

# **Journalism, Environment and Community Structure: News and Opinions in the Coverage of the Genetic Engineering Issue in New Zealand**

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## **Introduction**

The investigation of journalism is intertwined with the study of news as an agent of policy formation. Journalists do not work in a vacuum and although they are not explicitly 'governed' by the state, their organisation, their cultural heritage or the market, they are considered to be working in relation to, and under the influence of, all of those factors. Traditional studies of the hierarchy of influences on journalism classify streams of interactions as individual, routine, organisational, external (institutional) and ideological forces (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). The list demonstrates a complex relationship between journalistic and other fields of social and cultural production. When it comes to environmental issues, academic research reveals close ties between media and the prevailing power structure of the community (Dunwoody & Griffin 1993; 1997; 1998). Systematic examination of the process by which the media cover environmental disasters, for example, shows how community plays a major role in establishing the larger framework within which the subject has to be discussed. However, the spectrum of judgements journalists make when gathering and presenting information for these stories remains less explored.

This study adopts the community structure model (Tichenor, Donohue and Olien 1980) to explore the link between journalism and the public debate about genetic engineering (GE) issues in New Zealand. Assuming that professional judgements determine and shape how and what is presented in the news media as one of the arenas for public discussion, it addresses two interrelated questions: a) how newspapers based in different communities—three largest cities in New Zealand, *The New Zealand Herald* in Auckland, *The Dominion Post* in Wellington and *The Press* in Christchurch—have reported on GE; and, b) how journalism practice, as expressed in reporting on GE, relates to the policy-making process.

The newspaper coverage of the genetic engineering issue in New Zealand offers rich material for analysis. The New Zealand press reported extensively on the GE issue since the first imported, unlabeled, genetically modified food was found in the shops in the late 1990s (for a more detailed history of the issue see Weaver & Motion 2002). The pros and cons of GE became a subject of public controversy for the next couple of years, leading to the formation of the Royal Commission on Genetic Modification (RCMG). The Commission investigated the 'strategic options available to New Zealand' (Eichelbaum et al 2001: 6), and the media's coverage of the consultation process raised awareness and contributed to a wider understanding of the environment. For the purpose of this analysis, but with the intention of offering a categorisation that can be used in future studies on media coverage of environmental issues, the study uses key moments in the development of policy on GE to investigate the patterns of coverage. In the case of the public debate about the GE issue in New Zealand, those key moments were the release of the Royal Commission's Report on Genetic Modification (31 July 2001), the Government's response to the Report (1 November 2001), the announcement of the early general election (12 June 2002) and Election Day (27 July 2002). The coverage between these key moments was classified into three different phases of policy formation: expectation, evaluation and anticipation.

The study positions discussions about journalism, policy formation and community structure within the broader discourse of the journalistic field. The concept of a field, 'the site of actions and reactions performed by social agents endowed with permanent dispositions, partly acquired in their experience of the social fields' (Bourdieu 2005: 30), provides a theoretical framework for understanding and explaining journalism's interactions with the existing power structures in society. Journalism's position in society is politically, economically and culturally rooted, but the journalistic field is also characterised with a certain level of autonomy. Leaving aside the question of the limited nature of this autonomy, this study focuses on the agents in the journalistic field and their choice of journalism form, hoping that the play of the norms around journalistic form will generate data relevant for understanding the struggle between the autonomous and heteronomous poles of the field. The autonomous pole stands here for journalistic norms developed around the form of text (news and opinions) while the heteronomous pole represents points of interaction between journalism and the community in which it operates.

## **The community structure model and cycles in media coverage**

The community structure model, developed by Tichenor, Donohue and Olien (1980), suggests that more pluralistic and diversified communities tend to work in an atmosphere where conflict is a more routine part of public life and as such is reported in news media. By comparison, smaller communities prefer consensus, and news media in those communities play the roles of legitimisers and builders of that consensus. This model has been used by other scholars (Dunwoody and Griffin 1993; 1997; 1998) who confirmed that community pluralism ('structural' stands for demographic diversity) plays a role in the way media cover conflictive social issues: the media frames are driven by community structures and, by interpretation, championed by the prevailing power structure of a town. The media frame events and issues of public concern, reacting either as promoters of change or watchdogs of society. Journalism studies' scholarship pays particular attention to the diversification of happenings on events and issues. Events are distinct, fixed happenings that are limited geographically and temporally, whereas issues can be defined as 'matters of concern involving repetitive news coverage of related happenings that fit together under one umbrella term' (Johnson-Cartee 2005: 57). Johnson-Cartee (2005) focuses on the claim-makers' activity and the need to identify the transformation of events into issues, and gives a comprehensive list of points to be explored in relation to the media-agenda-policy process. She cites studies that define an issue as 'a conflict between two or more identifiable groups over procedural or substantive matters relating to the distribution of positions or resources' (Johnson-Cartee 2005: 57), and 'triggering devices' as the unforeseen events that often bring issues to the forefront.

Once an issue comes to the forefront, it is explored by the news media and other agents of public debate, until the next trigger brings the next issue to public attention. Other researchers investigated the rise and fall of issues in the public arena, noting how the 'issue attention cycle' consists of periods of intense activity and periods of dramatic drops in activity level (Downs 1972: 38). Analysing cycles in the media coverage of environmental problems, Downs (1972) identified five stages of public attention to the issues: a 'pre-problem', an 'alarmed discovery', a stage of 'euphoric enthusiasm', a stage of 'solution cost acknowledgment', then a 'decline of intense public interest' and finally a 'post-problem' stage, in which attention to the issue settles down (Downs 1972: 39–40). Downs argues that there is no solution to the problem of cyclical attention to environmental issues because they do not possess

those qualities that keep the news media interested. Downs' hypothesis has been challenged by Hilgartner and Bosk (1988), who argue that social problems co-exist in public space, simultaneously seeking and getting media attention. What influences cycles in covering the issue are institutional factors such as carrying capacities, competition for space, and the need for sustained drama. Other scholars investigated issue cycles by focusing on issues and the dynamics of social interactions (Hansen 1991), narrative structures (McComas & Shanahan 1999) and inter-media agenda setting and claims of sources (Trumbo 1994; 1996). In a study of news coverage of global warming over a ten year period, Trumbo (1996) found that scientists were quoted most often as sources for the causes and problems of global warming. By comparison, politicians and special interest groups were quoted most often about judgments or remedies (Trumbo 1996). He indicates that the transition in source dominance corresponds with Downs' (1972) problem-solving phase. The media tend to repeat narrative strategies in such a way that, once a cycle ends, the media are likely to use the narrative outcome of that cycle as a presumption upon which to found the next cycle (McComas and Shanahan 1999). Once the issue comes to a news medium, it is challenged by a new set of institutional principles before being thrown back into the public arena. McComas and Shanahan's study does not explain the clash between a public issue and journalism's institutional setting. In other words, it does not explain how elements of journalism practice, such as choice of journalism form (news or opinions), relate to the status of the issue for public debate. It is not easy to define the status of the semi-learned grammars of practice because practice is more than a mechanical reaction to models or roles. The everyday practice in the journalistic field might appear as a mechanical reaction to a set of models and operational combinations that are passed from generation to generation. Indeed, the models and roles, and the occupational knowledge expressed in the set of journalistic norms, are there, but so is the individual predisposition to challenge them.

In the case of the division between facts and views, one of the most important journalistic norms in the Anglo-American journalism culture, to which the New Zealand press clearly belongs (Norris 2001), journalistic norm develops as a particular rule on how to do a proper job when reporting about the contested issue. When the trainee comes into the newsroom, as one journalist interviewed for this study explains, he learns by example, by seeing and imitating the work of others (Samson, interview 2005). A car crash certainly leads to the form of 'hard news' (reportage too, if it is huge and obtained from eye witnesses), while the latest

Government decision on a long-lasting dispute that polarises society usually deserves a commentary (leader article or opinion piece). However, how this journalistic norm develops, and what the consequences of its application are, is a matter of academic dispute.

### **The myth of facts and views**

Journalistic norm is wider than the rules articulated in documents such as a Code of Ethics. It includes shared standards of journalism practice, and the principles that guide journalists in their everyday work. The norms are not prescribed, but assumed as a part of the everyday routine. Usually, they are the last to be changed in the newsroom. Occasional interventions of ambitious editors to change the rules of the game usually cause a stir among journalists (Matheson 2003). The norms are conservative: they regulate, rather than anticipate the practice—maybe even more so when they are not written down. The influence of norms on news-making practice is visible in journalistic rituals (everyday activities that include many repetitions, ‘repetitiveness’ being an element of ritual) has significance and is shared among the group members. Journalistic rituals are the application of journalistic norms. For example, conducting an interview is a journalistic ritual that includes several norms: to introduce yourself and give your name and the news organisation you are working for at the beginning of the interview, to ask questions clearly, to state accurately the name, status and position of the interviewee, to allow the interviewee to provide answers, to accurately present those answers—to name just few of them. As this list shows, the influence of norms on news-making practice can be significant. Norms differ from medium to medium (from the TV interview to the print interview, for example), they differ across time (in the nineteenth century, the interview was a hidden part of the newsgathering process, and no interviewees’ names appeared in the press) and differ in ritual (the style of interview differs between BBC and ITN, as it does between TV One and TV 3 in New Zealand, for example).

The coverage of contested public issues such as GE evokes journalistic norms that protect journalists from making mistakes (Tuchman 1978). Journalists’ habitual reaction to the division within society is to follow the rule about division between the facts and views by using clearly distinctive journalistic forms of news and opinions. Journalistic form, a discursive type with ‘distinctive rhetorical styles, aesthetic conventions and communicative functions’ (McNair 1998: 10) reveals news texts’ communicative function: to inform (news), and to comment (opinions). The lines

between the two forms are blurred, but the distinction has become one of the strongest held journalistic myths, a myth about the difference between publishing facts and views. The investigation of facts in news articles shows that the newspaper's decision to report an issue such as genetic engineering is based initially on an evaluation of the newsworthiness of the event. The answer to the question 'why should our readers care about this' that Tim Pankhurst, the *Dominion Post* editor-in-chief (online interview, 2005) underlines as the leading principle on which coverage is based, determines the inclusion of the story in the newspaper. What influences its further life in the press is a series of news judgments about the intensity of coverage (number of published articles), the structure of coverage (proportion of news to opinions), and the degree of the newspaper's direct involvement in the public debate (number of editorials and opinion pieces). The following analysis discusses how these components—intensity, structure and involvement—are related to the community in which a newspaper is based and the status of an issue in the public policy process.

### **Methodology: news and views in three phases of coverage**

The study looks at articles on GE in three broadsheet newspapers published in three cities in New Zealand: *The New Zealand Herald*, published in Auckland, the business capital of New Zealand; *The Dominion (Post)*, published in Wellington, the political capital of New Zealand; and *The Press*, published in Christchurch, a regional centre of the South Island. These three newspapers in the three biggest cities in New Zealand are the oldest news media in the country. They are suitable for the investigation of journalistic norms because the newsroom practice there has been formulated and modified by generations of journalists. These dailies have also the biggest circulation in New Zealand (Table 1).

**Table 1. Newspapers' circulation** <sup>1</sup>

<b>NEWSPAPER</b>	<b>Circulation at 30.09.2001</b>
<i>The New Zealand Herald</i>	211,117
<i>The Press</i>	91,024
<i>The Dominion</i>	68,571

<sup>1</sup> Source: New Zealand Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2001. The study deals with the articles published from August 2001 to August 2002, therefore data from 2001 are appropriate.

Using the community structure model and Census data (Statistics New Zealand 2001), I compared the following information about the citizens of Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch: language spoken, religious affiliation of citizens, education level, income, and number of internet users. Based on this comparison, Auckland and Wellington appear as significantly more diverse and socially pluralistic communities than Christchurch. The number of people living in these three cities (wider region) in 2001 were: Auckland 1,091,136, Wellington 407,916 and Canterbury, a region around Christchurch 466,191. When it comes to languages spoken, 94% of people in Auckland spoke English and 31% of people listed Maori, Samoan, New Zealand Sign Language and Other as languages spoken. In Wellington 96% spoke English and 21 % also spoke other languages, while in Canterbury 97% spoke English and only 4.5% spoke another language. Religious affiliation shows a similar community structure: in Auckland 58% of people said they were Christians, 7% stated a non-Christian religion (Buddhism, Hindu, Jewish, etc.), 29% declared themselves to be non-religious, and 6% objected to that question. In Wellington, 60% of people said they were Christians, 5% non-Christians, 30% non-religious, and 6% objected to the question. In Canterbury, 62% were Christians, 2% non-Christians, 30% non-religious, and 7% objected to the question. When it comes to education, in Auckland 19% of people had no qualifications, while 4% had a higher degree (above Bachelor degree level); in Wellington 19% had no qualifications and 5% had a higher degree. In Canterbury 25% of people had no qualifications, while 3% had a higher degree. Data about personal income also indicated far more similarities between Auckland and Wellington than between either of them and Christchurch. In Auckland and Wellington, 3% of people earned more than \$100,001, but only 1.5% did so in Canterbury. Access to the Internet shows similar data: 44% of

households in Auckland had access to the internet, 44% in Wellington and only 36% in Canterbury. When it comes to employment, the unemployment rate in Auckland was 5%, in Wellington 4.8% and in Canterbury 3.8%.

These data indicate a similarity of community context for *The New Zealand Herald* and *The Dominion Post*. When it comes to the ownership structure, the picture is different. *The Dominion Post* and *The Press* have the same owner (Fairfax), while the *New Zealand Herald* – at the time of this study – belongs to APN News. All three newspapers were fully owned by New Zealand companies until 1975, when the News Media Ownership Act was changed to remove all restrictions on foreign ownership of print media (and also to allow foreign ownership of television and radio). This and subsequent legislation, including the major deregulation of the media market in 1988, brought international companies to New Zealand: Fairfax – the owner of *The Dominion Post* and *The Press*, and APN News & Media Limited (APN)—the owner of *The New Zealand Herald*. Fairfax and APN together control over 90% of the circulation in the metropolitan, provincial and Sunday newspaper markets in New Zealand. Every major media company in the media sector in New Zealand is foreign owned, a situation that some authors find problematic and ‘without parallel in the modern world’ (Norris 2002: 36).

This context provides a background for the examination of the newspapers’ reporting on the issue of genetic engineering. Using the methods of content analysis and interviews, the study explores how two forms of news texts, news and opinions, were used in the coverage of the GE issue and how the proportion of news and opinions varied from July 2001 until July 2002. Three phases of coverage are identified. The first phase, expectation, relates to the coverage of genetic engineering between the release of the Report (July 2001) and the Government’s response to the Report (November 2001). Expectation-driven stories have, therefore, an easily recognisable time frame, from the time when the question or the issue is raised or opened (the release of the Report) until the moment when it is resolved (the Government’s response). The second phase, evaluation, includes articles published between the point at which Government policy was announced (November 2001) to the announcement of the early election (May 2002). Evaluation-driven stories assess the policy through an examination of the patterns of issue occurrence. The stories are focused on an issue rather than an event, the trigger (reason for publishing the story) differs and the time frame is flexible. Although the policy is examined, the evaluation does not necessarily involve a call for action. The third phase, anticipation, includes the articles published between the announcement of the early election (May 2002)

and Election Day (July 2002). It is characterised by stories that treat the issue as a sub-topic of a wider subject, an event yet to come; the issue is used as a trigger for a story about something else. In the case of newspaper coverage of genetic engineering, the news articles in the anticipation phase use the issue of GE to discuss political relations, the balance of power and the different parties' chances of winning the election or forming a coalition.

The case study of genetic engineering, with its clearly defined markers of policy formation, provides straightforward material for the investigation of what journalistic norms develop around expectation, evaluation or anticipation stories, and how they are related to the forms of the published news articles. The classification news and opinion follows two functions of mass media: informative and interpretative (Merill et al 1990: 61–63), where naturally 'news informs' and 'opinion comments'. The authors state five functions of the mass media: information, persuasion, service to the economic system and transmission of culture. 'News' in this study constitutes all articles published in the informative sections of a newspaper, written by journalists or reprinted from other news media, that inform readers of recent events about genetic engineering. The 'news' subcategory includes reports, feature articles, interviews, backgrounders, and front and back page articles if they contain information on genetic engineering and are longer than fifty words. 'Opinion' constitutes all articles published in the informative section of a newspaper that explicitly express opinion, and includes editorials, regular columns of staff writers, regular columns of guest writers, occasional commentaries and all opinion pieces published on 'Dialogue' and 'Opinions' pages.

### **To inform and to comment**

A content analysis of all articles published in the three dailies from 31 July 2001 to 27 July 2002 (Table 2) shows that *The New Zealand Herald* was ahead of the other two papers in terms of informing its readers about genetic engineering and commenting on it. Almost a third (30 %) of *The Herald's* coverage comprised opinion pieces. This compares with 24% of opinion pieces in the coverage of *The Press* and 13% in the coverage of *The Dominion*. Clearly, *The Herald* played a much greater partisan role in attempting to persuade its readership than the other two newspapers.

**Table 2. Journalistic form**

<b>NEWSPAPER</b>	<b>News</b>	<b>Opinion</b>
<i>The New Zealand Herald</i>	234 (70%)	100 (30%)
<i>The Press</i>	118 (76%)	37 (24%)
<i>The Dominion</i>	159 (87%)	24 (13%)

The frequency of appearance of the articles shows that the newspapers paid cyclical attention to the genetic engineering issue (Table 3).

**Table 3. Number of articles throughout the year**

<b>NEWSPAPER</b>	<b>Phase one</b> <i>Expectation</i>	<b>Phase two</b> <i>Evaluation</i>	<b>Phase three</b> <i>Anticipation</i>	<b>Total</b>
<i>The New Zealand Herald</i>	91 (27%)	88 (26%)	155 (46%)	334 (100%)
<i>The Press</i>	75 (48%)	38 (25%)	42 (27%)	155 (100%)
<i>The Dominion</i>	57 (31%)	47 (26%)	79 (43%)	183 (100%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	223 (33%)	173 (26%)	276 (41%)	672 (100%)

The three phases of the coverage, as explained, are identified in relation to four benchmark events. The distinction between phases is made relative to the public policy decisions, and the meaning of public policy is flexible enough to include discussions on issues of public interest and not only actual policies. The three phases correspond with the status of the issue in the public policy arena and the time of their appearance in the press.

The stories in phase one, expectation, usually have a clear trigger ('Government is about to announce a policy'); the stories in the evaluation phase are more vague about stating the reasons for the coverage ('A number of scare stories have been reported in relation to genetic engineering'); and anticipation phase stories usually

connect the issue with other more important issues ('GE will decide this election'). There are some overlaps between coverage driven by expectation, evaluation and anticipation. The media coverage of GE shows how the anticipation-driven coverage dominated the treatment of the issue in the major centre newspapers (*The New Zealand Herald* and *The Dominion*), while the regional centre paper (*The Press*) paid more attention to the GE issue in the expectation phase.

The difference in the treatment of the issue can be explained as a reflection of the differences between the editorial policies of the newspapers as well as their relationship with the community. First, *The Press* is a local newspaper based in a rich agricultural region in New Zealand, and was more interested in investigating the impact of the future GE policy on the development of agriculture than the other two newspapers. Out of 75 articles published in the expectation phase in *The Press*, 14 deal with the issue of farmers' views on GE (18.6%), far more than *The New Zealand Herald* (8%) or *The Dominion* (14%). Second, as a regional paper, *The Press* is more interested in 'soft' than 'hard' news and the higher number of articles in the *expectation* phase reflects several individual actions organised by the Organic Farmers—an association opposed to the commercial release of GE—and by local Green Party members. For example, one family walked from Christchurch to Wellington (370km) to express their concerns in regard to GE and *The Press* followed their journey extensively—twelve articles were published on their journey (the same march was ignored by the major centre newspapers). And, thirdly, the discrepancy in the number of articles published ahead of the election (anticipation phase) reflects the different level of interest in the elections between highly interested major-centre newspapers and the moderately interested local press.

The use of GE to discuss the balance of political power is most visible ahead of the elections in the anticipation phase, but was incorporated in both the expectation and evaluation of GE ('Would the Greens support the Government on issues of confidence and supply?'). The level of interest in the issue varies: in all three newspapers it drops in the evaluation phase signifying the daily press's preoccupation with events with a clear time frame. In the evaluation phase, with no policy decision or elections on the horizon, the press became less interested in the issue of genetic engineering. The newspapers lost the set of handy triggers from the preparation of the policy phase (press conferences, demonstrations, public meetings, official announcements), and journalists, who did not get media-staged events from the pre-election anticipation phase, had to deal with the reality of GE as an 'emergent science, science whose truth has not yet been settled by consensus, either scientific

or public' (Priest 1999: 97). The question is, therefore, one of how journalistic form in expectation, evaluation or anticipation stories corresponds with the public debate about the issue.

The proportion of 'news' to 'opinions' changed in those three phases—what is important in Table 4 are not absolute numbers, but the proportion of 'news' to 'opinions':

**Table 4. Journalistic form throughout the year**

NEWSPAPER	Phase One <i>Expectation</i>		Phase Two <i>Evaluation</i>		Phase Three <i>Anticipation</i>	
	News	Opinion	News	Opinion	News	Opinion
<i>The New Zealand Herald</i>	67 (74%)	24 (26%)	63 (72%)	25 (28%)	104 (67%)	51 (33%)
<i>The Press</i>	67 (89%)	8 (11%)	23 (60%)	15 (40%)	28 (66%)	14 (34%)
<i>The Dominion</i>	51 (89%)	6 (11%)	40 (85%)	7 (15%)	68 (86%)	11 (14%)
TOTAL	185 (83%)	38 (17%)	126 (73%)	47 (27%)	200 (72%)	76 (28%)

The proportion shows that all three newspapers were more interested in informing (publishing more news) when the policy was still in preparation (expectation phase) than when the policy was adopted (evaluation phase) or discussed in relation to another issue (anticipation phase). This preference corresponds with the informative function of the newspapers that McQuail (2000) puts at the top of the major social functions of the mass media in contemporary society. The list also includes correlation, continuity, entertainment and mobilisation, where correlation is explained as 'explaining, interpreting and commenting on the meaning of events' (79).

The number of 'opinion' articles that carry the correlation function of commenting upon the issue is lowest in the expectation phase, slightly higher in the evaluation phase and highest in the anticipation phase. This trend corresponds with the status of the issue in the public domain. The public disagreement over the best solution for

the GE issue (or any issue in the public domain) has legitimacy during the preparation of the policy and is incorporated into the news articles through extensive news coverage where, under the umbrella of objectivity, different voices (sources of news) get a chance to be heard. But once the policy is adopted, the disagreement moves into the evaluation phase and the number of opinions becomes proportionately higher.

The relatively high number of opinion pieces published in *The Press* in the evaluation phase—higher than in *The Herald* and *The Dominion*—comes again from the community context. On 10 January 2002 someone broke into the local scientific laboratory in Christchurch, a glasshouse with genetically modified potato plants, and destroyed the crops. The event, labelled as an act of vandalism ('Eco terrorism', *The Press*, 17 January 2002) intensified the coverage and increased the number of opinions as evaluation of that particular event, and not the whole GE policy.

The relationship between the press coverage and the status of the issue in the public domain becomes more interesting when the number of editorials is identified. The coverage of the GE issue in the three phases indicates that the New Zealand press has a preference for evaluating policy when it is adopted (evaluation and anticipation phase), rather than influencing its preparation (expectation phase). This, however, does not mean that the press has no ambition to make its voice heard and contribute to the policy-making process. It does have such an ambition. In the policy-preparation phase (expectation), the press, through editorials, gives itself privileges to comment upon the issue more often than the other writers of opinion articles. A closer look at the structure of opinion items (Table 5) shows that the press has a strong ambition to influence policy: it raises its own voice more often when policy is being prepared, rather than after it has been established.

**Table 5. Number of editorials and other opinion pieces throughout the year**

NEWSPAPER	Phase one <i>Expectation</i>		Phase two <i>Evaluation</i>		Phase three <i>Anticipation</i>	
	Edit.	Other	Edit.	Other	Edit.	Other
<i>The New Zealand Herald</i>	8 (33%)	16 (67%)	2 (8%)	23 (92%)	6 (12%)	45 (89%)
<i>The Press</i>	3 (37%)	5 (63%)	4 (40%)	11 (60%)	4 (29%)	10 (71%)
<i>The Dominion</i>	3 (50%)	3 (50%)	2 (26%)	5 (74%)	4 (36%)	7 (64%)
TOTAL	14 (37%)	24 (63%)	10 (21%)	37 (79%)	14 (18%)	62 (82%)

All three papers published, proportionately, more editorials on GE in the expectation phase than in the evaluation and anticipation phases. The exception is *The Press*, but when the summary-of-the-year editorials (with GE as just of the events that characterised the previous year) are excluded, the trend is the same (it would be 10%). The papers' willingness to declare their own standpoint on the GE issue in the middle of the heated debate about the Royal Commission's Recommendations, at a time when it was not clear how the Government would respond and what policy would be adopted, might indicate the newspapers' ambition to shift towards the role of public arbiter in society.

New Zealand journalists' description of the coverage of GE in the light of the newspapers' role in society follows the patterns of their peers in the Anglo-American world. One of the interviewees for this study sums it up as 'to inform and educate and promote discussion, to connect individuals with the societies in which they live and work' (Langdon, interview 2005), while another says it 'provides the public with information on which they can base their own informed opinions and actions' and functions 'as a forum for the views of the public and provides considerable space in its op-ed pages for contributed commentary' (Ellis, interview 2005). The issue of genetic engineering has reinforced the concept of the press as an arena for public

debate. Journalists' reflection on their work, both on objectives and practice, certifies awareness of the forum-creating capacity of the press. However, the proportion between news and opinions, analysed in three newspapers, demonstrates variations in levels of willingness to critically engage with the issues in the public domain. Differences come both in relation to policy formation and the structure of the community within which the newspaper is based.

### **Community structure determines approach?**

The study has shown a difference in the newspapers' judgements about the relevance of genetic engineering. The three papers had different habitual perceptions of their readers' interest in the GE issue. More similarities were found between the newspapers that belong to pluralist communities than between the newspapers that have the same owner. Thus, there were more similarities in the coverage of the issue between *The New Zealand Herald* and *The Dominion Post* (major-centre papers) than between *The Dominion Post* and *The Press* (same owner). The power structure in the community had an impact on the way the issue was represented in the press. *The Herald's* coverage bore the stamp of the prevailing business structure, *The Dominion Post's* of the prevailing political interpretations of the event, while *The Press's* coverage was focused on local and regional aspects of the GE stories.

When it comes to the question of how journalism practice relates to the policy making process, the cycles in news reporting reflects the internal logic of the journalistic field and the dynamics between the journalistic and other social fields. Three phases in the coverage of the genetic engineering issue followed the pattern of policy formation. The news cycles and policy cycles are intertwined, but the comparative study of the three New Zealand dailies' coverage of genetic engineering indicate that the community structure, in the case of New Zealand, has the strongest voice in determining the manner of reporting a contested issue in society. The analysis demonstrated that the circle of opinions and news in the coverage is a routine way of dealing with an ongoing story, signifying the daily press's preoccupation with events with a clear time frame. In the evaluation phase, with no policy decision or elections on the horizon, the press became less interested in the issue of genetic engineering. A closer look at the structure of opinion items—number of editorials extracted—shows that the press has a strong ambition to influence policy. One of the most interesting findings of this study is that a newspaper raises its own voice more often when policy is being prepared than after it has been established, but more case

studies are needed to confirm this as a trend in newspaper coverage of contested environmental issues.

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