forms have historically defined each other: the alternative media by differentiating itself from the dominant power-serving media either in perspective or in form, whilst at times incorporating elements of the mainstream; and the mainstream by absorbing the new popular forms and perspectives as they become popular and dominant.

Atton and Hamilton state that the best way to understand alternative journalism’s historical trajectory is to see it as:

a continual response and challenge to dominant practices. As the dominant has changed, the alternative that challenges it has changed as well. The twentieth-century proliferation of different ways of writing and of organizing the production and distribution of alternative journalism so apparent today emerged from a deep and fundamental challenge to the very bases of journalism itself (2008, p. 13).

This self-defining dance justifies the use of the term ‘alternative’ to describe the other partner in the dance because its shifting and varied nature could not fit well into the other terms put forth by scholars and mentioned above such as radical, oppositional, or independent media.

#### 2.4 Political Economy Effects on Alternative News Media

While the historical relationship between the mainstream and alternative media has shaped and defined both media, the other major force shaping the media is the political economy. The study of political economy is fundamentally about the production and reproduction of society: survival – the way societies structure themselves in order to produce what they need to reproduce themselves; and control – the way they keep order to fulfil economic, political, cultural and social goals (Meehan, Mosco & Wasko, 1993; Atton & Hamilton, 2008).

Classical political economy views the constitution of societies as natural, inevitable processes. Capitalism is seen as a given and the economy as autonomous and unchangeable. Inequality in the system is noted, but classical political economy does not seek to explain it. Instead, as Marx noted, “it takes for granted what it is supposed to explain” (1975 p. 273). Critical political economy, however, opposes this view. It sees inequalities not as natural and inevitable, but as the result of a series of intentional decisions and policies that not only reproduce themselves in the system, but also serve particular interests of individuals and class. Critical political economy analyses and evaluates the moral implications of particular modes of production and reproduction (Atton & Hamilton, 2008).

#### *2.4.1 Political Economy and Alternative News Media*

Applying critical political economy to the study of news media helps in understanding the complex and often contradictory relationship between the role of journalism, how the news media is structured, and whose interests are served. As is explored in greater detail below, Herman and Chomsky applied critical political economy to their study of the mainstream news media through their propaganda model (2008). From a critical political economy view, the pressures on alternative news media centre on how it is supported and the way that shapes the resulting practice.

With the conception of alternative journalism deriving from bourgeois journalism's values of strict standards of evidence gathering and interpretation, comes the political economy pressure of increasing scale and professionalisation. Full time professionals devoted to fulfilling these standards allow the news organisation to be extensive, comprehensive, and thus authoritative and competitive within the mainstream media market place. The running costs of large scale professional outlets create a barrier to alternative news outlets which are often run on minimal income and staffed by committed amateurs or activists.

In addition to the pressure of professionalisation is the pressure of advertising on alternative journalism as it is practised in capitalist societies. Large scale professional organisations especially require significant funding to run, and the readiest form of funding is advertising. However, as seen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century radical popular press of the US and Britain, advertising was a means by which those presses were co-opted and incorporated into the commercial popular press (Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Williams, 1978). Atton and Hamilton frame the issue as follows: "The resulting general political-economic dilemma for any critical project is that it needs resources with which to work, but those crucial resources are present only in the very

society that it seeks to change or dissolve” (2008, p. 18). Thus, this pressure to gain revenue through advertising presents a potentially existential problem for alternative media.

#### *2.4.2 Patronage*

One alternative funding mechanism to advertising used by both mainstream and alternative media is patronage; funding is provided by a donor or benefactor. In this way, the pressures of the market on content, i.e. maximising advertising revenue by salacious, scandalous, and superficial content, is removed. However, a new pressure arises; that is, for content to conform to the interests of the patron, be it a philanthropist or wealthy benefactor, a foundation, or as is often the case in mainstream media, the state. Having its roots far back in the practice of royal and ecclesiastic patronage, early bourgeois journalism was often funded by political parties in Britain and the United States. Present day examples of state patronage include: state-owned and partially or wholly state-funded public broadcasters in a number of parliamentary democracies, such as Britain’s BBC or New Zealand’s Radio New Zealand (RNZ), which operate within structures intended to try to insulate the media outlets from direct political control; and state-owned and operated models that allow direct political control, such as in authoritarian nations like China (Simon, 2012). So, while patronage can provide a way around reliance on advertising, it brings its own pressures of conformance.

#### *2.4.3 Commercial Support*

Commercially supported alternative journalism to some is a self-contradictory phrase. The pressure on a media outlet to maximise its audience in order to maximise its advertising revenue can, and often does lead to de-politicisation and dumbing down of content (Baker, 2012). However, especially since the rise of the 1960s subcultures, specialised niche markets have been able to support small scale publications via advertising it can sell to similarly

specialised businesses. Typically, these are small but professionally structured organisations on shoestring budgets that emphasise in-house commentary, issue analysis, and hire freelance contributors for occasional original reporting. They are professionally organised in order to maintain a degree of authority and reputation while minimizing potentially costly amateur errors, but typically are marginalised as they are unable to compete with the commercial popular press for market share (Atton & Hamilton, 2008).

When wider commercial support does extend to radical content, this is still contained within the larger political-economic structure. While some alternative outlets do enjoy a fair amount of ideological variance from the mainstream, this is explained by Atton and Hamilton as “the contradictory nature of popular culture and the political-economic containment of opposition by virtue of the commercialisation of alternative journalism in capitalist societies” (2008, p. 26). Here the claim might seem circular: that radical content does not receive large amounts of commercial funding, but if it does it is not really radical because it is contained within the capitalist system it is supposedly in opposition to. However, the argument is really a definitional one: Atton and Hamilton are in essence claiming that radical content cannot, by definition, receive large scale commercial support as the radical content then becomes commercialised, contained-opposition alternative journalism.

#### *2.4.4 Personal Journalism*

Patronage and commercial relationships enable media organisations to grow and journalism to become professional. And this, in turn, gives journalism its credibility and authority. That, in any event, is what alternative journalism ‘learned’ from bourgeois journalism. However, this is not simply the natural course journalism must take. In order to avoid the political economic pressures of commercialism and patronage, one must critique the journalism that,

for so long, has equated authority with empirical comprehensiveness and professionalism and seek an alternative conception of journalistic authority. One way to do so is to practice alternative journalism as a personal project (Atton & Hamilton, 2008).

One form of personal alternative journalism that was mentioned earlier is *samizdat*, “the distribution of uncensored writings on one’s own, without the medium of a publishing house and without permission of the authorities” (Skilling, 1989, p. 3). *Samizdat*, usually performed under repressive regimes, rejects the route of formal publication, and the professionalism it affords, due to the necessity of avoiding state persecution. It is a form of personal protest, and takes its authority from the skill and the logic of the writing, and the personal experience of protest it entails. In Soviet Russia, *samizdat* took the form of literary works smuggled out of the country, and the production and circulation of letters, pamphlets, and declarations. *Samizdat* was part of a more general ‘second system of communications’ which could refer to banned foreign literature, underground television, or radio as well as frank and honest conversation between friends.

In the western context of liberal democracies, personal alternative journalism has often been practised as a protest against commercialism rather than state censorship. One early practitioner was I.F. Stone, an American who circulated typed newsletters through the mail. A former professional journalist, Stone set up his operation with a US\$3,000 loan and mostly commented on and analysed what others had published, including public documents. His authority was established by his skilful writing and his exhaustive documentation, stemming from the traditions of bourgeois journalism but practised as an individual (Atton & Hamilton, 2008). Personal journalism is necessarily bound, by lack of resources, to an emphasis on



commentary and critique of public documents – focusing attention on the reigning dominant power structure rather than promoting emergent challenges to that power.

#### *2.4.5 Collective and Movement Support*

As their doors are open to volunteers, journalism collectives and movement-supported journalism eschew professionalism; volunteers are by definition non-professionals and such journalism is not organised in a professional structure. In relation to collective and movement supported journalism, Downing identified Indymedia as an example since it represented: “a means of open and decentralized publishing, collaboration and discussion as a form of direct action” (Downing, 2003, p. 251). This international network has similar reach, scale, and comprehensiveness to commercial-popular news organisations, but relies on volunteer work rather than financial support from patrons or advertising, and thus escapes the political-economic limits and pressures of such means of support (Atton & Hamilton, 2008). However, the Indy internet network is not totally immune to the pressures of capital. Service provider bandwidth presents costs at the producer end and, on the reader end, costs of computer and internet connection are either borne by the reader or the public tax dollar via libraries or similar centres with free internet access. Similar media forms labelled ‘independent journalism’, ‘community journalism’ and ‘participatory journalism’ are also part of the broad project of challenge and resistance (Howley, 2005; Ostertag, 2006).

The political economy of the alternative news media is an extremely complex, varied and often contradictory field of limits and pressures. One of the starkest contradictions lies in alternative media’s increasing amenability to capitalist organisation while continuing to challenge it. An example of this is the U.S. alternative online news outlet *The Intercept*. It was founded by editors Glenn Greenwald, Laura Poitras, and Jeremy Scahill to release stories

based on NSA whistle-blower Edward Snowden's leaks (of which Greenwald and Poitras exclusively had the entire cache) and does "adversarial journalism" (<https://theintercept.com/about/>). With a stable of professional journalists doing investigative journalism, *The Intercept* is funded by Paypal billionaire Pierre Omidyar's First Look Media. Ironically, Omidyar is known to be an anti-whistle blower since his company Paypal froze payments by supporters to Wikileaks from 2010 ("PayPal freezes WikiLeaks account", 2010). It has also been noted that the majority of Snowden's documents have not been released or reported on by *the Intercept* or any other outlet ("BFP Breaking News- Omidyar's PayPal Corporation Said To Be Implicated in Withheld NSA Documents", 2013), and that *the Intercept* may have been responsible for outing NSA leaker Reality Winner in 2017 ("The Intercept's Source Burning Problem", 2017). So, while adversarial journalism fulfils an alternative news media role, as these examples show, ownership and funding pressures appear to compromise that role to some extent.

## 2.5 News Selection

In order to explain which events are deemed newsworthy and why, scholars have advanced several models and these will be outlined in this section.

### 2.5.1 Structural Pluralism

The Structural Pluralism theory seeks to explain divergence in news coverage, and was first conceived as a media effects model in 1978 by Olien, Donohue and Tichenor. Since then it has been more commonly used to explain news media content in terms of how power is structured and executed at the community level. The model broadly states that more homogenous communities have more centralised power, and require the news media to protect that power structure by limiting 'conflict' reporting. More pluralistic, often larger,

communities, on the other hand, have a more diffuse power structure, enabling news media to report more on conflict and diversity (Donohue, Olien, & Tichenor, 1985). Structural pluralism can be considered to be at odds with Herman and Chomsky's perspective because the propaganda model, discussed below, proposed that larger newspapers, which are more likely to be corporate owned, serve the interests of the power structure by having a limited diversity of views.

### *2.5.2 Gatekeeping*

White (1950), who studied a telegraph wire editor in an American newspaper, proposed a gatekeeping model to describe the editor's process of discarding some news items and not others. In this simple instrumental model, gatekeeping occurs between the news event and the audience. McNelly's later model of news flow (1959) built on White's by adding several gatekeepers to represent the different steps a piece of news goes through before being published. Every step is an opportunity for gatekeeping - from the event itself, to foreign agency correspondent, to regional bureau editor, to agency central bureau editor or desk-person all the way to the story being reported, orally transmitted and feedback given.

In order to distinguish the various roles of different gatekeepers, Bass (1969) restructured the model splitting the news production process into two stages: gathering and processing. Stage one begins with 'raw news', then moves to 'news gatherers' (writers, reporters, local editors) and on to 'news copy'. Stage two follows on with 'news processors' (editors, copy readers, translators) and, finally, the 'completed product'. Barzilai-Nahon (2008) argued that gatekeeping should be considered a popular heuristic, rather than a complete theoretical model. Other criticisms came from Cohen and Young (1973) and Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1989), who claimed that the gatekeeper model of media operations is in general overly

simplistic given that the instrumentalist bases of the gate-keeper model are empirically unidentifiable due to wide variation in who controls the process, what the particular context is, the types of sources used, the type of news outlets involved, and what the particular issue is (Ericson et al., 1989).

### *2.5.3 The Three Dogs: Watchdog, Guard Dog, and Lap Dog Theories*

The watchdog theory views the news media as the ‘fourth estate’ ideal; an independent press plays the vital role in a democracy of challenging power and, in the interests of the populace, makes sure that the powerful do not abuse their position. While many scholars, such as Abramson (1990), Arterton (1984), and Linksy (1986) uphold this normative theory of news media (a view also shared by the American public according to a Pew poll cited in Dimock, Doherty, & Tyson, 2013) – others have proposed that the role the news media plays is often more like a guard dog (see, for example, Donohoe, Tichenor, & Olien, 1995). This model suggests that the news media is not autonomous but serves the power structure and, therefore, acts like a guard dog to protect the powerful – particularly those in industry and government. “The guard dog metaphor suggests that media perform not as a sentry for the community as a whole, but for those particular groups who have the power and influence to create and control their own security systems” (Donohue, et al., 1995, p. 116). In the guard dog model, the news media occasionally sounds the alarm when power is divided, but primarily preserves and protects the status quo. It defers to, but not necessarily colludes with, power.

Furthermore, this theory hypothesises that marginalised individuals, in contrast to those at the top of the social hierarchy, will receive very little attention in the news media, thus preserving the status quo by giving the powerful more of a voice in society and denying a voice to those at the bottom or outside of the social hierarchy. This had been proposed by Signorielli (1990) in her study of television news’ over-representation of professionals and

under-representation of others. The lapdog model holds that the news media is submissive to authority without any independence and acts as a conduit to the power elite, enabling the perpetuation of the socio-economic system from which they profit (Whitten-Woodring, 2009).

#### *2.5.4 News Values*

What makes some events more newsworthy than others? In 1965, Galtung and Ruge published the first attempt at a comprehensive definition of newsworthiness naming 12 factors that make “events become news” (1965, p. 65). These factors determine how one news story may get picked for publication instead of another. The 12 factors, together with three hypotheses regarding how the above factors affect news selection, are claimed by Galtung and Ruge to have a great deal of explanatory power in both the news production and selection process.

The 12 factors include;

F1. Frequency – news which unfolds over a similar time frame to news media is more likely to become news.

F2. Threshold – once an event passes a threshold of intensity, the greater the intensity, the greater the impact on the news selectors.

F3. Unambiguity – the less ambiguity around an event, the more likely it is to be selected as news.

F4. Meaningfulness – news which is culturally similar will better fit the news selector’s frame of reference and be more likely selected.

F5. Consonance – news that the selector expects to happen is more likely to become news.

F6. Unexpectedness – extremely rare or unexpected events are also likely to be selected as news.

F7. Continuity – events already in the news that have developments are likely to remain in the news because they are familiar.

F8. Composition – news maybe included not because of its intrinsic value, but because it provides balance to the overall newspaper or news broadcast.

F9. Elite Nations – news that references actions of elite nations, which have more consequence than other nations' actions, is likely to be selected as news.

F10. Elite People – the actions of elite people are likely to have greater consequence than others, and therefore stories containing these have more chance of being selected as news.

F11. Reference to Persons – news has the tendency to see people as the cause of events, rather than social forces.

F12. Reference to Something Negative – negative stories are often unambiguous and unexpected, thus making them more newsworthy.

The three hypotheses that follow the 12 factors and explain how they affect news selection are:

1. Selection. The more events meet the factors above, the more they are likely to be selected.
2. Distortion. When a news story has been selected, the factors it meets to make it newsworthy will be accentuated.

3. Replication. The processes of selection and distortion will occur repeatedly at every step in the chain from the event to the reader.

The model explains why some news stories are chosen for publication over others, specifically those stories that have a greater number of the 12 factors. The news selection model also explains which parts of a story may be emphasised or accentuated upon publication; that is, those parts which feature one or more of the 12 factors. The model identifies how these processes are replicated at several points along the line from the news event itself; the way in which the reporter will pursue, write, and rewrite the story, and the way it is edited, to its final publication. Thus, a reporter might pursue angles that emphasise or make prominent one or more of the 12 factors through selecting with which aspect to lead the story, who to use as sources, what questions to ask the source, and how to frame the story. The editor might then go through a similar process, selecting a story that contains several news values factors and editing it in a way to emphasise those factors (Galtung & Ruge, 1965).

Harcup and Oneil (2001), in their study of British newspapers, found that the news stories they analysed frequently contained Galtung and Ruge's factors of news-worthiness. However, they contended, like Seaton (Curran & Seaton, 1997 cited in Harcup & Oneil, 2001) before them, that many news items do not depict real events, but "pseudo-events" – constructed news, advertising and public relations spin (2001, p. 276). They note, following Hartley (1982, cited in Harcup & Oneil, 2001) that a set of news values may tell us how news stories are covered more than why, stating that some of Galtung and Ruge's news factors are less "intrinsic properties of a potential news story and more in the process of how a story has

been constructed or written up” (2001, p. 277). Furthermore, they took issue with the sample of Galtung and Ruge’s focus on news stories about international crises, claiming that the new values pertaining to such stories were not necessarily transferable to the everyday “bread and butter” news that makes up the majority of news stories. Informed by their sampling of the British press, a review of the pertinent literature, and their own practice as journalists, readers and academics (2001, p. 278), Harcup and Oneil proposed a contemporary 10-factor model incorporating and rewording some of Galtung and Ruge’s news values to more accurately represent their data. Harcup and Oneil’s set of news values includes: Power Elite, Celebrity, Entertainment, Surprise, Bad news, Good news, Magnitude, Relevance, Follow up, and Agenda.

Similarly, with an emphasis on television news, McGregor and Comrie (2002) added four new news values (Visualness, Conflict, Emotion, and Celebification) to Galtung and Ruge’s 12. These added values reflect a technological shift with the rise of fast-paced television news reliant on imagery (Visualness) which often employs an emotional appeal to the audience (Emotion), the advent, since the 1970s, of point-counterpoint political reporting (Conflict), and the role of the journalists themselves as personalities that are part of the story (Celebification).

## 2.6 The Propaganda Model

Herman and Chomsky’s (2008) propaganda model, first presented in their 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent*, is part of a political economy approach to the media which identifies the structural forces acting on mainstream news before it is published. While western democratic journalistic cultures are generally not subject to official or overt censorship, Herman and Chomsky argue that:



Censorship is largely self-censorship by reporters, and commentators who adjust to realities of source and media organisational requirements, and by people at higher levels within media organizations who are chosen to implement, and have usually internalized, the constraints imposed by proprietary and other market and governmental centers of power. (2008, p. lx)

The propaganda model posits that this ‘self-censorship’ has five causal factors, or filters, that, in effect, censor the news media in a way that serves the interests of the media organisations, their interlocking public and private sector institutions and organisations, their advertisers, and their editors and journalists. The model, given below, is essentially a list of 5 successive filters through which “the raw material of news must pass... leaving only the cleansed residue fit to print” (Herman & Chomsky, 2008, p. 2).

A brief outline of the propaganda model:

- 1) The size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth, and profit orientation of the dominant mass-media firms;
- 2) advertising as the primary income source of the mass media;
- 3) the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and experts funded and approved by these primary sources and agents
- 4) ‘flak’ as a means of disciplining the media; and
- 5) ‘anti-communism’ as a national religion and control mechanism.

(Herman & Chomsky, 2008, p. 2)

#### *2.6.1. Media Ownership*

To pass the first filter, a piece of news should not question or fundamentally challenge the ever growing, ever consolidating media giants and their wealthy owners, who have

significant business interests in other markets and common interests with governments, banks, and other major corporations. As the multinational media giants stretch across the globe, in what Hope calls the “corporate colonisation of media conglomeration” (Hope, 2012, p. 44), this first filter is attuned to the owners’ transnational interests. In the propaganda model, concentration of ownership, as distinct from size, is of some significance. Herman and Chomsky stated that “when the powerful are in disagreement, there will be a certain diversity of tactical judgements on how to attain generally shared aims, reflected in media debate” (2008, p. ix). If this is the case then it stands to reason that the greater the number of the ‘powerful’, the more chance for disagreement and diversity. However, the significant point is that despite the appearance of a disagreement and diversity of opinions, the aims are shared. Little debate that questions those aims, if any, will be permitted (2008).

The ‘powerful’ referred to by Herman and Chomsky, had been labelled by sociologist C Wright Mills as the *power elite* and their sharing of aims as a *unity of interest* (1956). Mills described the power elite as stemming from three main power sources: the military, the political system, and the economy. Their unity, he argued, relies on “psychological similarity and social intermingling... structural blending of commanding positions and common interests” and, at times, “the unity of a more explicit co-ordination” (1958, p. 34). The mass media, being corporate or government-owned, fit into either the political or the economic power sources, and work to mask a manipulative social and political order (1956).

In the United States, media consolidation has moved rapidly, with six media giants dominating the media landscape, shrinking from 50 in 1983. These six companies – Comcast, Newscorp, Disney, Viacom, Time Warner, and CBS – produce a reported 90 percent of

media consumed in the U.S. A striking example of the conflict of interest between news organisations and their war reporting comes from Robert Soloman (2005):

In 1991, when my colleague Martin A. Lee and I looked into the stake that one major media-invested company had in the latest war, what we found was sobering: NBC's owner General Electric designed, manufactured or supplied parts or maintenance for nearly every major weapon system used by the U.S. during the Gulf War—including the Patriot and Tomahawk Cruise missiles, the Stealth bomber, the B-52 bomber, the AWACS plane, and the NAVSTAR spy satellite system. 'In other words,' we wrote in *Unreliable Sources*, 'when correspondents and paid consultants on NBC television praised the performance of U.S. weapons, they were extolling equipment made by GE, the corporation that pays their salaries'.

An example of Herman and Chomsky's first filter at work is a 2002 opinion piece. Stephen Kimber, columnist for the then recently CanWest-acquired Daily News (Halifax, Canada), wrote a column in which he compared the futility of Israel's escalating revenge attacks on Palestine to George W. Bush's war on terror. The editor agreed to run the piece, but, under constraints established by CanWest, "the argument vaporized" (Kimber, 2005, p. 53). According to Kimber, this was just one of many instances of censorship by CanWest in its newspapers. CanWest's close political relationship to Prime Minister Chretien, whose government supported the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, is one reason why the piece was pulled and is explained by the propaganda model's first filter (2005).

The effects of media ownership on war reporting across the globe are pervasive. A study by Baum and Zhukov (2013) compared coverage of military conflicts in independent and

smaller network newspapers with that in newspapers owned by large media conglomerates across 110 countries. They found that the former were significantly more likely to report on a crisis than the latter. The less-conglomerated outlets also published reports with “greater emphasis on hard news, issues of military operations, and policymaking relative to softer topics emphasizing human interest or personality angles” (2013 p. 25).

In New Zealand, with a heavily consolidated trans-national and pan-regional media landscape beholden to the ebb and flow of global capital, as well as the government’s selective and oft decreasing funding of public broadcasting, “public media space is shrinking and the commercial influence expands” (Myllylahti & Hope, 2011, p. 204). The effect of this shrinking public media space is that the voices and opinions heard become less diverse and more aligned to moneyed interests as the cost of access to media is too high.

Mirroring ‘the Big Six’ in the United States, New Zealand has six major commercially operated media organisations: NZME, Sky TV, MediaWorks, Fairfax Media, TVNZ and Bauer Media. Of these six, MediaWorks and Bauer Media are privately owned by foreign entities, TVNZ is owned by the state (a ‘crown’ entity), and the rest are publicly owned by shareholders (Myllylahti, 2017). As such, all fall under the influence of global capital flow. Herman and Chomsky (2008) argued that it is such concentrated, profit driven media ownership by corporations that have multiple interests in both the private and public sectors, which generally assures news stories that conflict with the interests of these media giants have little chance in passing the first filter to become published news. Whilst there may be some variation in how the aims of the media giants may be achieved, as McChesney puts it

while alluding to a scene from *The Godfather II*, “what they all agree on, like those gangsters in Havana, is that it is their cake and nobody else gets a slice” (2004, p.22).

The mass media’s structural relationship with government is a significant factor in this filter. Licenses for radio and television networks are required to operate, and policy around this, as well as anti-trust or competition laws, business tax, interest rates, labour policies all make media corporations dependent on close working ties with government (Herman & Chomsky, 2008).

#### 2.6.2 Advertisers

To pass through the second filter, a piece of news must not hurt the outlet’s ability to sell advertising either by criticising or challenging an advertiser directly, or by lowering audience numbers and hence lowering the amount an outlet can charge for advertising. This second filter, ‘advertisers’, concerns the major source of funding for most media companies. “Before advertising became prominent”, Herman and Chomsky pointed out, “the price of a newspaper had to cover the costs of doing business” (2008, p. 14). They explained further that as newspapers picked up advertising, they could afford to sell the paper for considerably less than production cost, thus giving them an edge over non-advertising papers in copy price. They also gained surplus profits that could be put back into the business giving them an ever-increasing advantage and driving out ‘sales only’ revenue models. Advertisers discovered though, that circulation to some sections of the population (middle and upper class) meant more of a sales increase than circulation to others (working class). The working class and radical papers were thus disadvantaged.

In television and radio, the advertisers are, in effect, buying the programming that will be associated with their product or service. Television networks are acutely aware of how ratings affect advertising revenue. Chomsky and Herman pointed out that in 1988 “an audience gain or loss of one percentage point in the Nielsen ratings translates into a change in advertising revenue of from \$80 to \$100 million a year (2008, p.16). With such high stakes, media outlets have a strong economic imperative to not run stories that might anger their advertisers or hurt their ratings or their circulation to a target demographic. In this filter, commercially-run media outlets reliant on advertising revenue must take the interests of the advertisers into account in the news selection process. Stories that may hurt the image or brand of the advertisers and risk the withdrawal of vital funding, or simply those stories that may not serve to garner the widest possible audience, may be left out of publication.

In New Zealand, only two public service media outlets not reliant on advertising revenue remain: Māori Television and Radio New Zealand. The crown (the state) owns these two organisations as well as Television New Zealand (TVNZ), but the latter is commercially run. Broadcasting deregulation, which began in the late 1980s, saw TVNZ shed its role as a public broadcaster. In 2003, however, a charter was instituted by the Helen Clark-led government. The charter, amongst other things, called for local programming and in-depth news coverage of minority interests (Thompson, 2004). The government, recognizing the effect this would have on TVNZ’s profitability, provided limited funding to implement the charter while still demanding dividends, which negated the funding (2004). TVNZ served as both a public and a commercial broadcaster until its charter was abolished in 2011 (Myllylahti, 2017).

#### *2.6.3. Sources*

Mainstream professional journalism depends, to a large degree, on journalists’ or outlets’ relationships with their sources. Official sources, such as from government or the corporate

sector, can be especially valuable because they often represent a regular go-to source of information. If a story is published that is displeasing or harmful to a source, this could mean the loss of that source in the future. So, a journalist or an editor might be wary of writing or publishing a story that could harm their relationship with a valuable official source.

The third filter in the model is, therefore, ‘sources’. Encoded into professional journalism is a reliance on a certain type of source of information. As McChesney explained:

To remove controversy connected with the selection of stories it [professional journalism] regarded anything done by official sources, for example, government officials and prominent public figures, as the basis for legitimate news... [the result] gave those in political office (and, to a lesser extent, business) considerable power to set the news agenda by what they spoke about, and what they kept quiet about (2002a, p. 367).

Have you noticed, for example, that coverage of the anthrax scare dried up almost overnight after it came out that the anthrax almost certainly came from U.S. government laboratories. No conspiracy, the sources simply dried up. There was nothing to be gained politically by pushing the story along (McChesney, 2002b p. 25).

Hager (2012) as well as Hope (2012) have highlighted the rise in the influence of public relations on journalism in New Zealand. “By 2002 approximately 160 communications professionals were employed across 39 core government departments. More than twice that number was employed in other public service areas such as health, tertiary education and local government” (Hope, 2003, p.338 cited in Hope, 2012, p.45). Hager noted the increase in numbers and influence of public relations professionals in New Zealand, especially in the

private sector: “Private PR firms began to appear in the 1970s and 1980s and since then there has been exponential growth... On most issues, and especially controversial ones, focused and well-resourced PR people are dealing with journalists who may well have only come to the issue only that morning” (Hager, 2012, p. 214).

With this rise in public relations in New Zealand, the propaganda model’s third filter seems likely to apply as public relations practitioners become ‘go to’ sources for stories with both public and private sector concerns. Hager argued that public relations and “other commercialised methods of communication” are detrimental to journalism in that they can “actively manipulate or obstruct journalistic news gathering,” and crowd out “other messages from the democratic and public space” (2012, p. 214). It could be assumed that, alternative journalism, typically less reliant on official sources than the mainstream, would not be as affected by this filter.

#### *2.6.4. Flak*

If a story is seen by a media outlet as likely to anger powerful entities, which have the power to ‘hit back’, it may not be published for fear of retaliation. “If certain kinds of fact, position, or program are thought likely to elicit flak, this prospect can be a deterrent” (Herman & Chomsky, 2008 p. 26). This fourth filter, ‘flak’, is a negative response to a piece of news. It could be in the form of emails, phone calls, petitions, protests, boycotts, lawsuits, or counterfactual media pieces, and may result in the need for a public defence, retraction, apology, or resignation.



In 1995, the San Jose Mercury News did not predict the flak it would receive in the wake of Gary Webb's ground-breaking journalism on the CIA's complicity in South Central Los Angeles' crack epidemic of the 1980s. Whilst initially receiving positive feedback – Webb won 1996 Bay Area Journalist of the Year award – it didn't take long for the flak to arrive. It came in the form of hit pieces attacking Webb and his journalism from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The LA Times*. Then the rest of the mainstream media followed suit (Webb, 2002). The sources filter may also have played a role here, as Webb was unable to get any 'professional' sources on the record. Since the CIA was willing to go on record for the mainstream media in denying Webb's allegations, this was enough for them print an attack on Webb. Though no one ever found any factual errors in his reporting, he was maligned and ridiculed for his story's implications, and his paper retracted the story and eventually fired him. Several years later, Webb reportedly committed suicide (Parry, 2008). The effect of the flak received by Webb not only arguably cost him his life, but also acted as a warning for journalists and media outlets to steer clear of stories implicating the CIA in drug trafficking. This case still has a chilling effect on mainstream reporting on the subject to this day. Despite the accuracy of Webb's reporting having largely been vindicated some 20 years ago by a United States Department of Justice Report ("The CIA-Contra-Crack Cocaine Controversy: A Review Of The Justice Department's Investigations and Prosecutions", 1997) and a year later by the CIA Inspector General ("Allegations of Connections Between CIA and The Contras in Cocaine Trafficking to the United States Volume I: The California Story", 1998), the mainstream news has been mostly silent on the issue, with alternative outlets like *Consortium News* taking up the slack. It took until just a few years ago, with the 2014 release of the film based on Webb's experiences *Kill the Messenger*, for *The New York Times* to make a half-hearted apology for its role via a film review (Carr, 2014), along with ex-*Los Angeles Times* reporter Jesse Katz, who was heavily involved in the flak giving a similarly

guarded apology (Schou, 2013). *The Washington Post*, however, has stood firm having published an op-ed by one of Webb's original detractors, Jeff Leen, in which he claimed "Webb was no journalism hero" (Leen, 2014).

It could be assumed that journalists and their outlets working outside the mainstream media are not totally immune to flak. On the one hand, alternative journalism, with its lower audience is more likely to fly under the radar and not raise the ire of mainstream media pundits or other major institutions. On the other hand, small alternative outlets with little legal and financial resources might be more likely to shy away from potential defamation or other law suits.

#### *2.6.5. Anti-communism/Anti-terrorism/Dominant Ideology*

When a news story conflicts with the dominant ideology of the culture within which it might be published, it is likely to end up in the trash instead. Every culture has its sacred cows which must be protected, and its third rails which must be scrupulously avoided. From the end of World War 2, to the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, communism was anathema to western culture, and all that was needed to silence a critic or cast serious aspersions on a foe was to call them 'a communist'. Therefore, mainstream media outlets had to be very careful to avoid any such label by maintaining a vehement anti-communist/pro-capitalist stance. Any news stories that cast the Soviet Union or other communist states in a positive light would be unlikely to pass through this ideological filter. The fifth and final filter, 'anti-communism', is arguably outdated in today's post-cold war era. In explaining the power of the original filter, Herman and Chomsky wrote:

It should be noted that when anti-communist fervour is aroused, the demand for serious evidence in support of claims of ‘communist’ abuses is suspended, and charlatans can thrive as evidential sources. Defectors, informers, and assorted other opportunists move to center stage as ‘experts’, and they remain there, even after exposure as highly unreliable, if not downright liars (2008 p. 25).

To update this filter, Herman and Chomsky argued that “‘anti-terrorism’ and ‘the war on terror’ have provided the needed Enemy or Face of Evil”. They go on to explain that ‘anti-communism’ is still relevant in as much as it is used to propel the dominant ideology, of the United States and neo-liberal global capitalism. For Herman and Chomsky, despite suggesting anti-terrorism is more useful as the 5<sup>th</sup> filter, anti-communism is not obsolete in that it shows “the lesson of excessive government intervention and questioning of free market principles (Herman & Chomsky, 2009)”. Pedro (2011) characterised this updated filter more succinctly as *Convergence in the Dominant Ideology*. He emphasised the need to employ a category “broad enough to encompass the ideological variations that occur in political, intellectual, and academic discourse” because “the rhetoric of the dominant ideology is always flexible, as the elite themselves will gradually transform it in keeping with their interests...The dominant ideology is constantly shedding its skin in order to continue defending capitalism as the best form of organization and justifying the activities of the ruling elite” (2011, p. 25).

If anti-terrorism is taken as the new title and frame for the fifth filter, it becomes apparent how, since 9-11, the filter might still be relevant in a post-cold war context. During Saddam Hussein’s rule, Rafid Ahmed Alwan al-Janabi, an Iraqi, gave false accounts of working at a

plant that produced mobile chemical weapons laboratories. His account was a major source of information in Colin Powell's presentation to the United Nations Security Council in the lead up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Drogin, 2008). Given that the account served 'war on terror' campaign, Alwan al-Janabi was accepted uncritically by the United States congress as well as the mainstream media as an expert source, the consequence of which was the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

#### 2.6.6 *Worthy and Unworthy Victims*

One of the predictions/observations made by Herman and Chomsky and explained by the propaganda model, is that of worthy and unworthy victims. "A propaganda system will consistently portray people abused in enemy states as *worthy* victims, whereas those treated with equal or greater severity by its own government or clients will be *unworthy*" (2008, p. 37). By *worthy* and *unworthy*, Herman and Chomsky were referring to the level and type of coverage these victims get in the mainstream media. They used several paired examples of similar crimes to demonstrate this inequality of coverage depending on the *worthiness* of the victims. In their first case study, they stacked the deck in favour of a neutral mainstream media by comparing the 1984 murder of a Polish priest, Jerzy Popieluszko by the Polish government (then a Soviet client state and therefore an enemy state) to a hundred religious victims of 'friendly' states in Latin America, including the murder of father superior of the Franciscan order of Guatemala, Father Augusto Ramirez Monasterio, El Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, and four American churchwomen. Herman and Chomsky showed that the quantity and quality of coverage of the Latin American murders differed sharply in comparison to the Polish murder. For example, the Polish murder of Popieluszko made the front page of *The New York Times* a total of ten times, compared to -four front page appearances concerning the murder of Archbishop Romero. In fact, all the quantitative

statistics for the 100 Latin American murders by friendly states, which included a number of articles, column inches, editorials, and number of news programmes across *The New York Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and CBS News, were still less than what was measured for the single Polish murder by an enemy state (2008, pp. 40-41). Qualitatively, a number of aspects of the Popieluszko murder coverage in the U.S. media were identified. The analysis found that the U.S. media were dogged in the coverage of the details, demand for justice, and anti (communist) state framing of the Popieluszko murder, while the Romero murder was treated with relative short thrift, a lack of interest in justice, and an apologist tone and framing in regards to the state's involvement and responsibility (2008, p. 37).

#### 2.6.7 Criticism of the Propaganda Model

The propaganda model is part of a political economy approach to critiquing the mass media, where the power of the media is based on the economic, political, and personal ties between the owners and the controllers of the media and corporate, political and cultural elites.

Phelan, Rugar, and Hirst (2012) argued that although the ownership and control model is useful for observing the power relationships between the various media industries, “it doesn’t always account for situations where the independence of journalists asserts itself in exposure of corporate malfeasance or political intrigue and lies” (p. 13). This is a common criticism of the propaganda model. Herman and Chomsky addressed this issue, though in an arguably circular fashion, in their introduction to the second edition of *Manufacturing Consent* where they admitted that the structural factors they had described “are not all controlling and do not always produce simple and homogeneous results” (2008, p. xii). They went on to argue that, rather than being a problem for the power structure, news media stories that are critical of political and corporate elites are of benefit in maintaining the illusion of a free press:

...various parts of media organizations have some limited autonomy... These considerations all work to assure some dissent and coverage of inconvenient facts. The beauty of the system, however, is that such dissent and inconvenient information are kept within bounds and at the margins, so that while their presence shows that the system is not monolithic, they are not large enough to interfere unduly with the domination of the official agenda (2008, p. xii).

Mullen (2010) pointed out that although the propaganda model has been largely ignored in the field of communication studies, and the social sciences in general, as Herman and Chomsky predicted, the attention it has received has been mostly negative. Criticisms include: complaints that the model is too blunt for meaningful analysis (Schudson, 1989); that it leaves out the impact of professional journalism (Goodwin, 1994; Hallin, 1994; Sparks, 2007; Corner, 2003); and that it simultaneously overstates the power of the news media as propaganda while downplaying popular opposition to the elite (LeFeber, 1988). However, Mullen dismissed these criticisms, stating “It is important to note that most of these commentators and scholars did not engage with the propaganda model on its own terms, ascribing to it claims that Herman and Chomsky never made...” (2010, p. 678). Here, Mullen was referring to both the mischaracterisation of the propaganda model as a tool for micro analysis of media performance, rather than the institutional or systemic overview that it is, and a failure to engage with the evidence brought forth by their research presented in *Manufacturing Consent*.

The aforementioned criticisms levelled at the propaganda model might be more applicable to the instrumental Gatekeeper model discussed briefly above. However, the propaganda model

is not an instrumental one – wherein individuals consciously act to explicitly censor stories to protect power – but is systemic. In the propaganda model, journalists and editors are part of a self-preserving system, within which they are selected and trained to, by-and-large, act in accordance with and ultimately protect. In dealing with this kind of criticism, Klaehn (2002) provided the following explanation:

The PM acknowledges that journalists and editors do play central roles in disseminating information and mobilizing media audiences in support of the special interest groups that dominate the state and private economy. But the PM assumes that the processes of control are often unconscious. Its basic argument in this context is that meanings are formed and produced at an unconscious level, such that conscious decisions are typically understood to be natural, objective, common-sense (p. 150).

Within the system, according to the propaganda model and as was previously noted, there is room for a divergence of tactics and occasional opposition to ‘elite preferences’ to be published, and, to repeat, this in itself helps maintain the system by strengthening the illusion of a free press (Herman & Chomsky, 2008 p. xii).

The more substantial criticism has come from Sparks (2007) and Boyd-Barrett (Mullen, 2010). Sparks, while recognising the propaganda model as “one of the best available attempts to provide a robust analytic framework for understanding the performance of the news media,” identified weaknesses and suggested ways “to extend its explanatory power” (2007, p. 69). One criticism he had of the model is the claimed uniformity of aims within the media elite. As noted above, whilst the propaganda model allows for a diversity of tactics on a

central issue, when elite opinion is divided, they are still supposedly together in their aim. Sparks disagreed and alluded to opposing views within the British press on the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Sparks, 2007). Whilst this example does seem to prove his point, he admitted that partly it boils down to how one defines ‘tactical’. Sparks also noted that from an economic view, what the media business elites have in common is the interest in maintaining both their ownership of the means of production, and their right to reap the profits of the production: “They seek to eliminate any threats to those rights” (Sparks, 2007, p. 72). However, they would be divided on issues where different business elite groups have competing financial interests.

A further criticism of the propaganda model made by Sparks was that different capitalist democracies, especially in Europe, have a much wider range of mainstream political parties with ideologies that fall outside of the capitalist interest assumed in the propaganda model. Sparks gives the example of the Communist Party in Italy which, for a time, controlled one of the three state television channels and contributed to a wide and varied public discourse. “The range of debate about issues of domestic policy tends to be rather wider than is accounted for by the classical iteration of the PM” (2007, p. 74). Corner (2003) had advanced previously this criticism of the propaganda model’s unsuitability to a European context, questioning its apparent ignorance of European media criticism and stating that “there is very little by way of new theoretical insight that the propaganda model can bring to European media research (2003, p. 367)”.

Whilst the range of mainstream political thought in New Zealand is certainly wider than the two party neo-liberal state of the U.S., the mainstream media in New Zealand, unlike



alternative media in general, does not typically cater to radical political debate. Therefore, it is apparent that the strength of this criticism of the propaganda model is relative to the media culture in which the model is located.

Lastly, Sparks (2007), amongst other critics referred to above, found the propaganda model wanting in its description of journalists as middle class conformists to political and financial dictates with no autonomy. He pointed out that most journalists are wage earners with more in common with the working class than their media managers. Sparks also emphasised that in the United Kingdom, journalists have stood up to management at significant times in the past in response to attempts at politically motivated censorship. His examples of journalistic autonomy are mostly drawn from the BBC. As a public broadcaster, the BBC does not exactly fit the U.S. multinational corporate media system studied by Herman and Chomsky (as is noted by Sparks in a separate criticism, 2007). However, the BBC, much like Radio New Zealand, does fit into the broad conception of the mainstream media in the propaganda model given its state ownership which is interconnected with the interests of corporate power.

#### *2.6.8 The 6<sup>th</sup> Filter: An Instrumental Component*

The issue of journalist autonomy is an important part of a wider criticism of the propaganda model, and one that parallels Boyd-Barrett's (2004) main criticism. While Sparks (2007) contended that journalists have more autonomy than the model allows for, and thus are less swayed by the structural interests, Boyd-Barrett argued that the powerful political and economic interests, which the model accounts for structurally, have more agency than the model suggests. In particular, Boyd-Barrett stated, "One area that Herman and Chomsky seemed purposely to eschew was the direct purchase of media influence by powerful sources,

or the ‘buying out’ of individual journalists or their media by government agencies and authorities” (Boyd-Barrett, 2004, p. 436).

Boyd-Barrett went on to highlight that Herman and Chomsky clearly stated their model does not appeal to ‘conspiracy theory’ to explain the news, but that it does not rule it out, either (2004). Boyd-Barrett maintained that, on matters such as the Kennedy assassination, Chomsky has made public and principled stands against ‘conspiracy theories’ – a term that Boyd-Barrett ironically explains as one commonly used to dismiss genuine critiques of the establishment – “preferring to explain corruption in terms of social systems than in terms of specific human agents” (2004, p. 436). Moreover, Boyd-Barrett had no difficulty in finding fault with this stance as it applies to the media given “the irrefutable evidence of wide-scale, covert CIA penetration of media—by definition, an illustration of ‘conspiracy’ at work” (2004, p. 436). Here, Boyd-Barrett is referring to the results of three investigations in the 1970s: the Senate Church Committee; the House Pike Committee; and an investigation by Carl Bernstein for Rolling Stone which uncovered that more than 400 U.S. journalists had been employed by the CIA for over 25 years, including freelance informants and CIA officers working under deep cover. The journalists’ collaboration with the intelligence agency ranged from intelligence collection to serving as go-betweens for espionage agents. Almost every major U.S. news outlet had been infiltrated, usually with the cooperation of the highest management. CIA-infiltrated media included the Associated Press, ABC, CBS, Hearst Newspapers, *Miami Herald*, Mutual Broadcasting System, NBC, *New York Herald Tribune*, *The New York Times (NYT)*, *Newsweek*, Reuters, *Saturday Evening Post*, Scripps-Howard, *Time/Life*, as well as United Press International. Numerous prominent journalists, editors, and publishers were implicated (Boyd-Barrett, 2004 p. 436). Foreign news media was also targeted, with the report stating that:

The CIA currently maintains a network of several hundred foreign individuals around the world who provide intelligence for the CIA and at times attempt to influence opinion through the use of covert propaganda. These individuals provide the CIA with direct access to a large number of newspapers and periodicals, scores of press services and news agencies, radio and television stations, commercial book publishers, and other foreign media outlets (“Final report of the Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, United States Senate: together with additional, supplemental, and separate views.” 1976, p.455).

In pointing out such facts of the infiltration of the U.S. media by intelligence agencies, Boyd-Barrett raised questions about the comprehensibility of a structural propaganda model. Clearly, for Boyd-Barrett, evidence for conspiracies at work in the news media means a comprehensive model should account for them.

#### *2.6.9 The 6<sup>th</sup> Filter at the Paper of Record*

Given the clear indication of the infiltration into media organisations by the intelligence agencies, Boyd-Barrett suggested a 6<sup>th</sup>, instrumental filter for the propaganda model:

“Buying-out” (2004, p. 436). As stated above, Boyd-Barrett was referring to the purchasing of journalists or media outlets by government agencies and authorities. The inclusion of the 6th filter by Boyd-Barrett was not based solely on the investigations outlined above, but also on an examination of the performance of the mainstream media in the intervening period, with a particular focus on Judith Miller and her poorly sourced, pro-war stories for *The New York Times* in the lead up to the Iraq War of 2003. Whilst Boyd-Barrett did not cite any direct evidence of intelligence agency complicity, “since by its very nature the tracks of such evidence are well covered and rarely disclosed,” but he did find circumstantial evidence which “makes it highly likely, if not certain, that wide-scale and deep penetration occurs”

(2004, p. 447). If this is the case, it might explain the difference between the more critical and diverse U.K. media coverage of the lead up to the Iraq War in 2003, and the cheerleading coverage of the U.S.

Daniel Chomsky's analysis of *The New York Times*' memos between the owner, Arthur Hays Sulzberger, and the chief editor and certain reporters, as well as Sulzberger's personal notes, shows the heavy instrumental influence the owner bore on the editorial content of the paper in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as some of the reporting (1999; 2006). In one of numerous examples, when the French, Israelis, and British invaded the Sinai Peninsula in 1956, Sulzberger sent a memo to his editor Catledge asking for reporting on Egypt's "shocking" treatment of the French and British soldiers - "The editors found room for this aspect of the story in the news pages" (Chomsky, 2006, p. 7). Revealing the agency of ownership of the news outlet on the content of the news, Chomsky provided us with a clear example, one of many, of the operation of an instrumental power at work on the news media. While they definitely show instrumental power, these examples do not show any direct 'buying out' and could reasonably be explained by an ideological bias on the part of Sulzberger.

#### *2.6.10 The Black Box Problem*

Despite the rare examples afforded to us by Sulzberger's memos, clear examples of this 6<sup>th</sup> filter at work, or indeed any of the filters, are usually difficult to pin down and attribute with certitude. Boyd-Barrett (2004) identified, in further criticisms of the propaganda model, a lack of precision in the characterisation of the filters, and, more significantly, the challenge of observing the operation of some of the filters, including his own 6<sup>th</sup> filter:

They tend to fall within the compass of what may be described as the ‘black box’ within whose darkness occur some of the operational transactions that probably must occur for the implementation of Herman and Chomsky’s political-economic determinants. Penetration of this ‘black box’ remains, for the most part, a major challenge to those who would seek further operational confirmation of the propaganda model at work (2004, p. 448).

Like Sparks (2007), Boyd-Barrett (2004) is essentially running up against the problem of a structural model which seeks to explain the broad-stroke dynamics at play in the creation of news media output. Spark, Boyd-Barrett see it as removing the ability to explain the autonomy of the individual players within those power structures.

#### *2.6.11 Five Additional Filters for the Digital Age*

Dr Rob Williams (2018), founding president of Action Coalition for Media Education, suggested five further filters for the digital age to be added to the propaganda model. While the propaganda model’s five filters refer to the filtering of news in the mainstream media, Williams’ additions relate more broadly to online news.

In addition to the first five, Williams’ 6<sup>th</sup> filter is the Deep State Disinformation Filter. Similar to Boyd-Barret’s Buying Out filter, it posits influence in the news media by the deep state, which is American foreign policy critic Peter Dale Scott’s term for a state’s continuous power structure impervious to electoral change (Scott, 2014).

The 7<sup>th</sup> addition by Williams is the Algorithmic Filter. This refers to internet search engines' and other platforms' algorithms that determine search results. In May 2017, changes to Google's algorithms in the face of the moral panic over 'fake news' led to a dramatic loss in traffic to well-established alternative, left-wing, and whistle-blowing news sites. Damon and North reported in August 2017 that data obtained using SEMrush analysis showed that, beginning in May, *Wikileaks* experienced a 30% decline in traffic from Google searches, *Democracy Now* fell by 36%, *Truthout* dropped by 25%, *Alternet* saw a 63% decline in traffic, *Media Matters* saw a 36% drop in traffic, *Counterpunch.org* fell by 21%, *The Intercept* fell by 19%, and its own traffic dropped by 67% percent over the same period (Damon & North, 2017). With alternative news sites being pushed down the results list and experiencing these sharp drops in traffic, the flipside is the mainstream news media are left to dominate search results.

Williams' 8<sup>th</sup> filter is the Filter Bubble, which is the self-selected range of digital and social media parameters, such as *friends*, *following*, and *likes* on Facebook, determining which exposure on the various popular platforms that determines what content an individual will see on social and digital media.

The 9<sup>th</sup> filter is the Behavioural Micro-targeting Filter which was reportedly used by Cambridge Analytica (Lapowsky, 2017) in the 2016 US Presidential Election to expose voters on social media to specifically targeted content based on behavioural digital data aimed at persuading the voter to vote for a particular candidate.

The 10<sup>th</sup> filter proposed by Williams is named the Sock Puppet Filter, and refers to the use of fake or anonymous social media accounts that are used by corporate or government interests to attack or support political ideas, positions, candidates, or parties (Williams, 2018).

## 2.7 Framing

As consumers of news that helps construct our social reality, the way news events are depicted in the news media is an important factor in the make-up of that reality. This treatment of an event in the media is known as framing. The more general theory of framing, first presented by Goffman in *Frame Analysis* (1974), posits that people interpret what is happening in and around their world through their primary framework. The framework is considered to be primary due to the user being unaware of it. Goffman presented two kinds of primary frameworks – natural and social. Natural frameworks view events in the world as natural, physical events without any attribution to social forces. Social frameworks see events as socially driven, due to the “will, aim, and controlling effort on the part of an intelligence... chiefly a human being” (1974, p. 22). Social frameworks are built on the natural frameworks. These two frameworks and their subsequent frames that emerge in communication have a significant effect on how information is interpreted, processed, and communicated.

In relation to news reporting and commentating, a frame is the way in which information is selected, organised, and presented (Entman, 1993), and functions “to select and highlight some features of reality and obscure others in a way that tells a consistent story about problems, their causes, moral implications, and remedies” (Entman, 1996, pp. 77-78), or more simply, “to make sense of relevant events” (Gamson, 1989, p. 157). For Tuchman (1978), frames are chosen to present precise messages in relation to particular issues.

### *2.7.1 Media Frames*

Media frames, or objective frames, are created through the use of techniques including words, phrases, metaphors, historical examples, depictions, and visual images that operate as ‘reasoning devices’ and present a certain view of the news story (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). These are to be distinguished from individual frames, or subjective frames, which focus on the effect on the audience, and are not the concern of this study.

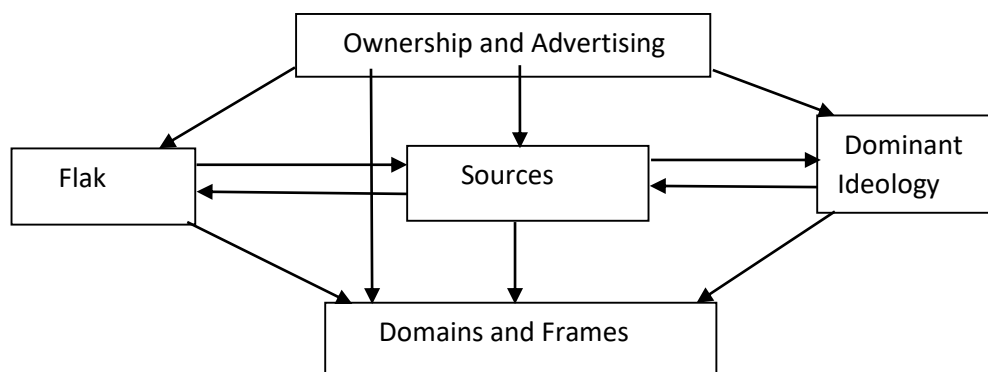
Media frames can further be broken down into generic frames and issue specific frames. Generic frames involve narrative elements that may be found across a wide range of news stories irrespective of the topic of the particular story. These frames can include responsibility frames, which diagnose and identify causes of particular issues, and may suggest treatment for the issue (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992). Morality or value frames, which reflect the value attributed to a specific event or problem can also be included into this category (Neuman et.al., 1992; Entman 1993). Iyengar’s (1996) episodic and thematic frames are also broadly applicable to news stories regardless of their topic, as they are concerned with the temporal nature of the story – whether it is focused on a single event (episodic) and therefore presenting it without context and history, or, in contrast, presenting a broad social or historical context of a continuous process (thematic). Issue-specific frames apply to specific stories and may not be relevant to a wide variety of news stories. A story about an oil spill, for example, might be likely to employ an environmental frame, but would be unlikely to use a national security frame.



### 2.7.2 Domains or Frames?

Mattis argued that most frames discussed in research “are really more sub-topics or ‘domains’” (2014, p. 107), and that to constitute a frame, “the domain highlighted must also include aspects of **how** that domain is interpreted” (emphasis in the original 2014, p. 107-8). How the domain is interpreted is the valence or angle the story takes within the domain. Mattis used the example of the domain ‘cancer’ following the Gulf of Florida oil spill. A news story could discuss the cancer risk as either being negligible or a significant risk – two different frames of the same domain. For Mattis, the domain can be identified quantitatively by words, phrases, and ideas that populate the news story, but the frame can only be determined once the valence of the domain has been discerned through qualitative analysis.

Mattis (2014) related domains and frames to the previously discussed five filter propaganda model. Mattis conceptualised a hierarchy of filters: the first two filters, ownership and advertising, giving rise to the next three, sources, flak, and dominant ideology. The domains and frames in news stories can then be seen as “a result of the interaction of the five filters” (p. 112). Mattis’s diagram (see *Figure 1*) depicts the relationship and hierarchies of the five filters and their relationship to domains and frames (2014, p. 112).



*Figure 1.* The relationship between the five filters and the domains and frames in media stories

### *2.7.3 Five Common Frames/Domains*

In their study of both media frames and individual frames, Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) found that five of the most common news media frames were: conflict, responsibility, economic, human interest, and morality frames. These five frames have since been used by researchers to deductively determine news frames in quantitative content analysis (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; An & Gower, 2009) by way of a 15 question coding scheme devised by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). This study will also employ this coding scheme and the five frames, which are discussed further in the Methodology section.

## *2.8 Summary*

This literature review discussed the definition of alternative and mainstream media, and the history of the relationship between alternative and mainstream news media, examining how the two have continuously borrowed from, and shaped, each other. An explanation was provided as to the ways in which the political economy exerts pressure on alternative media and its response to those pressures in the form of various organisational structures, journalistic practices, content production, media formats, and distribution.

News selection was discussed, with various models outlined including structural pluralism, gatekeeping and 'the 3 dogs'. Galtung and Ruge's news values was discussed with a view to what professional mainstream journalism considers newsworthy, and therefore what we might expect to find in the news. Similarly, Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model was also examined to consider what, although newsworthy, might not make it into the news for reasons of structural censorship as well as for reasons of possible instrumental censorship outside of the explanatory power of the propaganda model.

Finally, this literature review discussed the concept of media frames as a way to shape perception of a given event, and ways in which the examination of framing can be used in the following research comparing mainstream and alternative news media.

## Chapter 3 METHODOLOGY

In order to compare mainstream with alternative news media in New Zealand, several definitions and parameters first need to be made. These include the formulation of research questions, definitions of mainstream news and alternative news, the type of media selected (e.g. print, television, radio, internet, social media), the media outlets that provide news coverage in the type of media selected and that fit the alternative and mainstream definitions, the kind of news stories to be compared, and the elements of the stories to be compared.

### 3.1 Main Research Question

In endeavouring to compare the mainstream with the alternative news media in New Zealand, or indeed for the undertaking of any academic research, the formulation of a research question is central in that it sets the course the research will take. Initially, a question was formed with the intention of solely investigating what kind of news stories were not covered by mainstream news media in New Zealand. This entailed a number of challenges, such as how to find stories that were not covered and how to verify them, and the question of their news worthiness to begin with. However, while setting that research question would perhaps serve to elucidate stark differences in coverage between the mainstream and alternative news by looking at what went uncovered, comparing what *was* covered might produce some more subtle, interesting data. With this consideration, the starting research question was reformulated into the following:

*How does alternative news media coverage differ from mainstream news media coverage in New Zealand?*

For the purposes of the practicalities of research, this question needed to be honed a little more; the type of media needed further definition in order for it to be sampled. With the ease of internet accessibility in mind, online news media was chosen as the media type and was added to the research question. However, this needed further definition still as online news media could include video, audio, or text. Whilst both video and audio held an allure due to the passive nature of their consumption mode (one just needs to listen and/or look), a quick survey revealed that it might be a struggle to find enough alternative news content in those formats, perhaps due to higher production costs for the meagrely-resourced alternative outlets. Text-based online news seemed the most ubiquitous and therefore the most likely medium in which to find enough comparable content across the mainstream and alternative news outlets. Therefore, text-based news media was added to the research question:

*How does online text-based alternative news media coverage differ from online text-based mainstream news media coverage in New Zealand?*

However, as it came time to select news events for analysis, it became clear that the research question would need to be clarified further. As is discussed below, in order to find news events that were covered by a majority of the selected eight outlets, and with a mind to selecting news events that might more likely yield meaningful data, the main research question was amended as follows:

*How does online text-based alternative news media coverage of power-challenging news events differ from online text-based mainstream news media coverage in New Zealand?*

While this main research question guides the general direction of the research, as the methodology is fleshed out below, further sub-research questions are added.

### 3.2 Defining Mainstream and Alternative News Media

The term alternative media, within which alternative news media is a prominent subset, has traditionally been a hard one to define (Downing, 2003) given the wide variation in styles and approaches in news reporting and storytelling therein, and has been discussed in some length in the literature review section. In brief, that discussion acknowledged a multitude of academic views on how alternative media should be defined: alternative media as self-identified (Albert, 1997), independent (Atton, 2002; Waltz, 2005), small scale, non-hegemonic and democratic (Downing, 2000), radical (Downing, 1984), activist (Waltz, 2005), small scale and less commercial (Dowmunt & Coyer, 2007), oppositional to media power (Curran & Couldry, 2003; Ramonet, 2005), creating different values, traditions, and social roles and relationships (Hamilton, 2000) and removed from mainstream, non-commercial, transformational and oppositional to power (Atkinson, 2006).

Kenix (2011), pointing out a convergence between the mainstream and alternative media spheres, found many of these definitional frameworks problematic given mainstream news outlets' emulation of alternative news media's content, form, and organisational structure. According to Kenix, two of the aforementioned alternative news' definitional elements that appear to not be emulated by the mainstream, are independence and non-commercialism. These are in diametric opposition to the first two filters of Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, namely Ownership and Advertising. If, as Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model has it, the mainstream media is owned by the corporate-government power nexus, and is commercially driven, then the inverse could be said to define alternative media; that is, *independently-owned and non-commercial*. This would appear to be a useful definition for alternative news media within the propaganda model framework, though its

often present characteristic of *oppositional* (Curran & Couldry, 2003; Ramonet, 2005; Atkinson, 2006) is useful in considering the how alternative news media might position itself with regards to the power structure and also might shed light on the type of content it produces.

### *3.2.1 Definitions for Identifying the Alternative and Mainstream Online News in New Zealand*

For the purposes of identifying mainstream and alternative news outlets for this study, the aforementioned definition of alternative news media as *independently owned and non-commercial*, and mainstream news media definition as *corporate or government owned and commercial*, can be employed with some alterations.

With *independently owned, and non-commercial* as a definition of alternative news media for this study's purpose of identifying alternative online news media in New Zealand, one quickly runs into a problem. If a strict definition of non-commercial is to be used, almost all independent outlets are ruled out due to most having advertising on their websites. Do only outlets that eschew advertising deserve to be included in the alternative media definition? This is a difficult, but perhaps not impossible ask of an outlet that necessarily exists within the capitalist framework of western-democratic societies like New Zealand.

Conversely, employing the definition of the mainstream news media as *corporate or government owned and commercial* also poses a problem in the New Zealand media landscape. The commercial element to the mainstream media definition rules out a major media outlet, Radio New Zealand, because it is non-commercial, relying solely on government funding.

Given the problems for both definitions with the use of the words *commercial* and *non-commercial*, the definitions are cut down considerably to the following. To remedy this problem somewhat, the term *less commercial* as attributed to Downmunt and Cowyer (2007), listed in the previous section, could be used in place of *non-commercial* within the definition of alternative news media, given that the advertising on the alternative media sites, if it appears at all, seems to be less prominent and intrusive than on the mainstream sites. Therefore, the definition used by this study of a mainstream news media outlet is simply a *government or corporate owned and government or commercially funded news media outlet*, and the definition of an alternative news media outlet is an *independently owned and less commercially funded news media outlet*.

### 3.3 Base Studies

This study will draw on several previous studies in its methodology, initially Mattis' 2014 study *Mixing Oil and Water: An Evaluation of the Media Propaganda Model in News Coverage of the Gulf of Mexico Oil Disaster* comparing corporate media's coverage of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill with independent media coverage. Most relevant to this study, Mattis used quantitative analysis to identify predetermined source-types and predetermined domains, or frames as they are called in this study, which she used to compare the mainstream and alternative news media.

As Mattis' study focused on an environmental disaster, she obtained frames specialised for that topic from previous content analysis of environmental disasters (Mattis, 2014 p. 134).

This study's content analysis is not limited to environmental news events, but instead surveys



a number of different news events and therefore employs common news frames first identified by Neuman, Just, and Crigler in their study of framing in the book *Common Knowledge* (1992). Based on these authors' common news frames, Semetko and Valkenburg's 2000 study *Framing European Politics: A Content Analysis of Press and Television News* (2000) is another study that is drawn upon considerably here. Semetko and Valkenburg used a series of 20 questions to deductively determine the dominant frame of a news story from a selection of the five most common frames as discovered by Neumen et al. These frames – *attribution of responsibility, conflict, human interest, economic consequences, and morality* – and the questions to identify them developed by Semetko and Valkenburg have been used subsequently (An & Gower, 2009; Dirikx & Gelders, 2010; Dreijere, 2013; Ardèvol Abreu, 2015; Gronemeyer & Porath, 2017) and are used in this study.

### 3.4 The Mainstream and Alternative Media Outlets

In the interests of obtaining data from a number of sources across both mainstream and alternative outlets, and drawing on Mattis' (2014) methodology whereby she selected four corporate and four independent outlets, it was decided to select eight outlets, of which four are mainstream and four are alternative. In this way, variations in the data could be shown from outlet to outlet, whilst also being collated to give a picture of the mainstream versus the alternative news in a more general sense.

#### 3.4.1 Four New Zealand Mainstream News Outlets

The four mainstream news outlets; *the Herald, Stuff, Radio New Zealand, and Newshub*; have been selected in line with the definition of a government or corporate owned, and government

or commercially funded news media outlet as discussed above, providing a cross-section of the mainstream media landscape in New Zealand.

#### 3.4.1.1 'The Herald'

At the time of writing, *the Herald* is owned by NZME, which owns several newspapers and radio stations around New Zealand including *The Northern Advocate*, *The Bay of Plenty Times*, *The Rotorua Daily Post*, and *Newstalk ZB*. NZME is owned by APN News and Media Ltd, which itself owns a long list of Australian print, broadcast, and online media outlets. APN has two major shareholders; the fund manager Allan Gray Australia, and Rupert Murdoch's News Limited.

News Limited's parent company is News Corp, which, along with its sister company 21st Century Fox, is a multi-national media giant owning newspapers throughout Australia (*The Daily Telegraph*, *The Courier Mail*), the UK (*The Sun*, *The Times*), and the U.S. (*The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Post*). The corporation also owns: the publishing house Harper Collins; the Fox network of television stations including Fox News, Star TV, Sky TV in the UK, Germany, and Italy; film production house 20th Century Fox; and the Dow Jones Index.

Allan Gray Australia, the other major shareholder in APN (AUD18 million in holdings) has other significant holdings in a number of companies involved in gold mining in Australia, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea; oil and gas companies with fields in Australia, the Timor Sea, and New Zealand; an infrastructure maintenance company operating across defence, transport, utilities and mining; Australasian banks; food distribution companies; and shares in other media companies including Fairfax Media (AUD17 million holdings).

#### 3.4.1.2 'Stuff'

*Stuff*, which includes in its online news media site the New Zealand newspapers *The Sunday Star Times*, *The Dominion Post*, and *The Press*, is owned by Fairfax Media. The latter owns many Australian newspapers such as *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, as well as other online platforms including *Huff Post Australia* in partnership with Huffington Post and Nine Entertainment Co. Fairfax Media also owns a large share in the Macquarie Radio Network which owns several, mostly AM, stations around Australia. Major shareholders include financial services multinational Morgan Stanley and investment fund manager Ausbil Dexia, as well as Allan Gray Australia.

#### 3.4.1.3 'Newshub'

*Newshub* is Media Work's news media website that consolidates *TV3 News* and *Radio Live* onto one platform that includes video/television, audio/radio, and text-based news coverage. Media Works broadcasts the television stations TV3, The Edge TV, and FOUR, and 11 radios stations, including *Radio Live*, around the country. Media Works is owned by the American firm Oaktree Capital Management, which invests primarily in high-yield distressed and corporate debt, and has investments in oil tanker operators General Maritime, and jet airline company Sky Holding, among other investments.

The three commercial mainstream news media outlets selected for the study - *The Herald*, *Stuff*, and *Newshub* - rely on advertising revenue and, are owned by companies with a diverse range of commercial interests around the globe including fossil fuels, transport, defence, food distribution, and banking. Therefore, these news outlets fit this study's definition of a mainstream news media outlet a government or corporate owned, and government or commercially funded news media outlet. According to Herman and Chomsky's propaganda

model, this makes these outlets' news coverage subject to the two filters of ownership and advertising, whereby news stories that pose a significant threat, direct or indirect, to the commercial interests of the outlets' owners would struggle to make the news.

#### 3.4.1.4 'Radio New Zealand'

In contrast to the three mainstream news media outlets mentioned above, the fourth selected for this study, Radio New Zealand, is a public broadcaster. It is publically owned and funded, and operates under a charter which requires Radio New Zealand to promote debate and critical thought and reflect cultural diversity, as well as reflect a diversity of ages and interests, and help create a national identity. Without a reliance on advertising revenue and no corporate ownership, one might reasonably assume Radio New Zealand produced news that poses a threat to elements within the corporate world might escape the censoring scalpel of the first and second propaganda model filters. However, with its ownership and funding dependent on government, news stories that question the government's competency, and indeed legitimacy (even in a broad, non-partisan way), might fall prey to the first filter ownership, as well as stories that threaten corporate interests that intersect with government. Given its government ownership and funding, *Radio New Zealand* fits this study's definition of a mainstream news media outlet a government or corporate owned, and government or commercially funded news media outlet.

#### 3.4.2 Four New Zealand Alternative News Outlets

The four New Zealand alternative news media outlets; *the Daily Blog*, *the Standard*, *Evening Report*, and *Whale Oil*; were selected for the study, fitting the definition of independently owned and less commercially funded news media outlet as discussed above.

#### 3.4.2.1 'The Standard'

*The Standard* is a news blog created and owned by the Standard Trust, a collective of mostly anonymous writers funded by reader donations, and doesn't run advertising. The site mostly does news analysis, quoting from and linking to reporting from mainstream sites such as *the Herald* and *Stuff*. *The Standard* comes from an openly stated leftist political angle where writers "share a commitment to the values and principles that underpin the broad labour movement" (<https://thestandard.org.nz/about/>, n.d.).

#### 3.4.2.2 'The Daily Blog'

*The Daily Blog*, similarly to *the Standard*, provides analysis of news stories, often reported in the mainstream media, from a left wing perspective. Created and edited by Martyn Bradbury, *the Daily Blog* describes itself as uniting "over 42 of the country's leading left-wing commentators and progressive opinion shapers to provide the other side of the story on today's news, media and political agendas" (<https://thedailyblog.co.nz/about/>, n.d.). It is funded by the trade union UNITE, the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) and the New Zealand Dairy Workers Union (NZDWU) as well as readers' donations. It also runs several static advertisements on its website.

These outlets fit this study's alternative news media outlet definition as independently owned and less commercially funded news media outlets. Given the leftist oppositional perspective of the above two media outlets, it could be expected that both would provide coverage of news events that would not shy away from exposing government or corporate maleficence. *The Daily Blog*, with its funding by the aforementioned trade unions, might be expected to have weak spots with news that could affect those unions.

#### 3.4.2.3 'The Evening Report'

*The Evening Report* is a news site created and edited by Selwyn Manning – a long time investigative journalist formerly with scoop.co.nz, and a press secretary for the Labour-led government from 1999-2001. Its public editorial policy is “founded on public interest advocacy of humanitarianism, environmentalism, progressive economics, sustainable business practice, and security” (<https://eveningreport.nz/about-us/>, n.d.). *The Evening Report* comes from a left of centre perspective, but with a non-partisan agenda more akin to objective ‘professional journalism’ than the oppositional blogs mentioned above. *The Evening Report* fits this study’s alternative news media outlet definition as an independently owned and less commercially funded news media outlet.

#### 3.4.2.4 'Whale Oil Beef Hooked'

*Whale Oil Beef Hooked* or *Whale Oil* for short, is a well-known right-wing blog, controversial for its ties to members of the National party and its role in what investigative Nicky Hager calls ‘dirty politics’ in his book of the same name (2014), wherein it is alleged that the man behind the blog, Cameron Slater, was paid by National Party members to write attack pieces on opposition politicians. These allegations are backed up by hacked emails and Facebook chats. Due to Slater’s close ties to the National Party which are not denied by former Prime Minister John Key, the alleged payment he has received for ‘hit’ pieces on politicians of the opposition, and his own stated “centre-right political viewpoint” (<https://www.whaleoil.co.nz/about/>, n.d.), one would generally expect support for key National party policies and associated corporate interests, or even perhaps criticism of these from a further-right perspective. *Whale Oil* runs several static advertisements on its website, however it fits this study’s alternative news media outlet definition as an independently owned and less commercially funded news media outlet.

### 3.5 Quantitative content analysis

As this study will employ quantitative content analysis, some discussion of the history and meaning of this approach is appropriate. Content analysis began in the 19th century as an academic field to study written texts, and emerged as a systematic methodology in the mid-20th century as an “objective and systematic quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Berelson, 1952, p. 18). Quantitative methods continue to be used in communications and other fields, as well as qualitative methods – which have emerged as an alternative and supplemental approach for describing latent content within textual information.

Scholars disagree on a single definition of content analysis. Krippendorff (2004, p. xvii) reported that at a Political Science symposium in 2004, scholars debated the meaning of content analysis in contrast to discourse analysis. Definitions varied greatly, though most thought of content analysis to be quantitative in nature, and some felt it to be reliant on a positivist epistemology, in contrast to discourse analysis, which is underpinned by social constructivism. Other scholars thought that discourse analysis rests on a theory of social and political power, or that it assumes that without a broader context, texts have no meaning, thus implying that content analysis foregoes context.

Mattis (2014, p. 116) pointed out that several media scholars do not agree with the above assessments. Indeed, Krippendorff (2004) did not differentiate between content and discourse analysis, instead categorising discourse analysis as one of the several kinds of qualitative approaches. Thus, a definition of content analysis in regard to media content can be stated as

a study of recorded communication which can encompass both quantitative and qualitative approaches, analyse both manifest and latent content, and can be evaluative and/or predictive (Krippendorff, 2004; Mattis, 2014).

Quantitative methods of content analysis involve numerical counts of variables such as words and phrases that are identified, measured, and statistically processed. Quantitative content analysis is defined by Riffe, Lacy and Fico (2005) as:

The systematic, and replicable examination of symbols of communication which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods, to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption (p. 25).

This study uses quantitative analysis of both manifest, explicit content - such as word length, the number of context factors, source types and balance of sources - and latent, inferred content in terms of deductively, or a priori determined media frames.

While quantitative analysis is considered a reliable approach in dealing with manifest content due to greater inter-coder reliability than qualitative analysis (Kolbacher, 2006), quantitative analysis of latent content can be more difficult as inter-coder reliability weakens (Babbie, 2010). Thus, it is suggested that a future study might utilise a qualitative approach to expand on the analysis of the sampled material.



### 3.6 News Stories

Across the eight selected news outlets, 25 news events were selected, for a projected total of 200 news articles. This total sample size is considerably lower than Mattis' 600 articles sourced from eight news outlets for her (2014) *Examination of the Media Propaganda Model in News Coverage of the Gulf of Mexico Oil Disaster*, or Jacobsen, Fang, and Raffel's 550 articles all sourced from *The New York Times* in their (2002) *Test of Human Rights Reporting in the New York Times*. However, the sample size is much greater than the 30 articles from six major daily newspapers in Kennis' (2009) *Evaluation of US News Coverage of the Uprising in Ecuador, January 2000* or the 90-article sample Grounder used in her (2006) media analysis of the 2000 Fijian coup.

The projected 200 article sized sample, then, fits into a middle ground, similar to the 289 articles sampled by Lafferty in his 2006 study *Applying the Propaganda Model to Media Ownership Theory*, or even the slightly larger 341 articles sourced from six newspapers in Frederik and De Alwis' (2008) study *Catherine Wheel*, which examined military censorship of Sri Lankan news coverage during the civil war.

The selection of the news events was a difficult process. Initially, news categories were devised with the goal of selecting a set number of articles covering the same news events across each of the eight news outlets. This proved a challenging task, as while the mainstream outlets covered most of the selected events, the alternative outlets varied much more on what they covered, making the pre-categorised news events process unworkable.

Instead, a broader search for news events covered by all eight outlets was undertaken. The selected news events were simply defined as events concerning corporate or government power. This broad category was used in light of the role of alternative and mainstream media discussed in the literature review chapter 2.2 which in part concerns challenging the power structure, and mainstream media's role in perpetuating the power structure. A news event offering an opportunity to both kinds of outlet to perform these roles, and thus most likely show a divergence in coverage, was the fundamental basis for whether it was considered fit for the purpose of the study, along with it being covered by most, if not all of the 8 selected media outlets.

A brief description of the 25 news events selected are as follows: *NZDF settles a defamation claim with a journalist, the Prime Minister harasses a waitress, a police raid on a journalist's home is ruled unlawful, the Prime Minister lies about his knowledge of a minister being investigated, New Zealand features as a tax haven in the Panama Papers, a minister's office leaks private information in apparent revenge on the head of a marae, the government's wrong-doing in the Saudi sheep deal, the government denies terminally-ill union-leader medical cannabis, a wrongfully imprisoned man is offered a low pay-out, New Zealand votes to keep its flag, new spy laws targeting Kiwi leakers introduced, Australian government abuse in detention Narau camp, Britain votes to leave the EU, NZ troops are to remain in Iraq, a minister resigns over a scandal, Snowden reveals the GSCB is conducting mass surveillance, the opposition scapegoats Chinese over the property bubble, a claim of a prisoner death due to a miss-run private prison, a prized writer criticises the government, Kiwisaver funds are invested in weapons manufacturers, a gastro outbreak has a possible link with the dairy industry, the Trade Minister fails to relay a Chinese trade threat over steel*

*dumping, the government is to spend 20bn on defence, the police block a gang academic's data access.*

While most of these news events were covered by all eight news outlets, a few were not.

Therefore, the projected number of 200 total news articles as discussed above, was not quite reached. Instead, a total of 189 articles covering the 25 new events were collected and analysed.

### 3.6 Breaking down the articles' elements

In comparing the articles covering a news event across eight news outlets, the pertinent elements of the articles that can be quantitatively identified must be chosen.

#### 3.6.1 Article Length

The volume of coverage or *attention*, along with *prominence* and *valence*, are the three core elements in measuring media salience according to Kiousis in his 2004 study *Explicating Media Salience: A Factor Analysis of New York Times Issue Coverage During the 200 U.S. Presidential Election*. Various scholars have used different methods to measure the volume of coverage. Kiousis counted the number of presidential election stories devoted to various topics in the New York Times in the year 2000.

Similarly, Herman and Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent* (2008) counted column inches to measure attention given in the same newspapers to *worthy* and *unworthy victims*. Jacobsen, Fang, and Raffel (2002) also compared the attention given worthy and unworthy victims by counting the number of *New York Times* articles on torture, disappearance, killings,

imprisonment, and exile. Word length was also measured but not included in their results as it did not have a “notable impact on results” (Jacobsen et al, 2002, p. 29).

Kennis measured volume of coverage by counting paragraphs critical of a January 2000 uprising in Ecuador (2009), and counted the number of stories in CNN and CNN Español newscasts covering news of Fallujah, Iraq (2015) to represent the volume of coverage.

Lafferty (2006) counted the number of articles mentioning ownership of the newspaper in which the article was published, and word length to compare independent and conglomerate media outlets in terms of the attention they gave to deregulation.

Word length is counted to measure the volume of coverage or *attention* given to the power-sensitive selected stories in this study. While this potentially shows a difference in significance given to the story by the mainstream news media versus the alternative news media, other factors could be at play here, including the level of the outlets’ financial resources. So while it would be expected that alternative media, not owned or funded by corporate entities or the state, would be more willing to give attention to stories that are sensitive to the corporate-state power structure, a possible mitigating factor is that the less financial resources the alternative media has, the less coverage it might be expected to give news events.

This measure answers the sub-research question: *How does online text-based alternative news media coverage of power-challenging news events differ from online text-based mainstream news media coverage in New Zealand in regards to article length?*

### 3.6.2 Context

In her 2011 book *Challenging the News*, Forde wrote that alternative journalism “relies on following up and completing existing news stories or providing it with fuller context” (2011, p. 175). Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model showed that, through the work of its five filters, the mainstream media are unlikely to publish stories that situate news events in a wider context that could potentially expose government or corporate wrongdoing. Therefore, a comparative quantitative measurement of context in news coverage would appear to be potentially fruitful in showing the difference between the alternative and mainstream media. However, this kind of quantitative measurement of context does not seem to appear in the literature. Therefore, in an attempt to measure the amount of context in a news story, this study will use an original method of counting the number of contextual factors mentioned in an event.

For example, a news story discussing the Iran Nuclear Deal struck in July 2015 between Iran, the United States, China, France, Russia, the U.K., the U.S., Germany, and the European Union, may or may not include mention of the following: 1) the American and British governments’ role in toppling the democratically elected Iranian President Mossadeq and installing the Shah in Iran in the 1950s on behalf of British Petroleum; 2) the authoritarian reign of the Shah, characterised by torture and executions carried out by the secret police SAVAK; 3) the resulting mass uprising 20 years later; 4) the U.S. embassy hostage crisis; 5) the coming to power of Ayotollah Khomeini; 6) the frosty relations with the West including sanctions imposed on Iran.

These are six pieces of *context*, or *context factors*, amongst many possible others, within which the Iran Nuclear Deal rests, but may or may not be included in news coverage of the deal. These *context factors* however, for reasons given above, might be more likely to be mentioned in alternative news media, and thus show a point of difference in news coverage between the two outlets.

This measure aims to answer the sub-research question: *How does online text-based alternative news media coverage of power-challenging news events differ from online text-based mainstream news media coverage in New Zealand in regard to the amount of context given?*

### 3.6.3 Sources

The kinds of sources used by the news media, as articulated by Herman and Chomsky (2008), are a function of the political-economy pressures of ownership and funding of the news outlet. Commercially-driven corporate- and government-owned media are predicted to rely heavily on official sources, as corporations and government departments use the news media to project their own public relations message, and mainstream news uses access to press conferences, press releases, interviews with highly-placed government and corporate persons, as well as strategically leaked information. Alternative news media, with different political-economy pressures and an interest in social change as discussed in the literature review chapter 2.2, might reasonably be expected to not be as reliant on official sources as the mainstream media, and instead use non-official sources like independent citizens and advocacy groups. Therefore, sources used in the article will be enumerated and categorised,

echoing Mattis (2014), who labelled the categories as follows: corporate sources, government sources, societal experts, advocacy organisation sources, and independent citizen sources.

This measure aims to answer the sub-research questions: How does online text-based alternative news media coverage of power-challenging news events differ from online text-based mainstream news media coverage in New Zealand in regard to the amount and kind of sources used?

#### *3.6.4 Balance of Sources*

When a news story uses multiple sources confirming one another's position, this can create a strong message or narrative around a news event, in contrast to when a story draws upon sources who disagree (Martins et al., 2013). The inclusion of opposing views gives the appearance of balance and objectivity, two elements of professional journalism (Forde, 2011; Atton & Hamilton, 2008). This sort of objective, balanced journalism, although it is an entrenched professional norm of mainstream journalism, has been questioned as unrealistic, dishonest and commercially-driven, (Forde, 2011, p. 114). Alternative journalism, potentially freer to not conform to professional journalism's standards, often have publicly-stated social, economic, or political positions as mentioned above. Therefore, quantifying the level of agreement of sources used in mainstream and alternative news articles could provide fertile ground for finding differences in news coverage across the two types of media outlets.

Consequently, as part of the quantitative analysis of sources, this study will examine the balance of the agreement versus the disagreement of sources within a story. Martins' et al's (2013) study, *News Coverage on Media Violence and Aggression*, quantified and compared the number of sources in 368 news stories that agreed, were neutral, or disagreed with the

scientific research mentioned in each story. Taking a cue from Martins et al (2013), but with no direct model in the literature to base it on, this study will count the difference between the number of sources who are in agreement on either side of the central issue of each news story. For example, if a news story about the proposed New Zealand Defence Force budget increase included three sources who expressed support for the budget increase and two who did not, then the difference in the agreement of sources would be one. This difference in the agreement of sources or *balance of sources* for all 25 news events across each media outlet can then be quantified and compared.

However, one of the drawbacks of this measure is that where the difference in the *balance of sources* is a number of sources on one side and zero on the other side, the fact that there are no opposed sources is not represented with any more weight (1 v 0, for example, is the same difference in the balance of sources as 2 v 1, that is, 1). Given that an article that has one source on one side of an issue with no source on the other seems obviously less balanced than an article with two sources on one side of the issue and one on the other. Therefore, in a further attempt to quantify the *balance of sources* used by mainstream and alternative news media, another count focused on the number of articles from each outlet that used unopposed sources, that is, sources that are on the same side of the central issue of the news story, with none on the other side.

Again, given mainstream media's supposed adherence to the tenets of professional journalism (Forde, 2011; Atton & Hamilton, 2008), it would be expected that it would produce less news coverage using unopposed sources than the alternative media, which might be more likely to utilise unopposed sources to fulfil an acknowledged social, political, or economic agenda.



Although a similar dynamic will also be quantified in the framing section of the analysis to determine whether the story has a *conflict*, *attribution of responsibility*, or other dominant frame, the balance of sources analysis will give stand-alone, quantitative indications of the comparative level of adherence to the professional journalism tenet of balance, at least in reference to sources, between the mainstream and alternative media in New Zealand.

This measure aims to answer the sub research question: *How does online text-based alternative news media coverage of power-challenging news events differ from online text-based mainstream news media coverage in New Zealand in regard to the balance of sources used?*

### 3.7 Five Common Frames

Media frames act on news stories to present an implied certain view of that event (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). In an attempt to understand the possible differences in media frames employed by mainstream and alternative news media in New Zealand, this study uses a quantitative deductive method to ascertain this.

Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), drawing on Neuman, Just, and Crigler's study of framing in their book *Common Knowledge* (1992), created a series of 20 questions to deductively determine the dominant frame of a news story out of the five most common frames as discovered by Neuman et al; *attribution of responsibility*, *conflict*, *human interest*, *economic consequences*, and *morality*. The deductive quantitative methodology has been used by

several scholars (An & Gower, 2009; Dirikx & Gelders, 2010; Dreijere, 2013; Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015; Gronmeyer & Porath, 2017), and is employed in this study.

### 3.7.1 Responsibility

The level of presence of the *attribution of responsibility* as a dominant frame is determined, in Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) study, by the five following questions coded for in the analysis:

Does the story suggest that some level of the government have the ability to alleviate the problem?

Does the story suggest that some level of the government is responsible for the issue / problem?

Does the story suggest solution(s) to the problem / issue?

Does the story suggest that an individual (or group of people in society) is responsible for the issue / problem?

Does the story suggest the issue / problem requires urgent action?

The articles are analysed for the presence of the a priori codes; that is, the content asked about in these questions. The presence of such content is indicated by a *yes* or *no* on the coding sheet.

This frame presents an issue or problem in a way that attributes responsibility for its cause or solution to a government, group, or individual. As Semtko and Valkenburg (2000) pointed out, the frame is used by the media to shape public understanding of who is to blame for causing or solving key social problems.

By determining the existence and frequency of this frame across the news articles analysed in this study via this set of questions, the study aims to show whether the media outlets in question, and alternative versus mainstream media in general, produce news coverage that holds parties responsible for problems or their solutions and calls for corrective measures. As noted previously, given alternative media's openly admitted social, economic, or political positioning, one could expect from them a tendency to attribute responsibility for problems and call for action. Thus, they would be fulfilling what Forde (2011) laid out as an essential component and characteristic of alternative journalists as "committed to encouraging their readers to participate, in broader social campaigns and political activity" (p. 174).

Mainstream media, on the other hand, in order to adhere to its professional journalistic claims of balance and objectivity might avoid using this frame (Entman, 2004), especially where the power structure might be blamed and held responsible. However, the mainstream media might be likely to use the *responsibility* frame on occasion to lay blame on an enemy state, or a party posing a threat to the economic or political interests of power (Herman and Chomsky, 2008).

### 3.7.2 Conflict

The level of presence of the *conflict* frame as a dominant frame is determined, in Semetko and Valkenburg's study, by the following four questions coded for in the analysis:

Does the story reflect disagreement between parties-individuals-groups-countries?

Does one party-individual-group-country reproach another?

Does the story refer to two sides or to more than two sides of the problem or issue?

Does the story refer to winners and losers?

The articles will be analysed for the presence of the a priori codes, that is, the content asked about in these questions. The presence of such content is indicated by a *yes* or *no* on the coding sheet.

This frame emphasises conflict between institutions, groups or individuals. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) claimed that this is done “as a means of capturing audience interest” (p. 95). Beyond this point, it is worth noting that, in contrast to *responsibility* frames, *conflict* frames can obscure responsibility for making or solving a problem, as well as the possibility of identifying a solution. Including conflicting perspectives may result in a final story that puts too little emphasis on an evidence-supported view and too much emphasis on opinions held by a minority who can be found on almost any issue (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). This runs the risk of sacrificing an empirically-based account of an issue for perceived balance and objectivity. Therefore, by presenting two or more sides of a problem as equally valid, a fuller understanding of the issues at stake, including where responsibility resides, might be occluded (Hackett, et al, 2017).

The representation of two entrenched and opposed sides also obscures possible common ground between the two said parties, and decreases the apparent potential for resolution (Karlberg, 1997). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) pointed out that *conflict* frames are often used in political reporting, especially in presidential elections, which has resulted in the media being criticised for “inducing public cynicism and mistrust of political leaders” (p. 95).

As mentioned above, while the *responsibility* frame may more likely fall under the purview of activist alternative media, the *conflict* frame adheres more closely to professional

journalism values more commonly held by mainstream media outlets. This is because stories with *conflict* frames typically involve views from two or more sides of an issue, and therefore can be presented as balanced journalism and simultaneously avoid holding a responsible party to account – which may entail avoiding a threat to the power structure. Additionally, this frame also raises audience interest and thus, advertising revenue, which is critical for commercially driven mainstream media outlets. Neuman et al. (1992) found this to be the most common news frame.

By using this set of questions to determine the visibility of *conflict* frames across the news stories analysed, this study aims to compare the prevalence of *conflict* frames in alternative and mainstream news media in New Zealand.

### 3.7.3 Human Interest

The level of presence of the *human interest* frame as a dominant frame is determined, in Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) study, by the following five questions coded for in the analysis:

Does the story provide a human example or “human face” on this issue?

Does the story employ adjectives or personal vignettes that generate feelings of outrage, sympathy-caring, sympathy, or compassion?

Does the story emphasise how individuals and groups are affected by the issue / problem?

Does the story go into the private or personal lives of the actors?

Does the story contain visual information that might generate feelings of outrage, sympathy-caring, sympathy, or compassion?

The articles will be analysed for the presence of the a priori codes, that is, the content asked about in these questions. The presence of such content is indicated by a *yes* or *no* on the coding sheet.

The *human interest* frame presents news with a human face or emotional angle in order to capture audience interest. By using a human example of the impact of a certain issue, the news becomes personalised, creating an emotional connection to the audience. Such an appeal to emotion is an age-old rhetorical device that can be used to persuade the reader towards a particular argument. One might expect activist alternative media to employ this frame to inspire action around an issue. The mainstream media, given its commercial nature, might also be expected to use the frame for its ability to capture and retain audiences. Neuman et al. (1992) found this frame to be commonly used, second only to the *conflict* frame. It also is very close to one of Galtung and Ruge's (1965) news values, namely *personalisation*. This study will use this set of questions to determine the presence of this frame in the articles analysed in order to compare how it is used by alternative and mainstream news outlets in New Zealand.

#### 3.7.4 *Economic*

The level of presence of the *economic consequences* frame as a dominant frame is determined, in Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) study, by the following three questions coded for in the analysis:

Is there a mention of financial gains or losses now or in the future?

Is there a mention of the cost/degree of expense involved?

Is there a reference to economic consequences of pursuing or not pursuing a course of action?

The articles will be analysed for the presence of the a priori codes, that is, the content asked about in these questions. The presence of such content is indicated by a *yes* or *no* on the coding sheet.

The *economic consequences* frame presents an event, issue, or problem in terms of the economic consequences it has on an individual, group, institution, region, or country. The widespread impact of an event is an important news value according to Galtung and Ruge (1965), who name it ‘threshold’. One possible impacting element that can spread far is economic. For example, while one may not feel the tremors of an earthquake or have any property damaged, if that earthquake destroyed a major regional, national, or international financial centre, the economic consequences are likely to be felt. Thus, the *economic consequences* frame has been identified as a common news frame.

Also worth considering is the neo-liberal economic paradigm of the present day which shapes how most mainstream media operate, that is as commercially driven entities within the media marketplace. Media outlets operating with a commercial interest might be more concerned with the *economic consequences* frame regarding their own survival in the market place than those alternative news media which have social justice, social liberty or other ideological goals at heart. However, when these ideological goals have an economic element, the *economic consequences* frame may be utilised. This study will employ the above set of questions to determine the presence of *economic consequence* frames in alternative and mainstream news media in New Zealand.

### 3.7.5 *Morality*

The level of presence of the *morality* frame as a dominant frame is determined, in Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) study, by the following three questions:

Does the story contain any moral message?

Does the story make reference to morality, God, and other religious tenets?

Does the story offer specific moral prescriptions about how to behave?

The articles will be analysed for the presence of the a priori codes, that is, the content asked about in these questions. The presence of such content is indicated by a *yes* or *no* on the coding sheet.

This frame reports an event, problem or issue in the context of moral prescriptions or religious tenets (Semtoko & Valkenburg, 2000). While the norms of professional journalism make outright moral or social prescriptions by mainstream news media coverage very rare, journalists instead make use of source quotations or inference to raise the point (Neuman, et al. 1992). Alternative news media, unrestrained by the norms of professional journalism, may be more likely to make outright prescriptions. This study will use this set of questions to determine the frequency of the *morality* frame in the articles analysed across the alternative and mainstream news media in New Zealand.

### 3.8 Measuring the Frames

The total list of 20 questions each require a *yes/no* answer. The affirmative answers per frame are expressed as a percentage, and then compared across the other frames to find the dominant frame for the article. If two frames carry an equal percentage for a single article,



that article is considered to have two dominant frames. In this way, by using Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) series of questions, the selected news stories' dominant frames will be deductively and quantitatively determined, thus potentially showing a difference in framing tendencies between the alternative and mainstream news in New Zealand.

This measure aims to answer the sub research question: *How does online text-based alternative news media coverage of power-challenging news events differ from online text-based mainstream news media coverage in New Zealand in regard to how their news coverage is framed?*

In totality, these quantitative measures aim to answer the main research question: *How does online text-based alternative news media coverage of power-challenging news events differ from online text-based mainstream news media coverage in New Zealand?*

## CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

In this results section, the data collected in the study will be presented to answer the series of research questions laid out in the methodology section.

### 4.1 How does online text-based alternative news media coverage of power-challenging news events differ from online text-based mainstream news media coverage in New Zealand in regards to article length?

While alternative journalism, given its previously discussed oppositional role, might be expected to give more attention – and thus more coverage – to power challenging news events than the mainstream media, this could reasonably be expected to be negated by a comparable lack of resources in alternative media. With the study focusing on online text-based news, the constraints of newspaper space and printing costs do not, at least directly, apply. However, the labour costs of journalists do present a constraint likely to be more sharply felt by alternative journalism with less money, if any, to pay reporters. Thus, it was an open question as to what the data would show in terms of mainstream versus alternative news media article length.

The word counts for the total of 189 news articles covering 25 news events across eight different New Zealand online news media outlets are tabulated below. Figure 2 shows *The Herald* with the largest total word count, at 22,264 across the 25 stories and a mean of 891 words. This is closely followed by *Stuff* with a 21,344-word total, and a mean of 854 words. As mentioned previously, both *The Herald's* and *Stuff's* online content mirrors print content published in *The Herald* newspaper, and the various New Zealand newspapers owned by Fairfax Media including *The Dominion Post*, *The Press* and *The Sunday Star Times*. As such,

article lengths may fall under considerations of print space and page layout required by the hardcopy format of a newspaper. The generally longer and more consistent-in-length news coverage produced by these two outlets as compared to both their mainstream and alternative media competitors, might be due to their online news articles originating from their print-based newspaper arms.

Table 1

*Article length displayed with mean, median, and range in word count across 8 New Zealand online news outlets.*

	Mainstream Outlets				Alternative Outlets			
	The Herald	Stuff	Newshub	RNZ	The Standard	Daily Blog	Whale Oil	Evening Report
<i>N (articles)</i>	25	25	25	25	25	25	22	17
<i>Total</i>	22264	21342	12646	17921	15379	16987	10382	21340
<i>Mean</i>	891	854	506	717	615	679	472	1255
<i>Median</i>	912	714	445	677	577	479	426	1531
<i>Min</i>	191	299	222	293	91	182	284	58
<i>Max</i>	1766	1642	1056	1443	1623	3596	1058	2378
<i>Range</i>	1575	1343	1150	834	1532	3414	774	2320

In contrast, *Newshub* – TV3’s recent coalescence of television and online news – focuses primarily on videos, often pieces taken from their nightly and daily television news broadcasts. These videos are usually embedded on the webpage with an accompanying text article, and are occasionally verbatim transcriptions of the embedded video. *Newshub*’s word count across the 25 articles totalled 12,646, with a mean of 506, considerably less, by around 60%, than *The Herald* and *Stuff*. This shorter word count seems to reflect the short and punchy videos from the television news pieces the text accompanies.

The *Radio New Zealand (RNZ)* website, as the name suggests, is a counterpart to the radio station of the same name, and features streaming and downloadable audio clips from its various shows, as well as text articles. Some of these are stand-alone articles, others have related embedded audio that compliments, summarises, or reiterates – rather than directly mirrors – the text. *RNZ's* total word count of 17,921, and mean word count of 717 place it neatly in the middle of *Newshub* at the lower end, and *the Herald* and *Stuff* at the higher end.

Of the alternative news outlets, only *Evening Report* came close to *the Herald* and *Stuff* in total word count with 20,884. However, given that the site did not cover nine of the 25 news events, the mean word count of 1,305 for those 16 articles was easily the highest of all the outlets. The even higher median of 1,637 words points to the fact that while a majority of *The Evening Report* articles had a high word count, it also produced articles with some very low word counts, too – the lowest being 58 words. While *The Evening Report* tends to cover a lot of Pacific news on a story-by-story basis due to its syndication of stories by the Pacific Media Centre, much of its local news coverage is either accumulated into Bryce Edward's lengthy political roundup, or given a short description alongside audio of Selwyn Manning discussing New Zealand news with an Australian radio host. This explains the high range (difference between minimum and maximum word counts) of 2,320 words and the low number of articles (19) across the 25 news events.

*The Standard* and *The Daily Blog*, both blog sites with multiple contributors, produced similar word count statistics in terms of total, mean, and median. However, one article on *The Daily Blog* pushed its maximum word count up to 3,596 – more than double *The Standard's* maximum of 1,623 words – and therefore widened its range to 3,414 words. *Whale Oil, the*

other sampled blog news site, offered shorter articles than all of the aforementioned except *Newshub*, with which it shares similar word count statistics.

The blog news sites generally run text-based articles only – with the occasional video embedded, except for *the Daily Blog's* Whaatea 5<sup>th</sup> Estate video series. Given these sites' general lack of a counterpart media (such as print, radio, or television) the article lengths have considerable word count range relative to their mean word count. Their format allows for both very short pieces making brief commentary on a breaking issue, or very long in-depth articles. The limited resources these alternative outlets appear to have compared to the mainstream news means that they do not do a lot of original reporting, and so their longer articles often block quote mainstream reporting, adding their own opinion and analysis.

The word count data between the mainstream and alternative outlets was added into Table 2 to give a direct comparison between the 2 kinds of news outlets.

Table 2

*Article length displayed with mean, median, and range in word count comparing mainstream online news outlets to alternative online news outlets in New Zealand.*

	Mainstream Outlets	Alternative Outlets
<i>Number</i>	100	89
<i>Total</i>	74162	64088
<i>Mean</i>	742	720
<i>Median</i>	674	497
<i>Min</i>	191	58
<i>Max</i>	1766	3596

<i>Range</i>	1575	3538
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Table 2 shows that while the mainstream outlets amassed 74,162 words from a total of 100 articles, the alternative outlets produced just over 10,000 less words (64,088) from 89 articles covering the same 25 news events. Their mean word counts were both similar (742 and 720 respectively), but their median word counts showed considerable difference (674 and 497 respectively), pointing to the fact that although the number of alternative news media's articles was considerably lower than the mainstream's, its total word count was pushed up by some very long articles. The alternative outlets' data also showed much greater word count range than the mainstream. This points to the alternative news media's ability to occasionally offer longer in-depth coverage of some news events than the mainstream when able or needed.

In practical terms, this means that when turning to text-based alternative online news for coverage of a given event, the length of coverage is likely to be shorter than what one might find in the text-based mainstream online news coverage. However, given the occasional lengthy treatment given to some news events by the alternative media, one is more likely to find a greater variance of article lengths within the alternative news media than the mainstream. While this suggests the mainstream news media might give more a consistent amount of coverage per article, it also suggests the alternative news media has more ability to provide responsive news coverage; going for longer and more in-depth articles for some news events, and less for others.

The mainstream's consistency of article length would be expected due to its organisational structure of large teams of professional journalists assigned to certain news content and cross-produced for print or broadcast, while the alternative media's wide divergence in article length could conceivably be due to both the alternative outlet's view of the worthiness of the depth of coverage for any given news event, and to resource constraints or availability at the time of writing.

#### 4.2 How does online text-based alternative news media coverage of power-challenging news events differ from online text-based mainstream news media coverage in New Zealand in regard to the amount of context given?

As noted in the previous section, alternative journalism is expected to provide fuller context (Forde, 2011) than the mainstream. This is not only due to its often present – but not for this study defining – characteristics of democratic, activist, and oppositional content, but also to its political economy constraints that are different to the mainstream media's. As the mainstream media is usually profit-driven and corporate or government-owned, context that exposes corporate or government wrong-doing and thus potentially hurts outlet owners or advertisers might be left out, while context that might be seen as superfluous, boring, or too complicated for the average reader might be left out lest it harm ratings and thus advertising revenue. Therefore, it was expected that in measuring the amount of context given in mainstream compared to alternative news coverage across the same news events, a significant difference might be found. That is, more context might be given in alternative news coverage than in the mainstream.

To measure this, *context* factors, or individual pieces of context, from each article were identified and counted as explained in the methodology section. *Context* factors, for the

purpose of this study, are considered to be pieces of data related to the main news event presented in a news article, thus providing greater understanding of the meaning of the news event. Totals, means, medians and ranges were found for each outlet across the 25 news events, as shown in Table 3.

This measure gives a quantitative picture of the number of *context* factors present in the articles analysed. While a higher number of *context* factors may indicate a more complete presentation of the context of the news event, this is not necessarily so as this measure does not reflect depth, breadth, and fullness of the *context* factors. However, with this data we can determine, on aggregate across the 25 news events, which outlets and type of outlets use a greater or lesser quantity of context factors.

Table 3

*Number of Context factors displayed with mean, median, and range across 8 New Zealand online news outlets.*

	Mainstream Outlets				Alternative Outlets			
	The Herald	Stuff	Newshub	RNZ	The Standard	Daily Blog	Whale Oil	Evening Report
<i>N (articles)</i>	25	25	25	25	25	25	22	17
<i>Total</i>	520	581	411	488	302	363	228	378
<i>Mean</i>	20.8	23.2	16.4	19.5	12.1	14.5	10.4	22.2
<i>Median</i>	19	23	10	18	12	12	9	18
<i>Min</i>	6	7	4	8	3	3	5	1
<i>Max</i>	50	46	49	43	39	55	31	52
<i>Range</i>	44	39	45	35	36	52	26	51



The data in Table 3 shows the mainstream outlet *Stuff* presenting the highest total, mean, and median number of *context* factors of the eight outlets across the selected 25 news events, followed by *The Herald* and *RNZ* in terms of total and median. However, in terms of mean number of *context* factors, *Evening Report* (from a smaller number of 17 articles compared to 25 of all other outlets except for *Whale Oil's* 22) showed the second highest number of 22.2 compared to *The Herald's* 23.2 mean number of *context* factors. *Evening Report's* median number of *context* factors is shown to be third equal with *RNZ*. The other alternative outlets, namely *The Daily Blog*, *The Standard*, and *Whale Oil* were all found, in that order, to have less *context* factors across all the measures than their mainstream counterparts.

In summation, the data shown in Table 3 indicates that on average *Stuff*, followed closely by *Evening Report* provided the most context, in terms of number of *context* factors, in their coverage of the 25 selected news events. This was followed by *The Herald* and *RNZ*, with *Newshub* and the rest of the alternative outlets with considerably less context provided. With the exception of *Evening Report*, all the individual mainstream news outlets provided more context on average than the alternative news outlets, which was counter to the expectation stated above that the alternative news outlets would provide more context than the mainstream.

Table 4

*Number of context factors displayed with mean, median, and range comparing mainstream online news outlets to alternative online news outlets in New Zealand.*

	Mainstream Outlets	Alternative Outlets
<i>Number</i>	100	89
<i>Total</i>	2000	1271
<i>Mean</i>	20	14.3
<i>Median</i>	18	12
<i>Min</i>	4	1
<i>Max</i>	50	52
<i>Range</i>	46	51

In Table 4, the mainstream and alternative outlets' collective *context* factors are shown using the measures of totals, means, medians, and range. The table shows that the mainstream outlets were found to have a mean of 20 and median of 18 *context* factors across the 25 selected new events, considerably more than the 14.3 mean and 12 median number of *context* factors in the alternative outlets' coverage. Based on this data, one could expect to encounter more context, that is, the number of *context* factors within an article, and therefore the possibility of a greater understanding of a given news event, when reading from New Zealand's mainstream online text-based news outlets than alternative outlets, with the exception of *Evening Report*, which is more or less on par with the mainstream coverage in this regard.

This result was counter to the expectation stated above that the alternative news outlets would provide more context than the mainstream. This could be partially explained by the alternative news media's shorter average article length than the mainstream's (shown in

Table 1), which means less article length within which to provide context. However, this does not seem to be a complete explanation given that the mean difference in article length is slight (720 to 742, or a 3% difference) while the mean difference in *context* factors between mainstream and alternative news media is more considerable (14.3 to 20, or 28.5%).

#### 4.3 How does online text-based alternative news media coverage of power-challenging news events differ from online text-based mainstream news media coverage in New Zealand in regard to the amount and kind of sources used?

As discussed in previous sections, mainstream news journalism's supposed reliance on official sources is a mechanism that entwines mainstream journalism with the corporate-government power nexus. Journalists benefit from relationships with official sources who can provide information on political and corporate news, both official and leaked, while the sources benefit from the relationship by having an outlet to which they can feed selected information. Furthermore, that relationship can be leveraged, explicitly or implicitly, by officialdom against journalists. That is, a journalist or their outlet might not want to publish a story if it meant losing access to the official source. Based on this line of thinking, measuring and comparing the use of different kinds of sources between mainstream and alternative news media might yield significant differences, with mainstream news expected to use official government and corporate sources more than independent citizens and advocacy groups and *vice versa* for the alternative news media.

The 189 articles from a total of eight New Zealand media outlets covering 25 news events were coded for types of sources used. The sources were sorted into predetermined categories, as previously discussed, of *Corporate*, *Government*, *Societal Expert*, *Advocacy Group*, and

*Independent Citizen*. The total of each type of source used by each outlet, along with the corresponding percentage of the type of source used by each outlet, is shown in Table 5.

Table 5

*Type of sources displayed with percentage across 8 New Zealand online news outlets.*

	Mainstream Outlets				Alternative Outlets			
	The Herald	Stuff	Newshub	RNZ	The Standard	Daily Blog	Whale Oil	Evening Report
<i>N (articles)</i>	25	25	25	25	25	25	22	17
<i>Corporate</i>	7 (5.1%)	7 (5.9%)	4 (4.0%)	4 (3.4%)	2 (3.2%)	5 (11.6%)	1 (2.8%)	0 (0%)
<i>Government</i>	86 (62.3%)	79 (66.4%)	68 (68.7%)	69 (58.5%)	32 (51.6%)	14 (32.6%)	19 (52.8%)	53 (26.9%)
<i>Societal Expert</i>	27 (19.6%)	15 (12.6%)	7 (7.1%)	24 (20.3%)	15 (24.2%)	20 (46.5%)	8 (22%)	130 (65.9%)
<i>Advocacy Group</i>	8 (5.8%)	10 (8.4%)	9 (9.1%)	12 (10.2%)	9 (14.5%)	2 (4.7%)	2 (5.6%)	11 (5.6%)
<i>Independent Citizen</i>	10 (7.2%)	8 (6.7%)	11 (11.1%)	9 (7.6%)	4 (6.5%)	2 (4.7%)	6 (16.7%)	3 (1.5%)
<i>Total Sources</i>	138 (100%)	119 (100%)	99 (100%)	118 (100%)	62 (%100)	43 (%100)	36 (100%)	197 (100%)

The most apparent characteristic of the data shown in Table 5 is the expected predominance of the use of official *Government* Sources across the mainstream outlets. *Newshub* is shown to have the highest percentage of reliance on *Government* sources with 68.7% of its sources used across its online text-based coverage of the 25 news events falling into that category. This is closely followed by *Stuff* with 66.4%, and *the Herald* with 62.3%, reliance on *Government* sources. *RNZ's* sources for the 25 news events had the lowest of the mainstream

outlets' reliance on *Government* sources with 58.5%. While *Government* sources were expectedly relied upon the most heavily by all the mainstream outlets, the other official kind of source, *Corporate* sources, were unexpectedly the least relied upon by all of the mainstream outlets. While the reasons for this unexpected result are not clear, it is in comparison with the alternative media's use of the same kind of source that a more meaningful measure will be found in relation to the research question.

Indeed, when compared with the individual alternative outlets, all but *The Daily Blog* relied even less on *Corporate* sources than their mainstream counterparts. However, while the alternative media outlets also unexpectedly relied, in some cases predominantly, on *Government* sources, this is shown to be to a considerably lesser extent than the mainstream outlets. *The Standard's* and *Whale Oil's* use of *Government* sources for the 25 news events were both the dominant type of source used at around the 50% mark (51.6% and 52.8% respectively), while *The Daily Blog's* and *Evening Report's* use of *Government* sources for the 25 news events at 32.6% and 22.9% respectively, were both less than their use of *Societal Expert* sources which were used at a rate of 46.5% and 65.9% respectively.

*Societal Expert* sources were the second most used type of source for *The Standard* (24.2%), *Whale Oil* (22%), *RNZ* (20.3%), *The Herald* (19.6%) and *Stuff* (12.6%). *Newshub's* use of *Societal Expert* sources is shown to be 3<sup>rd</sup> at 7.1% after *Independent Citizen* sources at 11.1%. For most of the eight outlets *Independent Citizen* sources, *Advocacy Group* sources, and *Corporate* sources are shown to be near to or less than 10%, aside from *The Standard's* use of *Advocacy Group* sources at 14.5% and *Whale Oil's* *Independent Citizen* sources at 16.7%.

To summarise, all of the individual mainstream outlets relied primarily on *Government* sources, and most of those outlets then relied secondarily on *Societal Experts*. Conversely, half of the individual alternative outlets relied primarily on *Societal Experts* and secondarily on *Government sources* with the other half relying primarily on *Government* sources and secondarily on *Societal Experts*. So, while there was significant difference in two of the alternative outlets (*Evening Report* and *The Daily Blog*) from the mainstream, the other two alternative outlets' use of sources was very similar to the mainstream outlets.

*Societal Expert* sources, while able to use their expert knowledge to cast light on a news event in their related field, are often tied to universities or other institutions such as hospitals, think tanks, or NGOs, and can come with ideological biases. When their institutions are funded by government, corporations, or foundations with their own interests, conflicts of interest can arise with *Societal Expert* sources when asked to comment on issues that may impact their institution's funders. Although the alternative news media outlets have a greater reliance on *Societal Expert* sources than the mainstream, this is not without its own problems.

Table 6

*Type of sources displayed with percentages comparing mainstream online news outlets to alternative online news outlets in New Zealand.*

	<b>Mainstream Outlets</b>	<b>Alternative Outlets</b>
<i>Corporate</i>	22 (4.6%)	8 (2.4%)
<i>Government</i>	302 (63.7%)	118 (34.9%)
<i>Societal Expert</i>	73 (15.4%)	173 (51.2%)
<i>Advocacy Group</i>	39 (8.2%)	24 (7.1%)
<i>Independent Citizen</i>	38 (8%)	15 (4.4%)
<i>Total Sources</i>	474 (100%)	338 (100%)

When the data is collated to compare New Zealand text-based online mainstream news media outlets' use of source types against that of alternative news media outlets, it shows a heavy reliance on *Government* sources by the mainstream media with 63.7%, compared to the alternative media's 34.9% use of *Government* sources. The alternative media is shown to rely mostly on *Societal Expert* sources (51.2%), while mainstream media's use of *Societal Expert* sources is a distant second with only 15.4%. The rest of the source type usage for both alternative and mainstream media are fairly evenly spread with the mainstream's use of *Advocacy Group* sources and *Independent Citizen* sources at 8.2% and 8% respectively compared to the alternative's 7.1% and 4.4%. The mainstream's use of *Corporate* sources at 4.6% is also shown to be slightly higher than the alternative's 2.4%.

As discussed earlier, heavy reliance on *Government* sources, which is shown most prominently by *Newshub* and *Stuff*, is significant in that it suggests the possibility of a *quid pro quo* dynamic between the news media at large and the state. When news outlets and

individual journalists come to rely on *Government* sources, conflicts of interest arise in that the threat of loss of access to these sources could hurt individual careers and the ability of the outlet to compete with other mainstream outlets.

Given the data, it can be stated that, based on the eight selected New Zealand online text-based media outlets across the 25 selected news events, the mainstream outlets use mostly *Government* sources, while the alternative outlets use mostly societal experts in their news coverage.

#### 4.4 How does online text-based alternative news media coverage of power-challenging news events differ from online text-based mainstream news media coverage in New Zealand in regard to the balance of sources used?

Each article from the eight selected outlets across the 25 selected news events were analysed for *balance of sources*. As explained in the methodology section, this was done by identifying the central issue of the article, quantifying any expressions by sources of support or opposition to the issue, and then dividing the difference by the number of articles in which sources were used to get the mean difference in the balance of opposing sources for each outlet, as shown in Table 7. Additionally, each outlet's articles that used *unopposed sources*, that is, sources that only expressed views on one side of the central issue, were counted. These are shown in Table 8 as a percentage of that outlet's total number of articles that used sources.



Table 7.

*Balance of sources displayed as a ratio, and a percentage (where 100%=even balance of sources) across 8 New Zealand online news outlets.*

	Mainstream Outlets				Alternative Outlets			
	The Herald	Stuff	Newshub	RNZ	The Standard	Daily Blog	Whale Oil	Evening Report
<i>Mean Difference in Balance of sources</i>	2.4	1.6	0.8	1.4	1.4	1.1	0.83	6.3
<i>Unopposed sources percentage</i>	4.8%	4.2%	8.3%	8.7%	41.2%	50%	40%	21.4%

Table 7 shows that using this particular measure, of the eight selected media outlets, *Newshub* (0.8) closely followed by *Whale Oil* (0.83) had the most balanced use of sources – meaning, as explained in the methodology section, on an article-by-article basis the views expressed by their sources were the most evenly balanced on either side of the central issue – across the 25 selected news events. *The Daily Blog* (1.1) was the next most balanced, followed by *RNZ* and the *Standard* (both 1.4), and not far behind, was *Stuff* (1.6). A considerable gap saw *The Herald's* mean difference in the balance of sources at 2.4, while *Evening Report* lagged far behind (6.3). To have the data – arrived at by the process explained in the methodology section – show three of the alternative outlets with a high level of balanced sources, or a low mean difference in balance of sources, comparable with, and in some cases more balanced than, their mainstream counterparts was unexpected. Balance is seen as a tenet of professional journalism, and so the mainstream outlets were expected to display this significantly more than the alternative outlets.

The articles with unopposed sources, as discussed above, were counted and expressed as a percentage of each outlet's total number of articles that used sources across the 25 news events. By this measure, the mainstream outlets showed an expectedly more balanced use of sources than the alternative outlets, with the mainstream outlets' percentage of articles with unopposed sources ranging from 4.2% - 8.7%, compared to the alternative outlets' 21.4% (*Evening Report*) to 50% (*Daily Blog*). It is worth noting that while *Evening Report* had the most unbalanced difference in opposing sources in the first measure of all eight outlets, in the second measure it had the least percentage of articles with unopposed sources of the alternative outlets, meaning that although *Evening Report* tends to stack their sources on one side of an issue, they do usually have some sources on the other side, too. In general, the findings of this particular measure, as mentioned, were expected given mainstream news media's adherence to balance in professional journalism and therefore the less likelihood of using unopposed sources, and alternative journalism's often present characteristic of oppositional media, in which sources would be more likely used to advance a stated agenda.

Table 8

*Balance of sources displayed as a ratio, and a percentage (where 100%=even balance of sources) comparing mainstream online news outlets to alternative online news outlets in New Zealand.*

	Mainstream Outlets	Alternative Outlets
<i>Mean difference in balance of sources</i>	1.6	2.4
<i>Unopposed sources percentage</i>	5.4%	38.1%

In Table 8, the mean difference in balance of sources and the percentage of articles with unopposed sources are collated into the categories of mainstream and alternative news

outlets. The difference in the balance of sources across all of the mainstream news articles that utilised sources were added together and divided by the number of those articles to get the mean difference in balance of sources for the mainstream news outlets, and the same was done for the alternative outlets. Similarly, the total number of articles with unopposed sources from mainstream outlets were counted and divided by the total number of mainstream articles that utilised sources. The same was done for the alternative articles and both were expressed as a percentage as seen in Table 8.

The data shows that the four selected mainstream New Zealand text-based news media outlets, in total, had a mean difference in the balance of the sources used of 1.6 across the 25 selected news events. The alternative outlets, on the other hand, used a considerably higher mean difference in the balance of sources of 2.4. This measure in Table 8 is more in line with expectations than what the same measure's data showed in Table 7 for the individual outlets, due to *Evening Report*'s outlying data point that was redistributed across the alternative outlet's group in Table 8.

The percentage of articles using unopposed sources clearly shows a large, expected difference, with mainstream outlets using unopposed sources just 5.4% of the time, and alternative outlets seven times more likely to use unopposed sources at 38.1%. As previously noted, this difference can be explained by the adherence of mainstream journalism to balance as part of a professional journalism ethos, and the often present characteristic of alternative journalism as oppositional.

However, according to both data measures in the Tables 7 and 8, it can be concluded that while the New Zealand online text-based mainstream news media outlets are far more likely to use sources on either side of an issue than the alternative news media, when the alternative news media do use sources on either side of an issue, they are almost indistinguishably as balanced as the mainstream.

#### 4.5 How does online text-based alternative news media coverage of power-challenging news events differ from online text-based mainstream news media coverage in New Zealand in regard to how their news coverage is framed?

If independently owned and less commercial alternative news media is often oppositional, in contrast to government/corporate owned and government/commercially funded mainstream news media which is thought to be balanced and objective; this difference might be measured by determining how these two kinds of media outlets frame their news coverage. Professional journalism's aim of balanced and objective journalism could be expected to be borne out by the use of the *conflict* news frame. In this frame, a problem or an issue is approached by presenting two or more opposing sides that play off against each other resulting in, the appearance at least, of balance.

Oppositional news media would be expected to use a different kind of news frame. The *conflict* frame, after all, does not present a narrative that blames the issue on one party, and therefore no responsibility, solution, or course of action can be offered. However, with the use of an *attribution of responsibility* frame this can be achieved. Therefore, this frame would be expected to be employed by alternative new media.

As discussed in the methodology section, articles covering 25 selected news events from eight selected news media outlets were quantitatively analysed for dominant frames using a set of predetermined questions (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2008) relating to five predetermined news frames (Nueman et al., 1992), namely *attribution of responsibility*, *conflict*, *human interest*, *economic*, and *morality*.

The dominant frame (or frames when multiple dominant frames emerged) were determined for each article from the eight outlets. The total number of each dominant frame for each outlet, and the corresponding percentages were found and tabulated in Table 9.

Table 9

*Dominant frames displayed with percentage across 8 New Zealand online news outlets.*

	Mainstream Outlets				Alternative Outlets			
	The Herald	Stuff	News hub	RNZ	The Standard	Daily Blog	Whale Oil	Evening Report
<i>N (frames)</i>	30	25	25	26	27	29	24	19
<i>Attribution of responsibility</i>	12 40%	7 28%	9 36%	10 38.5%	17 63%	17 58.6%	10 41.7%	9 47.4%
<i>Conflict</i>	11 36.7%	12 48%	13 52%	11 42.3%	4 14.8%	1 3.4%	11 45.8%	8 42.1%
<i>Human interest</i>	6 20%	2 8%	1 4%	2 7.7%	3 11.1%	6 20%	2 8.3%	1 5.3%
<i>Economic</i>	1 3.3%	2 8%	2 8%	2 7.7%	1 3.7%	2 6.9%	0 0%	1 5.3%
<i>Morality</i>	0 0%	2 8%	0 0%	1 3.8%	2 7.4%	3 1%	1 4.2%	0 0%

Table 9 shows the dominant frames used by each outlet for the 25 news events. The two frames most used by all outlets except for *The Daily Blog* are the *attribution of responsibility*

frame and the *conflict* frame. While *The Herald* unexpectedly used slightly more *attribution of responsibility* frames (40%) than *conflict* frames (36.7%), the other mainstream outlets went the other way using more *conflict* frames than *attribution of responsibility* with *Newshub* using 52% to 36%, *Stuff* 48% to 28%, and *RNZ* 42.3% to 38.5% respectively.

As discussed in the methodology section, a *conflict* frame is one that could be expected to be used by mainstream news media for the reason that it allows for the appearance of a principle of professional journalism, balance. Within a *conflict* frame, views are expressed from more than one side of an issue, often without settling on the issue of culpability – which could appear as unbalanced. On the other hand, the *attribution of responsibility* frame is one that fits more closely with an often oppositional alternative news media's agenda –an agenda supposed to challenge power and seek justice. In order for this to happen, recognition of and responsibility for the issue at hand needs to be addressed, as well as a course of action prescribed. This is done from within the *attribution of responsibility* frame.

As expected, most of the alternative media outlets used the *attribution of responsibility* frame considerably more than the *conflict* frame, with *Whale Oil* being the only exception favouring *conflict* frames (45.8%) over *attribution of responsibility* (41.7%). *The Standard* used *attribution of responsibility* 63% of the time, while using the *conflict* frame in only 14.8% of incidences. *Evening Report* had a closer split with 47.4% and 42.1% respectively, and *The Daily Blog* had the widest gap between these two frames of 58.6% compared to 3.4% respectively. *The Daily Blog* was the only outlet to have a different dominant frame in its top two, with the *human interest* frame its second-most used frame at 20%.

For all other outlets, the *human interest* frame is shown to be the third-most used frame, *The Herald* using the frame in 20% of instances, *The Standard* at 11.1%, and all other outlets using the frame at under 10%.

The human interest frame is used to show the impact of an issue on particular people, and/or elicit an emotional response. While it can be used to give everyday people a voice, which could be expected to align with alternative news journalism's values, this frame can also be used to voice an emotional or evaluative statement, which mainstream professional journalists generally cannot do directly in news reporting. In these ways *human interest* frames are useful for both alternative and mainstream news media.

The *economic* and *morality* frames were the least used as dominant frames of all the frames, being used well under 10% of the time by all outlets, if they were used at all. The *economic* frame reflects a pre-occupation with profit and loss, and the values of the culture of capitalism at large, and could reasonably be expected to be employed as a dominant frame by the market-driven mainstream news media, as well as an alternative news media that often challenges greed and profit motive by government and corporate players from within both economic and morality frames.

Table 10

*Dominant frames displayed with percentage comparing mainstream online news outlets to alternative online news outlets in New Zealand.*

	Mainstream Outlets	Alternative Outlets
<i>Number (frames)</i>	106	99
<i>Attribution of responsibility</i>	38 (35.8%)	53 (53.5%)
<i>Conflict</i>	47 (44.3%)	24 (24.2%)
<i>Human interest</i>	11 (10.4%)	12 (12.1%)
<i>Economic</i>	7 (6.6%)	4 (4%)
<i>Moral</i>	3 (2.8%)	6 (6%)

In Table 10, the dominant frame data (totals and percentages for each frame) is categorised into mainstream and alternative news media outlets. The table shows that, as expected, the alternative outlets used mostly *attribution of responsibility* as dominant frames (53.5%) in their coverage of the 25 news events, while, expectedly, the mainstream outlets used a plurality (44.3%) of *conflict* frames in its coverage. As discussed above, this is to be expected given the values of balance and objectivity in professional mainstream journalism, and alternative news media's often oppositional values that can include challenging power and justice-seeking.

The mainstream outlets next most dominant frame, *attribution of responsibility*, was used over a third of the time (35.8%), followed by *human interest* (10.4%), *economic* (6.6%), and *morality* frames at just 2.8%. Alternative outlets, after *attribution of responsibility* frames,



used *conflict* frames at 24.4%, then *human interest* frames (12.1%) at a similar rate to the mainstream outlets. *Morality frames* (6%) were the next most dominant amongst alternative media outlets and finally *economic* frames were used 4% of the time.

In summation, to answer the research question - *How does online text-based alternative news media coverage of power-challenging news events differ from online text-based mainstream news media coverage in New Zealand in regard to how their news coverage is framed?* - the most apparent trend identified in this data set of selected outlets and news events shows that in New Zealand the *attribution of responsibility* frames dominate coverage of power-challenging events by online text-based alternative news media, while coverage by its mainstream counterpart was dominated by a plurality of *conflict* frames.

This means one could expect more of a ‘point, counterpoint’ style of mainstream news coverage, where different, opposing views and sources are set off against each other within a conflict frame; and from the alternative news coverage one could expect to find the cause or responsible party for an issue identified, and a course of action to resolve the issue suggested.

#### 4.6 How does online text-based alternative news media coverage of power-challenging news events differ from online text-based mainstream news media coverage in New Zealand?

Returning to the main research question, in light of the data presented above, one can say the following:

- Online text-based alternative news media coverage of power-challenging news events differs from online text-based mainstream news media coverage in New Zealand in that the alternative news coverage displays more variation in length yet is generally shorter in article length than the mainstream.
- The alternative news media coverage contains fewer points providing context than the mainstream.
- The alternative news predominantly uses *Societal Expert* sources followed by *Government* sources while the mainstream news predominantly uses *Government* sources followed by *Societal Expert* sources.
- The alternative news is less balanced in terms of using opposing sources and more likely to use unopposed sources than the mainstream news.
- The alternative news predominantly employs *attribution of responsibility* frames followed by *conflict* frames compared to the mainstream news which uses a plurality of *conflict* news frames followed by *attribution of responsibility* frames.

## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The differences in the content of the news stories found in the data comparing mainstream news media to the alternative news media suggest differences in the normative operational frameworks of the two types of media. Many, but not all, of these differences were expected - being in alignment with Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model (2008) and political economy conceptions of alternative and professional journalism in the literature (Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Forde, 2011).

### 5.1 Article length

The news events analysed were selected for their potentially 'power challenging' nature, and thus might be expected to be paid more *attention* (Kiousis, 2004) by an independent, less commercial alternative media described by scholars as power challenging (Atkinson, 2006; Couldry & Curran, 2003), oppositional (Jakubowicz, 1990; Haillin, 1984; Downmunt & Cowyer, 2001) and radical (Atton, 2002). By contrast, the mainstream media, who are woven into the power structure through economic, political, and personal ties between the owners and the controllers of the media and corporate, political and cultural elites (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Phelan, Rupar, & Hirst, 2012), might be expected to give less *attention* to these power challenging events.

However, the data showed that the alternative media's amount of news coverage in terms of article length was still typically shorter than the mainstream's. So, by the measure of article length, the alternative news media does not appear to offer more extensive news coverage of power challenging events than the mainstream. The alternative news coverage also varied greatly in length, with some alternative outlets devoting several hundred words to some events, whilst devoting only a paragraph or two to other events.

The relatively consistent and slightly longer on average article length the mainstream news media produced when compared with the alternative news media likely reflects the standards and organisational structure of the mainstream's professional journalism. With its large scale organisations comprised of full-time journalists devoted to the ideal of providing extensive, comprehensive, and thus authoritative news coverage, mainstream professional journalism strives to be competitive in the market place (Atton & Hamilton, 2008). Alternative journalism, without the mainstream's profit-centred focus, does not typically have this kind of professional organisational structure, often making do with a limited staff of volunteers or part-time contributors (Atton, 2002; Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Forde, 2011).

## 5.2 Context

In line with the results on article length, and again not predicted by the propaganda model, is the data gleaned on *context* factors and the number of sources used. This data revealed that the mainstream news provided more context in terms of the quantitative amount of contextual information in the news stories analysed. It also showed that the mainstream news used considerably more sources per story than the alternative news. These results are again explainable by considering the resources available to professional journalism compared to its alternative counterpart. From a propaganda model perspective, one might expect the mainstream media to offer less context than the alternative media in order to limit the range of discourse within parameters acceptable to the 'power elite' (Mills, 1956), and perhaps this *is* the case when looked at qualitatively, but when looked at through the particular quantitative measure used in this study, the mainstream news in New Zealand provides more context than the alternative news.

### 5.3 Sources

As mentioned above, similar results appeared when counting the number of sources used by both types of media; the mainstream were found to utilise a greater number of sources than their alternative counterparts. Again, this would arguably be surprising from a propaganda model perspective; wouldn't alternative media give *more attention* to power challenging events by using more sources (along with the previously discussed measures of more context and longer article length)? One might certainly expect so if resources were more evenly distributed between the two types of media, but with an apparently large resource disparity, one can therefore understand these results as a function of this disparity.

So, while the mainstream news in New Zealand seems to provide *more attention* to these kinds of power challenging news events than the alternative news when measured by article length, number of context factors, and number of sources used, different measures such as framing, and balance of sources and source types used, revealed a different type of *attention* apparent between the alternative and mainstream news, as will now be discussed.

The main types of sources used by the mainstream media predicated on the propaganda model were discovered to be official sources: *Government*, *Corporate*, and *Societal Experts*. Given that the mainstream media is seen by the propaganda model as an integral part of the government-corporate power structure, it follows that it would routinely use sources from within this structure, and therefore come to rely on them. The propaganda model posits that if a mainstream news outlet reports news that is potentially harmful to the power structure, the government, corporate, and any other type of official source might cease to give information to that journalist or outlet, thus cutting the outlet off from an official news source and disadvantaging it in relation to other news media outlets. As noted in the literature review

section, Nicky Hager (2012) pointed out the rise of the public relations role in government ministries in New Zealand, which is indicative of a growing effort to influence public perception through control of media coverage in what is often referred to as *access journalism*. Both corporations and government ministries use public relations specialists who cultivate close ties with journalists, or who already have such ties as they are often ex-journalists themselves. This revolving door between mainstream journalism and public relations facilitates the symbiotic relationship that has developed between the two roles, and as the propaganda model has it, acts as one of five filters blocking news coverage that would appear to be detrimental to the state-corporate power structure.

In accordance with to the prediction inferred by the propaganda model (and Nicky Hager's point as outlined above), the findings showed the mainstream as relying predominantly, over 60%, on official *Government* sources (it also used *Societal Experts* at around 15% and *Corporate* sources at 5%). This result identified a very close relationship between mainstream journalism and the government in New Zealand. On the other hand, the data found that alternative news media use government sources much less, at 35%, and instead rely more on a different official source, *Societal Experts* - a clear difference in the reliance on government sources, and indicative of a less cosy relationship with government.

While the study's results found that the alternative media too relies heavily on another kind of official source - *Societal Experts* - this kind of source is further removed from the government-corporate power nexus. *Societal Experts* are often employed in the wider public sector, such as in health and tertiary education, or have migrated to private sector institutions. They may or may not be considered as the power elite depending on the individual or

organisation in question, but are generally well-embedded in the power structure in order to have the status of *Societal Expert*.

#### 5.4 Balance of sources

As has been explained previously, in attempting to quantify how the mainstream and alternative news outlets balanced their sources, this study employed a method of counting the number of sources cited in each article that were opposed on the central issue of the article, with the difference between the number of sources on each side of the issue being the measure. These numbers were then tallied and averaged out for each outlet to get the mean difference in balance of sources. As an additional measure, articles that had no opposed sources were also tallied and expressed as a percentage of the total number of articles from each outlet that were analysed and which cited sources.

Expectations, based on the propaganda model (Herman & Chomsky, 2008) and Atton and Hamilton's (2008) view of alternative and professional journalism, were that the mainstream news – employing the standards of professional journalism, specifically *balance*, or at least the appearance of it – would therefore be found to employ a balance, or a roughly even number, of sources on either side of an issue being covered. Furthermore, the alternative news would be expected to be less balanced and more likely to be taking a certain angle given alternative media's characterisation by scholars like Waltz (2005), Downing (1984;2000), and Atton (2002) as activist media. While the results backed this up to some degree, most alternative outlets showed a similar balance of sources to their mainstream counterparts, with only one alternative outlet's data pushing up the difference in the collated results between the two types of outlets. The unopposed sources measure, however, was much more clearly in line with the expectation since all mainstream outlets were found to

have well under 10% of analysed articles with unopposed sources at an average of 5.4% compared to the alternative outlets, all with 20% or much higher at an average of 38.1%.

These particular results when taken together suggest that when it comes to the use of sources in its online text-based news coverage, the mainstream media in New Zealand is somewhat more balanced than its alternative counterpart, especially considering the very low percentage of their articles that used unopposed sources. However, the balance of sources used by the mainstream, 1.6, is – arguably – not particularly balanced. The data revealed that, on average, mainstream articles utilised more than one source more on one side of each article's central issue. When a large number of sources were used per article, this difference is less significant, but when there are only a few sources used, 1.6 becomes a more considerable difference. This difference of the balance of sources, combined with the low percentage of unopposed sources in mainstream news articles, suggests the possibility that the utilisation of sources on either side of an issue could function to give a semblance of balance, while still leaning more on one side or the other – the opposing source or sources being more of a token opposition. This appearance of balance and objectivity which can cloak an agenda in mainstream news media, is therefore more pernicious than news stories or outlets that are up front and open about their agenda as is taken to often be the case in the alternative news media. The high percentage of alternative news articles (38.1%) with unopposed sources suggests a much greater willingness to openly side with a particular perspective on an issue.

## 5.5 Framing

Aside from the use of token opposition described above, the propaganda model suggests that another – perhaps less obvious – way that mainstream professional journalism can mask an



agenda is through framing issues within parameters of discourse acceptable to the power structure. As Herman and Chomsky stated, “when the powerful are in disagreement, there will be a certain diversity of tactical judgments on how to attain generally shared aims, reflected in media debate” (2008, p. ix). The divergence of opinion within those parameters serves to offer the illusion of a free press. The occasional, genuinely dissenting opinions and inconvenient facts that do slip through the filters and are published are still “kept within bounds, and at the margins” (2008, p. xii). News media coverage of a divergence of opinion and information, whether it reflects merely a diversity of corporate tactics in achieving their broadly shared aim, or represents the broad range of opinions that exist in society, is quantitatively similar if not indistinguishable.

This study did not look at the parameters of the discourse within the frames used in the analysed articles, which would be a potentially fruitful area of qualitative content analysis, but instead looked quantitatively at *which* frames of the five common media frames (*attribution of responsibility, conflict, economic, human interest, and morality*) were used. By identifying what frames were used by the mainstream compared to the alternative news media, a picture emerges as to how the two types of media outlets treated power-challenging news events, and therefore how they wanted their audience to think about them.

## 5.6 Conflict and Responsibility Frames

This study found the vast majority of dominant frames used across both media types were the *conflict* and *attribution of responsibility* frames. As was expected, given the professional journalism standards of balance and objectivity (Atton & Hamilton, 2004) and the seeming divergence of opinion allowed for by the propaganda model (Herman & Chomsky, 2008), the mainstream news utilised the conflict frame more than the alternative news media (in 44.3%

of mainstream articles compared with 24.2% of alternative articles). With the dominant use by the mainstream outlets of a *conflict* frame, where more than one side of an issue are presented, the reader might be left to make up their own mind about an issue from among the options proffered. One could reason that this represents a fair and balanced presentation of the facts and plurality of views on an issue, thus adhering to the mainstream news' purported standards of professional journalism. On the other hand, it could exemplify a false equivalency where an objectively-supported truth claim is presented as potentially equally true to an unsupported or less supported truth claim. A third way to see the use of *conflict* frames is as bounded discourse, where what appears as a divergence of views obscures what is a shared aim of the power elite, as suggested both by the propaganda model (Herman & Chomsky, 1988) and the guard dog theory (Donohoe, Tichenor, & Olien, 1995).

The *attribution of responsibility* frame involves identifying agency in the telling of a news story – which party is the perpetrator in this case? While this frame can be used for blatant propaganda purposes as has been recorded in China or Russia (Simon, 2012; Brandurski & Hala, 2010), it can also be considered more contextualised than the *conflict* frame in that it focuses on the cause and effect of an issue. For the news media to provide evidence that traces responsibility for a significant issue to the power elite is to see the news media assuming its role as a watchdog. Protecting the populace from the abuses of the powerful is the normative theory of news media as upheld by Abramson (1990), Arterton (1984), and Linsky (1986) and shared by a majority of the American public as recently as 2013 (Dimock, Doherty, & Tyson, 2013). This *attribution of responsibility* frame was used in a majority of this study's alternative news media articles (53.5%) and was the second-most utilised frame after the *conflict* frame in the mainstream media news articles (35.8%).

That the alternative news media would be more frequent in their use of the *attribution of responsibility* frame compared with the mainstream is supported by the literature that considers the role of alternative news. Downing (1984; 2000) and Atton (2002) described alternative journalism as radical, goal orientated activism; Jakubowicz (1990) and Haillin (1984) characterised alternative media as oppositional and challenging of the state, government, or particular policies; Waltz (2005) portrayed alternative media as activist; and Atkinson (2006) depicted it as challenging power structures. These conceptions of the role of alternative journalism as contesting power are supported by the results of this study. These demonstrated that the most utilised frame by the alternative news media is that which exposes actions of those in power so as to apportion blame and demand justice.

### 5.7 The Dance Continues

In contrast to the afore-mentioned findings showing alternative news utilising frames that apportion blame and demand justice, this study's findings suggest that the mainstream news media appear to not perform an adversarial role so much, despite professing to represent the Fourth estate and be a watchdog, holding power to account. Instead, balance and objectivity are the principles that mainstream news media at least appear to uphold the most.

Atton and Hamilton (2004) put this down to reasons of political economy, maintaining that the original emphasis on objectivity and the cessation of challenges to power by what was then known as the bourgeois media in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, occurred as a result of market forces – the drive to appeal to a wider audience. These market forces brought about the end of an era of a radical-popular press and, in its place, came a commercial-popular press

which represented, according to Atton and Hamilton, “the corruption of the promise of bourgeois journalism due to commercialisation” (2004, p. 9). In the current era, these same forces are at work in Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model, creating the five filters through which news must pass, and thereby arguably turning the watchdog into something more of a guard dog.

In distinction to the political economy explanation offered by Atton and Hamilton, Habermas described this same 19<sup>th</sup> century process more nefariously as a mass media take-over of the bourgeois public sphere “a battle is fought not only over influence but over the control of communication flows that affect behavior while their strategic intentions are kept hidden as much as possible” (Habermas, 1992, p. 437). Here, Habermas has offered an instrumental approach to the fall of the bourgeois media, seeing agents behind the take-over with secret agendas. Similarly, Boyd-Barrett, not content with the propaganda model’s political economy explanation of the performance of the mainstream media in limiting discourse, posited agency behind the scenes with the addition of his sixth instrumental filter.

If these are ways we can understand the operation of the mainstream media, as expressions of market forces or tools of power, to which the results of this study are not dispositive, what then of the alternative media? Whether the New Zealand alternative news media in the present day, like the bourgeois media before it, faces corruption due to commercialisation is unclear, despite the political economy pressures of the marketplace surely being ever-present. Such a claim is aligned with Atton and Hamilton’s observation

about the “political-economic containment of opposition by virtue of the commercialisation of alternative journalism in capitalist societies” (2008, p. 26).

While this idea of the commercialisation of the alternative media would arguably see the alternative media become like the mainstream, Kenix’s argument (2011) for convergence of the two media spheres sees it happen the other way; the mainstream emulates the alternative media’s content, form, and structure.

These ideas attempt to describe the continuing ebb and flow dance between the mainstream and alternative news media that has been occurring over the past few hundred years, with the two media forms continuously converging and separating. As the results of this study bear out, whether or not these media are engaged in a converging or separating stage, there is currently a clear distinction, most saliently in the use of framing, in how the mainstream and the alternative news media in New Zealand cover power-challenging news.

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