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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# What kind of country we want for our children: an analysis of media coverage of the 2017 New Zealand General Election

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## ABSTRACT

This article is the third in a series investigating media reporting of New Zealand elections. Based on content analysis of 510 articles published in the *New Zealand Herald*, and thematic analysis of a subset of news stories related to young people, the study examines media coverage of the 2017 elections by looking at the topics of news stories, presence of party policies, diversity of sources and references to social groups. Comparing the 2017 results with the results of the *Herald's* coverage of 2014 elections, we register a shift towards a stronger presence of policy issues, more female voices in the reports and significantly higher reference to young people. We further investigated the high number of references to young people by conducting qualitative analysis on the subset of articles mentioning young people.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Media; elections; New Zealand; diversity; young people

## Introduction

The investigation of election reporting usually carries a seed of mistrust. Are the media objective, do reporters cover policies, what is foregrounded and what silenced in a text? Politicians keep an eager eye on how much coverage each party gets, who features on front pages, and whose sound bites are prominent in current affairs programmes. Journalists on the other hand, conscious of their watchdog role, pay additional attention to professional norms of accuracy, fairness and balance. Citizens, whose interest politicians and journalist swear to serve, go to the polling station to take the unique opportunity to say what they think about the government. What do scholars do? The AUT Media Observatory, an ongoing research programme whose analysis we present in this paper, uses the election coverage to examine the media's role in this process.

By conducting regular monitoring of media performance in election times, we look at the election reports and discuss the relationship between news, politics and diversity. We aim to address the questions of who is engaged in the election debate, who is talked about and what issues dominate the coverage. These questions have been asked in the projects related to the media coverage of the 2014 New Zealand General Election, the 2016 Local Body Elections and the 2017 General Election. The AUT Media Observatory is designed to generate longitudinal data resources for examination of news media's roles in providing a forum for public debate and helping citizens to participate in public life (Dobson 2014).

We see the media's pledge to represent a diversity of voices as being critical for understanding its place in society. Reporters' references to social groups, one of the elements of media coverage our studies focus on, are considered to be 'signs of belief in common origin, joint action, and a certain level of distinctiveness that in everyday production of news journalists transparently recognize as a "plural subject" worth mentioning in order to understand the election debate' (Rupar et al. 2015, p. 7). Media representation of elections as reflected in the choice of sources, references to social groups and selection of topics, has been considered an important segment of the wider process of mediatisation of politics (Cushion and Thomas 2013).

In this paper, we present results of the 2017 analysis of the election coverage by focusing on the *New Zealand Herald* (the *Herald*), the largest and most influential daily newspaper in the country, its overall coverage of the elections, and more specifically its articles mentioning young people. We first outline the *Herald's* approach to the elections based on a content analysis (Krippendorff 2013) of topics covered, references to party policies, sources of information and references to social groups in the election articles. We examine news and diversity in light of the media's task of ensuring a 'diverse marketplace of ideas', a prerequisite for citizens' informed decisions on who to vote for. We then focus on a subset of articles referring to young people to identify the relationship between the ways young people were invoked in the reports and the general trends in the coverage.

## Research design

This study is based on a content analysis of news stories that appeared in the national newspaper the *New Zealand Herald*. We used the Newztext database to select the election articles following the coding protocol for quantitative content analysis established in the AUT Media Observatory study of the 2014 New Zealand General Election (Rupar et al. 2015) and 2016 Local Body Elections (Baker et al. 2017). While for the 2014 election we focused on three news outlets, the *New Zealand Herald*, Radio New Zealand's 'Morning Report' and Television New Zealand's 'ONE News', and for the 2016 elections we included regional media too, this time we focused exclusively on the *Herald*. We narrowed down the sample because comparative analysis of different news outlets did not generate significant differences in the previous two projects on media coverage of the elections.

The period of coverage was the 32 days starting the day after Parliament was dissolved, and ending the day before Election Day, that is, from 22 August to 22 September 2017. All news stories mentioning the General Election either in the headline or in the first paragraph, or discussing the election in at least three sentences, were included in the sample. The final sample for coding included a total of 510 stories. Each story was treated as a single unit of analysis, and coded according to a coding sheet consisting of ten categories designed to produce significant data for an analysis of the relationship between news, politics and diversity. The categories included questions about genre and frame of the stories, parties and policies mentioned, topics, sources (coded according to affiliation and gender), political leaders mentioned, and references to social groups. Social groups were divided into categories based on the Human Rights Act 1993.

The *Herald* was chosen as it is the newspaper with the widest circulation in New Zealand. Its circulation was 117,269 copies as at September 2017 (ABC 2017). It is a privately owned newspaper, currently part of New Zealand Media and Entertainment (NZME), and it incorporates the website [nzherald.co.nz](http://nzherald.co.nz) that reaches 1.99 million New Zealanders each month (New Zealand Herald 2017a). Coding of the articles was conducted by the first author. Initial cross checking, establishment of stable codes and a pilot coding of the articles was conducted by the first co-authors over three days before the monitoring period started (21–24 August) and then occasionally when there was a need to consult over complex coverage.

The coding results showed a significantly increased focus on young people. The 2017 *New Zealand Herald* coverage mentioned young people (Youth, young people, teenagers, children, babies and any mentions of under 25 year olds in the collective) in 24% of its articles over the election campaign period, compared with 11% of its articles during the 2014 election campaign. We took the 167 articles mentioning young people as a subset for further analysis. We used N-Vivo software to aid the process of thematic content analysis, a form of qualitative content analysis designed to draw out themes and patterns in the data (Altheide 1987; Oliviera et al. 2016).

Thematic, or ethnographic, content analysis allows for new analytic categories and codes to emerge during the process of analysis. It is a reflexive style of content analysis that aims to be ‘systematic and analytic, but not rigid’ (Altheide 1987, p. 68). N-Vivo allows for the sorting, merging, deletion and addition of codes at any stage. As an example from this study, the themes of generational change and generational inequality were noticed during coding, new codes were added and the articles sorted through again from the beginning to pick up any references to these themes that had been missed. Some early codes were deleted as the items in the N-Vivo ‘nodes’ remained nearly empty at the end of the coding process. N-Vivo also allows for cross referencing of codes, for example showing how many of the articles discussing child poverty also mentioned Jacinda Ardern. We first conducted quantitative content analysis then moved into a qualitative thematic analysis and we follow this order in the presentation of results.

## **The 2017 shift: more policies and more female voices**

Each article was coded for a maximum of three main topics. Because there was a choice of up to three topics, ‘political process’ was the most frequent topic (over one-third of all the topics coded). Political process as a cross topic is expected in the election coverage, underpinning other topics concerning the social life of the country. The debate, that is, is not just focused on specific issues in isolation, but in how these issues (and the related policy suggestions) are engaged and developed in the political processes that surround the election. A comparative look at the frequencies of topics in the last two general elections shows that in 2014, there was a stronger focus on political process and the related topic of polls, at the expense of other issues such as housing, health and environment. This suggests an increased focus, in 2017, on issue-based topics. This comparison, however, is limited by the fact that data from 2014 incorporates newspaper, radio and television coverage of the elections.

In terms of the areas of social life covered in the election stories, the most prominent topics were those concerned with the economy of the country (Table 1). The issue of

**Table 1.** News story topics.

Topic	% of all mentions (2017)	% of all mentions (2014) <sup>a</sup>
Political process	35.49	44.51
Business & Economy	11.14	12.53
Tax <sup>b</sup>	7.38	–
Housing	7.25	3.21
Other	6.74	3.93
Health	4.40	1.24
Environmental issue	4.15	2.69
Education	2.98	1.66
Personal profile	2.59	1.04
Transport	2.59	0.62
Inequality	2.46	3.21
Polls	2.33	10.35
Welfare <sup>b</sup>	2.07	–
Māori affairs	1.55	3.42
Employment	1.42	1.86
Crime	1.17	0
Immigration	1.17	0.62
International news	1.04	0.10
Gender <sup>b</sup>	0.91	–
Race relations	0.39	0
Science & Technology	0.26	0.34
Sports	0.26	0.34
Arts	0.13	0
Defence	0.13	0

<sup>a</sup>Includes *The New Zealand Herald*, Radio New Zealand's *Morning Report*, Television New Zealand's *One News at 6pm* (data elaborated from Rupar et al. 2015).

<sup>b</sup>This category was not coded in 2014.

housing was also prominent, and closely related with the economy of New Zealand given the rising prices in the housing market. Health, environment, education, transport and welfare were also present, but received considerably less coverage. Only a few articles were concerned with employment, crime, immigration, Māori affairs, gender, race relations or international affairs. Other topics received very little coverage (or no coverage at all). Although the 2014 list of topics was slightly different – tax and welfare were not separate categories, but they were incorporated into ‘business and economy’, while ‘gender’ was not among the topics coded – it is clear that the overall focus in the coverage of both elections was on business and economy. We refined the ‘business and economy’ category after pilot coding when it became obvious that tax and welfare had become more prominent in the news.

Data show that almost two-thirds of the stories (precisely, 322 stories, corresponding to 63.1%) mentioned at least one policy. The previously outlined hierarchy of topics is roughly reflected in the references to parties’ policies (Table 2). In other words, economic policies were the most frequent (169 mentions), followed by housing, environmental issues, health, education, transport and welfare. Compared to 2014, in 2017 there was a higher importance of environmental policies and a decrease in reference to policies related to crime.

When it comes to sources, the trend shows a continued media preference towards political party sources. However, the preference was weaker in 2017 than in 2014, when political party sources were almost twice as frequent as the other sources. Moreover, in 2017 the use of political party sources was much more polarised, with a strong predominance of National Party and Labour Party sources (Table 3). National Party sources were most

**Table 2.** Parties' policies.

Policy	% of all mentions (2017)	No. of mentions (2017)	% of all mentions (2014)	No. of mentions (2014)
Business, Economy & Tax	25.96	169	30.15	60
Housing	14.13	92	14.57	29
Environmental issue	11.06	72	4.52	9
Other	9.52	62	–	0
Health	7.22	47	6.03	12
Education	6.76	44	8.54	17
Transport	5.84	38	4.02	8
Welfare <sup>a</sup>	4.76	31	–	–
Inequality	3.07	20	9.55	19
Employment	2.92	19	5.53	11
Immigration	2.46	16	2.51	5
Crime	1.84	12	7.54	15
International affairs	1.54	10	–	0
Sports	0.92	6	3.02	6
Gender <sup>a</sup>	0.77	5	–	–
Defence	0.31	2	0.50	1
Local government	0.31	2	–	0
Māori affairs	0.31	2	1.51	3
Science & Technology	0.31	2	–	0

<sup>a</sup>This category was not coded in 2014.

prominent in both the 2014 and 2017 elections. In 2017, there were 274 sources from the National Party as opposed to 248 from Labour. Smaller parties, represented by the category 'Others', which comprised over one-fifth of the political party sources in 2014, lost relevance in 2017. Other official sources, in particular sources from central and local government, were less present in 2017, in favour of a stronger importance of NGOs but, most of all, the world of business and economy. Previous reports have underlined how in 2014, the disproportionate use made of political party sources leads to the danger of reducing the informative role of the media and minimising the space for citizens' voices (Rupar et al. 2015). While in 2017, the disproportion was reduced, this did not result in an increased importance of citizens' voices (with the partial exception of

**Table 3.** Sources.

Political parties	2017 (%)	2014 (%)
National Party	38.70	21.12
NZ First	9.18	9.90
ACT	1.83	4.62
Labour Party	35.2	25.74
Green Party	9.03	8.91
Māori Party	3.10	5.94
United Future NZ	1.12	2.31
Others	1.97	21.45
<i>Total</i>	<i>100% (708)</i>	<i>100% (303)</i>
Other sources		
Academia	6.04	7.14
Business and economy	35.93	7.14
Media/journalist	12.08	18.83
Members of the public	29.25	30.51
NGO/CSO	6.04	1.94
Pollsters	6.83	1.29
Central/Local government	3.81	33.11
<i>Total</i>	<i>100% (629)</i>	<i>100% (154)</i>

NGOs), but rather in a strong increase in the use of business sources and polls. Moreover, while the overall relevance of political sources decreased, so did the pluralism of political voices, substituted by a much stronger focus on the two major political parties, Labour and National.

What has changed considerably, however, is the gender of sources. In 2017, there were more female voices talking in election stories than there were in 2014 (28.51% in 2017, 17.74% in 2014 – [Table 4](#)).

Still, the gender imbalance in news sources remains (46.27 male versus 28.51 female), confirming other studies that show women are under-represented in news stories (Major and Coleman 2008). A relatively high per cent of sources of non-identified gender is due to the higher presence of articles related to party policies, and documents as source of this information. In the election articles with a focus on policies, journalists use a shortcut to reference to written statements by saying ‘the Labour Party says..’ or ‘the National Party says ...’

As well as gender, other aspects of social identity were coded, including characterisations by age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, nationality, religion, physical ability and marital status. References to social groups are investigated as an element of practice that reflects journalists’ perceptions of specific social groups’ relevance. They are considered to be signs of belief in common origin, joint action and a certain level of distinctiveness that in everyday production of news journalists transparently recognise as a ‘plural subject’ (Day 2006), worth mentioning in order to understand the election debate. For example, statements such as ‘Ardern’s “relentless positivity” has resonated with young people, as have values-based, ideologically driven speeches, and the Greens looking shaky. The millennials have pricked up their ears’ (Robinson 2017), use ‘young people’ freely as a social category. Writers see this as a meaningful social category that can be generalised upon, and they expect their readers to understand what they mean by ‘young people’ (and ‘millennials’ in this instance), without the need for definition or explanation. [Table 5](#) lists all social groups we coded in the news stories. The categories and the codes composing the table are drawn from the Human Rights Act 1993, which identifies them as prohibited grounds for discrimination. The analysis of the frequency of these categories is a useful way to identify which social groups were at the centre of the public debate during the electoral campaign, and highlights significant areas for further analysis.

As data show, categories such as disability, religion, sexual orientation, marital status and political orientation were left out of the public debate, which instead was largely focused on themes of ethnicity, socio-economic status and age.

There were significant differences between the references to social groups in 2014 and in 2017. In 2014, ‘New Zealanders’ were by far the most frequently mentioned social group, while the category ‘young’ was a distant second (Rupar et al. 2015, p. 17). In 2017, this order was reversed, and young people became the most mentioned social

**Table 4.** Gender of sources.

Gender	in 2017	in 2014
Male	46.27	67.74
Female	28.51	17.74
Not identified	25.22	14.51

**Table 5.** References to social groups.

Social group	No. of articles that mention it	% of all references (2017)	% of all references (2014)
<i>Disability</i>		1.13	0
Able-bodied	1	0.14	–
Disabled	7	0.99	–
<i>Ethnicity</i>		39.13	31.51
Europeans	9	1.27	0.34
Māori	45	6.36	7.88
Asians	26	3.68	3.77
Pacific People	14	1.98	1.03
MELAA	3	0.42	0.00
New Zealanders	123	17.37	14.73
Pākehā	3	0.42	0.68
Foreigners	54	7.63	3.08
<i>Religion</i>		0.56	2.73
No religion	0	–	–
Buddhists	0	–	–
Christians	4	0.56	2.05
Muslims	0	–	0.68
Hindu	0	–	–
<i>Socio-economic status</i>		17.09	21.58
Low-income	52	7.34	9.25
Middle-income	14	1.98	2.74
High-income	24	3.39	3.77
Beneficiaries	22	3.11	2.74
Unemployed	9	1.27	3.08
<i>Sexual orientation</i>		0.56	1.03
Homosexual	3	0.42	1.03
Bisexual	1	0.14	–
Heterosexual	0	–	–
Asexual	0	–	–
<i>Marital status</i>		1.98	2.74
Married/Civil union/Partnership	9	1.27	2.40
Single	5	0.71	0.34
<i>Gender</i>	7.64	4.45	
Women	31	4.38	2.40
Men	21	2.97	2.05
Transgender	2	0.29	–
<i>Age</i>		30.65	16.43
Young	167	23.59	11.64
Middle aged	4	0.56	0.68
Elderly	46	6.50	4.11
<i>Political orientation</i>		1.27	19.52
Centrists/Swing voters	1	0.14	5.82
Conservatives/Right wing	3	0.42	6.51
Liberal/Left wing	5	0.71	7.19

group. Rather than a decrease in importance of the category ‘New Zealanders’, this is mainly due to an increase in importance of the category ‘young’.

This is consistent with the AUT Media Observatory’s analysis of the 2016 New Zealand Local Body Elections coverage (Baker et al. 2017), where young people were the most mentioned social group. Part of this relevance could be attributed to the presence, in both elections, of important young candidates (mayoral candidate Chlöe Swarbrick in 2016, and the Labour Party leader Jacinda Ardern in 2017). The analysis of the topics of news stories, presence of party policies, diversity of sources and references to social groups generated a number of questions related to the growing importance in the last two elections of young people as a social group. This suggests the possibility of a bigger structural shift



in the public debate. As will be seen in the next section, this shift is confirmed by qualitative analysis of the data subset mentioning young people.

## Shift towards youth

The quantitative content analysis of the 2017 election coverage showed a noticeably increased focus on young people. We followed up this finding by conducting qualitative analysis of the 167 articles that mentioned young people. The initial idea was to test previous studies that argue adult depictions of young people tend to be a projection of their hopes for the future, and their fears of change (Kelly 2000; Cunningham 2005; Staeheli et al. 2013). These dual feelings – hope for the future and concern about it – emerged as clear themes in the *Herald's* election coverage. Articles frequently expressed ideas around generational conflict and generational change. The journalists and commentators – overwhelmingly older adults, with very few youth writers or youth sources included in articles mentioning young people – described children and young people as a collective responsibility. These news articles focused mainly on young people as a ‘problem’, discussing their mental and physical health, the quality of their education and their preparedness for a changing work environment. The majority of writers expressed care for young people, viewing them, in the main part, as a passive group in need of guidance and assistance.

The rise of Jacinda Ardern, who has become the youngest New Zealand Prime Minister in 150 years, was a clear catalyst for this. Of the 167 articles mentioning young people, Ardern was also mentioned in half of them (86). Ardern's relative youth, in political terms, her own interest in youth issues, and her speculated appeal to young voters, all generated extra focus on young people in the *Herald* coverage.

Some portrayed Ardern as heralding a generational change in politics:

It is true, however, that Ardern and the people who surround her are young in political terms. They take for granted that we live in the twenty-first century not the 20th. This attitude makes them more willing to think differently about the future. (Maharey 2017)

And:

Jacinda Ardern on the stump quickly dispels any notion she is too young for the job. She's an assured public speaker in that modest, natural way New Zealanders like. She puts on no airs and can laugh at herself. And she is young enough to represent a generational change. (Roughan 2017)

Opinion writers, especially, speculated about whether young people would vote in higher numbers as a result of Ardern's candidacy and youth-focused policies:

Now the lure of free tertiary education, combined with better public transport, a massive house-building programme and Ardern's personal charisma, could bring young people out to vote for Labour in unexpectedly high numbers. (New Zealand Herald 2017b)

And:

[Mainfreight group managing director Don Braid] ‘She's got youth and she's got energy, and she's almost – without blaspheming – the John Key effect for the Labour Party, isn't she? And perhaps that's what the younger vote is looking for, perhaps that's what the non-voter has been looking for; someone to hang their hat on.’ (O'Sullivan 2017)

Overall the depictions of youth showed a strong focus on young people as ‘apprentice citizens’ (Harris 2006). Writers tended to portray young people as vulnerable and passive: the victims of poverty; the minds in wait to be educated; the future fuel for the New Zealand economy. Child poverty was a key issue in the 2017 election, with articles documenting the dire statistics in the area:

An average 20 children die and 30,000 are hospitalised every year from preventable, housing-related diseases like asthma, pneumonia and bronchiolitis, health statistics show. (Johnston 2017)

Journalists and commentators also noted parties’ targets and policies for addressing the child poverty issue:

Take this week’s TV debate. Both Jacinda Ardern and Bill English tried to out-do one another on how much they would do for child poverty. It was like a child poverty custody battle, and each parent was saying: ‘I’m Santa!’ (Kan 2017)

Mental health and suicide got some coverage in relation to older youth:

New Zealand has the highest teen suicide rate in the developed world. When it comes to youth suicide – those 25 and under – we have the second-highest rate. (Fisher 2017)

And:

[PSA National Secretary Erin Polaczuk] ‘New Zealand’s suicide rate – the highest in the developed world for teenagers – should be considered a national disgrace after increasing for the third year in a row, and we simply must do more as a society to reduce this number’ (Collins and Orsman 2017)

The state of New Zealand’s education system was another big focus of the 2017 *Herald* election articles. Journalists and commentators covered the parties’ education policies (especially those of Labour and National):

Voters face a tough choice in this election between starkly different education priorities from our two main parties. National’s main goal is lifting student achievement, particularly in the basics of primary school reading, writing and maths. Labour’s goal focuses on the other end of the age spectrum, proposing three years of lifetime free tertiary education to help us train and retrain to cope with expected technological upheavals. (Collins 2017b)

The education articles often came with commentary about how well, or how badly, New Zealand’s education system was fulfilling its purposes (usually seen as to equip young people for work):

If the point of education is to help everyone get the knowledge and skills they need to contribute their best to the world, then our system is not working for too many of our young people. To put a number to it, 12.9 per cent – one in eight – of our youths aged 15 to 24 were not in employment, education or training (‘Neet’) in the year to June, up from 11.3 per cent the previous year. (Collins 2017a)

Most of these observations and opinions focused on the opportunities and risks for young people, and seemed to be motivated by concern that they be given the skills necessary to survive in the future workplace. Occasionally the focus was on the workplace rather than the young people, however, with young people framed as resources that needed to be

shaped to be of better use to employers or the ‘economy’ more broadly. This was particularly true of the *Herald* ‘Mood of the Boardroom’ interviews with CEOs on election issues:

Many countries are educating their children a lot better than we are here. We need to think about those trends. We need an educated workforce. I think the Government has to listen to what business is saying and has to listen to the people. And I think this current Government isn’t listening enough. (Braid 2017)

And:

All our kids are going to university, they’re coming out with degrees and qualifications that aren’t necessarily translated to what the economy needs. (Luxon 2017)

Generational conflict and generational change were very strong themes in the *Herald* coverage of the 2017 election. Many writers noted generational inequalities in New Zealand society around, primarily, superannuation, the cost of housing and the cost of education:

Younger generations faced with big education and housing costs and less generous state retirement assistance might reasonably be interested in the details of Peters’ pension, suggested Duncan Greive. (Taylor 2017)

And:

Older people have become the over-mighty of election decision-making. More than 50 per cent of the 2014 election vote came from those 50 years and over. Party policies on fundamental economic issues such as rebalancing financial distribution to reduce inequalities, increasing the age of entitlement to superannuation, and who to tax and by how much, are decided with a fixed stare at the silvering of voter appeal. (McGregor 2017)

And:

Ardern’s pledge to keep superannuation at 65 will be a huge disappointment to people her own age.

You’d have to have lived under a rock not to know there has been something akin to a generational war with superannuation as the battle ground. (du Plessis-Allan 2017)

Although most of the articles focused on young people’s problems, there were a few articles that celebrated their achievements, or expressed optimism about youth potential:

In June I asked the question here, would the ‘youthquake’ that shook the Westminster landscape in the British election happen in New Zealand?

The British election result, Bernie Sanders’ US presidential campaign last year and the ‘Jacin-damania’ witnessed in New Zealand since early August give plenty of reasons to suggest young people will respond when something or someone gets them engaged. (Robinson 2017)

And:

These millennials are astute and free-thinking, with a refreshing optimism and generosity of spirit. Jacinda Ardern is one of this new breed of Kiwis. They make the neo-liberal die-hards seem moribund, stuck in an ideological morass. (Salmond 2017)

Very few articles mentioning young people were written by young people or quoted from young sources. Those that did tended, with one exception, to focus on high-achieving youth, another recognised trope in media discourse on youth (Wyn 2005; Farthing

2010; Harris et al. 2010). One of the *Herald* articles, written by a (high achieving) high school student, focused on the question of why young people vote in proportionally lower numbers than older adults.

Ironic, isn't it? Our youth, who are the future of New Zealand, who will live in the tomorrow that today creates, are the ones who are least engaged. So, let's ask the question on every politician's mind this election: 'Why?'

... to [older generations], we youth are nothing but 'too young to understand!' Comical, I know.

The unfortunate truth is that our politicians think the same way. They assume and dictate what they believe is best for us youth, and with that, they forge the mentality that as youth, our opinions don't matter. And soon enough, we begin to believe it too. (Hua 2017)

The only article that sought to capture an 'average' young voice was written by (then 30-year old) journalist Jack Tame, who texted a non-voting 27-year old he knew to quiz him on his likelihood of voting:

I texted Brad. I'm not sure there's any such thing as a 'typical' millennial voter, but at 27, Brad might be the least politically engaged young voter I know.

It's not to say he isn't bright. He has a big job at a corporate doing something very complicated with computers, but you won't find him canvassing for the Greens or tweeting about public transport.

Not one for the 6pm bulletins or breaking news updates on his phone, when Brad was on a coding project he famously took more than a week to realise John Key had resigned as Prime Minister ...

'Will you vote in this election?' Brad answered right away: 'No.'

'Why?' 'I'm only concerned about house prices and I'm not convinced anyone knows how to make them cheaper.' Just six days to convince him otherwise. (Tame 2017)

## Discussion

The examination of topics, the use of sources and references to social groups have demonstrated that the *New Zealand Herald* has indeed provided a forum for public debate. As is the case in any election, it regularly reported on political events, offered news analysis and commentary and provided candidates and parties the opportunity to express their views and access a wide audience on a range of social, political, economic and cultural issues. Some focus on the political process was involved in a third of the stories published, while the business and economy stories were again in the centre of the election coverage. Political parties were again the most drawn-upon news source in the reports, with both the National and the Labour Party significantly more present in 2017 than 2014 (National 38.70% versus 21.12%, Labour 35.2% versus 25.74%). This was at the expense of smaller parties. The 2017 elections were in that sense more of a two-party contest during the campaign. This appears to have swiftly returned to the multiparty environment during the postelection coalition talks.

The focus on political sources confirms the tendency already outlined during the 2014 general elections (Rupar et al. 2015). While this has an important informative function, as

it allows citizens to obtain the necessary information to make an informed voting choice, it also runs the risk of over-exposing political parties at the expense of other groups. There is a clear disproportion between the frequency of political sources, and that of the other main sources (see Table 3); sources from political parties outnumber the sum of all other main sources. Sources from the world of business and economy outnumber the sum of voices from members of the public (226 versus 184). This is partly due to the *Herald's* recurring 'Mood of the Boardroom' series, which interviews and surveys CEOs on election issues and presents the results in articles over the campaign period; this year there was a bumper issue on 12 September. The space for citizens' voices was even further minimised than it was in 2014, when business sources were a minority. This should raise a concern over the role of the news media, in New Zealand, in giving equal accessibility to the public debate to every relevant group, including citizenry. It seems, instead, that attention and selection is biased towards political parties and business representatives in the *Herald*.

A similar bias in the selection of sources exists in relation to gender. Despite a visible reduction in the gap, male sources continue to dominate over female sources. This was despite the presence of Jacinda Ardern, leader of the Labour Party, and centre of the attention of much media coverage. Equality in the representation of male and female voices has clearly not been reached yet.

In terms of diversity of social groups, as in 2014, the category 'New Zealanders' dominated over all other categories (with the notable exception of 'young'). The ambiguity of the term 'New Zealander', as already underlined in Rupar et al. (2015), lies in its inclusive power ('New Zealanders' intended as all citizens, regardless of their religious, ethnic, socio-economic, sexual and other differences) and, at the same time, in its generic nature in which diversity tends to be lost instead of highlighted. Most of the other categories related to ethnicity, for instance, tend to be ignored in the media coverage, with the exception of 'Māori' and 'foreigners' (the latter a category that classifies individuals as non-New Zealanders). Religion, sexual orientation, marital status and political orientation are also largely ignored categories, indicating a relatively low attention to diversity in these areas. The focus, instead, is more on socio-economic status and age, indicating that the public debate during the electoral campaign revolved mainly around these two areas. This fits with the focus on business, economy and taxes as the dominant topics of news coverage, and main concerns of policies. In particular, there is a clear link between a public debate often focused on socio-economic status (and, in particular, on low-income people and beneficiaries), and the need to address the economic state and policies of the country.

The focus on young people was the most noticeable change during the 2017 electoral campaign. The literature on childhood and young people emphasises the constructed nature of the concept, and its relationality to a concept of adulthood (Ariès 1962; Wyn and White 2013). It is widely noted that most of the political and media discourse on young people is authored by adults, and is a reflection of their hopes and fears for the future (Giroux 1996; Holland 2004; Drotner 2013). Ideas about what childhood means have changed over time (Ariès 1962; Cunningham 2006; Brickell 2017) and vary across cultures (Wyn and White 2013).

The literature on representation of young people identifies typical discourses, perhaps the most famous of which is the discourse of exaggerated deviancy/delinquency, described in the works of Cohen (1972), Hall et al. (1978) and Pearson (1983), for example. Other

typical discourses in the media are of youth at risk, and of young achievers (Wyn 2005). Of these three common framings of young people, the idea of 'youth at risk' was by far the strongest in the *Herald's* 2017 election coverage. Young people were overwhelmingly portrayed as being 'human becomings' (Qvortrup 1994), in need of guidance and intervention to ensure a transition to healthy, independent, productive adulthood.

In the *Herald's* 2017 election coverage, there was clear anxiety about New Zealand's youth, particularly children in poverty, the adequacy of children's education, young people's mental health and young people's preparedness for work. There was also concern about their lack of participation in voting, and commensurate excitement about whether or not Ardern's rise to the Labour leadership would catalyse a higher youth vote. Children and young people were often invoked as a kind of proxy for, or appeal to, New Zealand's future – 'the kind of future we want for our children'. This sometimes slid into a more functional/neoliberal desire for children to be trained to serve the future economy. In an interview with Mercury CEO Fraser Whineray:

He suggested the idea of canvassing top New Zealand companies to understand what skills would be in demand in the next five to 10 years, then utilising that information by filtering it to young people making subject choices in high school.

Unlike New Zealand where apprenticeships normally mean plumbing, electricity and building, Swiss students are trained in accountancy, banking and a range of other skills designed to have them enter the workforce as efficiently as possible. (Cook 2017)

Jane Higgins, writing about the way youth transitions have been viewed over time in New Zealand, identifies this kind of thinking within a neoliberal model in which:

The private benefits of tertiary education/training were seen to include the capacity of individuals educated/trained to recoup the costs (and more) of their educational investment once in the labour market. This model of transition links tertiary education closely to the needs of industry, both practically and conceptually ... (Higgins 2002, p. 50)

In this model young people are seen as 'adults in waiting' and the burden of their support during their extended education or training periods is seen as their parents' responsibility. She argues that this has been a feature of transitions policy, and the way New Zealanders think about youth transitions, since the 1980s (Higgins 2002).

The conversation about young people in the *Herald* was generally marked by care and concern – there was little evidence of Cohen's 'folk devils', or deviant youth, in the coverage. The same could not be said for the National Party, whose policies of boot camps for young offenders, curfews for young people out without adult supervision, and threats of cutting young people's benefits were all clearly appeals to this kind of sentiment, but the *Herald's* commentary and reporting on those policies was generally critical.

However, the lack of youth voices in the *Herald* articles mentioning young people was notable, and problematic. Young people are likely to have a different view of the issues confronting them. The few articles that were written by, or deliberately sought out, young voices were more nuanced about young people's motivations for voting or not voting, for example. The absence of young voices in the call for rethinking the kind of future we want for our children needs further investigation, both in terms of citizens' participation in the political process and in terms of labelling the 2017 elections as generational change.

## Conclusion

This research on the media coverage of the 2017 General Election is the AUT Media Observatory's third study of election coverage in New Zealand, following the 2014 General Election and the 2016 Local Body Elections. The 2017 election coverage showed a greater focus on policies than previous elections. So far there seems to be a trend towards greater diversity in the gender of sources, though women are still substantially under-represented. This is despite the fact there were prominent female candidates running in the latter two elections: Chlöe Swarbrick and Jacinda Ardern. Their candidacies may go some way towards explaining the increase in female sources, and their youth towards explaining the increased mention of young people in the coverage of these latter two elections. In this study, we further investigated the mentions of young people by conducting qualitative analysis of the relevant articles. We found that the coverage emphasised the trope of young people 'at risk', especially children in poverty, youth mental health and the adequacy of young people's education and training in preparing them for the future. Young people were often invoked by commentators in symbolic and emotive calls to attend to the political direction in which New Zealand is heading: 'the kind of country we want for our children'. The *Herald's* discussions on youth were generally marked by care and concern, rather than blame or fearmongering, but cast young people in passive roles. The relative lack of young sources in the *Herald's* coverage, despite the increased emphasis on reporting about young people, is a case in point, and an issue warranting further attention.

## Disclosure statement

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