Neoliberalism, media and the return of Brash
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Abstract

This essay uses the event of Don Brash's "extraordinary coup" of the ACT party in April 2011 to reflect on the relationship between neoliberalism and media. The argument addresses concerns that the term neoliberalism is articulated in media studies and elsewhere to produce a formulaic mode of critique where everything is subsumed into a neat neoliberal story.   My approach concurs partly with these criticisms because abstract appeals to a monolithic "neoliberalism" can obscure the messy and paradoxical character of neoliberal regimes. Nonetheless, contrary to the antithetical assumption that we are "post-neoliberal", I argue that neoliberalism – or what I prefer to call neoliberalization – is a crucial analytical concept for understanding the dynamics of "media democracy". Grounding the argument in a meta-analysis of the media and political representation of Brash's return, the essay explores how neoliberalized logics are contextually articulated in the Aotearoa New Zealand of 2011.

Preface[1]

The 2011 election night results were as TVNZ's then political editor Guyon Espiner put it "an unmitigated disaster" (cited in TVNZ) for the ACT party and its leader Don Brash. The outcome had been widely anticipated during the election campaign. Indeed, by that stage, the man Brian Edwards dubbed "the political embarrassment called Don Brash" (Edwards "I risk arrest") had become easy comic material: the subject of several fake Twitter accounts and, when he wasn't being denounced as a "racist" (Small), lampooned as a "dinosaur stuck in the oppressive past" ("Don Brash labelled").

Two media commentaries on the political death of Brash, both articulated by figures positioned on the mainstream political left, overlap with this essay's reflections on neoliberalism. That they both speak of neoliberalism is interesting in itself, since the term is rarely cited in mainstream media-political discourse. The first was Chris Trotter's pre-emptive political obituary published a week before election day in different Fairfax newspapers ("John, Brash will"). It considered Brash's place – or more like his lack of place - in the "teapot tapes" meeting between John Key and John Banks. Trotter read the meeting as evidence of an "electoral alliance" designed to oust Brash as leader of Act and reflected on the strategic parallels with Brash's "overthrow of Rodney Hide" earlier in the year.

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[1] The core sections of this paper were first presented at an October 2011 seminar at the School of Social and Cultural Studies, Victoria University of Wellington and later in a revised version at the 2012 International Communication Association conference in Phoenix, Arizona.

Brash's desire to "rehabilitate Act" was attributed to his "ideological" conviction that "when it came to keeping the National-led Government on the *straight-and-narrow neoliberal path* [italics added], he was the only man for the job". Conversely, the identity of John Key and the National Party was distanced from neoliberalism: for instance, the policy prescription that emerged from Brash's leadership of a "taskforce dedicated to closing the wages-gap with Australia" was described as a "hard-line neoliberal prescription" that did not "impress the Prime Minister, who more or less dismissed Dr Brash's recommendations out-of-hand". Trotter therefore concluded that the "electoral alliance being forged [at the teapot meeting] was not between conservatives and neoliberals, it was between the Centre-Right and the Far-Right", as represented by "the genial and urbane Mr Key and the aggressive...provincial" and "outrageous right wing populist" Mr Banks.

The second media commentary here was the reported comments of Otago politics lecturer Bryce Edwards in an Anthony Hubbard article published a week after the election in the *Sunday Star Times.* Framed by the assumption that the election results illustrated a "battle for the political middle ground [that] left those on the edges out in the cold" (Hubbard), the article wondered why "the left-wing Mana party and the right-wing Act party did badly in the election". Edwards was cited to support the claim that the election illustrated a "'new centrist consensus' in politics, leaving little room for those outside it. 'We have an incredibly centre-oriented political sphere at the moment,' he [Edwards] said. 'There is just not the ideological mood for more diverse politics'." The point is reinforced when Edwards invokes neoliberalism: "Edwards suggests that Act's economic stance - its neo-liberal or Rogernomics-style model - is now out of date. 'The tide's gone out on neoliberalism, just as the tide's gone out on the [left] ideologies that sought to counter neoliberalism'".

Conceptualising neoliberalism: blind-spots and possibilities

Trotter and Edwards' analyses of Brash and the Act party overlap with this article's empirical focus on the earlier media-political event that was Brash's "extraordinary coup" ("Brash 'too extreme' for Key") of Act in April 2011. However, their observations about neoliberalism are even more interesting because of how they understand the term in a problematic way that supports this essay's core argument about the relationship between neoliberalism and media.

The conceptualization of neoliberalism articulated by both Trotter and Edwards is marked by similar blind-spots and limitations. For Trotter neoliberalism is defined through the metaphor of a "straight and narrow path" that is implicitly distinguished from the path currently being taken by the "National-led Government". The characterisation of Brash as a "hard-line neoliberal" implies there are different ways of being neoliberal. However, by representing Key as contemptuous of Brash's policy prescriptions, Trotter situates Key and National as something other than neoliberal, a perception that, as we will see later, also informed Trotter's assessment of Brash's return earlier in the year ("'One people'"). Edwards' double-use of the "tide" metaphor articulates a similar logic even more forcefully: 'The tide's gone out on neoliberalism, just as the tide's gone out on the [left] ideologies that sought to counter neoliberalism'". The comment exemplifies a wider discourse that constructs the present as a "post-ideological age" (Dean), a logic also reproduced in Edwards' previous description of Key as an exemplary "anti-ideological" and "anti-political" figure ("NZ politics daily").

Trotter and Edwards rearticulate a popular discourse that gained traction at the outset of the current economic and social crisis which represents the present historical moment as the "death" or "end of neoliberalism" (see Stiglitz; for a critical discussion, see Harvey "Is this *really*"). The supposition is that the term neoliberalism implies an ideological coherence and faith in the "free market" that can no longer be attributed to politicians like Key. The implication is that the contemporary political landscape needs to be understood as a "post-neoliberal" context (see, for example, Rustin), in recognition of how political and governmental actors are now more amenable to policy measures that break from neoliberal ideological strictures.

Five years on this post-neoliberalism discourse already seems dated because of the emergence of a "hyperneoliberal" (Fuchs) austerity programme as the primary political response to the paradoxical crisis in neoliberalism. Yet, interpreted on its own terms, this post-neoliberalism discourse makes at least two problematic assumptions. First, it tends to define neoliberalism as a specifically economic ideology: a clearly delineated set of technical policy measures that privilege market mechanisms in the ideological construction of the social order (see Stiglitz). Economic and economistic concerns are clearly pivotal to the constitution of neoliberal identities and formations. However, the shorthand privileging of the economic, as a discrete sphere of social life, deemphasises how neoliberalism also needs to be understood as a political, social and cultural phenomenon (see, for example, Brown; Couldry "Voice Matters"; and Dean). Conceptualising neoliberalism in a more expansive way therefore underlines the need for caution in interpreting the renunciation of a particular policy regime as representing its "end" – as some were inclined to do when different national governments bailed out their banking systems in 2008. Narrowly focusing on the most recent policy initiative, in determining whether neoliberalism has ended or not, also ignores the cumulative structuring effects of earlier political decisions in naturalizing neoliberalized dispositions that do not simply disappear as a consequence of particular policy changes.

The second and more fundamental problem with the post-neoliberal discourse is that it obscures how the political institutionalization of a neoliberalized social order has always been marked by a contradictory relationship with neoliberal doctrine. Contrary to Trotter's earlier metaphor, there has never been a "straight and narrow neoliberal path", but a messy and variegated political trajectory that cannot be reduced to a singular ideological blueprint or a simplistic opposition between market and state (Peck; Birch and Mykhnenko). These paradoxes were originally noted in Polanyi's analysis of how the nominally "free market" programmes of the 19th century relied on a strong state that contradicted the doctrinal hostility to state intervention. They have been explored more recently in, for example, Hall's study of Thatcherism, Harvey's ("Brief History") analysis of different national articulations of neoliberalism, and Wacquant's discussion of the state's role in managing the social classes deemed surplus to market requirements. We cannot therefore adequately comprehend the phenomenon of "actually existing neoliberalism" (Brenner and Theodore) if we restrict our understanding to self-constructions of political identity (for how many people describe themselves as neoliberal?) or over-identify with neat typologies of the political field that position different identities as discrete. We could even suggest there has never been a "pure" neoliberalism, and to presuppose such a thing is to construct a convenient strawman that allows other neoliberalized identities to present themselves as comparatively reasonable, pragmatic and non-ideological (Peck).

Yet, the desire to transcend the concept of neoliberalism should not simply be dismissed, for scepticism about how the concept is deployed in critical discourse as a "summary label" is justified (Peck, xii). The concept is too often articulated in a monolithic and one-dimensional way in media and communication studies and elsewhere: as a straightforward name for the social totality that assumes a doctrinal and ideological coherence that is at least partly an idealist projection of the critical gaze itself (Bowman). Barnett argues that, in both its Marxist and Foucauldian iterations, neoliberalism functions as a "consolation" term facilitating the ritualistic enactment of a formulaic critical identity (also see Grossberg). Hallin voices similar criticisms about media studies research, suggesting that building "the story of recent social change... in terms of the shift to neoliberalism" often "rests content with vague and simplistic formulations, which….are far from adequate to understand the changes that have taken place in media and social systems over this period" (43).

This essay does not present a detailed theoretical examination of the relationship between neoliberalism and media (for further discussion, see Phelan chapter in Dahlberg and Phelan). Nor do I explore how the analysis of neoliberalism can draw on insights from the existing media and communication literature, including the local literature on the political economy of Aotearoa New Zealand's media system (see Hope; Thompson; and Jutel). Formulated in broadstroke terms, my approach interrogates the prefabricated nature of much critical discourse about neoliberalism, yet argues that the term can be salvaged as a useful analytical concept. Clarke straddles a similar position when he calls for a form of critical analysis that dissects the "neo-liberalization of things" (13), rather than simply glossing social practices and identities *as* neoliberal. The problem with the latter approach is that it can cultivate a "subsumptive" form of analysis, in which a diverse array of social objects and practices are bundled under the concept of neoliberalism "without the object or the concept undergoing any modification during the process of subsumption" (Glynos and Howarth 16). Put simply, this is to say that our methodological procedures for analysing neoliberalism need to be informed by more than abstract conceptualizations – what Peck characterises as the standard critical invocation of neoliberalism as a "shorthand term for the ideological atmosphere" (xi). Instead, we need a theoretical and methodological approach that does not reduce complex social practices to the monolithic category of neoliberalism but which is nonetheless attentive to how different social regimes are neoliberalized in diverse ways. As a basic working definition, I define neoliberalization as:

> The process where market-based logics and practices – especially logics of market determinism, commodification, individualization, competitive ritual, and self-interest are dialectically internalized and generated in particular social regimes.

My empirical focus here is on Brash's April 2011 coup of Act as a moment that illuminates the "socially reproduced form" (Peck xii) neoliberalization takes in media representations. The analysis draws summarily on Meyer's notion of "media democracy", which he conceptualises as the repressive structuring effects that mainstream "media communication has on the substance of the political itself" in liberal capitalist democracies (xi). He argues that media logics have now "colonized" the formal political process, and that "media-led processes" and "their peculiar logic of communication" (xi-xiii) have become key factors in determining the political and material condition of modern liberal democracies. [2] Meyer's

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[2] My approach departs from Meyer by assuming an expansive conception of "the political" (Laclau; Laclau and Mouffe) that would interrogate his sharp distinction between media and political logics. For Laclau "the

argument is useful, as it focuses attention on the *political* implications of mainstream news media practices (hence my use of the hyphenated term "media-political"), as distinct from everyday media discourses that construct politics as a discrete phenomenon that journalists simply cover.

The next section of the paper describes the media-political constitution of Brash's return and summarises the "self-interpretations" (for further discussion of the methodological rationale, see Glynos and Howarth) articulated by the story's key figures.[3] The other two sections examine the event's representation in a more critical way that also enables me to signpost a general argument about the relationship between neoliberalism and media.

The return of Brash as an empirical event
The series of events that culminated in Brash's appointment as the ACT leader was widely framed as an "extraordinary coup" ("Brash 'too extreme' for Key") in media reportage. What was most extraordinary about the story is that Brash was not even a member of Parliament or ACT when he announced his intention to challenge the incumbent leader Rodney Hide. Brash legitimised his intervention as an appeal to the fate of a right wing "reform" agenda in New Zealand, in a context where it was widely suggested that – led by what Brash called the "toxic" brand Hide (Watkins "Brash Steamroller") – ACT might lose all its seats in the November 2011 election. The fate of the political right had been the focal point of media speculation earlier in 2011, with reports suggesting that well financed representatives of the New Zealand "business community" had asked Brash to lead a new political party. Fearing a split in the libertarian right wing vote, Brash baulked at the prospect of a new party, though the threat that he might establish one gave a brutal authority to his leadership challenge: either Hide would do the right thing and resign from his untenable position as ACT leader, or else Brash would establish a new political party that would annihilate ACT in the next election (Watkins and Small).

The perceived constraining effects of National's desire to remould itself as the core government party flanked by the putative extremes of ACT and the Maori party was one of the principal targets of Brash's intervention. It was also central to his publicly expressed rationale for leaving a National party that he – alongside his then finance spokesperson Key – had brought to within 1% of being the leading political party in the 2005 election. In an open letter to Key published as an advert in several papers on May 12, Brash reproached Key on several fronts. He accused Key of resiling from commitments they had both affirmed in opposition and of governing in a manner that – because of the government's perceived tentativeness about dismantling some of the policy initiatives of previous Labour-led coalitions – was preoccupied with assuaging the concerns of Maori Party voters and those of "Labour and Green voters who crossed over to you in 2008" (Brash). "Why are you [Key] running New Zealand for our opponents", Brash pled, especially when "you have spent the last three years building up probably the greatest reserves of prime ministerial popularity in New Zealand history".

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political" concerns the ontological question of how "social objectivity" has been institutionalized in a structurally precarious way. Laclau and Mouffe famously described social objectivity as a discursive horizon, where discourse is understood as a relatively stable, but also inherently contestable, articulation of linguistic *and* non-linguistic practices (where both kinds of practices are understood as material).
[3] The qualitative selection of media texts was based on an initial sample of texts about the Brash coup sourced from the Newztext plus database. Unsurprisingly, given the corporatized nature of the New Zealand media system, the sample included a large amount of recycled articles across newspaper titles.

Key's response to Brash's leadership bid was consistent with his interest in affirming the perceived pragmatic nature of the National political brand. Although he did not rule out the possibility of either a future coalition arrangement with a Brash-led Act or a future ministerial portfolio for Brash, Key was quick to characterise Brash as a political "extremist" opposed to his own moderate identity. "From National's perspective we are in a different space. We very much see ourselves as a Centre-Right party. We are not a political party that follows an extreme Right-wing doctrine" (cited in Small, Watkins and McCammon).

Labour sought to make political capital from Key's attempt to distance himself from Brash by emphasising the historical links between "the Key/Brash extreme team" and speculating on the possible backroom involvement of National strategists in Brash's coup (Labour Party Press Release). Yet, Key's preferred framing of the relationship with Brash was reproduced in different newspaper reports, with headlines and leads either emphasising Key's desire to distance himself from Brash ("Brash 'too extreme' for Key") or his reluctance to entirely rule out a future coalition relationship ("PM not dispelling Brash"). The omissions in Key's self-serving characterisation of Brash as an extremist was noted by some, with John Armstrong in the *New Zealand Herald* suggesting that Brash could conceivably retort that "he is only campaigning on much the same manifesto he did with National in 2005". A similar point was made more forcefully in a *Dominion Post* article by Luke Malpass, a policy analyst with the neoliberal think-tank, the Centre for Independent Studies. Suggesting that Brash was merely articulating a policy prescription that "has much in common" with the agenda of the Labour-led coalition in Australia, Malpass argued that the kneejerk labelling of Brash as an "extreme right-winger" showed how "left-wing New Zealand had become" and "how far New Zealand has drifted down a path of fuzzy, socialist sentiment, with little hard analysis of policy" (Malpass).

Malpass' framing of Brash's intervention as a realist antidote to the dominant political consensus was echoed elsewhere. A *Dominion Post* editorial ("Editorial: National may find ACT very different") suggested that, "with Brash at the helm of Act", National's desire for a "credible party to its right on the political spectrum" had now materialized, "but it could be more credible than National wants". The editorial amplified the theme of Brash's credibility, describing him as a "serious politician", in contrast to the frivolous Hide, "as evidenced by his seizure of the leadership of a party of which he wasn't even a member" and his desire "to lead ACT not to safety or even respectability but to a position of influence in the next government". The paper expressed admiration for what it saw as Brash's clarity of purpose in seeking to finish "the business [he] left unfinished when he stepped aside as National Party leader in 2006 - setting New Zealand on a course to close the economic gap with Australia", an objective which Key and his Finance Minister, Bill English, now merely cite as a vague "'aspirational' goal". The editorial conceded that "few, if any" of Brash's policy prescriptions "enjoy popular support". However, it suggested that "a return by ACT to the economic agenda it was formed to promote will be a welcome addition to a political landscape presently dominated by soundbites, photo opportunities and blather". "The country cannot indefinitely continue to borrow to maintain a standard of living it cannot afford", warned the paper. "A debate is needed about choices and the consequences of choices", which Brash has the credibility to promote.

The notion that Brash's intervention represented a forthright, potentially "revolutionary" challenge to the New Zealand political establishment was given unlikely credence in a May

13 *Dominion Post* column by Chris Trotter ("'One people'"). Trotter surmised that "Dr Brash's revolutionary project on behalf of the Right" is to dismantle the "'cradle to grave' welfare state" that "came under sustained political assault from Sir Roger Douglas and Ruth Richardson between 1984 and 1993". "Dr Brash's mission – 27 years on – is to finish the job", suggests Trotter, echoing – as the *Dominion Post* editorial did too – the *Unfinished Business* trope of a book published by Douglas in 1993. Trotter positioned Brash as someone outside the elite and political establishment, who, if he is to be successful, "must lead an uprising *against* [italics added] the political elites". Thus, despite his aversion to Brash's ideological project, Trotter rearticulated some of the central assumptions of the general media discourse by positioning the neoliberal Brash as anomalous with the current political consensus (assumptions that, as we saw earlier, were reinforced by Trotter's analysis of Brash later in the year).

Neoliberalized media democracy: a representative anecdote

So why construct a wider argument about the relationship between neoliberalism and media with an overview of an empirical event centred on the fate of the Act party? The return of Brash is an interesting empirical case because I think it offers a good representative anecdote of how Aotearoa New Zealand's media democracy has been neoliberalized in ways that are often invisible as such – or, to be more precise, are typically not talked about in "centring" (Couldry "Media Rituals") media-political spaces. My use of the processual term *neoliberalization* is quite deliberate because invoking an abstract, reified "neoliberalism" risks subsuming the case into a prefabricated critical explanation that has sometimes been the tendency of ideology critique in media and communication studies (Scannell). Instead of presupposing neoliberalism as a descriptive or explanatory category, I want to critically redescribe *how* precisely the media politics of the empirical event was neoliberalized and how that discursive regime was made possible (Glynos and Howarth).

I propose that the Brash case illustrates how Aotearoa New Zealand's media democracy is regulated by a hegemonic[4] articulation of logics and practices that need to be situated in terms of the neoliberalization – and the often paradoxical, fragmented and messy neoliberalization – of a wider set of social practices and identities. Five dialectically[5] linked features are highlighted here that also enable us to locate the more general "conditions of possibility" (Glynos and Howarth; Laclau & Mouffe) of neoliberalized media regimes.

First, the construction of the Brash story shows how, despite the commonplace critical abbreviation of the present as "the age of neoliberalism" (Hallin, 43), *overt* neoliberal identities like Brash and Act are often widely regarded with disfavour and cast as fringe identities both within the internal discursive configuration of the institutional political field and the wider field of mass media discourse. This may seem like an obvious point. After all,

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[4] My understanding of hegemony follows Laclau's conceptualization of hegemony as a general "ontological category" ("Glimpsing" 322) that treats *all* social identities as hegemonically constituted because identity is always articulated in a particular way that could be constituted otherwise. Therefore, as I use the term, the description of a particular identity as *hegemonized* should not automatically imply that it has been determined in a top-down linear fashion, as is commonly assumed in the discourse of "neoliberalism-as-hegemony" (Barnett). Instead, the question of *how* a particular identity has been hegemonized is a question that needs to be empirically explored, rather than presupposed as the functional product of a given power structure.

[5] This paper's conception of dialectical processes follows Laclau's deconstructionist understanding of the dialectic, which emphasises the constitutive failure underpinning any attempt to fully reconcile dialectically opposed identities (For further discussion, see Dahlberg and Phelan).

we know ideological formations are often most successful when they conceal their explicitly ideological pedigree; or, in the ideological move par excellence, position themselves – in the way Key's identity is constructed by himself and others – as opposed to ideology. Nonetheless, if it is an obvious point, it is one that has not been adequately recognised in critical discourses about neoliberalism, which are often too quick to name the dominant ideological formation as "neoliberal" without satisfactorily exploring these paradoxes. The question of how political and social identifications are articulated as part of a shared, intersubjective lifeworld (Coole) is important in a media studies context, particularly given the widespread assumption that the media is part of an ideological infrastructure that reproduces neoliberalism. If the social practices of journalists and others with symbolic authority in, over and through the media do reproduce neoliberalism, well, then, more recognition needs to be given to how they often do this by paradoxically distancing themselves from neoliberalism – indeed, *ideology* in general.

Second, at a social level dominated by mass media representations and images, journalism's tendency to disavow ideology is dialectically reproduced in the tendency to treat the given social order as non-ideological, as exemplified by the widespread representation of Brash as *the* ideological one. Key can – in a manner deemed credible to some at least – conceivably construct his identity as non-ideological simply because he is *not* Brash. Thus, the more Brash reproaches him, the more the truth of Key's anti-ideological identity is affirmed. The orthodox left-right mapping and differentiation of political identities still takes place; politics is not without some explicit ideological content. Yet political distinctions are reproduced in a social context that is often profoundly ahistorical and guided more by product placement and marketing logics, rather than substantive or broad-ranging political differences. Hence Key can affirm his non-ideological identity by simply avoiding an abrupt overhaul of Labour policy initiatives, or by repackaging default neoliberal policies like privatisation in the softer qualified language of "mixed ownership models" (Small). This strategically desired identity is implicitly affirmed by Brash and Malpass' hyperbolic construction of Key's identity as "left wing", even if the left-wing identity he has allegedly been contaminated by resembles nothing more daring than a New Zealand inflection of third way discourses (Duncan).

The charge of left-wing hegemony can, in one sense, be dismissed as incoherent and self-serving. Yet I propose that the Brash case attests to a more general discursive feature of today's media democracies that has had its most theatrical incarnation in the political stand-offs between the Obama administration and the Tea Party: that ideology functions most commonly and effectively in hegemonic media discourses as a pejorative epithet to censure either modest attempts to tame embedded neoliberalized norms that are immediately represented as "socialist", *or*, paradoxically, to condemn zealous identification with "free market" doctrine. What is often rendered invisible in these hegemonic media representations is recognition of the extent to which the existing social order *is* a neoliberalized formation. This enables – whatever about its implausibility to critical theorists – an enduring self-construal of neoliberalism as a minority and threatened identity (see Hayek; and Friedman), which struggles to be heard in mainstream media cultures allegedly dominated by "socialist" and "left-liberal" assumptions. This is illustrated in our empirical example by the casual presupposition at the start of Malpass' article: "IF ANYONE doubts how Left-wing New Zealand has become, one need look no further than the recent pronouncements of Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard". It is also echoed, less obviously, in *The Dominion Post's* hope that Brash's return may see a potential subversion of the current "political landscape" and Trotter's idiosyncratic positioning of Brash as an anti-

establishment figure, both of which situate the arch neoliberal as someone at odds with the present.

Third, Key may enact an identity consistent with a familiar "end of ideology" and "post-political" posture and style (Dean; and Brown). Yet, through his embrace of what Savigny characterises as the ruling ideology of political marketing, he is, in another sense, governed just as rigidly as Brash by a set of explicit ideological practices that uphold "the primacy of the market in all aspects of political life" (64). Distinguishing between politics as ideology and marketing as ideology, Savigny argues that the latter "serves to legitimate the activity of marketing per se" (66), so that "politics becomes about markets and market competition. Prescription for political action is focused on marketing values and beliefs, rather than political ones" (75). This is to say that Key's strategic desire to distance himself from Brash is less because of his aversion to the latter's political agenda, but governed more by his internalisation of a marketing-based conception of politics that – based on his own party's internal research data and publicly available opinion polls – shows how the all-important centrist electoral market does not like Brash or the kind of sharp political identity he represents. In that sense, Key has mastered a set of political marketing techniques that Brash, as leader of National, struggled to reconcile with his political identity (see Hager). However, by casting Hide's "brand" as "toxic", Brash's takeover of Act shows how his own actions are structured by political marketing assumptions that allow him to more easily reconcile his "conviction politics" style with the pursuit of a niche target market. Therefore, despite their self-avowed differences, both political identities exemplify a now commonplace view that politics can be satisfactorily understood according to a political marketing template, where, as Finlayson argues, the "ideological content of political marketing is not contained in the message…but in the very fact that politics has to go to the market in the first place, that is has to submit to that logic and cannot develop its own" (cited in Savigny 75).

Fourth, Brash's aggressive, corporate-style takeover of a political party he was not even a member of shows how the niceties of democratic process constitute no great impediment to the doctrinaire neoliberal. The anti-democratic character of Brash's intervention also evokes a particular set of neoliberalized memories for New Zealanders, given that much of the post-1984 Rogernomics programme was without an electoral mandate and justified in the language of perpetual crisis that dominated New Zealand politics at the time (Kelsey). Amplified by these collective memories, as well as more recent memories of the manipulative tactics during Brash's period as leader of National from 2003 to 2006 (Hager), this historical backdrop helps us better understand the aversion to Brash, and an *explicitly* ideological politics, that comes through in much of the reporting. In that respect, what I described earlier as the ahistorical construction of the space of political differences is ahistorical in a qualified sense only, since Key's political strategy and posture, as well as the marketing data that structures the public articulation of that identity, is heavily mediated by these collective memories. At the same time, much like the casting of Brash as the uniquely ideological one, these historical discourses and memories tend to be strongly individualized, so that asserting a political distance from the earlier historical period is often enacted by simply distancing the relevant political personality from ideological bogeymen like Brash and Roger Douglas. In other words, the focus on *the individual* as the locus of political agency and responsibility – itself a key constitutive element in both the neoliberalization *and* mediatization of political and social practices (see Blumler and Kavanagh) – deflects

attention from a more structurally orientated analysis of the ideological continuities between past and present.

Neoliberalization and the journalistic habitus

The final, multi-dimensional feature of the Brash case I want to highlight is the one of most importance to my argument: the specific role of media cultures and journalistic practices in the banal enactment of neoliberalized norms. The dialectical dimension of the analysis is particularly important here. I contend that we cannot understand the dynamic articulation of neoliberalized regimes and practices without analysing the specific role of media practices and journalistic logics in their constitution and naturalization. Two aspects of our empirical example are particularly salient. First, it is hard to see how we can understand the normalization of an "anti-ideological" and "post-ideological" politics, as personified by Key, without considering the homologies with mainstream journalism's own tendency to cultivate an anti-ideological disposition. This is to say that, despite the extensive critiques of the notion of journalistic objectivity, the journalism culture in Aotearoa New Zealand remains embodied in an ongoing identification with atheoretical and hand-me-down notions of objectivity, neutrality, balance and pluralism. This journalistic disposition is articulated as an anti-ideological ideology and style; performed as "an interest in disinterestedness" (Bourdieu "Pascalian" 125). However, much like Key's anti-ideological posture, the journalistic tendency to disavow ideology and politics cannot be accepted on its own terms. We need to explore instead how certain tendential features of the journalistic habitus[6] (Bourdieu "On Television"), particularly its "no-nonsense" focus on the empirically given and the concrete, resonate with what Aune describes as the rhetoric of "market realism" (see also Fisher).

This realist posture and disposition is illustrated in the particular case by *The Dominion Post* editorial's valorisation of Brash's seriousness and the presupposition that he is willing to confront economic and political realities others are in denial about. The paper may refrain from explicitly endorsing Brash's agenda. Yet it suggests his return should be welcomed because, unlike others, he at least faces up to the condition of the world as it *is*, rather than wishing it might be otherwise. The key point to underline here is the role of media discourses of this kind in reproducing and regulating the "is-ness" and precarious positivity of the world (Laclau "New Reflections") – a form of material-discursive power that plays a crucial role in determining the strategic context in which a wider set of social and political identities are articulated. Banal discourses of this kind are also deeply ideological because they deemphasise the contingency and contestability of the social order, while simultaneously euphemizing this ideological commitment behind a realist posture that signifies "we don't do ideology".

Second, it is also difficult to see how the normalization of a political marketing paradigm grounded in an eternalization of liberal democratic norms can be satisfactorily understood without reflecting on its capacity to resonate with the journalistic habitus. By this I mean political journalists' shared identification with sedimented discourses about the nature of democracy (as *liberal* democracy) and the increasing internalisation of the assumption that

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[6] By journalistic habitus, I mean the embodied forms of subjectivity that are enculturated and reproduced in the social universe that is the "journalistic field".

journalistic field identities need to justify their own existence in market and economic terms. This convergence of identities is not without paradox. On the one hand, the incessant polling of public opinion is now a central element in journalism's production and marketing strategies (Stanyer). Yet, on the other, *The Dominion Post's* lament about a "political landscape presently dominated by soundbites, photo opportunities and blather" ("Editorial: National may find ACT very Different") shows how journalistic field identities also communicate an archetypal aversion to marketing and PR practices. The journalistic convergence with political marketing discourses resonates more deeply in the homologous identification with the normative assumption that politics must be "accountable" to the market, which, if rearticulated in a more exalted rhetoric, bears a strong "family resemblance" to the classic watchdog journalism principle that politics must serve and be accountable to the public. The fourth estate identity that embodies these normative assumptions is not without value as a democratic vision (Curran). However, as with political marketing's normative submission of politics to "market realities", journalistic appeals to accountability can often impose clear limits on the logic of "the political" (Laclau and Mouffe). [7] This is because of centring media's (Couldry "Media Rituals") privileged role, even in the digital age, in determining how the very category of "the public" – its needs, demands and affective mood – is constituted.

Conclusion

This essay examined the relationship between neoliberalized, media and political logics by analysing the dominant media-political representation of Don Brash's takeover of the Act party in April 2011. My approach to analysing neoliberalism, and deploying neoliberalization as an explanatory category, interrogated two antithetical positions: first, the tendency of critical media researchers to rely on abstract appeals to a singular and totalizing "neoliberalism" and, second, the inverse claim that we are post-neoliberalism, a discourse routinely articulated in media representations of "free market" identities. In contrast, I emphasised how neoliberal logics are always dialectically articulated with other political, social and media logics, often in messy, fragmented and contradictory ways that are not socially recognized as neoliberal. I argued that the generally negative construction of Brash's *overt* neoliberal identity obscured the neoliberalized character of a wider set of social and media practices and amplified a "post-ideological" discourse that represents the present as other than neoliberal. I also emphasised the specific role of journalistic and media practices in constituting a neoliberalized imaginary that is repressive of the political.

To underline the latter point, I will end by briefly citing another media commentary in the aftermath of the 2011 election: a Tracy Watkins analytical piece where, like others, she lauded the merits of David Shearer's candidacy for the then open position of Labour leader. [8] The article is a near perfect reiteration of some of the neoliberalized assumptions structuring the representation of the Brash case. Shearer is described as the "candidate from central casting" (Watkins "Key-Like Qualities), because, like John Key, "he's the *anti-politician, which means the public instantly warm to him* [italics added], and he has a back story that only a Hollywood script writer could dream up". He is also celebrated as a

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[7] The point cannot be explored here. But it is worth noting how the homologies between neoliberalism, journalism, political marketing and an anti-politics imaginary are also illustrated in the dispositional affinities between the journalistic habitus and rational choice theory (see Phelan chapter in Dahlberg and Phelan).

[8] The enthusiasm for Shearer now seems quite ironic given the media criticisms of his leadership abilities in 2012, much of it coming from the same journalists and pundit class who initially raved about his "back story".

"political newbie" who, unlike his rivals for the leadership contest, "carries no baggage from past administrations" and is "not hide bound by tradition or ideology".

Could one cite a better recent example of how mundane media discourses, self-construed as politically and ideologically indifferent, naturalize the truth effects of neoliberalized logics? Not only were these media representations and projections crucial to Shearer's success in the leadership campaign, but, more importantly, they also helped determine the *conditions of possibility* of his success on grounds that internalized the fatalism of a neoliberalized anti-politics imaginary (Hay). This is to say that the real political significance of the journalistic representation is, contrary to everyday impressions, not in its speculative observations about who might be the next Labour leader or even its vulnerability to the charge of media or journalistic bias. Rather, it is in the reproduction of taken-for-granted presuppositions – what Bourdieu would call a doxa – that transpose the anti-political disposition of John Key onto a homogenous and classless "public", that assume ideology is a political liability (because of course ideology is now passé), and that marketize politics by representing good "back stories" and brand-freshness as key determinants of political success. These presuppositions are effectively ontologized: posited as things, truths and realities that prefabricate and structure the "objective" conjunctural condition of politics *and* political journalism. That they are presupposed, in Aotearoa and elsewhere, underscores the need for a critique of neoliberalism that also politicizes the socially unrecognized resonances between neoliberal, journalistic and media logics.

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