

Inoculating Information: A Thematic Analysis of News Media  
Framing and Coverage of the COVID-19 Vaccination Mandates  
in New Zealand

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A thesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in  
partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Communication Studies (MCS)

2023

School of Communication Studies, Faculty of Design and  
Creative Technologies

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## 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:

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July 2023

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Deepti Bhargava. Your patience and unwavering support are greatly appreciated. Thank you for all your guidance. I will forever be grateful for having the chance to work you.

Thank you to my partner Anna for encouraging me to take this leap and change careers — even though it meant less income and another 18 months at university. I appreciate that you always want the best for me.

I want to thank my family, Vee, Anita and Nimish, for always being in my corner.

To Michael, thank you for being the best friend anybody could ask for.

A special mention to Xavier and Zac for bearing with me through this journey.

Finally, thanks to everyone who helped Anna and me to relocate after we lost our home to the Auckland floods. Your kindness and support will never be forgotten.

## **Abstract**

This study explores how the New Zealand news media framed and covered the COVID-19 vaccination mandates that applied to the country's education and healthcare workers. It aims to identify the key frames and content used by New Zealand news media in its reporting of the vaccination mandates as a potential solution to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study follows a qualitative research approach involving a thematic content analysis of 12 digital news media texts from four established news media organisations in New Zealand.

The findings of this study identify three key alternative frames (moral, human-interest and economic) to the public health one in New Zealand news media coverage of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates. The most prominent is the moral frame, followed by the human-interest and economic frames. This discrepancy appears to have been influenced by imbalanced reporting and the considerable variation in reporting that communicated the scientific or technical aspects of vaccines and the vaccination mandates to the public. Together, this may have undermined the efficacy of the New Zealand Government's public health response to the pandemic.

The study also uncovers that news media practitioners may not have a full grasp of how their use of frames may impact public perception of a health issue. This foundational study provides recommendations for further research and emphasises the importance of adopting scholarly methods by tertiary institutions, news media organisations and government decision-makers to guide clearer and more effective communication to the public during a health crisis.

# Chapter One: Introduction

In 2009, Barry (2009) posited that “In the next influenza pandemic, be it now or in the future, be the virus mild or virulent, the single most important weapon against the disease will be a vaccine. The second most important will be communication” (p. 324). A decade later the world experienced the global Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, which proved this statement to be true (WHO, 2023a).

COVID-19 is caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and was first identified in an outbreak in Wuhan, China in December 2019. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern under the International Health Regulations on 30 January 2020 and subsequently declared a worldwide pandemic on 11 March 2020 (WHO, 2020). As of 28 June 2023, the pandemic has caused more than 767 million reported cases and 6.94 million confirmed deaths worldwide, making it one of the deadliest disease outbreaks in history (WHO, 2023a). The WHO (2023b) delisted the COVID-19 pandemic as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern under the International Health Regulations on 5 May 2023; however, the virus remains in circulation (WHO, 2023b). During the three-and-a-half-year pandemic, the evolving nature of the virus led to unpredictable variants that challenged the success of potential solutions to the outbreak, such as lockdowns that kept people indoors, social distancing that imposed a minimum distance between people when physical interaction was necessary, quarantine for travellers, and vaccines against COVID-19 (Dutta, 2022). According to Vasipoulous et al. (2023), volatility in public attitudes toward potential solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic that restricted civil liberties may have undermined the efficacy of public health responses.

## 1.1 The COVID-19 pandemic received considerable media attention

The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of a public crisis that has received considerable global media attention for its large human and economic cost, and the actions taken by governments around the world to mitigate its impact (Gylfadottir et al., 2021; Hubner, 2021; Thomas et al., 2020). The news media<sup>1</sup>, generally defined as traditional or established forms of mass media that deliver news to the public over various mediums like television, radio or digital platforms (Johnston, 2020), played a significant role in communicating crucial information about the COVID-19 virus, the impacts of the pandemic, and potential solutions to mitigate its impact (Afrin et al., 2022; Genereux et al., 2022). However, early news media reporting focused on the origins of the COVID-19 virus which painted China as the source of the outbreak and attempted to attribute blame or responsibility for the outbreak toward China (Bolsen, et al., 2020; Holt & Bushman, 2022).

According to Rothgerber et al. (2020), the way in which people come to understand the threat of a novel virus outbreak may be shaped by their own political ideology of beliefs, opinions and values that form their

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<sup>1</sup> Any reference to ‘news media’ throughout this thesis uses the definition of Johnston (2020).

worldview. Political ideologies have proven difficult to define (Heywood, 2021), but there is academic consensus that these ideologies sit on a political spectrum that ranges from 'left' (people who most favour economic or social change) to 'right' (people who least favour economic or social change) (Heywood, 2021). Each news media organisation may also possess a political ideology that underpins its organisational values and guides reporting (Abbas, 2022a; Alimi & Maney, 2018; Johnston, 2020; Paltridge, 2012). Moreover, various news media organisations may interpret contentious events differently, as "either political opportunities or threats for certain purposes" (Alimi & Maney, 2018, p. 779). As a result, some news media will draw attention to topics that receive little or dissenting coverage from other outlets, and vice versa, by escalating or de-escalating coverage of the same event (Alimi & Maney, 2018). Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic received concentrated media attention and became a divisive issue in public discourse that was rife with political meaning (Rothgerber et al., 2020). From this point forward, 'politicised' coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic refers to how the political ideology of media producers (news media organisations) and media consumers (the public) may have had the potential to influence what news media report on (Johnston, 2020), and how that reporting may have been perceived by the public (Rothgerber et al., 2020).

Scholarly evidence argued that news media reporting on the potential solutions against the COVID-19 pandemic was highly politicised (Abbas, 2022a; Abbas, 2022b; Gondwe & Chen, 2021; Hart et al., 2020), and that people's political beliefs may have affected the rate of public compliance with potential solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic (Painter & Qiu, 2020). Public health measures such as lockdowns, mask-wearing, social distancing, and mandated vaccination all received different degrees of politicised coverage in news media reporting (Lipsitz & Pop-Eleches, 2020; Tsao et al., 2021). Such politicisation in the media of scientific and health issues is well-documented within the literature (Abbas, 2022a; Abbas, 2022b; Gauchat, 2012; Nelkin, 1996). Scientific and health issues are inherently complex, and as a result, news media reporting may be politicised and extend beyond the realm of science and into the economic, financial, moral and governmental impacts of a health issue (Rowbotham et al., 2019). A focus on broader characteristics of an issue is not necessarily problematic, negative or to the detriment of informing the public (Gauchat, 2012). Stefanik-Sidener (2013) demonstrated that news media reporting which focuses on the wider impacts and consequences of an issue helps provide the public with a fulsome picture of health issues and may also help to increase policy support for solutions to important health issues. In a public crisis, such as a pandemic, "the truth should not be managed, it should be told" (Barry, 2009, p. 325).

Still, challenges arise when news media select to cover a topic and choose to emphasise a particular aspect in a way that resonates with their audiences, often to attract readership, views or clicks and drive revenues (Anspach & Carlson, 2018; Romer & Jamieson, 2020; Tangcharoensathien et al., 2020). Therefore, news media reporting may often be sensationalised, and the selection of topics may become skewed toward those that capture and hold the audience's attention (Moon & Lee, 2020). The most emphasised aspect of an issue in news media reporting may also be a crucial factor in how the public comes to think about the

issue, and in turn impacts their action and inaction (Thomas et al., 2020). Thus, what is included and excluded in news media reporting may shape public perception of what is important about an issue, or whether it is important at all (Hart et al., 2020).

## **1.2 What is agenda-setting and news framing?**

The ability to influence the salience of topics is the agenda-setting role of news media (Entman, 1993; Entman, 2007; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). According to Entman (1993; 2007), news media, as independent organisations, possess the agency to select certain topics to appear in its coverage, and this inherently means that news media can decide which stories to run and how long they run for. The selection of news is guided by specific factors that are deemed to be important to each respective news organisation (Rosenberg & Feldman, 2008), whereas salience is determined by the length of its coverage (Entman, 1993; 2007). Berry et al. (2007) argued that when a topic is included in news media coverage, it is seen as more significant in the eyes of the public, and when a topic is run for an extended period, it may lead to a dominant media narrative and reinforce the importance of the topic. Entman (1993; 2007) suggested that once the agenda has been set, the direction of reporting is guided by the theory of news framing.

Framing determines how the selected topics are conveyed to the public through the deliberate selection of certain aspects of a story (Entman, 1993; 2007). Thus, the way in which the selected topics are framed impact how the public perceive the content of an issue (Price et al., 1997). The concept of news cycle theory, as posited by Rosenberg and Feldman (2008) stated that some news stories hold more currency than others and that news media organisations are free to pursue certain stories which they may label as high value because they generate greater audience interest or engagement. However, the value of frames is subjective. According to Johnston (2020), different news media organisations will select varying frames, depending on several factors specific to each news media organisation. These factors include the target audience, organisational style, public pressure, journalistic routine, or political preferences (Johnston, 2020). Together, agenda-setting and framing form a news media narrative that may shape public perception of what news topics and subtopics are important (Johnston, 2020).

## **1.3 The importance of news framing in a public crisis**

According to Afrin et al. (2022), “those responsible for providing the public with important health information have historically played two roles: one centred on dissemination of crucial scientific truths, and the other on dismantling lies and misinformation” (p.5). Thus, the way that news media frames and covers an issue is arguably more important during a public crisis because they act as a conduit between political decisions and public life (Koerber, 2020). For example, news media were credited for providing the public with fact-based information, based on the opinions of scientific experts during the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic (Spratt, 2001). Frandsen and Johansen (2020) stated that public crises are defined as broad and situational, which include, but are not limited to, pandemics, natural disasters or terrorist attacks. The

situational nature of public crises means that the focal point of the response to the actual crisis event is to minimise the time spent in a crisis, promote public safety, and deliver quality public service (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020; Olsson & Eriksson, 2020). As a result of these unique characteristics, news media serve a wide range of functions during public crises, such as to act as a source of guidance, provide information to the public, promote government narratives, emphasise human life over political and economic factors, and encourage national identity (Mogensen et al., 2002).

Koerber (2020) argued that news media are therefore an invaluable host to the development and circulation of public discourse during a crisis, which shapes public perception of an issue and the required behaviours to solve it. Koerber (2020) expanded on the idea put forward by Mogensen et al. (2002) and argued that the role of mass media, news media or social media is worthy of greater consideration in media relations scholarship, particularly in times of public crisis. In the case of health issues, the topic may be subject to scientific jargon and knowledge rarely accessible by the layperson (Lancet, 2014) and may be deemed uninteresting to the public (Luzon, 2022). Therefore, news media may elect to frame a health crisis from an economic, moral, or political perspective to engage audiences (An & Gower, 2009). However, alternative framing of a health issue may influence people's understanding to the point where the health risks or consequences of the issue are minimised (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

News media also play an important role in public crises by communicating crucial information to the public in a timely and effective manner and should also, in theory, seek to provide fair, balanced, and objective reporting, while holding those in power accountable for their actions (Johnston, 2020). However, such journalistic ideals are challenged by the modern media landscape which includes a reactionary 24-hour news cycle, different political ideologies, commercial incentives, and the rise of digital or social media (Johnston, 2020). Thus, news media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic may have been vulnerable to the prioritisation of frames or content that sought to capture and hold audience attention and may have created an additional challenge for public health responses around the world (Lilleker et al., 2021).

Genereux et al. (2022, p. 1182) stated that "a better understanding of the role of news media could be developed by analysing journalistic coverage of the issues posed by COVID-19." The investigation of news media coverage at different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the implementation of potential solutions against the virus, is important for communication studies scholarship because such research will provide insight into how news media framed and covered potential solutions to COVID-19, and how that could have shaped public perception of the virus itself, government responses to the pandemic, or public behaviour in response to potential solutions (Genereux et al., 2022).

#### **1.4 The role of New Zealand news media in public crises**

The New Zealand news media have played a vital role in disseminating important information to the public in recent crises such as the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, the 2019 White Island volcanic eruption, and

the 2019 Christchurch terror attack (Croucher et al., 2021; Morgan et al., 2021). More recently, the New Zealand news media also had a significant role in reporting the COVID-19 pandemic (Morgan et al., 2021).

In the first instance, the New Zealand Government positioned itself as the go-to source of information about the COVID-19 pandemic through their communication strategy that used news media to reach and influence the public (Beattie & Priestley, 2021). A key part of the New Zealand Government's communications strategy was the use of media conferences in the form of nationally televised daily briefings, usually run by Right Honourable Dame Jacinda Ardern (who was the country's Prime Minister at the time) and public official Sir Ashley Bloomfield (who was the country's Director-General of Health at the time) (Jamieson, 2020). New Zealand news media would structure their 24-hour news cycle around these media briefings to inform the public. Early studies revealed that the New Zealand news media fostered healthy public discourse about COVID-19 and, for the most part, disseminated accurate health information to the New Zealand public in the early stages of the pandemic (Croucher et al., 2021; Geoghegan et al., 2021; Rijs & Fenter, 2020; Sibley et al., 2020). Croucher et al. (2021) attributed the exemplary COVID-19 response of New Zealand to the centralised government response and a media landscape that fostered constructive political discourse.

However, no similar research exists for the later stages of the COVID-19 pandemic response in New Zealand. This is a visible gap in the literature, particularly when the global public response to government decisions became increasingly divisive toward the repeated public lockdowns and mandated mask-wearing and vaccinations (Martin & Vanderslott, 2022). More specifically, public outcry in New Zealand occurred because of a change in the government's communication strategy for its pandemic response (Coughlan, 2021; Wilson, 2021). The initial pandemic response was designed to eliminate the virus until vaccination rates were sufficient to "relax restrictions while keeping case numbers low through border restrictions, control of mass gatherings, restrictions of movement and mandatory quarantine for international travellers into the country" (Baker & Wilson, 2022, p. 1), through an 'Alert System', that was announced and communicated to the public on 21 March 2020 via an address by Former Prime Minister Ardern (Ardern, 2020):

Alert Level 1 – 'Prepare' – pertains to when COVID-19 is contained domestically but is uncontrolled elsewhere; Alert Level 2 – 'Reduce' – means while contained in New Zealand, the risk of community transmission exists; Alert Level 3 – 'Restrict' – means there is a high risk the disease is not contained domestically; and Alert Level 4 – 'Lockdown' – means it is likely the disease is not contained domestically. Each step up in Alert Level is associated with increasingly tight restrictions in both international and domestic movement, social contact and economic activity.

The Alert Level system was internationally lauded and seen as effective crisis communication because the response was clearly outlined, concisely explained, and indicated to the public that the response would adapt to the changing situation (Degani, 2022; Jamieson, 2020). In contrast, the Traffic Light System,

announced on 4 October 2021, drew criticism for its ambiguity and confusion (Coughlan, 2021; Wilson, 2021). While the Traffic Light System abandoned the government's elimination messaging in favour of an approach that phased down restrictions, one immunologist even opposed the change of tack and argued that the switch in strategy required higher vaccination rates to be successful (Coughlan, 2021).

One of the most complex aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic was the successful mass distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine (Machingaidze & Wiysonge, 2021; Martin & Vanderslott, 2022), as the hesitation by people to get vaccinated against a disease is well-documented (Sallam, 2021). Troiano and Nardi (2021) said that there are many reasons that underpin vaccine hesitancy:

The most given reasons to refuse vaccine were as follows: being against vaccines in general, concerns about safety/thinking that a vaccine produced in a rush is too dangerous, considering the vaccine useless because of the harmless nature of COVID-19, general lack of trust, doubts about the efficiency of the vaccine, belief to be already immunized, doubt about the provenience of vaccine (p. 250).

The need for higher vaccination rates to transition away from an elimination strategy was not lost on governments worldwide, and vaccination mandates were introduced by various countries to limit and contain the spread of the virus, while resuming some level of normality to public life (Martin & Vanderslott, 2022; Stokel-Walker, 2022). The vaccination mandates in New Zealand followed a tiered system that targeted high-risk groups such as border, education or healthcare workers before requiring the general population to be vaccinated against COVID-19 (Hipkins, 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; Wood, 2021). In New Zealand, the vaccination mandates had the purpose "... to prevent, and limit the risk of, the outbreak of spread of COVID-19 by requiring certain work to be carried out by affected persons who are vaccinated and have received a booster dose" (COVID-19 Public Health Response (Vaccinations) Order 2021, s3). Even though vaccines and vaccination mandates were highly politicised in news media coverage around the world (Abbas, 2022a; Abbas, 2022b) and the framing of opposition to vaccines and vaccination mandates as a 'civil right' is a well-understood phenomenon (Colgrove & Samuel, 2022), there is less literature on the framing and content of news media reporting of potential solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as vaccination mandates, particularly in New Zealand.

## **1.5 Scope, importance, and relevance of the study**

The purpose of this study is to provide insight into how New Zealand news media framed and covered the vaccination mandates that took effect on 15 November 2021, which covered education, health and disability workers in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Hipkins, 2021a; 2021b). Outside of the concentrated news media attention placed on the 15 November 2021 vaccination mandates, both the education and healthcare sectors make up a large proportion of the New Zealand workforce and were deemed high-risk during the pandemic because of their proximity to unvaccinated or immunocompromised individuals (Hipkins, 2021a; 2021b). The investigation of media coverage at later stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the implementation of vaccination mandates as a potential

solution to reduce the spread and severity of the virus (Karaivanov et al., 2022), is important for communication studies scholarship because such research will provide insight into how news media framed and covered the vaccination mandates, and how that coverage could have shaped public perception of the vaccination mandates as a potential solution to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The literature review (see chapter two) revealed that even though the New Zealand Government's response to the pandemic has been, and continues to be, extensively studied, more research is needed to examine the role of the New Zealand news media in how different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic was framed and covered. Furthermore, while other communication studies research has focused on the early framing and coverage of the virus outbreak, there is less research on the framing and content of news media coverage of potential solutions to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as vaccination mandates. In New Zealand, both the announcement and implementation of vaccination mandates were key stages in the pandemic response and received concentrated media attention, particularly because they prioritised the vaccination of certain workforces (Hipkins, 2021a; 2021b; 2021c, Wood, 2021).

This research project attempts, in part, to fill this critical gap in the current scholarship and use New Zealand as an example. Firstly, this research aims to provide insight into how New Zealand news media framed and covered the vaccination mandates in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, this research seeks to further understand how news media framing and coverage may influence the perception of a public crisis, as well as the potential solutions to it. Overall, news media are crucial in times of public crises, particularly when the issue is evolving and highly uncertain (Genereux et al., 2022). In such times, news media are paramount in setting people's understanding and perception of the issue, what caused it, and the potential solutions to addressing it (Entman, 1993; 2007; Rothgerber et al., 2020). Therefore, this study is primarily directed at providing insight into the dominant frames and content produced by the New Zealand news media about the vaccination mandates in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research aim of this study is to explore how New Zealand media framed and covered the vaccination mandates of education and healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on this aim, the following research question was established:

(RQ): What content and dominant frames were used by New Zealand news media in their coverage of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates that applied to the country's education and healthcare workers?

The study adopted qualitative methods and a data sample of 12 digital news media texts was used to conduct a thematic content analysis. Digital news media texts were sourced from newspaper websites and were selected in place of print news media, because digital news media has been shown to reach a wider audience (Martens et al., 2018). The data were sampled from four digital news media organisations: Stuff, The New Zealand Herald, Radio New Zealand, and Newsroom. The reasoning behind the selection of these four specific news media organisations and the selection of digital texts are outlined in the methodology chapter. The total sample size is representative and combined with a qualitative research

approach the researcher immersed himself in the digital news media texts to produce rich descriptions and discussion of their framing and content coverage. To cover the vaccination mandate that affected education and healthcare workers, data were sampled between 15 November to 29 November 2021, providing two weeks of news media coverage that present rich examples of news media framing and coverage and what may have been made salient during the two-week timeframe.

The present research makes contributions to communication studies scholarship (including framing theory), media relations research, and media relations practice. This study offers insights into the framing and reporting of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates by news media in New Zealand, an area that has received limited attention in previous scholarly research. The current research also helps to better understand the role of news media in a public crisis by exploring which dominant frames (moral, human-interest and economic) are used and what content is popular in reporting. In addition, this research contributes a unique New Zealand perspective to the existing communication studies literature, which has focused on North America, Europe and parts of Asia (Abbas, 2022a; Adiprasetyo & Larasati, 2021; Figenschou et al., 2023). Finally, this study offers a perspective into the journalistic coverage and practice of fair and balanced reporting and use of explanatory journalism in New Zealand. Overall, the study identifies that there are internal and external constraints faced by news media that impact the frames used and content that is subsequently produced, even during a public health crisis.

## **1.6 Thesis structure**

This thesis consists of six chapters. The opening chapter provided context to the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter also briefly outlined the New Zealand media landscape, with an emphasis on the role of news media in the reporting of public crises. The rest of the opening chapter provided a summary that outlined the need for this study, along with its scope. Following the introduction, the next chapter presents an overview of the literature studied, identifies gaps and provides a framework for the current study. The second chapter also provides an overview of agenda-setting and framing, justifies that news media framing requires special attention during a public crisis, outlines the dominant frames in previous news media coverage of health crises, discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic was politicised by news media around the world, and identifies several emerging trends relevant to news media framing and coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter three outlines the research design for the current study, including the sampling of digital news media texts and the utilisation of thematic content analysis to generate the research findings. The fourth chapter presents the research findings and is structured according to the five key themes identified in the study. Chapter five interprets and discusses the findings of this study and its contribution to both the literature and practice. The final chapter provides a concluding summary, identifies the limitations of this research and outlines key recommendations to news media practitioners, scholars and government decision-makers.

# Chapter Two: Literature Review

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the literature that exists in communication studies scholarship on news media framing. The first section provides context as to how news media framing influences public perception and its increased importance in a mediated society. The second section discusses how a pandemic should be framed by news media in accordance with best practices. The third section reveals the dominant frames used by news media in their coverage of health issues such as the public health frame, or alternative ones such as the moral, attribution of responsibility, economic and human-interest frames. Additionally, the section highlights that the public health frame has historically been ignored in favour of alternative frames. The fourth section concentrates on how news media framed and covered COVID-19 the pandemic, and how this may have contributed to the politicisation of the potential solutions. The fifth section outlines emerging news media trends during the COVID-19 pandemic, including news media support for official messaging, a preference for news media as a source of news during a public crisis, an increase in the use of digital and social media platforms by news media, and the importance of communicating scientific topics to the layperson during a public health crisis. The chapter concludes with a summary of the literature review and identifies knowledge gaps that guide the current study.

## 2.2 Framing influences public perception of a public crisis

A rich tapestry of literature suggested that the information people receive from news media about various issues is 'framed' (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Nelson & Oxley, 1999; Price, et al., 1997;). Framing determines how the selected topics are conveyed to the public through the deliberate selection of certain aspects of a story (Entman, 1993; 2007). Entman (1993) defined framing as:

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (p. 52).

Frames are therefore concerned with how and why certain aspects of an issue become more prominent in news media coverage (Entman, 1993). According to De Vreese (2005), framing is an integral tool at the disposal of news media organisations in their reporting decisions. This view is corroborated by Rosenberg and Feldman (2008), who pointed out that frames prioritise ideas, themes, and content in media reporting, while agenda-setting determines the length of time those ideas, themes and content remain prevalent in reporting. Nelson et al. (1997) described the process of prioritisation, which involves the curation of different issues in news reporting, and which aspects of those issues to report on. Gitlin (2003) offered a similar view and conceptualised framing as 'versions' of events that may not constitute comprehensive news coverage and include acts by news media such as excluding key facts or significant stories from appearing as front-page news. Another study also arrived at a similar conclusion, where

framing may be viewed as news media offering an isolated view, rather than a fulsome report of events (Bardhan, 2001). This may influence how the audience interprets the event, as “frame-induced knowledge can significantly influence decision making by altering the mix of considerations brought to mind” (Price et al., 1997, p. 503).

Druckman (2001) also contended that the selection and presentation of news combined with the length of coverage impact the public’s perception of an issue and is instrumental in how the public comes to support responses or solutions to the problem. Chong and Druckman (2007) expanded on this argument and argued that people come to understand an issue by how news media emphasises certain aspects of that issue over time. The public is therefore a passive agent that receives incomplete information from news media, without express knowledge of what has been included or excluded in news media coverage (Gitlin, 2003). This view is corroborated by Altheide (2020), who stated that modern news media audiences receive mediated information about current affairs and the presentation of select information may therefore have an impact on their understanding of an issue.

Selective news media coverage may also contradict the core journalistic value of fair and balanced reporting, where both sides of the story are told, and information is sourced from a range of experts and non-experts (Benham, 2020). Imbalanced reporting by news media may reduce the credibility and trustworthiness of reporting (Benham, 2020; Kohl et al., 2016). According to Pihl-Thingvad (2015), news media should achieve fair and balanced reporting during a public health emergency or crisis, because the information disseminated may impact public health. When news media fail to consult expert sources during a public health emergency or crisis, reporting may facilitate the opinion of non-experts (Pihl-Thingvad, 2015). This may contradict scientific expert advice or opinion and contribute to the spread of misinformation, which may undermine the efficacy of a public health response (Stefanik-Sidener, 2013). However, Johnston (2020) stated that the primary objective of news media organisations is to reach a mass audience, and fair and balanced reporting does not necessarily align with this goal (Hansen, 2018).

According to Altheide (2020), the influence of news media on shaping public perception has grown in step with the rise of a mediated society, whereby the mass media (technology that carries media to reach a mass audience) influences other sectors of society such as politics, business, culture, entertainment, sport or education. The wide range of functions performed by news media is therefore central to society's making of meaning in a mediated society, which refers to how members of the public construct their reality, experiences and memories through their interaction with news media (Koerber, 2020). Thus, what news media cover, how they cover it and how long they choose to cover it for is vital for how the public comes to view and understand an issue – and how people perceive an issue is essential for adherence and support of proposed solutions, particularly in a public crisis (An & Gower, 2009; D’Angelo, 2017; Koerber, 2020; Radwan & Radwan, 2020; Simonov et al., 2022).

## 2.3 How should a pandemic be framed by news media?

Koerber (2020) outlined the inextricable link between public perception and important issues or events, because news media act as a conduit between important government decisions, news media that report them, and members of the public who interpret that information. The modern landscape of mass media, where the public obtains information from alternative sources such as independent or social media platforms (Johnston, 2020), means that the public is primed to accept and spread news from a variety of sources (Lahiri et al., 2021). This may create confusion among the public and create division over potential solutions to a public crisis (Eysenbach, 2020; Lahiri et al., 2021). It is therefore important for news media to elect frames that communicate risks about the potential impacts — negative and positive — of a public crisis to manage expectations and the behaviour of the public (Coman et al., 2021).

According to Rajkhowa (2020), “media coverage of a pandemic plays a critical role in how public awareness of the pandemic develops and how the community perceives government responses to the pandemic” (p. 254). One Canadian study revealed that news media coverage is an important guide for public behaviour, particularly in the case of assisting preparedness in a public health emergency (Kahn et al., 2019), such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Collinson et al. (2015) showed that news media may help positively change individual behaviours, especially during public health campaigns by supporting government narratives as well as influencing public reaction to a health crisis. According to Barry (2019), “the effectiveness of any measure is going to depend on risk communication to gain compliance” (p. 310). Kahn (2020) stated that this is particularly true during a pandemic, as a pandemic is one of the most serious forms of public health crises, due to the range and depth of the effects of the virus and the need to quickly and effectively understand how to mitigate its impacts. A symptom of a pandemic is high levels of uncertainty because there is limited scientific information in terms of susceptibility, severity and treatment associated with the early stages of a novel virus outbreak (Kahn, 2020). According to both DeTora et al. (2021) and Pollock et al. (2021), timely communication of scientific information about risks and solutions by news media may play a key role in prolonging or worsening the spread of a virus and contribute to reducing uncertainty in public discourse through the dissemination of relevant and fact-based information (Genereux et al., 2022). Lilleker et al. (2021) confirmed this finding in a global study and showed that news media played an important role in communicating the risks of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the effectiveness of various pandemic response strategies to the public.

However, a pandemic is inherently complex (Kahn, 2020) and its impacts reach far beyond risks and solutions. Stefanik-Sidener (2013) argued that reporting on the range of impacts of a health issue, and not only the risks to public health or the potential solutions, is important for providing the public with information about the wider economic, social or political implications of health issues. This also develops a broader knowledge base among the public, and in turn, may increase policy support for solutions to the issue (Stefanik-Sidener, 2013). Moreover, Mutua and Ong'ong'a (2020) demonstrated that the adoption of different frames about the impacts of COVID-19 may have contributed to slowing the spread of the virus

during the early stages of the pandemic. Thus, it can be said that news media should adopt a range of frames in their coverage of health issues to ensure the public is kept well-informed about the extensive impacts (Stefanik-Sidener, 2013). Moreover, news media play a major role in the social construction of perceived risks and threats to social, economic and political security through its adoption of various frames (Giddens, 1999), particularly during public crises (Alimi & Maney, 2018). Hence, a balanced set of frames should be considered in the coverage of public crises, such as a pandemic (Staniland & Smith, 2013).

## **2.4 The predominant frames of pandemics**

There are five predominant frames of health issues identified in the literature. Firstly, the public health frame, which communicates the issue in terms of its impact on public health. Secondly, the attribution of responsibility frame, which focuses on assigning blame to individuals, groups or organisations for the issue. Thirdly, the moral frame, which presents moral arguments for and against potential solutions to the health issue. Fourthly, the economic frame, which highlights the economic or financial consequences of the health crisis and its potential solutions. Finally, the human-interest frame, which concentrates more on the impacts on the individual, and generally showcases their experience or emotional response. This section outlines the definition and purpose of each frame, how it has been previously used by news media, and summarises the benefits and risks of each frame.

### **2.4.1 The public health frame**

A body of research highlighted that the most important type of framing of health issues is the public health frame (Nelkin, 1996; Prati et al., 2011; Stefanik-Sidener, 2013), despite the need for a balance of frames (Stefanik-Sidener, 2013). The public health frame, also referred to as the health or medical frame, occurs when news media portray a public health crisis, emergency or issue as a matter that impacts the health of the public (Pan & Meng, 2016). The public health frame commonly includes fact-based medical or scientific information to support their reporting (Prati et al., 2011) and prioritises the opinion of medical or scientific experts as sources to inform media coverage (Entwistle, 1995; Nelkin, 1996). The public health model of reporting suggested that news media framing should focus on mitigating the risk factors of a disease and other prevention strategies or solutions, while avoiding debate about the causes (Rowbotham et al., 2019).

In the context of COVID-19, Gylfadottir et al. (2021) stated that news media that used medical experts and scientists as the main sources in reporting produced public health frames which were concerned with risks of infection and how to prevent virus transmission. Moreover, people who received information about the safety or efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccine were more likely to report that they would get the vaccine, which helped promote strategies to combat the virus worldwide (Palm et al., 2021). Ghio et al. (2021) agreed and showed that public health framing in news media reporting may assist with the generation of support for preventative measures as well as the adoption of solutions to the issue by promoting self-efficacy. However, Rowbotham et al. (2019) found that this type of frame was not

commonly used by news media reporting of public health policies in the United States. In contrast, Park et al. (2020) found that public health frames outnumbered non-public health frames in COVID-19 news media coverage in South Korea, but alternative frames remained prominent throughout the reporting studied. Practical examples from the literature highlighted that there is a significant deviation from the public health frame in the coverage of historical public health issues (Rowbotham et al., 2019; Stefanik-Sidener, 2013). According to Moon and Lee (2020), a deficit in news media coverage that adopts the public health frame may skew public understanding of the issue and diminish its severity in the mind of the public.

News media have previously provided a wealth of coverage on epidemics and pandemics, such as the 2002 SARS outbreak, the 2009 H1N1 flu outbreak, the 2014 Ebola outbreak, and the AIDS-HIV pandemic (Bardhan, 2001; Beaudoin, 2007; Berry et al., 2007; Dalrymple et al., 2016; McCauley et al., 2013; Pan & Meng, 2016; Pieri, 2019; Roy et al., 2019; Staniland & Smith, 2013). Pieri (2019) found that news media coverage in the United Kingdom of the Ebola pandemic tended to assign the blame for the virus outbreak to African nations, rather than conveying health-related information about the virus outbreak. Furthermore, Bardhan (2001) conducted a study into global news media framing of the AIDS and HIV epidemic and showed that news media would often include content dedicated to lesser developed nations, even though AIDS was also a widespread issue around the world and contributed to a general association of AIDS with lesser developed nations among the global public. Moreover, Pan and Meng (2016) demonstrated that television news media coverage of the 2009 flu pandemic in the United States focused on the possible side effects of the flu vaccine, rather than promoting the potential benefits of a collective vaccination against the flu for society heading into winter. A separate study by Sandell et al. (2013) presented similar findings, where news media reporting of the flu vaccine in Australia, when compared to Sweden, focused more on the possible negative effects of vaccines, and may have reduced or slowed the vaccination rate in Australia against the flu. In contrast, Staniland and Smith (2013) showed how a balanced range of frames employed by the media during the 2009 H1N1 flu outbreak had a direct influence on how people viewed the severity of the outbreak and the responses taken to mitigate the impact.

#### **2.4.2 The attribution of responsibility frame**

According to Roy et al. (2019), the public seeks to make sense of a novel virus outbreak by looking for an individual, group or institution to blame. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) define this as the attribution of responsibility frame, where news media cover an issue in a way that links responsibility for who is perceived to be at blame for the issue and consequently who is tasked with solving the issue. McCauley et al. (2013) argued that attributing blame for an undesirable event is a common public response, and news media may take advantage of this by providing reports that identify individuals, groups or institutions who may be responsible instead of conveying health-related information (Bardhan, 2001; Pieri, 2019). Thus, news media framing influences how audiences come to comprehend the alleged causes of an issue and subsequently assign blame or responsibility in a crisis (Koerber, 2020). Lee et al. (2022) demonstrated that

the attribution of responsibility not only includes assigning blame to foreign countries or people, but also to their own government, particularly when it was perceived by the public that their government mishandles a crisis response. Thus, news media plays a significant role in shaping the public perception of who or what is the cause of that event when reporting assigns the blame for an issue, event, or crisis to an individual, group or institution (Lee et al., 2022). Adiprasetio and Larasati (2021) identified the attribution of responsibility frame as the most prominent one in their study of Indonesian news media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **2.4.3 The moral frame**

Moral framing in news media coverage of a health crisis tends to occur when news media present moral evaluations of the public health response (An & Gower, 2009; Thomas et al., 2020). According to Colgrove and Samuel (2022), the framing of opposition to vaccines and vaccination mandates as a 'civil right' is a well-understood phenomenon, and is directly related to moral arguments of freedom, liberty and individual rights. To some people, the decision to get vaccinated is viewed as a moral issue of right or wrong (Smith & Graham, 2019). Such a stance is related to the concepts of individualism (Hofstede, 1980; 2001) and collectivism (Schwartz, 1990). Both arguments are under the umbrella of moral framing, as defined by An and Gower (2009).

Individualism captures the extent to which people in a society are empowered to make their own choices and places rights above duties (Hofstede, 1980;2001). According to Labonte and Gagnon (2010), the concept of individualism in the health context is tied to an individual's experience of security or dignity. More specifically, some people believe that vaccination is an individual choice because it involves a medical procedure on one's body (Abbas, 2022b). In general, people who elected not to get vaccinated against a variety of diseases express a variety of concerns, including health risks, distrust in government authorities, moral preferences and the inability to make sense of abundant yet complicated information (Afrin et al., 2022; Troiano & Nardi, 2021). However, individualistic people tend to promote self-interest over public interest (Hofstede, 1980), and may undermine a collective public health response. Other global health issues have also been framed more broadly as human rights problems that concern an individual's right to choose, such as maternal and child health, tobacco consumption and reproductive health (Olesen, 2006; Reubi, 2012). Thus, the relationship between the moral framing in terms of the human right to choose and health issues is highly contested in public discourse (Labonte & Gagnon, 2010), particularly when vaccines and vaccination are involved (Smith & Graham, 2019).

In contrast to individualists, according to Schwartz (1990), collectivist societies are characterised by diffuse and mutual obligations or expectations. A collectivist society is more likely to accept restrictions on individual rights if it promotes public benefit (Schwartz, 1990). During a crisis, collectivists tend to accept or tolerate restrictions on their own individual liberties when there is a benefit to society and may help people engage in problem-solving to resolve the issue at hand (Chen, 2015; Matsaganis & Wilkin, 2015).

According to Vanderslott and Marks (2021), the relationship between collectivism and vaccines is underscored by the fact that mandatory vaccination is in place in more than 100 countries to protect people from a range of diseases, including measles, mumps, rubella, tetanus and polio. Recent research has argued that receiving the COVID-19 vaccine has generally been viewed as the morally 'right' thing to do, because a high vaccination rate in society may offer protection to both the vaccinated individual as well as the most vulnerable people in society, which is in the interest of public health (Rosenfeld & Tomiyama, 2022). Thus, the moral framing of the COVID-19 vaccine, from both the individualist and collectivist perspective was prominent when news media shared their reporting in the form of social media posts to Facebook (Zhang et al., 2023). In the context of New Zealand, Theunissen and Wolf (2023, p. 102), stated that "the use of the phrase 'team of five million' by the government and media during the early stages of the global pandemic" meant that New Zealand developed a collective identity in its response to the pandemic, particularly in the production of media. However, there is a gap in the literature as to whether this collective identity remained in the later stages of the pandemic when COVID-19 vaccination mandates were rolled out in New Zealand.

#### **2.4.4 The economic frame**

The Economic and financial impacts of public crises receive considerable news media attention (An & Gower, 2009; Sandell et al., 2013; Smallman, 2015). A pandemic may have profound economic effects, and news media coverage of the impact on the economy should not be a surprise (Mutua & Ong'ong'a, 2020). According to Ophir (2018), news media are an essential agent in the event of an epidemic or pandemic which documents the economic impact of the crisis and facilitates discourse in both the political and public domain about the economic handling of the issue. Thus, news media reporting of health issues may be approached from the perspective of their economic consequences on individuals, organisations, or countries (Pan & Meng, 2016; Shen, 2004). This is particularly true during epidemics or pandemics, which usually have broad-based economic consequences (Bardhan, 2001; Su et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2020). While economic consequences may be positive in news media reporting (Rowbotham et al., 2019), coverage tends to predominantly report the negative economic impacts of a health issue, such as the cost to the economy of public health restrictions, decreases in the stock market (Ogbodo et al., 2020) or loss of business and labour (Rowbotham et al., 2019). According to Afrin et al. (2022), economic framing was made salient in news media headlines and coverage in the United States, which focused on supply chain issues or how individuals and small businesses were negatively affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent study by Hung and Chang (2023) offered a slightly different view and showed that both positive and negative economic consequences were covered in Taiwanese news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic which may have contributed to or eased public concern about the country's economic outlook.

Brahmbhatt and Dutta (2008) postulated that negative news media coverage of a pandemic may result in the public overreacting to highly variable economic news during pandemics. This view is supported by recent empirical evidence which showed that the perception and expectation of the macroeconomic

environment guides households' economic decisions (Bailey et al., 2018, 2019; Kuchler & Zafar, 2019). Research indicates that outsized attention to a select few aspects of the economic impacts during a crisis may influence what audiences consider important (Damstra & Vliengenthart, 2018). Similarly, when news media report only on the positive or the negatives of an issue, audiences are exposed to a narrow subset of the entire issue, which may miss vital context throughout the coverage (Shen, 2004) and become subject to selection bias (Moon & Lee, 2020). Ogbodo et al. (2020) showed that the economic consequence frame focused more on the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as job losses or failed businesses, in a study of global news media coverage. Moreover, news media framing of the potential economic losses during the COVID-19 pandemic was found to have a limited impact on people's attitudes toward potential solutions or their intention to behave within public health guidelines across 84 countries (Dorison et al., 2022). Instead, the emphasis on economic losses increased public levels of anxiety about the economic outlook (Fetzer et al., 2021).

#### **2.4.5 The human-interest frame**

Another frame often ascribed to health issues are human-interest stories that focus on how a major disruptive event has affected an individual (Hughes, 1981; Valkenburg et al., 1999). Human-interest stories are typically feature stories that focus on people's lives, experiences, and emotions rather than on 'hard news', which is defined as important issues that are time-sensitive and impact the public (Lehman-Witzig & Seleztsky, 2010). The use of the human-interest frame allows for the integration of a human or emotional side to a story and connects those who are directly or indirectly affected by an event to unaffected members of the public (Beaudoin, 2007). An and Gower (2009) showed that the human-interest frame is popular in news media coverage across a range of crises. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) demonstrated that journalists cover significant events, issues or problems by giving them a human element or emotional angle to generate buy-in from the audience. Zillman (2002) offered a stronger conclusion and stated that human-interest stories or narratives are journalistic tools designed to captivate and engage the audience, influence public opinion and bring revenue to media organisations. Additionally, as per Cho and Gower (2006, p. 420), "a human interest frame puts a human face and emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem, so it makes people regard the crisis as serious, urgent or dangerous" and the usage of the human-interest frame may determine how serious people treat a crisis event.

The human-interest frame has also been criticised for selective news media coverage toward aspects of an issue that are designed to capture and hold audience attention (Moon & Lee, 2020), at the expense of 'hard news' which leaves audiences less informed about critical events and developments during a crisis (Lehman-Witzig & Seleztsky, 2010). When news media reporting is too focused on individual experiences and emotions, it may lead to the relegation of the importance of a health issue and its potential solutions (Bridgman et al., 2020, Radwan & Radwan, 2020). Patterson (2000) demonstrated that there has been an increased focus on the personal experiences of ordinary people and found that the use of human-interest frames in the United States more than doubled between 1980 and 2000. Recent studies have confirmed

this finding both within traditional news media (Hinnant et al., 2013) and throughout social media networks (Conrad et al., 2016).

Figenschou et al. (2023) concluded that the personalisation of news may be viewed as an individualisation of responsibility and dumbing down of public debate, largely because human-interest stories generally provide individuals with the opportunity to articulate how they have been personally affected by an event and provide their opinion and reasoning for why that is, to elicit sympathy from audiences (Gallagher, 2018). However, human-interest framing is not necessarily bad. On one hand, personalised coverage of an issue tends to pinpoint individual-level impacts that different events has on citizens (Thomas et al., 2020) and have proven historically popular with audiences by presenting a story in a relatable or sympathetic way (Gallagher, 2018; Hughes, 1981). On the other hand, human-interest framing may also be used to explain public health as a domain of collective responsibility, which serves to aid political intervention or hold health authorities accountable for their actions or inactions during a health crisis, based on how individuals are impacted by policy decisions made to combat the crisis (Figenschou et al., 2023). Ogbodo et al. (2020) concluded that the human-interest frame dominated global news media coverage of the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and highlighted the stories of individuals who may have lost their loved ones or their livelihoods. Moreover, the human-interest frame during COVID-19 was also found to be saturated with negative framing bias, which may have driven public fear and anxiety about the virus and potential solutions against it (Ogbodo et al., 2020).

## **2.5 The politicisation of the COVID-19 pandemic**

Health, medical or scientific issues attract considerable media and public attention (Abbas, 2022a). When issues covered by the media are subject to scientific jargon and knowledge rarely accessible by the layperson, news media framing arguably has an outsized influence on public understanding of that scientific topic (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Scientific topics in news media coverage also tend to be simplified, trivialised and sometimes sensationalised in a way that is judged by news media as more likely to resonate with the public, such as the use of moral, economic or human-interest frame (Moon & Lee, 2020; Nelkin, 1996) in place of the public health frame (Rowbotham et al., 2019). Thus, the use of alternatives to the public health frame by news media may have contributed to the politicisation of events, policies or topics during the COVID-19 pandemic, as political ideologies may influence how people interpret scientific issues when it is presented to them as a moral, economic or human-interest frame by news media (Rothgerber et al. 2020). As a result, scientific issues may be transformed into topical and politicised discussions in public discourse (Abbas, 2022a; Abbas, 2022b; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004; Gauchat, 2012; Nelkin, 1996).

Overall, the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic received highly politicised news media coverage that created division in public discourse over the government's ability to curb civil liberties (Abbas, 2022a; Abbas, 2022b; Gondwe & Chen, 2021; Hart et al., 2020; Rothgerber et al., 2020). Preventative measures

against COVID-19, such as lockdowns, social distancing and the wearing of face masks, were politicised in news media coverage (Hart et al., 2020; Tsao et al., 2021) when they were framed as an infringement on civil liberties (Rothgerber et al., 2020). Other news media reports discounted the effectiveness of preventative measures and questioned whether they were necessary to protect public health (Lipsitz & Pop-Eleches, 2020). Early global news media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic was also criticised for failing to equip the public with appropriate knowledge of preventative measures and actions to adopt in response to the pandemic (Romer & Jamieson, 2020; Su et al., 2021). Instead, early news media coverage was concerned with attributing blame for the virus outbreak to China and its people (Holt & Bushman, 2022; Su et al., 2021), the geopolitical tensions created by various government responses to the virus outbreak (Price & Harbisher, 2021), or debating the justification for policies which restricted civil liberties (Rothgerber et al., 2020). Moreover, Hubner (2021) showed that early news media coverage in the United States quoted three main sources: individual citizens, individuals representing interest groups, and political representatives who may or may not have been directly involved in the COVID-19 response. This may have contributed to the politicisation of the pandemic (Hart et al., 2020).

In reference to news media coverage of the vaccine that did not use the public health frame, Machingaidze and Wiysonge (2021, p. 1339) said that "... intensive media coverage may also discourage people from being vaccinated" and that news media should use fact-based information in their reporting. However, Abbas (2022b) demonstrated that some news media reporting about COVID-19 vaccines lacked credibility because they offered no scientific proof for their claims and were potentially produced for ideological or moral argument purposes. Elias and Catalan-Matamoros (2020) showed that vaccines were politicised in public discourse as they became a morally divisive issue in terms of whether they were an individual or collective choice. Moreover, Lin et al. (2020) showed that media coverage of COVID-19 which suggested vaccination processes were rushed led to greater vaccine hesitancy among the public. Thus, news media coverage that suggested that COVID-19 presented minimal risks or that certain vaccines were unsafe, may have prolonged collective efforts to stop or slow the transmission of the virus (Radwan & Radwan, 2020; Sallam, 2021; Troiano & Nardi, 2021). Disregard for framing COVID-19 as a public health issue, in favour of alternative frames, may have detracted COVID-19 discourse from evidence-based and public health recommendations (Moon & Lee, 2020), to morally or politically charged understandings of the virus and response measures taken by governments around the globe (Bridgman et al., 2020; Rothgerber et al. 2020).

## **2.6 Emerging trends during COVID-19**

Pandemics may also be politicised in public discourse when different news media organisations support or combat official messaging (Birks, 2021). Pan et al. (2022) found that state-owned news media are more likely than privately-owned or independent news media organisations to adopt frames that align with official government messaging in news media coverage. Two separate studies by Alnahed (2021) and Birks (2021) stated that the initial news media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United Kingdom was

uncritical toward government decision-making and may have undermined the core role of journalists to analyse and scrutinise government decision-making (Birks, 2021; Hansen, 2018). In contrast, Lilleker et al. (2021), found that news media coverage which challenged official messaging during the COVID-19 pandemic may have contributed to public confusion or non-compliance with respect to preventative measures and undermined public health responses around the world. This is important to communication studies scholarship during a public crisis, as news media are viewed as the trusted source of news during a crisis (Johnston, 2020). However, digital news and social media platforms have presented a contemporary challenge to providing fact-based information that criticises official messaging only when necessary to hold decision-makers accountable (Birks, 2021; Hansen, 2018; Lilleker et al., 2021).

### **2.6.1 Digital news challenged official messaging**

According to Cinelli et al. (2020), digital sources of news, including newspaper websites and social media, some of which report information to varying degrees of accuracy and reliability, became a popular source of COVID-19 related information for the public. The widespread adoption of digital news platforms may have weakened the ability of governments to communicate official messaging to the public and implement response strategies to the COVID-19 pandemic (Coman et al., 2021; Tangcharoensathien et al., 2020). More voices than ever played a role in shaping the interpretation of official government statements and scientific findings during the COVID-19 pandemic, from alternative media sources to traditional news media, which enabled a plurality of opinion, usually on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram or TikTok (Lilleker et al., 2021; Price & Harbisher, 2021; Rubin, 2022). Schultz et al. (2011) found that these new technologies bypass traditional news media to create a direct line of communication between political leaders or social actors and the public. Therefore, social media permits political and social actors to actively engage in public discourse on controversial issues, including content consumers, content creators or online spokespeople who exhibit influence over their followers (Palen, 2008; Perng et al., 2013).

Lilleker et al. (2021) stated that a wide range of views contributed to the division in public opinion during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Utz et al. (2013), social media plays a fundamental role in the negotiation and dynamics of crises due to its immediacy and shareability, but it also provides a breeding ground for misinformation and disinformation that may mislead and deceive the public. It does not help that people are increasingly using social media to source information on public affairs (Anspach & Carlson, 2018). If official sources do not fill information gaps, high levels of public uncertainty facilitate speculation online, throughout social media (Cmeciu & Coman, 2018; Hart et al., 2020; Tangcharoensathien et al., 2020), and is problematic because misinformation tends to be shared more often by social media users than verified information (Vosoughi, et al., 2018). As a result, the World Health Organisation urged news media to fight the explosion in misinformation that overwhelmed the public during the COVID-19 pandemic and challenged the credibility of public messaging (Rubin, 2022; WHO, 2020). Thus, the role of news media was challenged by the wave of misinformation which swept through social media (Lilleker

et al., 2021), because social media has diffused flows of information and decentralised the control of messaging in a crisis (Chadwick, 2017), an area that was once solely occupied by the government or news media.

### **2.6.2 The public trusted news media**

Johnston (2020) highlighted that the public exhibits a preference for news media as a source of official facts during a public crisis. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pollock et al. (2021) agreed that the public is drawn to news media for official information in a crisis and is deemed to be more trustworthy than alternative or social media outlets because of their established status. This view is corroborated by Ghio et al. (2021), who posited that the evolving nature of the COVID-19 virus and its associated uncertainties meant that the public relied heavily on news media for information during the pandemic. However, Abdenour and Riffe (2019) identified a caveat where trust in news media is affected by the quality of journalistic reporting, which is dependent on adherence to core journalistic values, such as fair and balanced reporting.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, news media have been a vital source of information for the public on various topics, including the identification of the novel virus, policy responses such as lockdowns, social distancing or mask-wearing, and details of the COVID-19 vaccines (Mutua & Ong'ong'a, 2020). According to Gylfadottir et al. (2021), news media reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic educated people about actions and inactions to take against the virus, as well as common symptoms and where to seek medical treatment. However, people questioned the accuracy and authenticity of the information published during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the rapid proliferation of information online and on social media (Cinelli et al., 2020). A body of research indicated that right-leaning news media may have also played a role in spreading misinformation about the COVID-19 virus in North and South America (Motta et al., 2020; Oliveira et al., 2022; Simonov et al., 2022). Still, there is a gap in the literature as to whether news media in other countries acted in the same way or produced factual reporting that was free of speculation about health issues throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **2.6.3 News media grew active on social media**

Johnston and Rowney (2020) claimed that traditional news media may use social media to establish online credibility by sharing their own reports on their own social media accounts to help counter the challenge of multiple voices contributing to the narrative online (Price & Harbisher, 2021). News media were responsible for a sizable amount of discussion on social media about COVID-19 due to the large number of news media articles shared by news media outlets from their newspaper websites to their own social media accounts, indicating that news media's use of social media adjusted to reflect the increased use of digital technologies to source news updates by content consumers (Dinh & Nguyen, 2021; Kopecka-Piech & Lodzski, 2022). In the case of New Zealand, news media were found to use social media regularly to update their audiences on the COVID-19 pandemic (Theunissen & Wolf, 2023).

Contemporary studies by Anspach and Carlson (2018) and Johnston (2020) showed that the adoption of certain frames online allows news media to package an issue in a way that garners higher audience engagement, such as readership, viewership and clicks, to drive digital revenues. Thus, the idea of journalists holding those in power accountable for their actions (Hansen, 2018) is tempered by the modern realities of such attempts to capture new audiences (Johnston, 2020). One technique used by news media to promote reporting on digital and social media platforms is known as Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), which involves the use of certain words or phrases that are trending online in digital media texts posted on newspaper websites to increase engagement with their content (Giomelakis & Veglis, 2015; Lopezosa et al., 2019).

#### **2.6.4 Explanatory journalism increased**

A body of literature suggested that news media reporting suffers from a scientific knowledge deficit and may be a contributing factor to the use of non-public health frames (see section 2.4.1) (Birks, 2021; Goldacre & Farley, 2009; Hoffman Goetz et al., 2003; Lancet, 2014; Munoriyarwa, 2021; Rajkhowa, 2020). According to Goldacre and Farley (2009), few journalists possess a scientific background and may have been over-reliant on their sources to interpret quantitative and qualitative evidence which may lead to journalists reverting to conduits of information. Birks (2021) posited that a lack of scientific expertise among journalists may lead them to bias their source selection toward non-experts, particularly when faced with strict reporting deadlines. For example, Rajkhowa (2020) outlined that Australian media commentary in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic was unable to interpret and effectively communicate expert scientific advice to the public and this may have contributed to public confusion and dismissal of the Australian government's response to the pandemic.

Furthermore, Hoffman-Goetz et al. (2003) argued that news media coverage which fails to reflect the threats, risks or potential solutions related to a public health issue may be less effective in informing, engaging, and empowering the public to act as a collective in a health crisis. According to The Lancet (2014), news media reports do not often communicate science effectively, and this may largely contribute to misinformation, misunderstanding, fear, and maladaptive responses. Though health journalism in general may have traditionally used elite sources such as medical experts and health authorities (Briggs & Hallin, 2016), other research indicated that there is a distinct lack of expert advice contained in news media coverage of pandemics (Bardhan, 2001; Pan & Meng, 2016; Rajkhowa, 2020). This may have contributed to the imbalanced reporting of the COVID-19 pandemic (Benham, 2020). Filling this scientific knowledge gap in news media organisations is not only vital for effective public health communication, but also for the future of fair and balanced reporting of health issues (Birks, 2021; Munoriyarwa, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of communicating scientific topics to the non-specialised public, especially in a public health crisis or an information overload, where the public is overwhelmed by the amount of information about an issue and cannot make sense of it (Luzon, 2022).

Distinguishing between accurate and inaccurate information has recently become more challenging due to the rise of digital technologies and social media, and information gaps may be filled with rumours and myths (Muhammed & Mathew, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated explanatory journalism (Birks, 2021; Luzon, 2022) — a subfield of reporting where coverage explains complex or esoteric concepts to the public and increases the credibility of news media in the process (Bielik & Visnovsky, 2021). When expert knowledge is transformed and recontextualised so that it reaches non-specialised audiences, the public is more likely to engage with the issues and understand why they must act in a certain way (Luzon, 2022).

Explanatory journalism has been identified as an important tool in the accurate and effective communication of health issues to the public (Birks, 2021; Munoyirwa, 2021). The tool has also been touted to combat misinformation that proliferates on digital platforms to promote fact or evidence-based information (Lewandowsky & Van Der Linden, 2021; Roozenbeek et al., 2020) which has been identified as a crucial element of a successful response to a public crisis (Su et al., 2021). Luzon (2022) also outlined that successful explanatory journalism related to COVID-19 made a conscious effort to demonstrate the information was reliable and trustworthy by providing hyperlinks to external sources so that audiences may continue the learning process as well as data visualisation or audio and visual content that supported their face-based reporting their written argument to develop public understanding of a complex topic that engages the public to employ them as agents in the fight against the virus (Bielik & Visnovsky, 2021).

### **2.6.5 Understanding news media framing in New Zealand**

While the New Zealand Government's policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been studied, particularly its communication strategy (Baker & Wilson, 2022; Beattie & Priestley, 2021; Degani, 2022; Dyer, 2021; Jamieson, 2020; Lilleker et al., 2021; Martin-Anatias, 2021), the New Zealand news media coverage of COVID-19 has not received the same amount of scholarly attention. A recent study by Theunissen and Wolf (2023) examined the consumption, production, regulation, and outcomes of COVID-19 media in Australia and New Zealand was focused on the first 12 months of the pandemic, and paid attention to the interaction of cultural dynamics and mass media, rather than assessing news media framing and content. Koerber (2020) posited that news media should be viewed as a vehicle of influence over people's perception of a public crisis through its agenda, content and use of frames in future communications research. Koerber (2020) also stated that future research in this area "opens up new possibilities for the study of the [COVID-19] crisis" (p. 505). This may reflect the unique relationship between the government, the public, and news media during public crises, rather than the treatment of news media in academia as "just another channel for communication" (Koerber, 2020, p. 495).

## **2.7 Summary**

The literature review has identified that news media frames during the COVID-19 pandemic are an under-researched area of communication studies scholarship. Existing research has been conducted during the

initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic or confined to studies in North America, Europe or parts of Asia. Little is known about how news media framed the latter stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and its potential solutions, such as vaccination mandates. The exploration of this topic, in the context of New Zealand, may present an important balance to existing literature, as well as relevant and interesting findings, given how New Zealand's response strategy to the COVID-19 pandemic has become well-known across the globe.

The identification of key frames used in the coverage of COVID-19 vaccination mandates may reveal interesting insights into how public health issues are framed in New Zealand. Consequently, this may influence the perception of news media as credible sources of information during public crises, despite the challenges to news media organisations posed by social media. The literature review has highlighted several areas where communication studies scholarship could benefit from deeper insight, such as whether fair and balanced reporting is consistent throughout the news media landscape, or if explanatory journalism was used in New Zealand's news media coverage of the pandemic. Furthermore, it is evident from the literature review that the framing and coverage of the later stages of the COVID-19 pandemic by news media is under-researched, and communication studies scholarship stands to benefit from a richer understanding of the ways in which the public comes to understand a significant and life-changing event or issue through news media framing and coverage.

The study will analyse the content and dominant frames used by four New Zealand news media organisations. The research could contribute to the understanding of news media framing and coverage of the vaccination mandates as a potential solution to the COVID-19 pandemic in New Zealand. It could also lend insight into the role that national news media may have had in shaping public perception of the issue. The knowledge gained by this research could also help improve journalistic practice in news media organisations, optimise official public health messages and facilitate better sharing of key information in a public crisis context.

# Chapter Three: Methodology & Method

## 3.1 Introduction

The methodology chapter outlines the research design for the current study. It presents the research question and the paradigm of constructivism that guides this study. It also explores the justification for a qualitative research method, involving a thematic content analysis of 12 digital news media texts from four national news media organisations. Further, the chapter discusses the reflexivity of the research and the processes in place to ensure the reliability and validity of the current study. Finally, it outlines the data sampling and analysis process to generate the research findings.

## 3.2 Research question

The research aim of this study is to explore how New Zealand media framed and covered the vaccination mandates of education and healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on this aim, the following research question was established:

(RQ): What content and dominant frames were used by New Zealand news media in their coverage of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates that applied to the country's education and healthcare workers?

## 3.3 Research paradigm

A paradigm is the set of beliefs that guide a research study and is defined as a “set of interrelated assumptions about the social world, which provides a philosophical and conceptual framework for the organized study of that world” (Filstead, 1979, p. 34). Guba and Lincoln (1994) identified four major paradigms commonly used by qualitative researchers: positivism, post-positivism, constructivism, and critical realism. While a researcher may move between different positions along the paradigmatic spectrum, it is important that the researcher's position is stated to communicate the underlying assumptions and beliefs that guide the research (Madill et al., 2000).

On one side of the paradigmatic spectrum are positivists, who believe that there is a singular objective ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ (Collins et al., 2012; Higgs, 1997) where axiomatic rules are theorised and then applied in research to develop academic insights (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Qualitative researchers challenge the foundational assumptions of positivism which asserts the existence of an objective reality (Grbich, 2012). Thus, some qualitative researchers believe that the development of knowledge is subject to interpretation or construction, which in turn may mean that ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ are subjective concepts, depending on the individual (Grbich, 2012). As such, the positivist view is in misalignment with the subjectivity of qualitative techniques that account for how people interpret and make sense of the world around them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

The two main contemporary paradigms in media and communication studies research are constructivism and critical realism (Flick, 2022; Jensen, 2021). The current research study involves an analysis of the framing and content produced by news media coverage of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates in New Zealand. It is therefore important to understand how news media framed and covered the vaccination mandates, and how these frames and content could potentially influence public perceptions of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates. Thus, the paradigm that is best suited to the current study is constructivist. A constructivist perspective guides this study and assumes that meaning is socially produced and reproduced, rather than already existing within individuals centred around an objective reality or meaning (Potter & Robles, 2022). Constructivism also argues that any conception of ontology is irrelevant because the epistemology simply reflects the ontology (Potter & Robles, 2022).

According to Burr (2015), constructivism is more of a landscape than a distinct perspective and may therefore be applied to the broad study of texts and how they are interpreted or experienced by people. This subjective paradigm considers people's beliefs, values, and context as contributing factors to how they form an understanding of the world around them (Blaikie, 2009; Higgs, 1997). Thus, to a constructivist, everyone's worldview is shaped by a range of cultural, economic and social factors (Potter & Robles, 2022; Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Constructivist researchers in the discipline of communication studies focus on how texts contribute to the construction of social realities (Potter & Robles, 2022) as news media reporting may be considered a vehicle of influence that contributes to the construction of reality, depending on how news is framed, and what content is included or excluded in news media coverage (Gitlin, 2003).

### **3.4 Qualitative research approach**

While both qualitative and quantitative methods may focus on the individual's viewpoint, quantitative methods collect numerical or statistical data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) and generally fail to account for the idea that social realities may vary between individuals (Morgan & Smircich, 1980; Potter & Robles, 2022). In contrast, qualitative research methods are suited to constructivist studies which seek to understand the meaning and context of a specific data set (Potter & Robles, 2022). In the context of news media analysis, qualitative research methods focus on the words, meanings and descriptions of a specific issue (Flick, 2022; Kelsey & Way, 2021) and often use thematic analysis as a qualitative research method to understand the content being studied (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

A body of literature also showed that qualitative research presents researchers with an opportunity to understand how individuals construct meaning and knowledge (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Flick, 2022; Jensen, 2021; Leavy, 2014) that contributes to "building knowledge about the social world and human experience" (Leavy, 2014, p. 1). In the context of news media reporting, qualitative interpretations of data are preferred when the aim is to understand the depth and complexity of the broader economic, political and social aspects of news media reporting (Kelsey & Way, 2021). Kelsey (2015, p. 75) pointed out in his research on newspaper responses to the 7 July 2005 bombings in London, that many of the same "words,

phrases and themes occurred in different discursive contexts and often served oppositional interests” and argued that quantitative methods do not capture the nuanced and contextual meaning within texts, nor the relationships they share with the wider processes of news media production (such as agenda-setting and framing). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Teti et al. (2020) stated that:

Qualitative methods can play a pivotal role in understanding epidemics like COVID-19, the people involved in them, and effective solutions and strategies... Qualitative methods can give insight into the current situation as it evolves and lessons to bring to bear on future epidemics and how to effectively manage them (p. 4).

Thus, a qualitative research design is suited to this research study as it seeks to understand how the COVID-19 vaccination mandates in New Zealand were framed and covered by news media.

### **3.5 Data Sampling**

An understanding of New Zealand media is fundamental to this research. A recent report titled ‘Aotearoa New Zealand Media Ownership’ (Hope et al., 2022) revealed the landscape of New Zealand media. Media ownership in New Zealand is split into four main categories: state-owned, shareholder-owned, independently owned, and privately held media companies (Hope et al., 2022). While prominent television, print and radio news media organisations exist in New Zealand, this study is focused on digital news media in line with current trends in news media consumption (Newman, 2022). Digital news media have also been shown to reach a wider audience compared to traditional print news media (Martens et al., 2018). It is also in the interest of limiting the scope of the research. It was therefore important to sample the data from a range of digital news media outlets that would facilitate rich and deep discussion of the investigation. The four digital news media organisations used in this study are Stuff, The New Zealand Herald, Radio New Zealand, and Newsroom — four traditional and established national news media outlets (Hope et al. 2022) that produced digital media coverage on their newspaper websites about New Zealand’s vaccination mandate during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Kelsey and Way (2021), a deep analysis of a small sample (at least eight news media texts) is considered representative to provide valuable insights across two or more news media organisations. Thus, 12 news media texts in total were selected to provide a representative sample. Three texts were sampled from each of the four news media outlets in this study to facilitate rich analysis and discussion.

#### **3.5.1 Stuff**

Stuff is New Zealand’s largest news media company (Hope et. al, 2022), and the “nation’s biggest news website” (Hope et. al, 2022, p. 54). Stuff is independently and privately owned, but not listed on the New Zealand stock market, and is therefore not required to make its financial position public (in the way NZME, the parent company of the New Zealand Herald, is required to do). This ownership model is reflected in Stuff’s recent 2022 Impact Report, which explicitly stated that “... our most important

measure of success is more than just the bottom line. We'd rather be judged on the impact we've made on people and the planet" (Stuff, 2022, p. 3).

### **3.5.2 The New Zealand Herald**

The New Zealand Herald is a privately owned media organisation and is a subsidiary of its parent organisation NZME, which is a publicly listed company on the New Zealand stock market (NZME, 2022). It is considered one of the most widely-read digital news media in New Zealand (Hope et. al, 2022). NZME has invested heavily in growing its online presence and announced that more than 100,000 New Zealanders were paying for a New Zealand Herald premium in 2022 (Hope et. al, 2022).

### **3.5.3 Radio New Zealand**

Radio New Zealand is a state-owned news media organisation. Its 2022 annual report stated that "Independence, trust and freedom of expression have always been at the core of RNZ's mandate and must also shape the new entity's primary purpose of serving the public good" and suggested that Radio New Zealand sees news as a public good that has the potential to benefit society (Radio New Zealand, 2022, p. 12). It was therefore selected in this study for three reasons. First, it is state-owned and may therefore reveal different news framing and coverage compared to privately and independently owned news media entities. Second, Radio New Zealand is the third most popular news website in New Zealand (Radio New Zealand, 2021). Third, Radio New Zealand is considered to be the most trusted media organisation in New Zealand (JMAD, 2022; Kantar Public, 2022).

### **3.5.4 Newsroom**

Finally, Newsroom is an independent news media organisation that focuses on digital news media and reached around 700,000 unique readers a month in 2022 (Jennings, 2022). Independent media outlets tend to be set up to cater to a specific audience. According to Newsroom's 2022 Impact Report, Newsroom provides "high quality investigative journalism, and a platform for the thoughtful, evidence-based exchange of ideas" (Newsroom, 2022, p. 3). Newsroom places a strong focus on business, environmental political and social issues and focuses on "amplifying expertise over celebrity" (Newsroom, 2022, p. 5-7). The idea that Newsroom considers itself a specialist in investigative journalism that seeks to consult with experts is indicative that Newsroom places greater importance on journalistic values than other news media outlets.

### **3.5.5 Sample selection parameters**

The timeline of New Zealand's vaccination mandate policies is important to this research. In New Zealand, the initial vaccine mandate of interest was made on 11 October 2021 to cover high-risk workers in the health and disability sector, who were required to be fully vaccinated by 1 December 2021 and to receive their first dose by 30 October 2021 (Hipkins, 2021a). The same mandate also stated that education staff

were required to be fully vaccinated by 1 January 2022 and to receive their first dose by 15 November (Hipkins, 2021a). On 23 October 2021, vaccination mandates were extended to cover *all* health and disability workers who required their first dose of the vaccine by 15 November 2021, while prison workers needed their first dose of the vaccine by 6 November 2021 (Hipkins, 2021b). Workplace vaccination requirements were extended to cover the Police and Defence Force on 26 November 2021, with the first dose of vaccine required by 17 January 2022 (Wood, 2021). COVID-19 Vaccination Certificates were also required for workers in public-facing non-essential businesses – such as hair salons, gyms and hospitality venues – during certain stages of the pandemic response, and members of the public were required to present vaccine passes (Hipkins, 2021c). The requirement for vaccine passes ended in April 2022 (Hipkins, 2022). All vaccine mandates were scrapped once the COVID-19 Protection Framework was retired in September 2022 (Ardern & Verrall, 2022).

For this research, the vaccination mandate that took effect on 15 November 2021 and covered education and health and disability workers is of interest. This is because these two sectors make up a large proportion of the New Zealand workforce and were deemed high-risk during the pandemic because of their proximity to unvaccinated or immunocompromised individuals, such as children who could not be vaccinated because the vaccine had not been approved for that those under the age of 12 until 3 December 2021 (Medsafe, 2023), or health patients who could also not be vaccinated because of the risk to their health.

To acquire the sample, the keywords ‘COVID-19’, ‘vaccines’, ‘vaccination’ and ‘mandates’ were inputted into the four news media websites. This was done to develop a sample relevant to the specific issue under study to permit deep discussion (Kelsey & Way, 2021). The data sample range for this study was therefore selected from 15 November to 29 November 2021. A fortnight provided ample time and text (12 news media texts) to provide rich examples of news media framing and coverage of the vaccination mandates on education and health and disability workers (Kelsey & Way, 2021). The range also guides the study to determine how media framing and coverage could have been made salient in the news media agenda during the two-week timeframe.

### **3.6 Research method: thematic content analysis**

Content analysis of news media reports is a research method that analyses the use of particular words, themes and other textual characteristics within a sample of news stories (Kelsey & Way, 2021). According to Kelsey and Way (2021), “quantitative interpretations of data cannot apply the depth and complexity that are needed to address the wider political and social significance not just of what newspapers write but how newspapers write and construct social reality” (p.114). Capturing the wider context of what new media report on and the frames used in their news coverage and how this may influence public perception of the issue is of relevance to this study. Thus, content analysis needs to be guided by a particular method. The method selected for this research study is thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Thematic content analysis is used in qualitative research to identify, analyse and report patterns or themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). It can be described as a process of searching for themes that are important to the description of the specific issue under study (Joffe, 2012). Thematic content analysis can be applied to textual data such as news media reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Dawson, 2013; Howitt & Cramer, 2010). It is a flexible method that may be used across several epistemological positions as it is not underpinned by any pre-existing theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2021). However, it is suggested that the epistemological position is made clear by the researcher (see section 3.3) (Willig, 2014).

Braun and Clarke (2021) outlined that constructivism examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings and experiences are the effects of a range of discourse opportunities within society. Therefore, thematic analysis does not seek to focus on motivation or individual beliefs but instead seeks to theorise the sociocultural contexts and structural conditions that enable the data being studied. Thematic analysis can either identify themes inductively from data or deductively from previous research (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Howitt & Cramer, 2010; Lyons & Coyle, 2016).

Themes at the semantic level are identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data and the analysis does not search beyond what exists in the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Lyons & Coyle, 2016). The latent level themes are identified by what may have shaped or informed the data, and latent analysis explores the meaning at the underlying or implicit level (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Lyons & Coyle, 2016). This study will predominantly focus on analysing the latent meaning of the data to provide explanations of the underlying meanings within the text, which tend to be associated with constructivist research (Braun & Clarke, 2021). However, there are some instances when semantic analysis may be more appropriate, and Braun and Clarke (2021) stated that this is acceptable since it is not a binary choice between the semantic or latent level.

### **3.7 Method**

The first phase involved becoming familiar with the data through transcribing, reading and repeated reading of the data. The researcher immersed himself in the data to become familiar with the depth and breadth of the content and to identify early patterns and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The second phase of Braun and Clarke's (2021) framework requires the researcher to generate initial codes that represent the explicit meaning of the data (Boyatzis, 1998). Kerlinger (1986) defined content analysis as a systematic method in which the process of coding should remain consistent throughout the analysis. Thus, the entire data set is examined systematically to ensure consistency (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Weber, 1990), and is coded for as many patterns or themes in the early stage of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In this study, the process of deductive-inductive coding was based on existing typologies within the literature and was informed by Van Gorp (2010) to ensure its reliability (see sections 3.8 and 3.9). Further, each of the 12 news media texts was systematically coded, line-by-line and paragraph-by-paragraph, to identify potential themes relevant to the research question of the research study. DelveTool,

a qualitative data analysis software, was used to code each of the 12 digital news media texts. According to Braun & Clarke (2021), coding is an iterative process. Thus, the coding phase was repeated several times to refine the set of codes and to ensure they best captured the patterns, meanings or themes of the data.

Phase three involves sorting the codes into potential themes from the analysis of similar codes and the sorting of these codes into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In this study, the development of initial themes occurred in DelveTool. A hierarchy of the most important themes was subsequently developed in this study by each theme's relevance to the research question, how often it appeared across the data set and whether the theme fit the overarching narrative or generalised theme of the research study. As the researcher entered phase three, an initial thematic map was developed to sort the codes into themes and demonstrate early connections as well as distinguish themes from each other (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Potential themes were then reviewed to generate final themes and subthemes. Braun and Clarke (2021) suggested another iterative process that involved reviewing the coded extracts to determine if they appear in a coded pattern or that the researcher considers the validity of the themes in relation to the data set. In the present study, if the codes did not fit the theme, they were assigned to a new theme, moved to an existing one, or discarded. Moreover, each potential theme was cross-examined with the original data to verify its alignment with that particular theme (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Van Gorp, 2010).

This process produced five different themes (see chapter four) and the aspects of the data they each capture (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In the present study, each theme was named to provide the reader with an understanding of its content, and a final thematic map was generated to illustrate how the themes fit together and tell a story about how New Zealand news media framed and covered the COVID-19 vaccination mandates. The researcher then selected rich and vivid extracts to illustrate themes and analysis in relation to the research question (see chapter five).

### **3.8 Reflexivity**

Boyatzis (1998) outlined that qualitative analysis may suffer from researcher projection, because the qualitative researcher is part of the research process, and the researcher's own experiences or knowledge may be reflected within the research. According to Olmos-Vega et al. (2022), reflexivity in qualitative research is about acknowledging the researcher's role in the research. However, there are several ways researchers may be reflexive, including acknowledging their subjectivity, explaining it, attempting to eliminate it, or even capitalising on it (Gentles et al., 2014).

The researcher's previous experience and knowledge obtained from working on the New Zealand Government's COVID-19 response and in news media added to the guiding knowledge of the study (Gentles et al., 2014). Van Gorp (2010) posited that the deductive analysis of news frames guides the inductive phase by providing frames that are established within the literature and are relevant to the issue under study. Such a strategy may limit, and even eliminate, subjectivity from content analysis (Santos et

al., 2013; Van Gorp, 2010). To do so, a deductive analysis of frames relevant to the issue (see section 2.4) guided the inductive analysis in which themes were derived from the data sample (see chapter four). Thus, the existing typologies of the moral, economic consequence<sup>2</sup> and human-interest frames outlined by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) guided the coding of this study. In addition, the researcher modified these typologies and added the public health frame, as stated by Rowbotham et al. (2019). In the present study, the definitions of explanatory journalism and fair and balanced reporting followed Luzon (2022) (see section 2.6.4) and Benham (2020) (see section 2.2), respectively.

While the researcher leans centre-left politically, he reflected on his position at regular intervals throughout the study and made every effort to ensure that the data sampling, coding parameters and identified themes were not guided by his own political beliefs and instead broadly relevant to the specific issues under study. This was achieved by maintaining a reflective journal to record and reflect on political biases to avoid colouring the interpretation and analysis of the data (Ortlipp, 2008). Moreover, the framework of Kitchener and Kitchener (2009) that identifies the different levels of reasoning that underpin ethical decision-making was followed. At level 1, a researcher's moral sense and judgement are informed by their beliefs and values and used to guide non-complex ethical decisions. However, more complex decisions require engagement with ethical codes formed by the accumulated wisdom of a profession (level 2), or the critical evaluation of the decision in relation to beneficence, non-maleficence, honesty and fairness (level 3). In the present study, only the first level was needed and used to solve non-complex ethical decisions.

### 3.9 Reliability and validity

Krippendorff (2019) stated that stability, replicability and accuracy are needed to establish the reliability and validity of qualitative content analysis. Weber (1990) posited that stability is achieved when data is coded several times over. In this study, coding was treated as an iterative process and may be considered stable (Weber, 1990). Potter and LeVine-Donnerstein (1999) also suggested that a systematic coding framework to extract themes from the data may ensure stability and accuracy of content analysis (see section 3.8). One criticism of qualitative research is that the findings are unable to be precisely replicated because qualitative researchers believe that social worlds are not fixed in time and therefore the interpretations of those worlds continuously change (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Schofield, 1993). However, the constructivist agenda is to provide deep descriptions and understandings of people, objects or events in a social context and has not sought to make total or statistical generalisations (Hammersley, 2013). According to Williams (2000), qualitative research situated within the constructivist paradigm may produce *moderatum* generalisations, where situational aspects fit within a broader set of features. Williams (2000) suggested that *moderatum* generalisations from limited cases to unknown ones are possible under categorical equivalence. Thus, the findings of this study may be reproduced to the extent that *moderatum*

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<sup>2</sup> Referred to as the 'economic' frame for the remainder of the current study.

generalisation applies (Williams, 2000). According to Brennen (2021), “constructivists replace positive concepts of external and internal validity with notions of authenticity and trustworthiness” (p. 10). Van Gorp (2010) claimed that the inductive coding framework ensures the validity, and therefore authenticity and trustworthiness, of thematic content analysis by reducing or eliminating the subjectivity of the researcher. Moreover, transparency about the researcher’s existing knowledge, beliefs and experiences may also enhance the validity of the study (see section 3.8) (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Leung, 2015; Fairclough, 1992).

### **3.10 Summary**

This chapter has outlined and discussed the methodological approach and methods of this research. To address the research question, this research utilises qualitative research methods, including thematic content analysis to provide insight into how news media framed and reported on the vaccination mandates in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in New Zealand. News media reports used in the study were obtained directly from their websites and uploaded to DelveTool for coding. The chapter also discussed outlined the steps taken by the researcher to address the limitations of a qualitative study.

# Chapter Four: Findings

## 4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the framing and content of media coverage of the vaccination mandates in New Zealand. Data was gathered through qualitative analysis of 12 digital news media texts from four different national news media organisations, including Stuff, The New Zealand Herald, Radio New Zealand and Newsroom. Thematic content analysis was then used to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to better understand the framing and content of media coverage of the vaccination mandates in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Five themes have been found to be present in the data: the moral frame (as to whether vaccination is an individual or collective choice), the prevalence of human-interest framing, the focus on negative economic consequences, the considerable variation in the use of explanatory journalism, and a varied adherence to the journalistic value of fair and balanced reporting. This chapter presents the findings of the thematic content analysis of the 12 digital news media texts. For simplicity, the data is presented first with a brief description of the theme, followed by a breakdown of the thematic content in this order: Stuff, The New Zealand Herald, Radio New Zealand and Newsroom.

## 4.2 Theme One — Moral Framing:

A significant theme that came out of the data was morality framing, where news media present moral evaluations of the public health response (Thomas et al., 2020). The moral evaluation of the vaccination mandates in the news media reports studied is presented in terms of individualism or collectivism, where vaccination is either viewed as an individual or collective choice (Smith & Graham, 2019). This theme therefore considered news media framing and coverage in terms of the wider arguments of morality with respect to vaccination mandates, specifically where the concepts of individualism, where theory suggested people have an unequivocal right to make their own decision (Hofstede, 1980;2001), or collectivism, where individual rights may be restricted if it promotes public benefit (Schwartz, 1990), emerged from the data sample. Stuff framed the vaccination mandates from the individualistic perspective and appeared to highlight individuals in their coverage who believed the vaccination mandates violated or infringed their civil liberties (Rosenfeld & Tomiyama, 2022) or that the vaccine itself was not safe (Pan & Meng, 2016; Sandell et al., 2013). Radio New Zealand and Newsroom used the collectivist frame and appeared to outline reasons as to why the restriction of civil liberties may promote public benefit (Rothgerber et al., 2020). Lastly, The New Zealand Herald used both frames.

### 4.2.1 Stuff

All three of the Stuff reports emphasised the morality framing from an individualistic perspective. The data that emerged from Stuff's reporting focused on people who felt they were being deprived of their freedom

of choice, giving them space to make an argument in favour of liberty. The most prominent example is found in the second Stuff report, *Covid-19: Vaccine mandate 'knee-jerk', spurring 'hated' – school staff say* (McNamara, 2021, as cited in Jones, 2021):

“There’s so much of it [research] out there, it just became hard to see what the truth is.”

“When it came down to it, all my research, all my reading all my thoughts lead me in circles, and they all came back to; it’s about people’s freedom, their right to choose for themselves” (paras 16-17).

The above example came from a staff member of an early childhood education centre who explained her individualistic decision-making and listed her reasons as to why she chose not to get vaccinated.

Another example from the third Stuff report, *Unvaccinated teacher: 'My 15-year career is basically down the drain'*, (Harding, 2021) provided further evidence of people affected by the vaccination mandates to argue their freedoms. In this report, a school principal was quoted giving their opinion that vaccination should be an individual choice: “When you are talking about something this personal, something that’s happening to your body, you should be allowed to choose” (Griglington, 2021, as cited in Harding, 2021, para 13).

#### **4.2.2 The New Zealand Herald**

All three of the New Zealand Herald reports contained individualistic framing and coverage of the vaccination mandates and devoted media attention to individualistic decision-making that argued people’s freedoms. However, this was done at the beginning of each of the three reports studied. For example, in the first New Zealand Herald report, *Vaccine mandate means more than 100 Northland District Health Board staff stood down*, where a nurse is quoted expressing her concerns over the vaccine and why she chose to remain unvaccinated against COVID-19, despite having been vaccinated against other diseases in the past (Mortimer, 2021, as cited in Ali, 2021):

"I looked at what the vaccination was and how long it stayed in the body. Pfizer is an experimental medication that we are giving to the general population and this is contrary to everything we've done in medication," she claimed (para 11).

Furthermore, the findings also showed that two out of the three reports tended to present collectivist counterarguments to the individualist framing (Ali, 2021; Schwanecke, 2021). For example, the first New Zealand Herald report emphasised the opinion of the Nursing Council of New Zealand that health workers should be vaccinated to protect the health of vulnerable patients (The Nursing Council, 2021, as cited in Ali, 2021):

They [nurses] should be prepared to discuss evidence-based information about vaccination and its benefits to assist informed decision making, the council said.

“As a regulator, we respect an individual’s right to have their own opinions, but it is the council’s view that there is no place for anti-vaccination messages in professional health practice, nor any promotion of anti-

vaccination claims including on social media and advertising by health practitioners” (paras 23-24).

The example above demonstrated how the New Zealand Herald appeared to balance their moral framing between individualist or collectivist framing.

#### **4.2.3 Radio New Zealand**

All three of the Radio New Zealand reports framed and covered their content from the collective perspective. Radio New Zealand’s coverage emphasised the impact on New Zealand society when health or education workers chose to remain unvaccinated against COVID-19. This was covered from the perspective of those who were put at greater risk when they were placed in the care of unvaccinated carers, such as immunocompromised patients in the presence of health workers, or school children who were under the age of 12 and therefore unable to be vaccinated. In the first Radio New Zealand report, *The missing context in vaccine media coverage* (Donell, 2021), the author explicitly mentioned Stuff and New Zealand Herald reporting as two news media organisations that devoted their coverage to unvaccinated healthcare and education workers and giving these individuals the opportunity to argue their freedoms or voice their opinions on the safety and efficacy of the vaccine. In contrast, the first Radio New Zealand report retorted such coverage and presented a counterargument from the collectivist perspective: “Whatever they say about their motives, they’re being stood down for not fulfilling their duty to protect the vulnerable people in their care” (Donell, 2021, para 13).

The second Radio New Zealand report, *Vaccine mandate: ‘Incredible pressure’ on remaining hospital staff*, quoted a doctor who expressed disappointment in healthcare workers who had chosen not to get vaccinated because of their individualistic rationale (Betty, 2021, as cited in Moodie, 2021):

“I am disappointed that this number of health workers would take this opinion about the vaccine and I suppose buy into some of the pseudoscience that is out there about the vaccine, because these are leaders in the community in terms of the Covid response” (para 21).

#### **4.2.4 Newsroom**

All three of the Newsroom reports rejected individualistic framing in favour of collectivist framing. In doing so, Newsroom employed expert opinions from medical or legal professionals in some of their reporting. One report considered the standard of best practice in public health policies involving the restriction of public behaviours and provided counterarguments to the following three main criticisms of the vaccination mandates found in public debate: vaccination mandates are ineffective and counterproductive when building public trust; vaccine mandates conflict with the principle that the ‘least restrictive alternative’ intervention should be used; and that vaccine mandates for Covid-19 violate important human rights, such as the right to refuse to undergo medical treatment (Fenton, 2021). In the first Newsroom report, *Why Vaccine Mandates are Ethical*, the author presents a morally collectivist argument in favour of vaccination mandates (Fenton, 2021):

Like all coercive policies, vaccine mandates restrict individual liberty by requiring a particular course of action. Seat belt laws and penalties for tax evasion are similarly coercive policies justified by appeal to reducing risks of harm, promoting social benefits, and fairly distributing burdens.

The fact that a policy is coercive does not alone make it ethically problematic. A coercive policy will be easier to justify when the cost to the individual of doing what is required is small, the harms prevented are significant, and the policy promotes important public good that can only be secured by a collective effort. Covid-19 vaccine mandates meet these conditions (paras 2-3).

The second Newsroom report, *The problem with the 'individual rights' movement*, (Thorne, 2021), outlined the differences between the legal and democratic systems in New Zealand and the United States and argued that New Zealand is a more collective society:

New Zealand society, reflected in our own constitutional structure, involves a much stronger view of the collective - the rights of society as a whole and the conditions that come with being a part of society.

Replacing this with a focus on individualism is selfish, does great harm to the community, and shows a lack of respect for others. Instead of focusing on the rights of the individual, the focus should be on the collective, and the things that need to be done for the good of the community (paras 20-21).

The same report also referenced several legal cases from the United States to argue that the restriction of individual liberties may be in the interest of the collective (Thorne, 2021).

The third Newsroom report, *Teachers question the rush back to school*, (Scott, 2021), argued that the resumption of in-person schooling was a risk to the collective: “The return to on-site learning means inflating bubbles and increasing risks for unvaccinated kids as daily rates of community cases climb” (para 1).

### **4.3 Theme Two — Human-Interest Framing:**

The next theme that came out of the data is the prevalence of human-interest stories in the coverage of vaccination mandates. Human-interest stories describe how people have been individually impacted by an issue or event and are generally considered ‘soft news’, which is more concerned with emotion and experience, rather than factual information (Witzig & Seleztsky, 2010). Therefore, human-interest stories tend to use emotional language to evoke empathy from the audience and generate buy-in (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Zillman, 2002). This theme suggested that reporting from Stuff and the New Zealand Herald focused on how individuals are personally impacted by the vaccination mandates and contained emotional or sympathetic language. These human-interest stories provided significant media attention toward unvaccinated individuals and how they were personally impacted by the vaccination mandates and focused strongly on the human element of reporting (Gallagher, 2018). This frame was used by Stuff and the New Zealand Herald, which was openly criticised by Radio New Zealand in one of the reports studied. Newsroom used the human-interest frame in one of its reports but took a different approach.

### 4.3.1 Stuff

All three Stuff reports focused on human-interest stories and outlined how individuals had been personally impacted by their decision not to get vaccinated against COVID-19 and were quoted sharing their emotions, feelings and opinions about the issue.

The first Stuff report *'Farewell and thank you': Health board chief says goodbye to unvaccinated staff*, started with the focal point of how a mental health nurse had been personally affected after refusing to get vaccinated against COVID-19, reporting on how she cried after losing her job as a result (McNamara, 2021, as cited in O'Callaghan & Broughton, 2021):

Christchurch mental health nurse Meagan McNamara sent a goodbye email to her team and cried as she rode away from her job for the last time.

"I gave my team a card and hugged my boss, I cried as I rode away from work" (paras 1-2).

The second Stuff report, *Covid-19: Vaccine mandate 'knee-jerk', spurring 'hated' – school staff say* (Jones, 2021) provided the most prominent example that showed how one individual felt alienated by their decision to not be vaccinated against COVID-19: "There's division, there's discrimination, there's real hatred and animosity towards people for what should be someone's personal choice" (McNamara, 2021, as cited in Jones, 2021, para 27).

The third Stuff report, *Unvaccinated teacher: 'My 15-year career is basically down the drain'*, told the story of how a schoolteacher felt like she had lost her career after refusing to get vaccinated against COVID-19: "It's basically 15 years of a career down the drain. Fifteen years of learning the craft of teaching and helping these kids," she said (Mortimer, 2021 as cited in Harding, 2021, para 3).

The same report (Harding, 2021) focused on explicitly mentioning that one unvaccinated teacher who lost her job was a 'mother' and the 'sole' income earner in her household:

The mother of three, who is the sole bread winner in her family, is among an unknown number of teachers who are refusing to be vaccinated across the country and will be barred from their school grounds after November 15 (para 4).

### 4.3.2 The New Zealand Herald

All three New Zealand Herald reports focused on the narratives of individuals who had been personally affected by the vaccination mandates. The human-interest frame used by the New Zealand Herald reported on unvaccinated workers who were unable to return to work and the people close to them who were also affected. The first New Zealand Herald report, *Vaccine mandate means more than 100 Northland District Health Board staff stood down*, told the story of a nurse who refused to get vaccinated and lost a job she had held for 20 years as a result (Ali, 2021):

After nearly two decades working as a nurse at a public hospital in Northland, Jill Mortimer is suddenly in the unenviable position of leaving the job she loves.

She is among 37 nurses employed by the Northland District Health Board who have been stood down because they had not had their first dose of Covid vaccination by Monday's deadline (paras 1-2).

The third New Zealand Herald report, *Covid-19 Delta outbreak: Teaching staff farewelled ahead of vaccine mandate deadline*, focused on the story of the school's Service Academy director who lost his job due to failing to meet the vaccination mandate deadline (Henry, 2021). The report highlighted the person was a former army veteran who "struggled to compose himself" as the school bid goodbye and that students "shed tears" at the procession (Henry, 2021, paras 12-13). In that same report, the school principal was quoted discussing the need to sympathise with the staff who chose not to get vaccinated against COVID-19 as they are still human (Craggs, 2021, as cited in Henry, 2021):

"That person sitting next to you... who two months ago was one of your favourite colleagues and you got on incredibly well with, is not a different person because they've decided not to get the vaccine, or have decided to get the vaccine. They're still the same person, and they need to have understanding and empathy" (para 17).

The second New Zealand Herald report, *Covid-19 vaccine mandate: Teacher aide for boy with learning difficulties among seven barred from school*, framed and covered the issue around a student with severe learning difficulties such as "ADHD, anxiety and sensory processing issues" which meant that he would not have the support he needed at school after his teacher aide lost her job (Schwanecke, 2021, para 22).

### **4.3.3 Radio New Zealand**

One Radio New Zealand report mentioned Stuff and the New Zealand Herald reporting for their apparent tendency to use human-interest framing and coverage in their reporting of vaccination mandates. In the first Radio New Zealand report, *The missing context in vaccine media coverage*, the author questioned the human-interest framing and coverage employed in Stuff and the New Zealand Herald reporting, despite unvaccinated workers representing a small proportion of their workforce (Donell, 2021):

Around 1300 DHB staff and an estimated 700 teachers have been stood down this week after failing to comply with the government's vaccine mandate.

Though that represents around 1.5 percent and 1 percent of the public health and education workforces respectively, the comparatively small ranks of the unvaccinated have punched above their weight in generating news headlines (paras 1-2).

The Radio New Zealand report cited the use of specific language in both Stuff's and the New Zealand Herald's coverage and stated that "many of these stories are sprinkled with sympathetic language" (Donell, 2021, para 5). The report also questioned the credibility of reporting which assumed the audiences of various news media understood the public health justification for the vaccination mandate (Donell, 2021).

#### 4.3.4 Newsroom

Of the three Newsroom reports studied, one used the human-interest frame (Scott, 2021). In contrast to Stuff or the New Zealand Herald, which both focused on unvaccinated education and healthcare workers, this report devoted its attention to vaccinated education workers who expressed concern about returning to teach when children under the age of 12 could not be vaccinated (Scott, 2021). The primary concern of these education workers was that unvaccinated children would increase the risk of infecting their own families with COVID-19 and put them at risk (Scott, 2021, para 27).

The third Newsroom report *Teachers question the rush back to school* (Scott, 2021) highlighted the perceived impacts on vaccinated education workers when schools were reopening, despite the vaccination mandates not covering children under the age of 12. The report also quoted a teacher who questioned the thinking behind the return of in-person schooling, despite the apparent risk (Underwood, 2021, as cited in Scott, 2021):

“We are a team of five million fighting against Covid, right? Let’s not put our children, our taonga, on the front lines. Remember, they have no say in any of this” (para 32).

The example above emphasised that the move by the government to reopen schools put children at risk and may have evoked an emotional response from the audience, such as parents.

#### 4.4 Theme Three — Economic Framing:

Another dominant theme that emerged from the data was the framing of vaccination mandates in terms of their economic impacts. Economic impacts are inextricably linked with health issues and news media have a responsibility to cover these economic consequences (Ophir, 2018). The data showed that three of the four news media organisations studied (Stuff, The New Zealand Herald and Radio New Zealand) covered the negative economic impacts of the vaccination mandates (Ogbodo et al., 2020). Further, the coverage focused on how the education and healthcare sectors struggled to cope with the loss of staff who refused to get vaccinated against COVID-19, even when the proportion of unvaccinated education and healthcare workers was small.

##### 4.4.1 Stuff

Stuff used economic framing to report on how the vaccination mandates would negatively impact staffing at schools and hospitals in two out of the three reports studied. The first Stuff report *Farewell and thank you: Health board chief says goodbye to unvaccinated staff* outlined that the maternity unit was not expecting to lose any workers, but the midwifery team was susceptible to staff shortages (O’Callaghan & Broughton, 2021): “The private hospital was working with the CDHB on solutions, including recruitment to build up the midwifery team again,” he said (Roxborough, 2021, as cited in O’Callaghan & Broughton, 2021, para 23).

The third Stuff report, *Unvaccinated teacher: 'My 15-year career is basically down the drain'*, quoted a school principal who discussed the secondary effects of the vaccination mandates, and stated that schools faced the possibility of losing staff (Dick, 2021, as cited in Harding, 2021):

Central South College principal Grant Dick, also the Southland Secondary Principals' Association chairman, said most schools were facing the possibility of losing valued staff.

"In general, it's an incredibly difficult situation to be losing teachers from the profession across the country," he said in a written statement (paras 23-24).

#### 4.4.2 The New Zealand Herald

All three New Zealand Herald reports focused on how the wider education and healthcare sectors were disrupted by the vaccination mandates, particularly where staffing shortages had already been experienced. In relation to healthcare, the first New Zealand Herald report, *Vaccine mandate means more than 100 Northland District Health Board staff stood down*, listed statistics about compliance rates of different District Health Boards in New Zealand (Ali, 2021):

Waikato DHB had the highest number of staff stood down, with 154, followed by Bay of Plenty (123) and Counties Manukau (119).

However, the DHBs with the highest proportion of unvaccinated staff stood down were Northland, Taranaki, Nelson-Marlborough and West Coast – all on 4 per cent.

Just over 1300 DHB unvaccinated staff from around the country have been stood down (paras 4-6).

The same report outlined that the Northland District Health Board was focused on minimising the impact of the vaccination mandates on its operations (Ali, 2021, para 7). However, a spokesperson for the New Zealand Nursing Organisation emphasised that certain areas of the health sector were already suffering from staffing shortages and that existing workers had to pick up the extra workload to compensate for any staff member who had refused to get vaccinated against COVID-19 (Governor, 2021, as cited in Ali, 2021):

"Some will retire early, we'll explore redeployment options for others but they are very limited. We don't want to lose staff because the workforce is already stretched, hospitals are overwhelmed," she said (para 25).

The third New Zealand Herald report, *Covid-19 Delta outbreak: Teaching staff farewelled ahead of vaccine mandate deadline*, also outlined how some schools were struggling to deal with the loss of staff due to the vaccination mandates (Rush, 2021, as cited in Henry, 2021):

With only about four weeks to go, schools would be able to 'limp through' to the end of the year. The hard date was January 1, when the policy's true impact would be seen.

"We simply don't know if we have sufficient teaching resource out there to backfill the absence of these teachers in a face-to-face context" (paras 24-25).

The second New Zealand Herald report, *Covid-19 vaccine mandate: Teacher aide for boy with learning difficulties among seven barred from school*, described the disruption to the education workforce caused by the vaccination mandates in the Hawke's Bay region and detailed how one school dealt with the loss of seven of its 50 staff, which involved teachers covering the vacant role in shifts and may have led to a disruptive teaching environment (Schwanecke, 2021, paras 18-19).

#### 4.4.3 Radio New Zealand

Two out of the three Radio New Zealand reports focused on how the vaccination mandates affected staffing numbers, particularly in the healthcare sector. The second Radio New Zealand report, *Vaccine mandate: 'Incredible pressure' on remaining hospital staff*, used economic framing to highlight the lack of supply of health workers to meet increasing demand during the COVID-19 pandemic (Moodie, 2021): "Health sector staff will be under further pressure as the strained system deals with the loss of 1300 workers across the country who are not vaccinated, say health experts" (para 1).

The same report *Vaccine mandate: 'Incredible pressure' on remaining hospital staff* quoted the head of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation, who explained how the healthcare sector was already under strain before the vaccination mandates and how the workforce was being impacted by healthcare workers electing not to get vaccinated against COVID-19 (Nuku, 2021, as cited in Moodie, 2021):

She said burnt-out nurses had been stepping up to meet overwhelming demand for almost two years now, and despite their best efforts, the quality of care would suffer.

"While we talk about how many beds there might be in ICU, we don't ever focus on how many nurses does it require to man the bed to be skilled nurses and be able to provide the compassionate care that's required," she said (paras 12-13).

The third Radio New Zealand report, *Hundreds of health workers unvaccinated heading into mandate deadline*, also presented the number of unvaccinated health workers who lost their jobs (Quinn, 2021):

About 2000 district health board workers had not been vaccinated 15 hours before the deadline to lose their jobs.

From today no one can work in healthcare unless they have had at least one dose of the Covid-19 vaccine or are exempt from the government mandate (paras 1-2).

#### 4.4.4 Newsroom

None of the Newsroom reports studied used economic framing.

### 4.5 Theme Four — Explanatory journalism

A fourth theme that emerged from the data was a considerable variance in the use of explanatory journalism. These themes are based on examples of framings where news media were trying to explain complex concepts, such as the vaccination mandates in ways that are accessible to the layperson (Luzon,

2022) to provide clarity on topics where there is an abundance of misinformation (Lewandowsky & Van Der Linden, 2021; Roozenbeek et al., 2020). In other words, explanatory journalism generally involves defining concepts that are difficult to understand, while explaining them using fact-based information. Explanatory journalism was a prominent feature of Newsroom reporting. The New Zealand Herald and Radio New Zealand also performed the role of explanatory journalism in their reporting but to a lesser degree. Stuff displayed a distinct lack of explanatory journalism in its reporting.

#### 4.5.1 Stuff

Zero out of the three Stuff reports studied engaged in explanatory journalism. The closest example from the texts studied that resembled explanatory journalism may have been identified in the third Stuff report *Unvaccinated teacher: 'My 15-year career is basically down the drain'* where an official source was quoted to explain the vaccine options available in New Zealand (Hipkins, 2021, as cited in Harding, 2021):

Covid Response Minister Chris Hipkins said the Pfizer vaccine remained the primary vaccine in New Zealand. But work was under way to introduce the AstraZeneca vaccine as an alternative option for the 'very small' number of over 18s who were unable to have the Pfizer vaccine for medical reasons, and for people hesitant to receive the Pfizer vaccine (para 17).

However, this did not appear to meet the criteria for explanatory journalism (Luzon, 2022), because it does not frame the news in a way that aims to communicate a complex topic that is accessible to the layperson.

#### 4.5.2 The New Zealand Herald

One of the three New Zealand Herald reports studied engaged in explanatory journalism. The first New Zealand Herald report, *Vaccine mandate means more than 100 Northland District Health Board staff stood down* (Ali, 2021), quoted a nurse who claimed the reason she refused to get vaccinated against COVID-19 was because of the experimental status of the vaccine, as the trial date was set to end in 2023, two years after it was being distributed among the public. However, the New Zealand Herald, in the same report, consulted an academic expert who cleared up confusion around the experimental status of the vaccine that may have dissuaded members of the public from getting vaccinated against COVID-19 (Petousis-Harris, 2021, as cited in Ali, 2021):

Auckland University vaccinologist Associate Professor Helen Petousis-Harris recently told the NZ Herald Pfizer vaccine trials for efficacy and safety were achieved late in 2020.

They were no longer experimental once authorised for use. She said there had been a misunderstanding among some that because the trial end date is 2023, the vaccine must be 'experimental'. The end date is to allow for other endpoints, one example being the effect booster doses (paras 12-13).

This example provided context to the layperson as to why vaccine trial end dates may be set later than expected by those outside the medical or scientific profession.

### 4.5.3 Radio New Zealand

Radio New Zealand also produced explanatory journalism to provide context to the vaccination mandates in two out of its three reports. The first Radio New Zealand report, *The missing context in vaccine media coverage*, attempted to explain some of the scientific information about the vaccine (Donell, 2021):

Some research indicates unvaccinated people are roughly 20 times more likely to pass on Covid, mainly because they're more likely to catch it and their cases are usually more severe.

Unvaccinated nurses, midwives, and teachers are at greater risk of infecting pupils, patients and newborn babies (paras 12-13).

The third Radio New Zealand report, *Hundreds of health workers unvaccinated heading into mandate deadline*, outlined the results of internal surveys conducted by District Health Boards to determine how many staff members would not get vaccinated against COVID-19 and showed that healthcare workers would be uncomfortable working with unvaccinated people: "It is a real serious issue with people losing their jobs but it is also a very serious issue for people concerned about their health and the health of their families," he said (Hehir, 2021, as cited in Quinn, 2021, para 22).

These two examples provided fact-based information about the spread of the virus and presented context to the layperson as to why education and healthcare workers may be treated as high-risk individuals.

### 4.5.4 Newsroom

Explanatory journalism was prominent in two of the three Newsroom reports. In the first Newsroom report *Why Vaccine Mandates are Ethical* (Fenton, 2021), the author refuted three criticisms of vaccination mandates, employing moral arguments to explain the author's reasoning. Below is a prominent example of how a health expert described the perceived problem with voluntary vaccination and argued that vaccination mandates are the 'least restrictive alternative' (a common principle that guides public health interventions) (Fenton, 2021):

A policy of voluntary vaccination imposes a greater risk of harm on those who cannot be vaccinated and those for whom the vaccination is less effective, and so restricts their freedom to live without fear of avoidable harms.

In the debate over vaccine mandates, this type of freedom is especially ethically salient. From the perspective of those who want to live free from the avoidable risks of infectious disease, vaccine mandates constitute the least restrictive alternative (paras 12-13).

The second Newsroom report, *The problem with the 'individual rights' movement*, explained the historical and legal differences between New Zealand and the United States and argued why New Zealand may be the more collective society between the two (Thorne, 2021):

America has a written Bill of Rights, enshrined in its constitution. The rights it contains are (mostly) absolutes. The US Supreme Court can, and does, invalidate legislation where it conflicts with the Bill of Rights. This system creates an incentive to frame debates in individualistic terms because the rights contained are individual in nature.

New Zealand has a very different system. Our Bill of Rights is like any other piece of legislation. It has an important guiding and informing purpose but little more. It is neither supreme, nor entrenched (paras 15-16).

These two examples attempted to explain complex moral and legal aspects of a health issue and presented their arguments in a way the layperson may understand.

## 4.6 Theme Five — Imbalanced reporting

Fair and balanced reporting is a journalistic ideal that aims to shed light on multiple sides of the story while sourcing information from a range of experts and non-experts (Pihl-Thingvad, 2015). A major theme that emerged from the data was an elevated platform for non-experts to voice their opinion about the COVID-19 vaccination and vaccination mandates in news media coverage, particularly throughout Stuff and the New Zealand Herald reporting. This theme showed that Radio New Zealand drew on a range of sources in their coverage of vaccination mandates, while Newsroom was the most likely to consult with expert sources.

### 4.6.1 Stuff

All three of Stuff's reports allocated framing and coverage toward unvaccinated workers to argue from an individualistic perspective or describe how they have been individually impacted by the vaccination mandates, as outlined in Theme One and Theme Two. The first Stuff report *'Farewell and thank you': Health board chief says goodbye to unvaccinated staff* (O'Callaghan & Broughton, 2021) may be described as a balanced report. Stuff consulted a wide range of sources, including one health board spokeswoman, the chief executive of a District Health Board, and the chief executive of a hospital. A professional body representing General Practitioners was also consulted to discuss the disruptions to the local health workforce. However, while the report surveyed a range of sources, two nurses were directly quoted a total of three times in the report (out of five direct quotes) and indirectly quoted a total of referenced their situation or individualistic reasoning a total of six times in the report (out of ten indirect quotes).

The second Stuff report *Covid-19: Vaccine mandate 'knee jerk', spurring 'hatred' at school — school staff say* (Jones, 2021) may be described as Stuff's least balanced report. Two principals, a teacher and the president of the New Zealand Principals' Federation were interviewed to discuss the lack of optionality and legality around mandates, and the disruptions to the education workforce and present arguments from an individualistic perspective. The report also did not consult any health, legal or scientific experts. It may be said that this report concentrated its sources on those personally aggrieved by the vaccination mandates within the education workforce.

The third Stuff report *Unvaccinated teacher: 'My 15-year career is basically down the drain'* (Harding, 2021) is an example, to an extent, of balanced reporting. Two schoolteachers and a principal presented their own arguments around freedom of choice and the lack of optionality for teachers who did not wish to get vaccinated against COVID-19. However, the other side of the story received five paragraphs of coverage in

a 26-paragraph report where The Covid Response Minister Chris Hipkins explained the government's reasoning and positioning for the mandates.

#### **4.6.2 The New Zealand Herald**

All three of the New Zealand Herald reports may be considered balanced reporting because they interviewed and consulted a wide range of experts and non-experts. The first New Zealand Herald report, *Vaccine mandate means more than 100 Northland District Health Board staff stood down*, consulted one nurse who refused to get vaccinated, official statistics of District Health Board vaccination rates in New Zealand, the Northland District Health Board Covid-19 incident controller, an academic specialising in vaccine safety and efficacy, a spokesperson for the Nursing Council of New Zealand, an organiser for the New Zealand Nursing Organisation and the Chairwoman of the New Zealand College of Midwives (Ali, 2021).

The second New Zealand Herald report, *Covid-19 vaccine mandate: Teacher aide for boy with learning difficulties among seven barred from school*, consulted or quoted the mother of the child who was the subject of the story, the teacher aide who refused to get vaccinated, the school principal, the Covid-19 Response Minister, the national president of the New Zealand Principals' Federation, and the Hastings Youth Council chair (Schwanecke, 2021).

The third New Zealand Herald report, *Covid-19 Delta outbreak: Teaching staff farewelled ahead of vaccine mandate deadline*, consulted or quoted Former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, one school principal, a former army veteran who refused to get vaccinated and lost his job in the education sector, the national president of the New Zealand Principals' Federation, Auckland University's Head of Initial Teacher Education, and an academic adviser for a trust that was seeking to set up an online school that could hire unvaccinated teaching staff (Henry, 2021).

However, the structure of their reporting is noteworthy. Two of the three articles in the data set opened with coverage from non-experts — the workers who refused to get vaccinated and lost their jobs — and gave them space to voice their opinions and arguments about their freedoms, before responding later with quotes from health experts or politicians. The first New Zealand Herald report allowed a nurse to argue her freedom and opinions about the safety of the COVID-19 vaccine (see section 4.2.2). Then, halfway through the same report, the New Zealand Herald consulted a health expert to explain that the vaccine is not experimental (see section 4.5.2).

#### **4.6.3 Radio New Zealand**

One of the three Radio New Zealand reports may be considered an opinion piece, while the other two may be considered examples of standard news reporting. In the first Radio New Zealand report, *The missing context in vaccine media coverage*, appeared like an opinion piece because it did not consult with expert or non-expert sources (Donell, 2021). However, the report quoted various official statistics to highlight

that there was a skewed representation toward unvaccinated workers within Stuff and New Zealand Herald reporting of the vaccination mandates (see section 4.3.3). The same report also argued that Stuff and New Zealand Herald reporting was not balanced and stated that those stories provided no explanation for the reasons behind the COVID-19 vaccination mandate (Donell, 2021, para 9).

The second Radio New Zealand report, *Vaccine mandate: 'Incredible pressure' on remaining hospital staff*, consulted the medical director of the Royal NZ College of General Practitioners, official District Health Board statistics, the Kaiwhakahaere [administrator] of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation, a doctor and associate professor of rural health, and the New Zealand Health Minister (Moodie, 2021). However, it did not consult any non-expert sources.

The third Radio New Zealand report, *Hundreds of health workers unvaccinated heading into mandate deadline*, consulted official District Health Board statistics, a member of a Waikato health worker union, the medical director of the Royal NZ College of General Practitioners, the Kaiwhakahaere [administrator] of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation and the chief executive of the College of Midwives (Quinn, 2021). This report also did not consult any non-expert sources.

#### **4.6.4 Newsroom**

Two of the three Newsroom reports may be considered as 'expert opinion' pieces. The first Newsroom report *Why vaccine mandates are ethical* (Fenton, 2021) was written by Dr Elizabeth Fenton, who was a lecturer at the Bioethics Centre at the University of Otago at the time of publication. The report contained three hyperlinks to documents or information that may support the argument of the report, including an analysis of COVID-19 vaccination policies from the United Kingdom (Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 2021), legislation (New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990) and an outline about the legality of vaccination mandates in the United States.

The second Newsroom report, *The problem with the 'individual rights' argument* (Thorne, 2021), was written by Dr Hayden Thorne, a specialist in the legal history of the United States. The report contained several references to case law and legal documents and cited another academic (Geiringer, as cited in Thorne, 2021):

As Professor Claudia Geiringer, chair in public law at Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, notes “Parliament has retained its sovereign right to legislate in conscious disregard of the Bill of Rights”.

Set against this framework, the individual rights dialogue perpetuated by anti-mandate protests is completely unhelpful (paras 17-18).

The third Newsroom report, *Teachers question the rush back to school* (Scott, 2021) consulted a range of experts and non-experts, including one teacher, the Minister of Education, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Education and the president of the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association. The report referred to the WHO website and specific information related to COVID-19 to support the argument of

the article (Scott, 2021): "... the WHO website also notes that as children are more likely to have a milder form of the disease and potentially show fewer symptoms, cases may go unnoticed in school environments" (para 25).

#### **4.7 Summary**

Several common themes appeared out of the data. Firstly, the issue of vaccination mandates was framed and covered from the moral argument as to whether vaccination is an individual or collective choice. Moral framing was the most prominent theme revealed in the findings across all four news media organisations studied. Secondly, the human-interest frame was the second-most prominent theme identified in the findings across all four news media organisations studied, where the framing and content focused on the impact on individuals of the vaccination mandates. Thirdly, the third-most prominent frame was the economic frame, where the vaccination mandates were framed and covered in terms of disruption to the education and healthcare workforces. Fourthly, there appeared to be variation in the usage of explanatory journalism among all four news media organisations studied. Finally, the findings identified a considerable variation in balanced reporting between the four news media organisations studied. These five themes suggest that there are internal and external constraints that impact the content news media produce, even during a public crisis that concerns public safety. The discussion of the themes' significance in understanding the framing, content and coverage of New Zealand news media of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates is explored in the following chapter.

# Chapter Five: Discussion

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an interpretation of the five themes identified from the findings of this qualitative study. The chapter begins with a summary of key findings with respect to each news media outlet examined in this study, before weaving together the key threads of the discussion. The discussion of the findings is followed by an outline of the limitations of this study along with some recommendations for future research in the final chapter.

## 5.2 Three key frames found

As one of the first studies in New Zealand to assess national and digital news media framing and coverage of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates, this research has contributed to the expanding knowledge base of news media framing. The results revealed that the COVID-19 vaccination mandates were not framed primarily as a public health issue, despite the existing research that highlighted the importance of using the public health frame when framing health issues (Ghio et al., 2021; Nelkin, 1996; Prati et al., 2011; Rowbotham et al., 2019; Stefanik-Sidener, 2013). Instead, the findings showed that the COVID-19 vaccination mandates were predominantly framed in terms of the moral question of whether vaccination is an individual or collective choice, the impact of the vaccination mandates on individuals in the form of human-interest stories, or the negative economic consequences of the vaccination mandates.

The key frames identified in the findings imply that the moral, human-interest and economic frames were deemed to be both important and interesting to the specific audiences of each respective news media organisation studied during the agenda-setting process (Entman, 2007; Johnston, 2020). As a result of this agenda-setting process, the consistent use of moral, human-interest and economic frames became salient in the two weeks that followed (Damstra & Vliengenthart, 2018) the implementation of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates which covered education and healthcare workers. The discussion considers how these three frames may have contributed to the politicisation (Rothgerber et al., 2020) of the vaccination mandates as political ideologies may influence how people interpret public health issues when the issue is presented to audience members in the moral, economic or human-interest frame by news media.

Another central point of the discussion examines why alternatives to the public health frame were popular in news media coverage, even though the number of unvaccinated education and healthcare workers comprised a small fraction of the population covered by the vaccination mandates in New Zealand (see section 4.3.3). A significant amount of news media attention in this study was given to what was objectively a minority voice within the public (see section 4.3.3) but may be viewed as an important voice nonetheless in public discourse (Johnston, 2020). While this does not necessarily make it negative news coverage (Gauchat, 2012; Stefanik-Sidener, 2013), salient reporting on a group that makes up a fraction of the population may be considered selective or skewed news coverage if the specific angle or aspect chosen

is believed to generate greater audience engagement (Figenschou et al., 2023; Johnston, 2020; Moon & Lee, 2020). Earlier studies have evidenced that selective news coverage may be problematic because the chosen angle or aspect of an issue to be reported on may influence how the public comes to understand it (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Gitlin, 2003; Nelson et al., 1997).

### **5.3 Moral framing most prominent**

While individual and economic impacts are important to highlight, the findings suggested that public debate around the COVID-19 vaccine and subsequent vaccination mandates became politicised in news media coverage and is consistent with a body of research (Abbas, 2022a; Abbas, 2022b; Elias & Catalan-Matamoros, 2020; Hart et al., 2020; Labonte & Gagnon, 2010; Lipsitz & Pop-Eleches, 2020; Machingaidze & Wiysonge, 2021; Sallam, 2021; Troiano & Nardi, 2021; Tsao et al., 2021). This finding did not come as a surprise as vaccination has historically been a morally divisive issue (Smith & Graham, 2019) and several earlier studies have evidenced that news media framing and coverage devote a significant amount of attention to vaccine safety and efficacy (Lin et al., 2020; Radwan & Radwan, 2020; Sandell et al., 2013) or vaccine choice (Lipsitz & Pop-Eleches, 2021; Martin & Vanderslott, 2022; Rosenfeld & Tomiyama, 2022).

Vaccination and vaccination mandates appeared to become more of a contentious issue during COVID-19 because the moral debate as to whether vaccination is an individual or collective choice was politicised in news media coverage and therefore public discourse (Abbas, 2022b). To an individualist, vaccination is a medical procedure on one's body and the choice to get vaccinated lies with each individual person (Abbas, 2022b). A collectivist, meanwhile, believes that vaccination is a collective choice because high vaccination rates may promote public health and safety (Rosenfeld & Tomiyama, 2022). It also stands to reason that the large scale of misinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine widened the division between individualists and collectivists and amplified the public debate (Afrin et al., 2022; Lilleker et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2020; Machingaidze & Wiysonge, 2021; Sallam, 2021; Troiano & Nardi, 2021). Thus, the moral debate over vaccination in public discourse (Martin & Vanderslott, 2022; Rosenfeld & Tomiyama, 2022) may have been interpreted by the New Zealand news media as an important angle to communicate to their respective audiences (Johnston, 2020) from either an individualist or collectivist perspective. Moreover, the findings of this present study implied that the New Zealand public does not appear to share a unified individualist or collectivist perspective and is consistent with research by Theunissen and Wolf (2023), who found that the consumption of COVID-19 messaging in New Zealand ranged across both perspectives.

Overall, this finding confirmed that the public debate in New Zealand about the COVID-19 vaccination and vaccination mandates extended beyond the realm of health, medicine and science and into the moral argument as to whether vaccination is an individual or collective choice (Hofstede, 2001; Labonte & Gagnon, 2010; Smith & Graham, 2019; Martin & Vanderslott, 2022; Rosenfeld & Tomiyama, 2022). In

this study, the moral choice presented in news media coverage may have contributed to the politicisation of the COVID-19 vaccine and vaccination mandates (Rothgerber et al., 2020). Furthermore, an emphasis on the moral choice of vaccination may have undermined the New Zealand Government's public health response to COVID-19, as per Vasipoulous et al. (2023). Widespread moral arguments against vaccination in news media coverage could likely have led to increased COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy among the public (Machingaidze & Wiysonge, 2021; Palm et al., 2021; Sallam, 2021; Troiano and Nardi, 2021).

### **5.3.1 Each news media outlet took a different moral approach**

The morally contentious nature of vaccination mandates within the findings is an important point to note for future news media coverage in times of public crises, which are time-sensitive and highly uncertain, as evidenced by Genereux et al. (2022). The findings identified variations between the four news media organisations studied and confirmed the politicised and morally contentious nature of health issues in news media framing and coverage (Lipsitz & Pop-Eleches, 2020; Martin & Vanderslott, 2022; Rothgerber et al. 2020). Stuff used the individualist perspective. Radio New Zealand and Newsroom used the collectivist perspective (but for different apparent reasons). The New Zealand Herald used a neutral approach and reported from both perspectives.

The findings showed that Stuff's reporting mainly contained framing and coverage from the individualist perspective (Hofstede, 1980; 2001), and devoted a significant amount of attention to individuals who argued for their civil liberties (Rothgerber et al., 2020). This finding suggested that Stuff may have chosen to place emphasis on this aspect of the vaccination mandates because it may have resonated with their audience, which is consistent with earlier studies that found different news media organisations select an aspect or angle to cover and make that salient to appeal to their respective audiences (Anspach & Carlson, 2018; Figenschou et al., 2023; Johnston, 2020). However, a narrow focus on a particular aspect of a complex topic may have led to selective or skewed news media coverage (Moon & Lee, 2020).

The New Zealand Herald reporting did contain individualistic framing and coverage in all three reports studied (see section 4.2.2), but the findings indicated that the New Zealand Herald took a more neutral approach than Stuff, Radio New Zealand or Newsroom. The New Zealand Herald sought to tell both sides of the story and quoted individuals affected by the vaccination mandates who argued that vaccination should be an individual choice, while also using the collectivist perspective. As per Benham (2020) and Phil-Thingvad (2015), fair and balanced reporting uncovers multiple sides of the story. In contrast to Stuff, the approach taken by the New Zealand Herald indicated that its audience may value a more neutral perspective which is consistent with findings by Abdenour and Riffe (2019), who showed that modern audiences appear to value quality journalism that provides fair and balanced reporting (Benham, 2020).

Radio New Zealand and Newsroom contained framing and coverage from the collectivist perspective (Schwarz, 1990) and devoted media attention to the COVID-19 vaccination mandates in terms of the benefits to society by way of promoting public health (Ghio et al., 2021; Nelkin, 1996; Prati et al., 2011;

Rowbotham et al., 2019; Stefanik-Sidener, 2013). This framing and coverage demonstrated that high vaccination rates may reduce the spread of novel viruses and reduce the human and economic costs to society (Rosenfeld & Tomiyama, 2022). However, this may also be considered selective or skewed coverage (Gitlin, 2003; Moon & Lee, 2020), because the reports may have failed to report on the human aspects of the issue (Lehman-Wilzig & Seletzky, 2010). In contrast to the more neutral approach of the New Zealand Herald, the findings demonstrated that both Radio New Zealand and Newsroom were openly critical of individualistic framing and coverage. Radio New Zealand accepted and pushed government messaging about the vaccination mandates, particularly by framing it as a collective issue (Schwarz, 1990), and arguing that restrictions on individual liberties that derive from the choice to not get vaccinated against COVID-19 are justified when there is a benefit to society (Chen, 2015; Matsaganis & Wilkin, 2015). While this may be the consensus view among health experts (Vanderslott & Marks, 2021), it may be said that Radio New Zealand did not challenge the government narrative and instead openly agreed with official messaging. This is in line with the findings of Pan et al. (2022), where state-owned media tend to adopt frames that are closer to its government's messaging in news coverage. In contrast to Radio New Zealand, the findings suggested Newsroom chose to frame and cover the vaccination mandates from a collectivist perspective because of its own emphasis on fact-based and investigative journalism (Newsroom, 2022), which may indicate that Newsrooms' audience values this type of journalism and is consistent with findings by Abdenour and Riffe (2019).

#### **5.4 Human-interest framing second most prominent**

While moral framing was a prominent frame in this study, the findings also confirmed existing research where health issues are often framed as human-interest stories (Figenschou et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2020). The findings showed that a key feature of Stuff and the New Zealand Herald reporting was human-interest frames that focused on how the COVID-19 vaccination mandates impacted individuals, using empathetic and emotional language. This finding is consistent with research studies by both Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and Zillman (2002), whose findings showed that news media produce human-interest stories because they provide a compelling angle that resonates with audiences on an emotional or personal level, particularly if these stories may provide context as to how an issue impacts people's lives (Gallagher, 2018; Hughes, 1981; Thomas et al., 2020; Valkenburg et al. 1999). It is also in line with the findings of Lehman-Witzig and Seletzsky (2010), who demonstrated that human-interest stories are feature stories that focus on people's lives, experiences, and emotions.

However, audiences may be left uninformed about critical events and developments if news media fail to cover 'hard news' (Lehman-Witzig & Seletzsky, 2010). This may have contributed to a slower adoption of public health guidelines by the New Zealand public. As posited by Radwan and Radwan (2020) and Bridgman et al. (2020), when news media reporting is too focused on individual experiences and emotions, it may lead to lesser recognition of the severity of a health issue and uptake of potential solutions (Figenschou et al., 2023). Together, this suggested that Stuff and the New Zealand Herald's framing and

coverage were geared toward audiences interested in how individuals were personally impacted by the vaccination mandate and may have detracted from the health impacts of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates (Figenschou et al., 2023). It is also indicative that these reports may have been produced under tight timeframes to keep the selected frames and coverage salient in the news cycle (Johnston, 2020; Rosenberg & Feldman, 2008).

Despite Stuff positioning itself as more interested in public impact rather than financial success (Stuff, 2022), the findings suggested that garnering clicks could likely have been a factor when setting its agenda and selecting frames in its coverage of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates. Both Stuff and, to an extent, the New Zealand Herald produced emotionally charged human-interest stories that focused on how individuals were impacted by the vaccination mandates which contained empathetic language and may have been designed to evoke an emotional response from the audience and boost the audience engagement (Zillman, 2002). This is consistent with research by Johnston (2020) and Johnston and Rowney (2020), in which both studies concluded that privately-owned media organisations are more likely to succumb to commercial pressures and compete for audience attention at the expense of journalistic values, such as sensationalist, biased or selective coverage (Figenschou et al., 2023; Gallagher, 2018). However, including human elements in news media reporting may help humanise issues or events, making them more relatable and understandable to a wider audience (Gallagher, 2018; Hughes, 1981). Even Newsroom, which considers itself an investigative journalism organisation (Newsroom, 2022), provided reporting that contained a human-interest angle. The key difference, though, was that the angle used by Newsroom was about how the COVID-19 vaccination mandates did not apply to children under the age of 12 and the impact that had on resuming in-person education for the staff and students who faced an increased risk of catching or spreading the virus. While human-interest framing is understood to focus on 'soft news' (Lehman-Witzig & Seleztsky, 2010), it can also make reporting more engaging to the audience by presenting the information in an empathetic way (Figenschou et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2020).

The findings also suggested that the way in which Stuff and the New Zealand Herald used human-interest framing could likely have been used to capture audience attention online, where digital news media reporting must answer to search-engine algorithms to ensure the high-traffic volume of their websites and reports. This is consistent with findings that suggested digital news media implement SEO techniques and strategies, such as using words or phrases that are trending online, to ensure their websites have high traffic volumes (Giomelakis & Veglis, 2015; Lopezosa et al., 2019). Thus, the use of human-interest stories in the findings pointed toward SEO considerations in agenda-setting and the choice of framing by Stuff and the New Zealand Herald (Giomelakis & Veglis, 2015; Lopezosa et al., 2019). Furthermore, the findings indicated that all the Stuff and the New Zealand Herald reports included human-interest aspects in their headlines. For example, all three of the New Zealand Herald reports studied contained human-interest framing in their headlines: *Vaccine mandate means more than 100 Northland District Health Board staff stood down* (Ali, 2021); *Covid-19 vaccine mandate: Teacher aide for boy with learning difficulties among seven barred from school* (Schwanecke, 2021); *Covid-19 Delta outbreak: Teaching staff farewelled ahead of vaccine mandate deadline*

(Henry, 2021). This may be indicative that digital news media have SEO considerations when writing headlines, which are considered an integral part of capturing audience attention (Johnston, 2020).

## 5.5 Economic framing third most prominent

Another frame identified in the findings was the economic consequences of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates (Afrin et al., 2022; Mutua & Ong'ong'a, 2020; Su et al., 2021). This is unsurprising as news media often frame health issues in terms of their economic consequences because health is closely connected to economic prosperity (An & Gower, 2009; Ophir, 2018; Sandell et al., 2013; Smallman, 2015), and economic concerns often dominate public discourse (Su et al., 2021). It is also consistent with the findings of Rowbotham et al. (2019), who found that the economic frame is widely used in the reporting of public health issues. Thus, it would be remiss for news media outlets to skip coverage of these economic impacts altogether.

Although less prominent than the moral or human-interest frame, the findings showed that the New Zealand Herald used the economic frame in all three of its reports while Stuff and Radio New Zealand used the economic frame in two out of three reports, respectively. An emphasis was placed on job losses and the disruption of workforces in the education and healthcare sectors which is in line with existing findings that demonstrated pandemics are often reported in terms of their deep and long-lasting economic impacts (Bardhan, 2001; Brahmhatt & Dutta, 2008; Hung & Chang, 2023; Pan & Meng, 2016; Shen, 2004; Su et al., 2021). It is also indicative of the negative bias in the reporting of economic consequences highlighted by a body of literature (Afrin et al., 2022; Brahmhatt & Dutta, 2008; Ogbodo et al., 2020; Rowbotham et al., 2019) and may have contributed to greater anxiety over the economic outlook (Fetzer et al., 2021). Moreover, the findings of this study uncovered a clear emphasis on how the vaccination mandates caused job losses in sectors that already suffered from labour shortages and are almost identical to the findings of Ogbodo et al. (2020).

The findings also suggested that Radio New Zealand's coverage tended to emphasise actionable steps taken to alleviate concerns about labour shortages in critical sectors that had been affected by the COVID-19 vaccination mandates, in step with their status as a state-owned media organisation (Pan et al., 2022). Together, the emphasis on disruption to the labour market is consistent with existing research that found framing health issues in economic terms may make them more relevant and accessible to audiences who may not be directly affected by the health issue itself but are concerned about its broader implications (Gauchat, 2012; Mutua & Ong'ong'a, 2020). On one hand, highlighting the economic consequences of a health issue may generate broader interest and engagement from audiences, potentially leading to greater public awareness and action to resolve the health issue (Ophir, 2018; Stefanik-Sidener, 2013). On the other hand, when news media make economic framing salient it may detract from the human, social and health impact of illness and disease (Brahmhatt & Dutta, 2008; Shen, 2004), and reduce the fundamental human right to individual health to an economic issue (Ogbodo et al., 2020). The following example of economic framing used by Radio New Zealand (Moodie, 2021) may be considered from both perspectives,

“Health sector staff will be under further pressure as the strained system deals with the loss of 1 300 workers across the country who are not vaccinated, say health experts” (para 1). It could be viewed as important information about the wider ramifications of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates that sought to raise awareness of the labour shortage in the healthcare sector. However, the choice of language appeared to be concentrated on the economic problem created by the vaccination mandates, rather than the public health issue it attempted to solve. The selected aspects of the economic impacts may have influenced what audiences considered important (Damstra & Vlienghart, 2018) about the COVID-19 vaccination mandates.

## **5.6 Explanatory journalism usage varied**

In contrast to theories within the literature which posited that news media have good reason to frame health issues in terms of morality (Smith & Graham, 2019), human-interest (Figenschou et al., 2023) or economic impacts (An & Gower, 2009), other research suggested that health issues are often presented from alternative frames in news media coverage because few journalists have a scientific background (Goldacre & Farley, 2009; Lancet, 2014). This may have contributed to an insufficient level of explanatory journalism, as per Birks (2021). The findings of this study pointed toward a lack of scientific reporting by Stuff and it may be implied that the organisation did not possess the in-house expertise or access to external sources to frame and cover the vaccination mandates as a public health issue. This is consistent with findings by Munoriyarwa (2021), who argued that a lack of scientific knowledge or sources within news media organisations may have contributed to reporting that is biased toward moral, economic or human-interest reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In contrast to the findings of Luzon (2022) and Munoriyarwa (2021), the findings in the current study showed that there was considerable variation in the use of explanatory journalism among the remaining three news media organisations studied. When explanatory journalism was used, it appeared to counter inaccurate information and explain the concept in layman’s terms (Luzon, 2022; Lewandowsky & Van Der Linden, 2021; Roozenbeek et al., 2020). The New Zealand Herald provided context around vaccine trial end dates that may have caused public confusion. Radio New Zealand presented fact-based information about how the virus spreads and detailed why education and healthcare workers may be considered high-risk groups with respect to COVID-19 transmission. Newsroom explained the complexities and nuances of the moral and legal debates around the vaccination mandates. Further, the findings suggested that the New Zealand Herald, Radio New Zealand and Newsroom appeared to have made limited contributions to the increased use of explanatory journalism in news media reporting. Overall, the findings of this study are in line with research by Rajkhowa (2020) who demonstrated that the inconsistent provision of public health information may have contributed to the way in which news about COVID-19 and its potential solutions were interpreted by the public.

## 5.7 Balanced reporting less common than expected

The findings of the current study implied that Stuff demonstrated a lack of balanced reporting. One report did not consult any expert sources (Jones, 2021), while the other two appeared to be skewed toward non-expert opinion (Harding, 2021; O'Callaghan & Broughton, 2021). This is consistent with findings by Hubner (2021) who found that early news media reporting of the COVID-19 pandemic quoted mainly non-experts. All three of Stuff's reports studied also contained human-interest framing, and as both Hinnant et al. (2013) and Conrad et al. (2016) pointed out, non-expert sources and opinions form a prominent feature within human-interest stories. Existing research also highlighted that including non-expert sources and excluding expert sources may lead to the proliferation of uninformed views or opinions throughout public discourse and may contribute to a shallow understanding of the issue and appreciation for its severity among the public (Benham, 2020; Bridgman et al., 2020; Kohl et al., 2016; Pihl-Thingvad, 2015). The salience of imbalanced reporting by Stuff may have led to its audience receiving and interpreting partial or incomplete information, as per Gitlin (2003). As a result, Stuff's reporting may also have been less effective in informing and empowering their audience to act against a public health issue (Hoffman-Goetz et al., 2003), such as COVID-19. From a constructivist perspective, the plurality of opinion in news media coverage may make it more difficult for experts to influence the narrative, official statements or findings based on scientific information (Lilleker et al., 2021; Price & Harbisher, 2021).

Other research evidenced that a lack of balanced reporting is common with news media outlets that seek to frame the same topic in different ways to cater to several factors including its target audience (Figenschou et al., 2023; Gallagher, 2018; Johnston, 2020). In the context of New Zealand, the findings indicated that Stuff reporting was more skewed to non-expert opinions than the other news media outlets studied. This may point toward problems with the 24/7 news cycle which demands that news media organisations produce and distribute news so quickly that it means there may not be enough time for journalists to consult a wide range of sources to improve the balance in reporting (Rosenberg & Feldman, 2008), or that Stuff lacks reporters who possess the ability to understand scientific topics and communicate them to the layperson (Birks, 2021). However, the findings are also indicative that Stuff's lack of balanced reporting is conducive to its agenda-setting process and its own idea of how to appeal to its audience, as suggested by Johnston (2020). In contrast, the findings also suggested that all of the reports studied by Radio New Zealand and Newsroom were skewed toward expert sources and alignment with official messaging. In the case of Radio New Zealand, this could likely indicate that its reporting is more aligned with official messaging, as per Pan et al. (2022). The findings related to Newsroom were unexpected, given that Newsroom called itself an investigative journalism organisation in its 2022 Annual Report (Newsroom, 2022), and balanced reporting is a core function of this type of journalism (Hansen, 2018) and an important factor to their audiences (Abdenour & Riffe, 2019). While it is understood that scientific experts should be the main source of opinion in news media coverage of public health issues (Entwistle, 1995; Nelkin, 1996), content that is skewed toward expert opinion may be perceived by audiences as less relatable (Figenschou et al., 2023).

In contrast, the findings of the current study suggested that the New Zealand Herald provided balanced and comprehensive coverage of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates and consulted a wide range of academic and scientific experts and non-expert sources across all three reports studied. For example, one report quoted a nurse who refused to get vaccinated against COVID-19, a range of scientific and health experts, and told both sides of the story (Benham, 2020). It is likely that the New Zealand Herald was able to garner audience trust by keeping its reporting balanced about the benefits, risks and limitations of potential treatments or policy decisions (Abdenour & Riffe, 2019; Afrin et al., 2022), and therefore may have contributed to their audience's ability to make informed decisions about their own health (Gylfadottir et al., 2021).

## **5.8 Summary**

This chapter has discussed the five themes identified in the current study. The chapter confirmed the politicised nature of vaccines and vaccination mandates and discussed why the moral debate of vaccination as an individual or collective choice may have influenced different news media framing and coverage of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates in New Zealand. The three key frames uncovered in this study are then analysed and the argument is made that the moral, economic, and human-interest frames are prominent in the coverage of health for several reasons. The chapter then discussed why alternative frames to the public health frame may point to specific issues within the New Zealand news media sector. Lastly, the chapter discussed the importance of explanatory journalism and the balanced reporting of future health issues. The sixth and final chapter provides a summary of the current study and outlines the limitations of this study and some recommendations for future research.

# Chapter Six: Conclusions

## 6.1 Concluding summary

The value of this study lies in the fact that people trust news media as their primary source of information during a public crisis (Ghio et al., 2021; Johnston, 2020; Pollock et al., 2021). Information overload and misinformation trends online (Cinelli et al., 2020) and on social media have contributed to the perception that traditional and established news media organisations are credible and trustworthy, if not only in times of crisis.

The novel findings of this study analysed the framing and coverage of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates by New Zealand news media. Overall, this current study supported existing communications literature and found that reporting on the COVID-19 vaccination mandates rarely used the public health frame (Rowbotham et al., 2019; Stefanik-Sidener, 2013) and found three key alternative frames. The most prominent frame identified in this study was the moral frame, followed by the human-interest frame and the economic frame. Many scholars have emphasised the need to understand such use of alternative frames when news media report on issues of public health (Moon & Lee, 2020; Ogbodo et al., 2020; Rowbotham et al., 2019).

While communications literature has so far examined the New Zealand government's response to the pandemic from a crisis communications perspective (Baker & Wilson, 2022; Beattie & Priestley, 2021; Degani, 2022; Dyer, 2021; Jamieson, 2020; Lilleker et al., 2021; Martin-Anatias, 2021), limited scholarship has analysed how the issues were framed by the New Zealand news media at key points of the pandemic. It is argued that an evaluation of the framing and coverage of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates is fundamental to understanding how a public health issue was reported on by New Zealand news media. In addition, it may also assist in deepening the understanding of the broader role of the New Zealand news media during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The current study identified a divisive moral debate between individualist and collectivist framing in news media coverage, despite the number of unvaccinated education and healthcare workers in New Zealand covered by the mandates being disproportionately low (see section 4.3.3). Stuff reported on the COVID-19 vaccination mandates from an individualist perspective, while Radio New Zealand and Newsroom chose a collectivist perspective, and the New Zealand Herald had elements of both. The moral aspect of a public health issue appears to be an important frame to news media organisations and is consistent with the literature (An & Gower, 2009; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Thomas et al., 2020). Thus, the current study discovered opportunities for news media to be more aware of the way in which they frame issues of public health that may stoke division, even if the intention of news media might be to hold decision-makers accountable or foster a healthy dose of debate in public discourse. It is likely that even though news media are trusted during a public crisis, the dominant use of alternative frames may actively undermine their credibility over the longer term (Abdenour & Riffe, 2019). Whether the moral framing identified in the

present study may be justified in terms of holding the government accountable for violating individual rights, or as skewed and selective news media coverage that would generate controversy in public discourse remains a source of debate (Labonte & Gagnon, 2010).

Another finding of the current study revealed that human-interest stories were a prominent feature of Stuff and the New Zealand Herald reporting that focused on the individual impacts, experiences, and emotions of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates (Lehman-Witzig & Seleztsky, 2010). In addition, the current study showed the negative economic consequences of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates also received considerable media attention through the coverage of the disruption to education and healthcare workforces. The findings of the current study implied that a focus on the impact of the vaccination mandates on critical labour sectors may have been important angles or aspects to news media organisations and may have guided public discourse of the vaccination mandates toward its economic cost (An & Gower, 2009; Rowbotham et al., 2019). The discussion chapter argued that this may, to an extent, be explained by the commercial or organisational pressures faced by news media (Johnston, 2020).

In the case of Stuff and the New Zealand Herald, it is suggested that the use of alternative frames may have been used to drive SEO and ensure high-traffic volumes or audience engagement for digital reporting (Giomelakis & Veglis, 2015; Lopezosa et al., 2019), given that communications scholarship outlined that moral arguments, economic consequences and human-interest stories are frames that tend to attract audience attention (An & Gower, 2009; Thomas et al., 2020; Zillman, 2002). It appeared in the current study that either the public (as media consumers) are perceived by news media organisations to potentially be uninterested in medical or scientific information, or that news media themselves (as media producers) perceive their audiences to be more interested in these alternative frames and therefore pursue them to drive audience engagement (Johnston, 2020). However, this is beyond the scope of this study and is left for future research.

The findings of the present study also supported existing scholarship that health, medical and scientific issues have historically been poorly communicated to the public because they fail to communicate the core technical aspects of the issue to the public (Lancet, 2014; Rajkhowa, 2020). The current research indicated that the use of explanatory journalism varied between each news media organisation studied. It also suggested there may be a lack of scientific knowledge among Stuff and the New Zealand Herald newsrooms' which may have contributed to reporting that was biased toward moral, economic or human-interest reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic (Munoriyarwa, 2021).

Another finding of the current study identified considerable variation in fair and balanced reporting between news media organisations and presented as an unexpected finding. The findings showed that Stuff reporting was skewed toward non-expert opinion, while Radio New Zealand and Newsroom reporting was skewed to expert opinion. Both could likely be understood as examples of imbalanced reporting (Benham, 2020; Kohl et al., 2016). It is argued that there is more scope for fair and balanced reporting by the New Zealand news media, which tells both sides of the story and consults a range of expert and non-

expert opinions during public health crises, emergencies, or issues (Pihl-Thingvad, 2015). Together, a case is made that a lack of explanatory journalism and imbalanced reporting may have a negative impact on the quality of reporting by New Zealand news media during future public health crises, as full and complete information is important to the public's ability to make informed decisions about their own health (Gylfadottir et al., 2021) and to a successful public health response (Stefanik-Sidener, 2013).

The current study may also be useful for policymakers. A successful government response to a public health crisis hinges on public understanding of the issue and the potential solutions that may exist (Kahn, 2020; Lilleker et al., 2021). Furthermore, how news media frame and cover an issue may impact public adherence to health guidelines, policies and potential solutions enacted by the government (Collinson et al., 2015; DeTora et al., 2021; Pollock et al., 2021; Stefanik-Sidener, 2013). The evaluation of news media framing of health issues in New Zealand may assist government decision-makers during a crisis, who must understand the role of news media in shaping public discourse when launching a large-scale policy response to mitigate the crisis (Koerber, 2020). The research identified opportunities for government communicators to be more cognisant that their official messaging may be reported in a way that may undermine the official narrative they are attempting to create (Lilleker et al., 2021; Stefanik-Sidener, 2013; Vasipoulous et al., 2023). However, news media are seen as independent of the public communication process in current communications scholarship (Koerber, 2020).

Thus, government communicators should seek training in media relations to foster closer and clearer communication channels with news media. A deeper understanding of the role of news media in the dissemination of crucial information to the public in a health crisis and the constraints they face may lead to greater efficacy in the field of media relations (Koerber, 2020; DeTora et al., 2021; Pollock et al., 2021). Government communicators should also seek training in how to construct an effective message that generates buy-in from the public to an official response strategy during a public crisis (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020; Johnston, 2020; Koerber, 2020).

## **6.2 Limitations and recommendations for future research**

Although this research has revealed several interesting findings about New Zealand news media framing and coverage of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates, it has a few limitations. While the 12 digital news media texts across four news media organisations is a representative sample (Kelsey & Way, 2021), increasing the size of the sample would enable more extensive conclusions as to how the vaccination mandates were framed by the New Zealand news media. In this case, a wider range of news media organisations would need to be considered. For example, news media at the local or regional level may represent audience interests specific to a demographic, while international coverage or alternative news may offer a unique perspective on the issue. However, the scope of this study was limited by the 12-month completion time for the Master of Communication Studies degree. Another limitation of the study is that it considered a specific period of two weeks following the implementation of the vaccination mandates in New Zealand that covered education and healthcare workers. Future research could consider studying all

stages of the vaccination mandates in New Zealand to develop a deeper understanding of what frames and content were made salient during the entire period in which vaccination mandates were active.

Still, the five key themes identified in the current study provide an important foundation for future research. From a constructivist perspective, the study could be a useful basis for future research seeking to understand how alternative frames to the public health one may have contributed to the public's perception of the COVID-19 vaccination mandates through interviews or focus groups. Furthermore, the identification of imbalanced reporting found in the reporting studied is an important contribution to the literature, as it is a core journalistic value (Hansen, 2018). Subsequent scholarship should seek to uncover the reasons why non-expert voices receive considerable media attention and may also consider the effects of a perceived increase in the importance of non-expert voices (Figenschou et al., 2023).

This study focused on digital news media. There is scope for future research to explore how Television broadcasting framed the COVID-19 vaccination mandates. Television broadcasting is a key source of information during a crisis for the public because of its visual element to reporting and its responsiveness in time-sensitive situations and how news was framed vis-a-vis this platform could present interesting findings (Johnston, 2020). Moreover, future research could explore how news media framed the COVID-19 vaccination mandates on social media. The literature review found social media to be an important platform in which news media organisations share reports and reach audiences (Dinh & Nguyen, 2021; Kopecka-Piech & Lodzski, 2021; Theunissen & Wolf, 2023). It also demonstrated that significant public discourse takes shape in the comments section of news media reports that are shared on social media platforms (Cinelli et al., 2020). Social media is also home to a substantial amount of misinformation that may challenge fact-based information or official narratives (Lilleker et al., 2021; Price & Harbisher, 2021). A better understanding of how digital news media, television broadcasting and social media interact, especially in forming public discourse, could provide ongoing development in best practices for government communicators and news media reporters. In turn, this could also inform how the discipline is taught throughout tertiary institutions to further advance the contemporary field of communication studies.

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# Appendix A: Transcript of Stuff news reports

## Stuff Report One

*Title: 'Farewell and thank you': Health board chief says goodbye to unvaccinated staff*

*Date: 15 November 2021*

*Text:*

Christchurch mental health nurse Meagan McNamara sent a goodbye email to her team and cried as she rode away from her job for the last time.

"I gave my team a card and hugged my boss, I cried as I rode away from work.

"I can't believe I don't have a right to say no. And now my team has one less person in it."

The Government's Covid-19 public health order amendment, making vaccination mandatory for teachers and health care workers, comes into force at 11.59 on Monday.

Workers who remained unvaccinated by the deadline would be stood down.

Unvaccinated district health board (CDHB) staff were urged to get vaccinated on Monday, with some health boards offering dedicated vaccination clinics up to an hour before the deadline.

The number of public health staff stood down over the vaccine mandate would be revealed "over the next couple of days", Rosemary Clements, a spokeswoman for all 20 health boards, said.

In a staff newsletter on Monday, Canterbury DHB chief executive Peter Bramley farewelled staff who had opted not to get the vaccine in the required time.

"To those leaving I wish you well and thank you for everything you've done for the people of Canterbury."

McNamara, who had 12 years' experience in mental health nursing in Melbourne, said she had just started in a role with the CDHB children and adolescent specialist mental health unit in October.

On Monday afternoon, she joined a group of other unvaccinated teachers and health workers at a picnic in Hagley Park, organised by former New Conservatives leader Leighton Baker and his daughter Chantelle Baker.

They told those in the crowd "you are not alone" and "don't give up, there are people all around New Zealand fighting for the same thing".

McNamara said she had a clotting disease and had suffered an aneurysm, and believed she could die from the vaccine.

She was provided with an exemption by a Christchurch doctor before the Government finalised the process and criteria. Afterwards, the GP said the Ministry of Health exemption panel would not approve an exemption as she did not meet the criteria.

In addition to a vaccine clinic on Monday at Christchurch Hospital, the CDHB was offering a mobile service for those who could not leave their department.

"If you want to get vaccinated but can't get away from your department ... someone will come to you," Bramley said

St George's Hospital was not expecting staff losses apart from in the maternity unit, chief executive Blair Roxborough said.

The hospital has stopped accepting postnatal mums who give birth elsewhere because of a midwife shortage caused by the vaccine mandate.

The rest of the hospital was “extremely well-positioned”, with no other areas of concern in terms of staffing, Roxborough said.

“We know almost 100 per cent of our colleagues have been vaccinated, and we will be expecting them to turn up [on Tuesday] as per normal.”

The hospital was required to report staff vaccination data to the Ministry of Health.

The St George’s maternity unit had a permanent workforce of 16 midwives, but Roxborough would not say how many were not vaccinated.

The private hospital was working with the CDHB on solutions, including recruitment, to build up the midwifery team again, he said.

A woman at the Hagley Park picnic, who did not want to be named, said she had worked as an administrator at a private hospital for 27 years.

“I have worked through every crisis and I have given my all to that job.”

She said she was a breast cancer survivor, did not believe the vaccine was safe, and had been told not to come to work on Tuesday.

The woman said at least eight midwives at the hospital where she worked were not vaccinated.

Pegasus Health, an umbrella group for GPs in Canterbury, said the health order had not created any issues for its services to date.

Acting manukura/ chief executive officer Mark Liddle said he was unaware of any staff who would be stood down.

## Stuff Report Two

*Title: Covid-19: Vaccine mandate 'knee jerk', spurring 'hatred' – school staff say*

*Date: 16 November 2021.*

*Text:*

The principal of a rural school says he is enforcing the Covid-19 vaccine mandate “under legal duress”, and staff should have been given options other than having to have the vaccine, to stay in school.

Mike Allen said two board members had resigned at Lake Rotoiti School on the edge of Nelson Lakes National Park as the deadline passed on Tuesday for school workers to have their first dose of the Pfizer vaccine.

Allen anticipated two others members would follow suit – leaving just him and one other person on the board.

One of the school’s two fulltime teachers was now also on leave.

The board chair was among those to step down, feeling he couldn’t “morally or ethically” fire someone or stand them down over something that had been legally mandated, Allen said.

“I don’t want to sign the letter either, but I’ve got a mortgage.

“I’ve legally got to sign the letter, or I’ve got to resign.”

The school had been “saved” by someone from the St Arnaud community returning to the school to help fill in for the teacher, Allen said.

The school couldn’t appoint another teacher without a school board, or approve the school's draft budget for next year – and he and the remaining board member would start trying to set up another board up, Allen said.

The sentiment in the village was not “anti-vax”, rather there was feeling people had been pushed into a corner, he said.

“I really think it’s been a knee-jerk reaction [from the Government] from beginning to end.

“Why for example couldn’t you test [for Covid-19] weekly, and wear a mask in front of children.”

Information obtained by the New Zealand Principals’ Federation on Tuesday showed 3 per cent of school staff had not complied with the mandate deadline.

President Perry Rush said the information from seven regions – not yet the Nelson region – showed just under 1 per cent of the teaching workforce were non-compliant.

The head teacher of an early children education centre in Richmond, Katrina McNamara, was working at home, after opting not to get a jab by Monday.

McNamara said she had been on the fence about getting vaccinated, but decided not to after the vaccine mandate was announced.

“It was ‘you have to, or else’.”

McNamara said it wasn’t that she didn’t believe the Ministry of Health, which said the Pfizer vaccine was safe and reduced infection and transmission.

She was up-to-date with her other vaccinations, and said there was chance she would have got vaccinated against Covid-19, if she had more time to make a decision.

The proliferation of vaccine information on the internet had made her decision a hard one, along with friends and family having strong opinions on both sides, she said.

“There’s so much of it [research] out there, it just became hard to see what the truth is.

“When it came down to it, all my research, all my reading all my thoughts lead me in circles, and they all came back to; it’s about people’s freedom, their right to choose for themselves.”

Other teachers had got vaccinated because they felt that had no choice, she said.

“That just doesn’t sit right with me.”

McNamara felt it was appropriate for her to be working from home “in the current situation”. But when asked by Stuff if she thought it was ok for children to be taught by unvaccinated teachers, she said in “some circumstances” it was.

Mandating the vaccine mean that instead of people being open to having discussions about vaccination, they had become polarised in their opinions, she said.

“There’s division, there’s discrimination, there’s real hatred and animosity towards people for what should be someone’s personal choice.”

Protests were reported outside some schools on Monday and Tuesday.

Motueka High School principal John Prestidge said he went out to talk to four or five people protesting “around the concept of being pro choice” outside the school through the day on Monday,

“Just asking them to make sure they didn’t obstruct ... access to the school.

“They were very happy to oblige with that.

“Certainly we want to make sure especially going into exams next week, that we don't have further disruptions.”

## Stuff Report Three

*Title: Unvaccinated teacher: 'My 15-year career is basically down the drain'*

*Date: 15 November 2021*

*Text:*

A school teacher who refuses to be vaccinated says she has shed tears as 15 years of educating children nears a premature end.

With Covid-19 vaccinations being mandated for teachers across the country before midnight on November 15, Rachael Mortimer said she would not be turning up for work at her South Canterbury school on November 16.

"It's basically 15 years of a career down the drain. Fifteen years of learning the craft of teaching and helping these kids," she said.

The mother of three, who is the sole bread winner in her family, is among an unknown number of teachers who are refusing to be vaccinated across the country and will be barred from their school grounds after November 15.

Mortimer said she had previous health issues and was unwilling to get the vaccine, while she was unwilling to be "bullied" by the Government to do something she did not want to do.

She had tried and failed to get a medical exemption, she said.

"I am pretty upset, I have had a few cries ... but I am also really angry. I don't want to leave, I feel this choice has been completely taken away from me."

Antony Criglington, principal of Tapanui School in West Otago, said he was facing the loss of one of his five teachers due to being unvaccinated, a better situation than a week ago when he feared he would lose two.

"I think we are resigned to the fact people's careers are being ruined by this. It's not good for anyone," he said

Mandating vaccinations was "fairly unprecedented" and the issue was having an adverse effect on relationships between teachers.

"It's also playing with people's livelihoods."

Griglington, who is fully vaccinated and stressed he was not anti vaccination, said he was fully aware of what the Government was trying to achieve, but he didn't agree with the mandating decision.

"When you are talking about something this personal, something that's happening to your body, you should be allowed to choose."

An existing shortage of teachers would just get worse and he had issue with the mandate being enforced so close to the end of school year, given the disruption it was causing schools.

"Surely they could have waited four weeks."

He also believed the public should have been given the choice of more than one Covid-19 vaccine.

Covid Response Minister Chris Hipkins said the Pfizer vaccine remained the primary vaccine in New Zealand. But work was under way to introduce the AstraZeneca vaccine as an alternative option for the "very small" number of over 18s who were unable to have the Pfizer vaccine for medical reasons, and for people hesitant to receive the Pfizer vaccine.

Mandating was never an easy decision, Hipkins said.

“We made this decision to reduce the risk of Covid-19 affecting students, staff and school communities.”

Most eligible New Zealanders were already vaccinated and feedback indicated this was also the case at schools.

“We also know communities and work colleagues have concerns if people around them are not vaccinated.”

The deadline for teachers to receive their first jab was midnight on November 15, with the second dose required by January 1.

Central Southland College principal Grant Dick, also the Southland Secondary Principals’ Association chairman, said most schools were facing the possibility of losing valued staff.

“In general, it’s an incredibly difficult situation to be losing teachers from the profession across the country,” he said in a written statement.

The profession remained buoyant but empathy was evident as people dealt with their own personal situations on the mandate, he said.

Otautau School principal and Southland Primary Principals Association chair Simon Bell said he would comment next week, “once we can get a gauge on how we have been affected across the region”.

# Appendix B: Transcript of The New Zealand Herald reports

## The New Zealand Herald Report One

*Title: Vaccine mandate means more than 100 Northland District Health Board staff stood down*

*Date: 19 November 2021*

*Text:*

After nearly two decades working as a nurse at a public hospital in Northland, Jill Mortimer is suddenly in the unenviable position of leaving the job she loves.

She is among 37 nurses employed by the Northland District Health Board who have been stood down because they had not had their first dose of Covid vaccination by Monday's deadline.

NDHB has stood down 104 staff across the region as at Wednesday morning, including 37 nurses, eight midwives, and three senior medical officers, who did not meet the Government's vaccination mandate, which dictated all DHB staff must have had their first dose by 11.59pm on Monday.

Waikato DHB had the highest number of staff stood down, with 154, followed by Bay of Plenty (123) and Counties Manukau (119).

However, the DHBs with the highest proportion of unvaccinated staff stood down were Northland, Taranaki, Nelson-Marlborough and West Coast — all on 4 per cent.

Just over 1300 DHB unvaccinated staff from around the country have been stood down.

NDHB said minimising any impact to services included careful staff rostering and close monitoring of any areas where there may be a shortage of employees.

Mortimer has been working at Whangārei Hospital's emergency department for 17 years and is adamant that although she was fully vaccinated for flu and other illness, she would not get the Covid vaccine.

"As is my practice, I like to be well informed so I looked at the evidence around Covid vaccines and I was concerned. When I looked at the stats, I was more concerned."

She said the Nursing Council of New Zealand, the regulatory authority responsible for the registration of nurses, ordered her and other nurses not to say anything negative to patients about the Covid-19 vaccinations.

"I looked at what the vaccination was and how long it stayed in the body. Pfizer is an experimental medication that we are giving to the general population and this is contrary to everything we've done in medication," she claimed.

Auckland University vaccinologist Associate Professor Helen Petousis-Harris recently told the Advocate's sister publication the NZ Herald Pfizer vaccine trials for efficacy and safety were achieved late in 2020.

They were no longer experimental once authorised for use. She said there had been a misunderstanding among some that because the trial end date is 2023, the vaccine must be "experimental". The end date is to allow for other endpoints, one example being the effect booster doses.

Mortimer also has an unvaccinated family member working for NDHB who will also lose their job.

The Nursing Council did not answer specific questions but referred the Northern Advocate to its guidance statement in which it strongly recommends all practising nurses to be vaccinated.

The council said nurses have a role in providing evidence-based advice and information about Covid vaccination to others.

They should be prepared to discuss evidence-based information about vaccination and its benefits to assist informed decision making, the council said.

"As a regulator, we respect an individual's right to have their own opinions, but it is the council's view that there is no place for anti-vaccination messages in professional health practice, nor any promotion of anti-vaccination claims including on social media and advertising by health practitioners."

NDHB Covid-19 incident controller Mark McGinley said ensuring continuity of safe patient care was their absolute focus.

Of the six staff who have been stood down in the cancer and blood service, five are nurses.

"We have contingencies in place and no patients are being delayed for their chemotherapy treatment because of this. We work closely with our metro DHB colleagues to ensure the sustainable delivery of the cancer and blood service," McGinley said.

He said a further update would be provided next week, including how many more staff have been stood down.

About 96 per cent of nurses employed by NDHB are members of the New Zealand Nursing Organisation, which is supporting the unvaccinated members who have been stood down.

Organiser Julie Governor said NZNO supported vaccinating the health workforce, but whether or not to get vaccinated was a personal choice.

"Some will retire early, we'll explore redeployment options for others but they are very limited. We don't want to lose staff because the workforce is already stretched, hospitals are overwhelmed," she said.

Chairwoman of the New Zealand College of Midwives (NZCM) in Northland, Christine Byrne, said although her members have been stood down, the college did not want people to think the appropriate level of care would not be provided.

"People are taking on more hours, others caseloads before the end of last week, and more shifts and whether that's sustainable, that's yet to be seen."

NZCM has about 80 members in Northland.

## The New Zealand Herald Report Two

*Title: Covid-19 vaccine mandate: Teacher aide for boy with learning difficulties among seven barred from school*

*Date: 19 November 2021*

*Text:*

The teacher aide of a Hastings boy with learning difficulties has refused the Covid-19 vaccine and is one of seven staff at the same school now not allowed on school grounds.

Nine-year-old Hastings Christian School student Tyrone Lambert is confused and upset, his mother Amber Lambert says.

But she says, in spite of this, she backs the decision of teacher aide Karen Spurgeon.

Education, healthcare and corrections staff were required to get their first Covid-19 vaccination by Monday.

Those that didn't are either being stood down or have resigned.

When the mandate was announced, Covid-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins said it was about leaving nothing to chance.

"It's not an easy decision, but we need the people who work with vulnerable communities who haven't yet been vaccinated to take this extra step.

"Vaccinations for children aged 5 to 11 are not yet approved."

Close to one per cent of school teachers – just under 700 – had refused to get the vaccine, according to one survey, National president of New Zealand Principals' Federation Perry Rush, said.

"I think that signals there's a high rate of compliance among teachers."

The survey covered nine regions across the country, and about three per cent of the whole education workforce.

In Hawke's Bay, exact numbers remained unclear yesterday but some schools have lost multiple staff.

Rush told Hawke's Bay Today that most small schools had one to two ancillary or teaching staff who were unwilling to be vaccinated and larger schools might have a few more.

Hastings Christian School principal Gavin Clark said the school, which teaches both primary and secondary students, would lose seven of its 50 staff.

Three were teaching staff and four were support staff, Clark said.

He had hoped for alternative options for those with "strong convictions" who chose not to get vaccinated, as it was going to have a significant impact.

"This has been really upsetting. It's devastating, actually."

Clark had a plan for the school to get through the next four weeks thanks to an "incredible effort" by his remaining staff.

One class has three teachers covering it in shifts, which is not ideal as it's disruptive to younger students who needed "consistency", he said.

However, he was unsure about what next year would look like.

"I don't want to think about how next year will pan out."

Hastings Christian School student Tyronne Lambert, 9, was diagnosed with ADHD, anxiety and sensory processing issues about two years ago.

Amber said the diagnosis had enabled Tyronne to get the "one-on-one support" he needed to catch up to his peers.

Having Sturgeon as his teacher aide had really helped with his confidence.

Tyronne didn't take the news he'd be losing his teacher aide well as he doesn't like change, Amber said.

"He needs that one on one support."

She said she wouldn't be worried about support being provided by unvaccinated staff, and Tyronne now faced a huge task trying to build trust with a new aide.

"I want [the Government] to consider the higher needs and special needs students who are losing teachers," Amber said.

Teacher aide Karen Spurgeon, of Hastings, said it was "devastating" to not be able to continue as Tyronne's teacher aide, but she did not want to get the vaccine.

She said the Lamberts were like family to her after two years together.

"We'll never lose that."

Spurgeon said a new teacher aide had been found who was "amazing" but it would still take some time for Tyronne to feel comfortable.

While she was still working with the school and helping with the handover, she was unable to be on the school grounds. From mid-December, she will be stood down.

She said the way the school had fought for her to stay was "humbling".

"They did everything they could."

Hastings Youth Council chair Keelan Hesterman, speaking in his capacity as a Karamu High School student, told Hawke's Bay Today earlier the health of those being educated had to be "paramount".

"I'm sure there have been some tough conversations over the last few weeks about this, but showing kindness and compassion in dealing with this is so important, particularly when encouraging the vaccine-hesitant to get the jab.

"Young people just want to feel safe at school, and knowing their teachers are vaccinated against Covid-19 plays a big part of that."

## The New Zealand Herald Report Three

*Title: Covid-19 Delta Outbreak: Teaching Staff farewelled ahead of vaccine mandate deadline*

*Date: 15 November 2021*

*Text:*

An unknown number of school teachers, early childcare and other education staff have been farewelled today as the vaccination mandate kicks in.

No unvaccinated staff or volunteers are allowed on school or ECE grounds from tomorrow.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said this afternoon that no schools were unable to open for learning as a result of the vaccine mandates but 11 were indicating they had a "high risk" of losing staff.

Overall there had been four applications for mandate exemptions, which were currently being assessed by the Minister, she said.

The mandate - which is supported by most in the sector - is in place because children can't be vaccinated, so rely on adults to slow the spread of Covid-19.

Vaccinated people are much less likely to catch and thus spread the virus - they are also thought to be less likely to infect others although more research is needed.

But some school and early learning staff have refused to get the vaccine, for a variety of reasons - often based on incorrect information they have read online.

That's led to some claims that those who leave shouldn't be in the sector in the first place as they lack the qualities of a good teacher.

But some school leaders say that's not fair - many of the teachers being farewelled were good at their jobs and will be sorely missed.

And a private online school is even being set up to give some of those teachers another employment option.

'We would welcome them back with open arms'

Papakura High School principal Simon Craggs said about seven per cent of staff had not had their first dose.

Among them was the school's Service Academy director Eparaima Paratene who posted a video to social media of a rousing haka and waiata at his farewell.

Paratene - a former army vet who served in Iraq and has led the academy for two years - struggled to compose himself before leading the "haka of respect" while some of his students were in tears by the end of the waiata.

Craggs said no staff were losing their job today - the school had decided to let them work from home and keep paying them until the end of the year.

Even though the school disagreed with their decision not to be vaccinated, they were still valued members of staff, he said.

With the public becoming increasingly divided over vaccine status, Craggs repeated a recent message he had given in the staffroom.

"That person sitting next to you ... who two months ago was one of your favourite colleagues and you got on incredibly well with, is not a different person because they've decided not to get the vaccine, or have decided to get the vaccine. They're still the same person, and they need to have understanding and empathy."

He believed that had struck a chord. "There was a bit of tension ... but that's really settled down once people realised, it's just one decision, it doesn't change who they are as a person."

Craggs had read some of the information those people were seeing. He understood why they found it "incredibly convincing" even though it was contrary to the advice from public health experts.

Staff had had chances to get their questions answered through a webinar series from Nanogirl Dr Michelle Dickinson and a Zoom call with Māori health advocate Dr Rawiri McKree Jansen.

It would be "fantastic" if people changed their minds in coming weeks, Craggs said. "We would welcome them back with open arms."

NZPF president Perry Rush told Mike Hosking this morning it was a tough day at the office for principals.

There was still no national tally of how many school staff would be gone on Tuesday.

With only about four weeks to go, schools would be able to "limp through" to the end of the year. The hard date was January 1, when the policy's true impact would be seen.

"We simply don't know if we have sufficient teaching resource out there to backfill the absence of these teachers in a face-to-face context."

Auckland University's Head of Initial Teacher Education Paul Heyward told NZME's Kate Hawkesby school leaders shouldn't be giving up on their unvaccinated staff members just yet.

Heyward said there was time to talk to them and get them to "change their mind with dignity" before January 1.

That discussion could look at how their decision related to the professional teachers' code - some might see their decision as upholding human rights which was part of the code.

"Let's begin the conversation, rather than seeing all anti-vax teaches as a kind of lunatic fringe, which they're not. We could lose some very talented teachers."

Private online school offering jobs for teachers who aren't vaccinated

The Villa Education Trust is setting up a private online school following the vaccine mandate coming into effect.

It put out a call over the weekend for expressions of interest from teachers, "vaccinated or not".

The trust's academic adviser Alwyn Poole said more than 40 teachers had responded including some who cited the vaccine mandate as their reason for seeking an online teaching job.

He believed unvaccinated teachers had been characterised unfairly - there were some "very very high-quality educators" among the applicants.

Poole said the school was already tentatively in the works, thanks to the move to online learning in the pandemic, but the mandate had hastened the move.

The school's aims included providing high-quality learning for students, ensuring predictability for families and providing another option for teachers who were losing their jobs.

If vaccines were brought in for children, that could also prove a problem both for pro- and anti-vaxx parents who might have concerns about who was in their child's class. The school could offer them another option, he said.

It will be run out of Mt Hobson Middle School and will cater to Years 5-13 initially. The fees would be "well below \$10,000", not including the costs of a once-a-term camp.

The school would be led by Poole, his wife Karen as chief executive, Dr Bruce Knox providing qualifications guidance and two others yet to be announced.

Poole said around 50 families had indicated an interest since it was announced on the weekend.

Between the trust's three schools - Mt Hobson, Middle School West Auckland and South Auckland Middle School - there were still four staff in a "decision-making process" about the mandate this afternoon.

VET wanted to follow a fair employment process and look at whether there were alternative ways they could stay employed, Poole said. "We love our teachers."

# Appendix C: Transcript of Radio New Zealand reports

## Radio New Zealand Report One

*Title: The missing context in vaccine mandate coverage*

*Date: 19 November 2021*

*Text:*

News organisations have devoted plenty of space to the unvaccinated healthcare and education workers being stood down this week. But many of those stories are missing vital context.

Around 1300 DHB staff and an estimated 700 teachers have been stood down this week after failing to comply with the government's vaccine mandate.

Though that represents around 1.5 percent and 1 percent of the public health and education workforces respectively, the comparatively small ranks of the unvaccinated have punched above their weight in generating news headlines.

Stuff has run stories on Richmond early childhood teacher Katrina McNamara, Christchurch mental health nurse Megan McNamara, Lake Hāwea early childhood teacher Kimberley Skiller, Marlborough nurse Sandra Stubbs, and South Canterbury school teacher Rachael Mortimer. NZME has covered Hastings teacher aide Karen Spurgeon and Northland nurse Jill Mortimer.

Many of these stories are sprinkled with sympathetic language.

Stuff's story on Stubbs describes her as having "lost her career", and quotes her husband saying she's been "forced" to leave her job.

Its story on Megan McNamara begins with the news that she "sent a goodbye email to her team and cried as she rode away from her job for the last time".

Over at NZME, the Northern Advocate's story on Jill Mortimer says she's in "in the unenviable position of leaving the job she loves".

Reading the accounts you'd almost believe these workers' employment has been put at risk unfairly and arbitrarily.

Some of the stories give no explanation for the reasons behind the vaccine mandate.

One of the more fulsome entries comes from the Herald, which devotes two paragraphs to Chris Hipkins' assertion that the requirement is about "leaving nothing to chance". The Advocate gives space to a defence of the vaccine from Auckland University vaccinologist Associate Professor Helen Petousis-Harris, but only as a rebuttal to several paragraphs of misinformation.

In reality, these staff aren't being forced out of their jobs. They can stay employed if they get a safe, effective, rigorously studied vaccine that's available at most GP offices or pharmacies.

Whatever they say about their motives, they're being stood down for not fulfilling their duty to protect the vulnerable people in their care.

Some research indicates unvaccinated people are roughly 20 times more likely to pass on Covid, mainly because they're more likely to catch it and their cases are usually more severe.

Unvaccinated nurses, midwives, and teachers are at greater risk of infecting pupils, patients and newborn babies.

Those facts go unmentioned in many of the stories on the staff refusing to comply with the mandate.

Instead they allow space for those workers to argue their freedoms.

Katrina McNamara is quoted decrying the animosity shown over “what should be someone’s personal choice.”

Megan McNamara talks about not being given her “right to say no”.

There’s little mention of the right of sick and immunocompromised people to be protected from potentially deadly breakthrough Covid-19 infections; silence on the freedom of students and babies to not be exposed to the virus.

Reporters may think that the reasons for the mandate are self-evident, or that other coverage is sufficient in explaining the benefits of the Covid-19 vaccine.

But social media is riddled with vaccine misinformation. Thousands of people recently marched on Parliament to advocate for the unhindered spread of Covid-19.

It needs to be repeated: vaccines reduce people's chance of catching Covid-19. The entire reason the vaccine mandates exist is to reduce infection risk for vulnerable people.

Those people should at least get a mention in the stories about the measures we’re implementing in their name.

Instead they’re too often invisible.

## Radio New Zealand Report Two

*Title: Vaccine mandate: 'Incredible pressure' on remaining hospital staff*

*Date: 18 November 2021*

*Text:*

Health sector staff will be under further pressure as the strained system deals with the loss of 1300 workers across the country who are not vaccinated, say health experts.

The vaccine mandate for health workers kicked in at midnight on Monday and DHBs are now figuring out how to do more with depleted staffing stocks.

Royal NZ College of General Practitioners medical director Dr Brian Betty says he respects the choice to not take the vaccine - but that decision would increase the strain on others.

"I think I was surprised by the absolute number. In some DHBs it's up to around 4 percent of the hospital health workforce, which is a high number, and especially in a system that's quite constrained."

He hoped unvaccinated health workers would re-consider their stance when the AstraZeneca vaccine becomes available later this month.

No one can now work in healthcare unless they have had at least one dose of a Covid-19 vaccine or are exempt from the government mandate.

At some DHBs, including Northland, the West Coast and Nelson Marlborough, 4 percent percent of their workforce has been stood down.

The largest number of workers stood down was 154 in Waikato - or two percent of its staff - ahead of the Bay of Plenty, with 123 people and 119 in Counties Manukau.

Nearly 500 of those off the job are nurses.

New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) Kaiwhakahaere Kerri Nuku said there was already 3500 vacancies for nurses and the situation had reached crisis point.

"We're at a really critical point now that we don't have enough supply to meet the increasing demands that is required once we start to get more and more patients, not just occupying ICU beds, but the general wards, which will take less urgent cases, but will still have incredible pressure on the hospital staff and nurses."

She said burnt-out nurses had been stepping up to meet overwhelming demand for almost two years now, and despite their best efforts, the quality of care would suffer.

"While we talk about how many beds there might be in ICU, we don't ever focus on how many nurses does it require to man the bed to be skilled nurses and be able to provide the compassionate care that's required," she said.

For Dunstan Hospital doctor and rural health associate professor Garry Nixon, chronic rural staff shortages are hard enough as it is.

"If you lose a large chunk of your workforce, even for relatively short periods, while some are in isolation because members of that workforce had passed on the virus to other other members of the workforce, that's going to have potentially even bigger impact on small rural health teams."

Health Minister Andrew Little said the mandate kept patients safe.

"I don't think the fact that some choose not to get vaccinated for whatever reason, clearly not clinical, and putting others at risk as a reason to lower those safety standards," he said today.

"It does put more pressure on the system. We'll continue to work with the nurses organisation and others on the recruitment campaign.

He said the 300 MIQ rooms set aside for health workers will help lighten the load.

But Dr Betty said the issues went much deeper than roster shortfalls, as people look to health workers for leadership.

"I am disappointed that this number of health workers would take this opinion about the vaccine and I suppose buy into some of the pseudoscience that is out there about the vaccine, because these are leaders in the community in terms of the Covid response.

"I think it is problematic that this number have decided to do this."

Dr Betty said the vaccine mandate wasn't just to protect the public from Covid-19 - it kept frontline healthcare staff safe too.

## Radio New Zealand Report Three

*Title: Hundreds of health workers unvaccinated heading into mandate deadline*

*Date: 16 November 2021*

*Text:*

About 2000 district health board workers had not been vaccinated 15 hours before the deadline to lose their jobs.

From today no one can work in healthcare unless they have had at least one dose of the Covid-19 vaccine or are exempt from the government mandate.

Unite Union's Gerard Hehir represents six Waikato Hospital orderlies who have decided not to get vaccinated.

They had a last minute meeting with the DHB yesterday, one of a series over the past few weeks.

"People have been given the opportunity to think about it, respond, have some time, offered more information," he said.

Even though they could not work from today, they would have one more meeting this week, a chance to change their minds before their contracts were terminated, he said.

Other DHBs also met with workers yesterday, with most offering the chance for last minute vaccinations.

It was still unclear how many people have made the same choice as the Waikato orderlies.

A spokesperson representing all district health boards said at 9am yesterday they estimated there were about 2 percent or 3 percent of their 80,000 staff nationally who were unvaccinated - between 1600 and 2400 people.

But it would be a few days before they knew the final number, she said.

That estimate did not count the tens of thousands of contractors who worked at hospitals, doing jobs like carpentry, food preparation or patient transport.

Counties Manukau DHB managers have been told they are responsible for checking every contractor who is coming on site to do work for their team.

The mandate went beyond DHBs to people working in the community - GPs, physiotherapists, psychologists, midwives, chiropractors and more.

The College of GPs medical director Bryan Betty said it was also trying to get a gauge on how many of the country's 5000 GPs were not vaccinated.

He knew of about 20 but also of nurses and receptionists who would lose their jobs.

Nurse and midwife organisations were also waiting on DHB figures to find out how their professions were impacted.

Nurses Organisation Kaiwhakahaere Kerri Nuku said there was a small number out of the roughly 50,000 nurses working around the country.

She knew personally of six who were still holding out but also of some who had been reluctant then realised their jobs were more important and got vaccinated.

College of Midwives chief executive Alison Eddy said she worried about losing any midwife from the workforce, because it was already so stretched.

Hehir said the union was supporting its workers but it did back the mandate.

When it surveyed its DHB workers, for every vaccine hesitant response, there were many more from those who said they would be uncomfortable working with unvaccinated people.

"It is a real serious issue with people losing their jobs but it is also a very serious issue for people concerned about their health and the health of their families," he said.

# Appendix D: Transcript of Newsroom Reports

## Newsroom Report One

*Title: Why vaccine mandates are ethical*

*Date: 26 November 2021*

*Text:*

As the pandemic races towards an unenviable two-year milestone, the Otago Global Health Institute's Covid-19 Masterclass Series is bringing together a network of experts to discuss key Covid-19 topics. We'll be running a piece daily until December 5.

Restricting people's liberty is justified when the costs of what is being asked are small, and the harms being prevented are significant, argues Dr Elizabeth Fenton

Vaccine mandates are ethically justified to reduce the risks of harm from infectious disease and ensure everyone who is able contributes their share to the achievement of a public good from which we all benefit.

Like all coercive policies, vaccine mandates restrict individual liberty by requiring a particular course of action. Seat belt laws and penalties for tax evasion are similarly coercive policies justified by appeal to reducing risks of harm, promoting social benefits, and fairly distributing burdens.

The fact that a policy is coercive does not alone make it ethically problematic. A coercive policy will be easier to justify when the cost to the individual of doing what is required is small, the harms prevented are significant, and the policy promotes important public good that can only be secured by a collective effort. Covid-19 vaccine mandates meet these conditions.

Three criticisms of these mandates have emerged in public debate. The first is that they are ineffective and counterproductive in terms of building public trust.

On-the-ground efforts to inform, educate, and invest in vulnerable or hesitant communities will be more effective in the long term without the costs of compulsion. These are not mutually exclusive, however.

When they are described and communicated correctly, mandates convey that vaccination is an individual and collective responsibility and are compatible with ongoing efforts to build trust and understanding around why that responsibility is being legally enforced.

The second criticism claims that vaccine mandates conflict with the principle that where public health interventions restrict individual liberty the 'least restrictive alternative' intervention should be used.

The Nuffield Council on Bioethics has argued that mandates are justified if, and only if, measures less intrusive on individual freedom, such as education and analysis of vaccine hesitancy, have been shown not to work.

The first problem with this claim is that the costs of a less restrictive strategy are potentially substantial in terms of higher levels of Covid-19 morbidity and mortality. We are not ethically required to tolerate those higher levels in the interests of protecting a small measure of individual freedom in the short term.

The urgency of preventing further spread of Covid-19, and reducing the social and economic costs of lockdowns, warrants the move to mandates before all less restrictive measures have been fully tested.

Second, advocates of a less restrictive alternative to mandates assume that we should only be concerned about restrictions of individual liberty. But for any application of this principle we must ask, less restrictive for whom?

A policy of voluntary vaccination imposes a greater risk of harm on those who cannot be vaccinated and those for whom the vaccination is less effective, and so restricts their freedom to live without fear of avoidable harms.

In the debate over vaccine mandates, this type of freedom is especially ethically salient. From the perspective of those who want to live free from the avoidable risks of infectious disease, vaccine mandates constitute the least restrictive alternative.

Finally, critics claim that vaccine mandates for Covid-19 violate important human rights, such as the right to refuse to undergo medical treatment.

This right means that others are under an obligation not to force a vaccine on you – they must not violate your bodily integrity. But it does not override an individual moral obligation to get vaccinated, nor does it obstruct the state’s right to coerce you to meet that obligation.

Critics argue that even if vaccine mandates do not violate bodily integrity, they violate a fundamental liberty right to make one’s own choices about whether or not to vaccinate, because they require a person to make a significant sacrifice (such as their job) in order to preserve that liberty.

However, this argument overlooks a key feature of mandates. They do not force an individual to make that sacrifice; rather they force the individual to decide how much they value this expression of their liberty relative to other goods, such as employment.

Those subject to the mandate remain free to choose which they value more – their freedom to reject a small burden that contributes significantly to the public good, or the good they are being asked to give up.

Objectors might respond that a vaccine mandate preserves this choice only in the sense that the thief who puts a gun to your head saying, “your money or your life,” offers you the freedom to choose which you value more. The freedom the thief gives you to choose does not make the threat morally justifiable.

In the current context, however, where the burden imposed by the vaccination mandate is significantly smaller than either “your money” or “your life”, the preservation of choice, coupled with the public health imperative to reduce the spread of disease, is sufficient to justify the mandate.

## Newsroom Report Two

*Title: The Problem with the 'individual rights' argument*

*Date: 18 November 2021*

*Text:*

In recent days, as vaccine mandates for healthcare workers and teachers have come into effect, there's been plenty of talk about the so-called "rights" of the individual to refuse the vaccine and keep their job.

Leaving to one side the public health discussion, the nature of the dialogue occurring is a major concern.

The emergence of a strong individual rights dialogue in New Zealand appears to be relatively new, and derived from American conceptions of individualism and individual freedoms.

But the way it is used in New Zealand has two problems: it corrupts the historical importance of American constitutional freedoms, and shows a serious misunderstanding of our culture and constitutional structure.

There is much we can learn from history to inform the current health crisis. Historians have made some important contributions about the history of vaccination and disease.

Many of those protesting against vaccine mandates could also do with a history lesson. Invoking the holocaust, segregation, or apartheid to protest a public health measure is not only baseless, but also disrespectful and demeaning to the millions who suffered through those events.

The belief in a rigid set of rights that cannot be taken away, even when they harm or infringe on the rights of others, corrupts the way individual freedom can be (and has been) a tool for positive change.

In the spirit of learning from history, here is a lesson on how the American right corrupted the individual freedom dialogue for its own purposes, and the danger of adopting that approach in New Zealand.

Let's start with the 1950s and 1960s. In the United States, individual rights and freedoms provided civil rights and civil liberties activists with a framework to challenge oppressive racial and social justice policies.

Famous examples such as *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, *Gideon v. Wainwright* in 1963 and *Miranda v. Arizona* in 1966 are cases where an individual right was used to push for a collective societal benefit: desegregating schools, providing lawyers to indigent defendants, and preventing oppressive police interrogations.

Groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People successfully adopted an individual rights framework because they had to - the American Constitution with its supreme Bill of Rights provided the most effective mechanism to uphold the rights of coloured and marginalised Americans.

We should never lose sight of the fact these actions were undertaken for the collective good.

Importing the individualistic, American conception of rights shows a lack of understanding of how New Zealand's constitution works.

In the 1970s, this individual rights dialogue was corrupted by the American right - in particular, the religious right - to protect what it saw as important, at the expense of other groups in society. Debates about abortion and gun control became infected with an emphasis on individual rights.

It is this post-1960s American conception of individual freedom that now seems to be dominating the anti-mandate and anti-vaccine protests. The belief in a rigid set of rights that cannot be taken away, even when they harm or infringe on the rights of others, corrupts the way individual freedom can be (and has been) a tool for positive change.

As for constitutional structures, importing the individualistic, American conception of rights shows a lack of understanding of how New Zealand's constitution works.

America has a written Bill of Rights, enshrined in its constitution. The rights it contains are (mostly) absolutes. The US Supreme Court can, and does, invalidate legislation where it conflicts with the Bill of Rights. This system creates an incentive to frame debates in individualistic terms because the rights contained are individual in nature.

New Zealand has a very different system. Our Bill of Rights is like any other piece of legislation. It has an important guiding and informing purpose but little more. It is neither supreme, nor entrenched.

As Professor Claudia Geiringer, chair in public law at Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, notes “Parliament has retained its sovereign right to legislate in conscious disregard of the Bill of Rights”.

Set against this framework, the individual rights dialogue perpetuated by anti-mandate protests is completely unhelpful. Our constitutional framework does not recognise individual rights in the same way that the American system does, and our Bill of Rights recognises that reasonable limits on individual rights are fundamental for the protection of society as a whole – a view upheld by the High Court just last month.

Let us leave behind this American-centric, rights-driven debate. It misrepresents why individual rights and freedoms are historically important and misunderstands New Zealand's constitutional structure.

New Zealand society, reflected in our own constitutional structure, involves a much stronger view of the collective - the rights of society as a whole and the conditions that come with being a part of society.

Replacing this with a focus on individualism is selfish, does great harm to the community, and shows a lack of respect for others. Instead of focusing on the rights of the individual, the focus should be on the collective, and the things that need to be done for the good of the community.

## Newsroom Report Three

*Title: Teachers question the rush back to school*

*Date: 18 November 2021*

*Text:*

The return to on-site learning means inflating bubbles and increasing risks for unvaccinated kids as daily rates of community cases climb

Coming out of lockdown has been a long and protracted process for Aucklanders, as elements of normal life come back into play one by one.

This week, the big step was the reopening of schools for all students Year 10 and under on Wednesday. That's 200,000 students, back on campus for the first time in three months.

But a lack of specific guidance for teachers and the inability to vaccinate children has raised questions from teachers and parents about whether now is the time for the school bells to start ringing again.

Susan Underwood is a specialist teacher who travels between four schools in Auckland. This week she sent a letter to Minister of Education Chris Hipkins asking why now is the time for these students to go back to school, while community transmission is on the increase and vaccination is not yet an option for under 12s.

"While it's inevitable that schools have to go back, schools need time to be given solid guidelines from the Government," Underwood said.

Working as a classroom teacher during last year's lockdown, she said the Ministry of Education left schools largely to figure things out for themselves, and with little warning.

"Schools don't get the information until on the spot when the announcements are made, and then you've got four days to set up your procedures," she said. "Often it's left to classroom teachers to come up with how they are going to do the social distancing and the masking and work out their routines."

And getting a classroom full of children to change their behaviour to match all the new safety measures isn't easy.

"Children are children, they aren't adults," Underwood said. "They aren't constantly mindful of these things."

She contended teachers were being forced to shoulder the responsibility of huge and unstable bubbles of children with minimal guidance and short notice.

"We locked down because the use of masks and social distancing was not enough to protect us," Underwood wrote in her letter to Hipkins. "Now we are expecting children to instantly know how to be safe and to consistently comply with these expectations."

In last week's announcement of the return to school for all students, Hipkins said measures such as mask use from Year 4 upwards, classroom ventilation, small groups and social distancing would help minimise the risk of Covid transmission within schools.

"Lockdowns can be stressful for children and young people, so returning to some on-site learning will mean they can reconnect with their teacher and friends," he said. "Starting this month will provide certainty ahead of the Christmas break and before the new school year starts."

But with ICUs around the country gearing up to cope with a virus that isn't going anywhere soon, Underwood wonders if the risk is worth it. With four weeks left in the term and students coming to school two days a week, they are only going to get eight full days of learning.

"In these four weeks, no learning is going to be happening," Underwood said.

The Ministry of Education has distributed a checklist of suggestions to manage risk when opening up during Level 3, which includes a long list of new responsibilities for school administrators and teachers to juggle.

Among these are making sure there are no early drop-offs at school in the morning, monitoring entrances, and timetabling access to playground areas.

But even if the students aren't all out on the playground at once and teachers spend a good amount of energy making sure they socially distance and keep their masks over their nose during class time, there's a certain amount of chaos on the playground that makes risk difficult to mitigate.

"Play time for kids is a time for them to let go - they're all outside, everybody gets a bit relaxed. You can constantly try to manage that, but they are kids - they play tag," Underwood said. "We are putting our kids into environments where we are expecting them to manage and control all of this themselves."

When asked if it was too soon for on-site learning to return, the Ministry of Education responded that it was a complicated situation in which it needed to strike the right balance. Nevertheless, there would be benefits for children who had been stuck at home for months finally being able to get back in the classroom.

"We recognise this is a complex situation, and we are balancing education outcomes and wellbeing with the need to protect the health of young people and school staff," said Sean Teddy, leader of operation and integration at the Ministry of Education. "Students, parents and whānau can be assured that our approach strictly aligns with public health advice and is designed to keep students, their teachers and their communities as safe as possible."

Meanwhile, the president of the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) said the notice given for primary students was more realistic than last month's sudden announcement of back to school for secondary students.

"The Government's announcement that these students will return from next Wednesday, 17 November provides a much more realistic timeline than that given recently for the return of senior students; two days' notice put a huge and unnecessary pressure on schools," said PPTA Te Wehengarua president Melanie Webber. "With the re-opening of all schools, we urge the Government to provide clearer, sharper, national guidelines for all schools, particularly around responses to Covid-19 cases occurring in the school community."

It has been reported that schools don't represent huge transmission risks, with the WHO saying there have been a relatively small number of outbreaks reported among teachers to date.

However, the WHO website also notes that as children are more likely to have a milder form of the disease and potentially show fewer symptoms, cases may go unnoticed in school environments.

Like many aspects of the pandemic, it is too soon to say for sure exactly what will happen. The same site goes on to say "the longer-term effects of keeping schools open on community transmission are yet to be evaluated".

Underwood said her feelings of anxiety were shared by a number of other primary teachers - especially as their role means they lose the choice over whether to send their own kids back to school. Most parents have that choice, but given teachers are expected to be back at work, they may not have the same option.

"A teacher I work with was in tears about these expectations and struggles with deciding to put her children at risk or find people to care for them while she works and then of course could bring Covid back to her family," Underwood said.

A friend who teaches in Ireland has shared some of the difficulties educators may soon face here.

“She said children just don't understand the importance to socially distance and use masks. It is hugely stressful for her and the virus is out of control,” Underwood said. “It’s like everyone has just given up. She is sorry to hear that our schools are opening. Being on the other side of it, she feels for New Zealand teachers and schools right now.”

Underwood awaits a direct response to her letter, but like many teachers, she is hoping for a rethink so teachers and families have the time and space they need to figure out how to run schools with full protection.

“We are a team of five million fighting against Covid, right? Let’s not put our children, our taonga, on the front lines. Remember, they have no say in any of this.”