

- EDITORIAL -

## Introduction

*Zita Joyce and Luke Goode*

The last issue of *New Zealand Journal of Media Studies*, prior to its renaming as *Media Studies Journal of Aotearoa New Zealand*, focused on the national turbulence of 2011 and included reflection on the media and the earthquakes, with analysis of the immediate coverage of the 22 February disaster as a news event (Beatty 2012), and the eye-witness documentary *When a City Falls* (Fisher 2012, Austrin and Farnsworth 2012). By mid-2013 the earthquakes, recovery and rebuild still dominated local media in Christchurch and maintained a constant presence in national news, particularly through the advocacy journalism of *Campbell Live*. We felt that a journal issue dedicated to the mediation of Christchurch's earthquakes would emphasise the extent to which the disasters still resonate, and the fact that for most New Zealanders, even many in Christchurch, the quakes and aftermath remain a primarily mediated experience.

It is therefore only appropriate that the first issue of the newly renamed *MEDIANZ* begins where it left off, with the premise that after four years the first Canterbury earthquake, its aftershocks and repercussions still shape national and Christchurch media. Local newspapers and broadcasters have spent the years since February 2011 working from new and transitional spaces, responding to a radically changed social, political, and built environment. National and local media have covered individual stories of losses, problems and successes, along with broader stories about the city's demolition, recovery and rebuild.

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This issue gathers five papers that focus on the first year after the September quake. They cover a range of topics but all share in common a concern with the dual role of media in times of crisis, namely, the gathering, organising and dissemination of critical information on the one hand, and the articulation, sustenance and invigoration of community on the other. Importantly, they also attend to the varying roles played by different media platforms.

We begin with two papers showing the vital role of radio, a medium liable to receive less attention when we are more easily fascinated by the new affordances of digital and especially social media. These papers complement each other in their differing fields of vision. Ruth Zanker looks at the role radio played in the immediate aftermath of the September quake. Brian Pauling and Nicki Reece zoom in on one community access radio station across a longer timeframe, examining the evolution of Plains FM in the aftermath of both the September and February quakes. Zanker's paper uses broadcast transcripts, interviews and media commentary in bringing to light various important themes, including a public service ethos prevailing at a time of crisis, even within a highly deregulated environment; the important role of talkback radio in the quake's aftermath; and the competing imperatives of immediacy versus accuracy and verification of information. Zanker's paper also contributes some much needed 'thick description' of media ecologies, situating radio amid quake debris, swipe-card entry systems and damaged power grids, as broadcasters struggled to stay on air in the immediate fallout.

Pauling and Reece begin by situating access radio in the context of political economy. Plains FM has benefitted from the professionalism and dedication of its volunteers and yet, especially after the February quake, those volunteers faced major challenges that have impacted severely on the station's ability to continue delivering programming that meets the access radio remit laid out by New Zealand On Air. Streams of private funding, through local business sponsorship for individual programme makers, have also been hit. Amid this adversity, Pauling and Reece document how the station has developed new priorities in servicing the local community, from translating official information sources into minority languages to creating a new platform for citizens to tell their stories about the quakes and the ongoing challenges they face. The authors, like Zanker, underscore the need for both public policy and academic research to reconsider the status of radio in contemporary society and offer some of their own reflections on its democratic role in light of the Christchurch experience.

New digital media platforms are the subject of the next two papers. Abi Beatson and colleagues document and interrogate the phenomenon of crisis mapping whereby crowdsourced and geolocated information is aggregated and visualised to provide searchable 'situational awareness' of the crisis and to facilitate the effective pooling of volunteer skills and efforts for assistance and recovery across

the affected area. An interesting and important implication of this study of the Christchurch Recovery Map is that the ‘wisdom of the crowd’ should not be mythologised as an intrinsic and ‘natural’ value (despite biological metaphors of swarm intelligence, self-organisation and adaptation), but is rather an achievement borne of human and technological intervention and data (re)mediation. Nor is their account of this particular case of crisis mapping one of unqualified celebration: the risk that this technology of social intelligence can be disruptive (in the bad sense) by contributing to what Mark Andrejevic and others have termed ‘infoglut’ is a very real one and the tradeoff between quality and quantity of data remains work in progress. This paper argues that the evaluation criteria for such tools demand further work, while contributing to that work in their own right.

Kris Vavasour’s paper provides further critical investigation into the high hopes and expectations invested in online tools as crisis media. The tendency for ‘technofix’ discourses to artificially isolate the technologies they vaunt brings us back to the importance of approaches that focus on the complex networks of interdependencies involving technologies and their human users. Vavasour goes further, invoking actor network theory to highlight the ways in which a crisis can ‘unblackbox’ technologies, revealing the interdependencies and infrastructural underpinnings that remain invisible during times of normal use. Media ecologies come to the fore again in the telling finding that newspapers were a consistently important information source for residents, but damage to local businesses and to roading were obstacles to media access for those in hardest hit areas. Based on survey research, Vavasour’s paper demonstrates among other things how digital media were less useful than ‘old’ channels like radio and word of mouth for those in hardest hit areas, where power and telecommunications infrastructure was damaged. Vavasour’s paper doesn’t dismiss the role of new media as the title might provocatively imply, but it does, like other papers in this issue, speak strongly to the dangers of neophile assumptions about technological ‘progress’ and the supposed ‘arrival’ of the digital age.

Sean Scanlon’s paper, the final in this issue, focuses on the vital role of ‘traditional’ news media. If the Christchurch quakes have underscored the continuing value and relevance of professional journalism, this paper shows how they have also stimulated self-reflection and evaluation among journalists themselves in regard to their public role and professional self-image. Scanlon interviewed thirty-three Christchurch journalists, from print and broadcast media, about the impact the quakes have had on them personally and how this has affected their journalistic practices. In particular, the paper shows how journalists have played an important role in mediating collective trauma, using their own personal experiences as a prism for their reporting. The paper raises a number of significant issues, including the ethos of journalistic objectivity and detachment in a time of crisis; the public advocacy role of local journalists; the

role and status of personal or human stories in news, which are often disparaged in other contexts as 'soft news'; and relationships of trust and identification between journalists and their subjects.

The papers gathered here focus on the responses of media based in Christchurch to earthquake experiences they shared with their audiences. Journalists, the local staff of networked radio stations, and volunteers from Plains FM had to report and reflect on the effects of the earthquakes while continuing to produce media through their own traumas. That the local community appreciated this work is apparent in responses to Vavasour's survey, and respondents' frustration with the generalising information carried by national broadcasters. Beatson et al provide a broader perspective on the immediate earthquake response, as the recovery map resulted from a national collaboration, with organisation from Wellington and content from Christchurch. The largely local focus of this issue reflects the extent to which the earthquakes have shaped research agendas as well as media content in the region.

## References

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