

How a Change in Government Affects Climate Change Coverage at *The Press*

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Introduction

This study analyses how the Government's agenda drives climate change coverage at one New Zealand newspaper. Using Fairfax's digital archive to search stories at a Christchurch-based broadsheet daily, *The Press*, it has been possible to track how a shift in power affects climate change coverage.

The mainstream media struggles to cover specialist issues well. Climate change is just one aspect of environmental reporting. Also, given the geographical spread of New Zealand newspapers, and the lack of a true national daily title, stories are given local or regional angles to make them more appealing to readers. With climate change, a topic that sits more comfortably at a national or global level, this can be difficult. Given that context, newspapers have to rely on authoritative sources, most notably the Government.

This study of front-page stories in *The Press* over five years finds that the Government's line is preferred in twice as many climate change-related stories as that of opposition parties. There is a considerable drop off in prominent climate change stories in the year following the 2008 general election.

The public gets most of its scientific knowledge, especially about climate change, from the mass media (Wilson 1995). Given the differences between science and reporting, however, there can be problems with conveying the seriousness and immediacy of climate change—possibly one of the most significant threats facing mankind (Boyce and Lewis 2009: 3). The responsibility in communicating the science of climate change challenges the modern media, which often does not have environmental reporters or specialists to cover what is a fast-growing research area. Scientific findings tend to be meticulously worded and give heavily qualified assessments. The media, by contrast, favour stories which are dramatic and eye-catching (Wilson 2000).

It has been argued (Bennett 1996) that normative journalistic practices, such as fairness, accuracy and balance, introduce an informational bias into science-based

news stories. In the prestige United States print media, at least, a so-called 'denial discourse' is at work, which gives an inflated voice to those who disagree with the global scientific consensus. Deniers and sceptics suggest the media have become willing partners in a kind of climate swindle. They characterise the media as being manipulated by doomsday merchants seeking research grants, while journalists themselves swill from the trough by working fulltime on 'the secular Armageddon story of our times' (Wishart 2009: 15–16). This gives a false impression that the science is uncertain and divided (Boykoff and Boykoff 2009). The scientific consensus is highlighted in a 2004 article in the leading scientific journal *Science*. None of 928 scientific paper abstracts containing 'global climate change' published in refereed scientific journals over the previous decade disagreed with evidence of human modification of the climate (Oreskes 2004).

In a recent study of Australian and New Zealand newspapers (Howard-Williams 2009) it has been argued that the validity of scientific claims is no longer an issue. Concerns remain, however, about how the media represent climate change. A 2009 study of Australian and New Zealand newspapers said there was a failure to question the social and economic structures that lie at the heart of climate change. In other words, the media did not frame the issue as one of lifestyle. Climate change was not linked to deep questions about how we're living our lives. The study found there was a heavy reliance on government or industry sources (Howard-Williams 2009). It has also been argued that discourse in the New Zealand media is driven by 'governmental policy frameworks' (Russill 2008). Russill (2008) claims that the government agenda influences the climate change coverage to such an extent that the media help 'structure perceptions of climate change to advantage very narrow ways of responding to the problem'. This is a more serious accusation than that of giving every side's view a run, which could be explained as adhering to professional standards or an honest lack of understanding. Russill suggests that public understanding is sacrificed to amplify industry perceptions—something much more insidious and alarming.

This article argues that the government, and to a lesser extent industry, drive climate change coverage at one New Zealand newspaper, *The Press*. Firstly, an archive search reveals increasing coverage of the issue, through the more common appearance of climate-related phrases. Two other Fairfax newspapers, *The Dominion Post* and the *Waikato Times*, will be examined to detect the prevalence of climate change issues amongst *The Press*'s sister papers. The purpose of this study is to discuss five years of front-page stories in *The Press*—four years under a

Labour government and one year of the incoming National government. The parties' opposing environmental policy directions should add flavour but the result should be the same: overall, the main sources of prominent climate change stories are governmental and industrial. *The Press* has had two environment reporters under employment since late 2008, just before Prime Minister John Key swept to power. One would expect to see an increased volume of environmental stories as a result.

Setting the Political Scene

Deep into her third term, and her popularity flagging, Prime Minister Helen Clark announced a bold package to cut carbon emissions. It would include a programme of increased tree planting and a target to boost the renewable share of electricity generation. New Zealand should dare to aspire to be carbon neutral, she said. Labour adopted a \$1 billion home insulation and clean heat programme proposed by the Green Party. Other marquee environmental moves included banning tenure review on lakeside properties to protect Crown-owned farmland from development, and spending \$40 million on a North Canterbury station to transform it into public conservation land. Later, her Government would propose banning incandescent light bulbs—seized on by opponents as evidence of a 'nanny state' (Stuff.co.nz 2008). Her announcements earned overseas praise (Brown 2008), but did not get her re-elected.

Six months before the election, Prime Minister-in-waiting John Key made a very different pitch. He described climate change as the biggest environmental challenge of our time. National would seek a credible path along which New Zealand would not lead the world but do its bit, he told a regional conference. The economy would underpin environmental policies. As Key and Environment Minister Nick Smith put it, the environmental responsibilities would be balanced with the economic opportunities. Key told his regional conference he was more interested in every Kiwi having a job than becoming the United Nations Secretary General (Key 2007). Months after losing the election, Clark was nominated for a position as head of the United Nations Development Programme (UN News Centre 2009).

National's political differences became clear as the previous government's environmental policies were wound back. The plan to ban traditional light bulbs was literally gone by Christmas. The ban on lakeside properties entering tenure review was lifted. The \$1 billion insulation fund was initially dropped but later adopted at a much smaller scale. The Department of Conservation's budget was cut. Government

programmes to reduce waste and emissions at more than 40 government agencies was axed. More controversially, mining plans were proposed for some of the country's most protected conservation land. The Government backtracked after massive public opposition.

In the climate change arena, Labour's controversial emissions trading scheme was substantially reworked and watered down, in terms of effectiveness and the Government cost. At least the argument over a response to climate change—a flip-flop over many years between a carbon tax and an emissions trading scheme—seems settled. A ban on building new thermal power generation was rescinded and more money was funnelled into highway building.

Early in 2010, Canterbury's regional councillors were sacked and replaced with commissioners. A report by Government appointees said the council had botched water policy over many years and could not deliver. Opponents said the undemocratic move was a water grab. In June 2010, Key said the Government would fund Canterbury irrigation projects.

The contrast between Labour and National, in environmental policy terms, is stark. Clark's government was proactively protecting Crown farmland from development and putting together a raft of policy responses to climate change. National has been interested in boosting the economy by building roads, lessening the long-term impact of the emissions trading scheme on businesses and funding irrigation schemes. The media has extensively covered National's moves to overturn many of Labour's policies and pursue projects which are the antithesis of the previous government's package aimed at cutting greenhouse gas emissions. One consequence of a weaker environmental strategy could be fewer stories on climate change. However, if the central thesis is correct then the government should still drive the coverage.

Background of *The Press*

The Press is Christchurch's only daily newspaper and the South Island's largest. It has seen off *The Star*—which crashed from a daily to a twice-weekly give-away in 1991—and a brief period of competition in the early 2000s from *The Citizen*. This may give the newspaper a ruthless quality but despite its traditional conservative leanings, it has recently taken on a green tinge. *The Press*, first published in 1861, is owned by Fairfax Media, which is probably the largest publisher of New Zealand's newspapers, magazines and sporting publications. Under editor Paul Thompson,

The Press won Newspaper of the Year at the Qantas Media Awards two years running, in 2006 and 2007 (Rosenberg 2008). In addition to this general pedigree, the newspaper has in more recent times taken a specialised interest in the environment.

Under current editor Andrew Holden, who was appointed late in 2007, the paper backed the conservation organisation World Wide Fund's (WWF) expansion into New Zealand of the Earth Hour initiative—a lights-out event aimed at raising awareness and encouraging local action about climate change. *The Press* was a media partner to the 2008 event, during which Christchurch was the only New Zealand participant. A WWF marketing team was based in the newspaper's central Christchurch building for several weeks. Holden's personal involvement in the event continued the following year, when he sat on the New Zealand event's national executive. Holden says it was his decision to support the introduction of Earth Hour to New Zealand. The media leads public opinion sometimes, and reflects it at other times. Holden says the Earth Hour coverage, including the production of a special tabloid pull-out, was an example of the editor leading public opinion, or at least knowledge of the issue.

Since late 2008, *The Press* has had two specialist environment reporters (including the writer of this article). Senior reporter David Williams left the paper's Queenstown office for the Christchurch newsroom, joining veteran writer Paul Gorman in the environment 'round'. Modern newspapers, owned by overseas corporate companies, have streamlined their operations in recent years, including the centralisation of roles such as some sub-editing functions. Falling advertising levels during the global financial recession prompted another round of cost-cutting, making newsrooms even leaner. That makes *The Press's* appointment of two reporters to cover the environment and conservation—areas not traditionally considered to be one of the big four 'rounds' of crime, council, education and health—even more unusual.

This sets a heavy agenda for its readers. But it also gives the newspaper the resources to deal with important stories breaking in its region, nationally and internationally. Factory farming of dairy cows in the South Island's Mackenzie country became a national issue in 2009—a story broken by Gorman. Much Parliamentary debate and newspaper column space were also devoted that year to Government plans to open up some of the country's most protected conservation land for mining. It was a tumultuous time for climate change policy and debate. An emails scandal broke involving climate scientists from several countries and the year ended with the

disappointing United Nations climate conference in Copenhagen. Williams reported from the conference for Fairfax. In early 2010 a damning review of Canterbury's regional council, Environment Canterbury, suggested the Government step in. ECan councillors were sacked and replaced with commissioners.

With two environment reporters, *The Press* was able to divert significant resources to covering these important stories. Holden explained it was his preference to have two environment reporters. However, the decision was also driven by the interests and skills of reporters within the newsroom. 'If you, David, had not joined the main newsroom, with your interest in the environment, then it is unlikely I would have looked to appoint a second reporter on the round. But given that you are here, it is my belief that environment issues are highly significant for *The Press* readership (particularly water, which I see as the dominant issue for the region) and therefore two is a fair reflection of that priority' (Holden, interview 2010).

Holden's support of Earth Hour and his appointment of a second environment reporter is evidence that the mainstream media's corporatisation has not stopped the personal interests of reporters and management from influencing a newspaper's reportage. Such moves need to be justified, either by reader interest or the newspaper's assessment of the major issues in its area. Nonetheless, it is clear that despite job losses and business efficiencies, journalistic agency still carries some influence in today's newspaper decisions.

Analysis

New Zealand's 2008 general election was held in early November. Therefore, instead of analysing a calendar year, each year is measured from November 1 of the previous year to October 31. The terms 'climate change', 'global warming' and 'greenhouse gas' were plugged into *The Press* archive.

This analysis is across the entire newspaper, including news stories, editorials, letters and advertising features. Therefore it is somewhat of a blunt tool and discounts judgement by the editorial team. An appearance of climate change in a front page story has the same statistical significance as an out of context remark in a reader's letter.

TABLE ONE – The Press, analysis across all sections

Year	Climate change	Global warming	Greenhouse gas
2009	440	173	131
2008	505	272	148
2007	490	308	139
2006	200	187	91
2005	142	127	63
1998	19	28	3

The appearance of climate change terms rises rapidly and then drops off in 2009, Table One reveals. In all cases, the mentions more than double between 2005 and 2007, signifying the rise in climate conversation across the newspaper. All terms decrease after the 2008 election, most notably climate change and global warming. It is impossible to tell the reason for the drop-off without further analysis. But it does leave the door open for the possibility that Key's administration, in reversing many environmental trends set by the previous government, is providing fewer reasons for coverage. The 1998 figures have been included because that year is rated by the UK Met Office as the hottest year on record for global average temperatures. Clearly, climate change was yet to take hold of the public imagination.

TABLE TWO – Fairfax newspapers' use of climate terms in 2009

	<i>The Press</i>	<i>Dominion Post</i>	<i>Waikato Times</i>
Climate change	440	291	270
Global warming	173	128	143
Greenhouse gas	131	97	86

Ownership is not necessarily a driver for climate change coverage, Table Two reveals. All the newspapers are Fairfax-owned but *The Press* uses climate change

related terms much more frequently than its sister papers in Wellington (*The Dominion Post*) and Hamilton (*Waikato Times*). Given the company's copy-sharing arrangements, you might expect all papers to be similar. Or given the *Dominion Post's* proximity to Parliament, and its resulting focus on national issues, it would not be surprising to see that paper to give stronger prominence to an issue that resonates nationally and globally. Given the previous discussion of *The Press* editor's support of environmental issues and the interest of his reporters, it is clear that personal preferences can strongly influence reportage. We can say with some confidence that the corporatisation of newspapers has not completely diluted journalistic licence to set an agenda for its readers.

TABLE THREE – *The Press* front page stories, by topic

Year	Climate change	Conservation	Environment
2009	7	23	16
2008	11	14	11
2007	12	12	7
2006	6	8	3
2005	3	7	2
1998	0	12	3

Table Three shows the deliberate placement of news stories over a longer period. In general, these figures reflect a growing interest in environmental issues. Many appliances bought by Kiwi consumers now carry energy and water efficiency ratings. Television programmes reveal the chemical make-up of our food. In Christchurch, the use of older wood burners and open fires has been banned by the regional council for part of the year in an attempt to reduce air pollution. City ratepayers can also access online thermal imaging maps to help judge the energy and insulation efficiency of their house.

In later years, the rapid increase in conservation and environment stories is almost certainly the product of *The Press* having two environment reporters. Ructions at

ECan are a highlight but the issue does not dominate the environmental stories making the front page. Other issues given prominence by the paper included smart meters, a nappy composting operation and businesses charging for plastic bags. Conservation issues traversed on the front page included mining plans on the conservation estate and wind farm proposals.

After the 2008 election, we see a drop in climate change stories. This supports the idea that a change in Government has affected climate change coverage—albeit we are dealing with very small numbers.

By analysing the 39 front-page climate change stories we will discover what is behind the most newsworthy stories on this topic in *The Press* over five years. We will also discover if a change in government brings about a difference in what drives the newspaper's coverage.

The year 2009 is a mixed bag. In three of the seven stories, the government's comments are the most prominent. In fact, the government has the first two voices in all three cases. Three of the stories originated from Wellington—either the parliamentary press gallery of the *Dominion Post*—and covered the emissions trading scheme (ETS) and the country's greenhouse gas reduction target. Both ETS stories were angled on the impact of government policies on taxpayers and consumers. Earth Hour stories were on the front page twice. One story written from Christchurch, 'NZ leads in rise of fossil-fuel emissions', on July 29, was written from a report from the International Energy Agency.

In 2008, Earth Hour appeared on the front page three times out of 11 stories, and most stories that year were generated from Christchurch. Yet the government, or a government agency, led comment in six of those stories (more than half). Three stories had the word 'price' in the introduction, including a June piece which described the ETS as the 'Govt's big green cash machine'. A story on March 26, 'Protest drains police from city', highlights the media's need for drama. It details how police were caught short while dealing with a Greenpeace stunt at Lyttelton. The story is angled on a lone police officer being attacked in a central city brawl. Readers have to wait until deep down, the 14th paragraph, to discover Greenpeace was protesting the government's greenhouse gas reduction target. Opposition political parties had the lead voice in only two nationwide stories: about a mandatory biofuels component in petrol and diesel, and luxury government limos not meeting its own efficiency standards.

There were 12 front-page climate stories in 2007. In five, the voices of government ministers and departments topped the story, while the opposition stole the lead in only two: 'Key makes Kyoto U-turn' on May 14 and 'Cows may be cuter, but UN says cars are greener' on December 13, 2006. There was an international flavour to six stories. United Nations studies featured in three stories, while there were also stories about the declining state of Mount Everest (with a strong New Zealand angle, given that it quotes the sons of Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, the mountain's conquerors) and a Nobel Prize citation for former US Vice President Al Gore. The other overseas sourced story, 'Apec warms to NZ pleas on climate', on November 20, was about New Zealand's lead role in an Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum's move to investigate cutting greenhouse gas emissions. One story in particular, 'Call for Govt to ban gas heaters', from November, conflated cutting power bills with reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It also drew in damp houses with causing sickness.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair makes an appearance in 2006. Three of the six front-page stories that year came from Wellington, including the one about Blair. The mid-winter story 'Power supply under threat' warns that power peaks are outstripping forecasts. However, there is no mention of rapid population increase or more heat pumps and electrical appliances pushing up demand. Deputy Prime Minister Michael Cullen and Environment Minister David Parker top two stories, while the Green Party leads a January 25 story about fuel efficiency standards, 'Petrol guzzlers may face penalty'. A story about scientists studying the effects of ozone depletion on plants bucks the political trend.

In 2005, a June story told of a \$1 billion botch-up in the country's greenhouse gas emission figures, which prompted calls for New Zealand to pull out of the Kyoto Protocol agreement. Opposition environment spokesman Nick Smith was the top comment on that story. A month earlier there were threats of price rises for power and petrol over a carbon tax, with leading comment from the lobby group Greenhouse Policy Coalition. Six months earlier, a *Dominion Post* story tells readers about the effect stratospheric ozone depletion over Antarctica is having on marine life.

How does climate change rate compared with other interest areas? In 2009, the paper had 25 front-page stories related to economic issues. There is a perception that rugby does not sell newspapers but that did not stop multiple references to the All Blacks and the locally-based 'Super' rugby franchise. The All Blacks were

mentioned 26 times in 2009, but only seven in a strictly sporting sense. The Crusaders featured in 11 front-page stories after making the Super 14 semi-finals.

Conclusions

An analysis of 39 front-page climate stories in *The Press* newspaper over five years shows government voices lead 16 stories, while opposition parties top only eight stories. In short, the government line was given twice the prominence of the opposition view. Non-governmental organisations such as Greenpeace and Federated Farmers, have the lead voice in three. Four stories would be considered scientific, including a 2008 story about an ice shelf collapse. Event-based climate coverage about Earth Hour, an initiative initially supported by *The Press*, hit the front page five times.

New Zealand newspapers rely on government sources because they are authoritative, institutionally-based sources. Politically, other than perhaps the ACT New Zealand Party, the scientific view that humans are causing climate change has been accepted. This is reflected in New Zealand newspapers. The focus of reportage now has shifted to the implementation of government policies and the remaining party political differences.

Feature articles aside, *The Press's* coverage tends to be less science-based and more sensationalist. Without the resources to constantly break stories, the media can be reduced to the role of relaying and reinforcing mainstream perceptions of an issue. More often than not the stories are focused on the economic elements of proposals, such as the boost to the region in terms of gross domestic product or jobs. This supports Russill's (2008) view that the media 'structure perceptions of climate change to advantage very narrow ways of responding to the problem'. Controversy, it seems, is more likely to spark prominence than a heavily researched scientific paper.

With two environment reporters, *The Press* is a special case in the New Zealand context, and worthy of specific comment. It has been the author's experience that having two people dedicated to one round allows a reporter to delve more deeply into specialist areas, such as climate change. The biggest advantage is the time to devote to certain issues and this helps build a range of contacts and depth of knowledge which, in the author's opinion, leads to greater journalistic scrutiny and quality reportage. Given this solid foundation, a reporter feels more confident to tackle issues like climate change. A good reporter, no matter their level of expertise on a topic, will always question authoritative sources. But a reporter's stronger

background might lead to a more detailed summary and possibly a better level of understanding for the reader. Also, a reporter's expertise can also help the newsroom in less obvious ways. This reporter has occasionally been asked by subeditors to look at stories written by other journalists to ensure the details are correct; a fairly unusual event.

An analysis of press releases from ministers and departments would improve the understanding of the government's role in leading climate change coverage. A deeper analysis across all pages of several newspapers would provide a more complete picture.

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