



Health Reforms 2001 Research Project

Report No. 9

PRINT MEDIA REPORTING OF THE DHBs

**Grant Hannis, Beth Houston, Dale Pfeifer,
Jacqueline Cumming, Marie Russell, Tai Walker**

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Introduction to the Health Reforms 2001 Research

In 2001, the New Zealand government introduced reforms to the structure of New Zealand's health and disability sector. Under the New Zealand Public Health and Disability Act 2000, the government introduced a number of overarching strategies to guide the health and disability sector and it established 21 District Health Boards as local organisations responsible for population health and for the purchasing and provision of health and disability support services at a local level.

In 2002, funding was provided to chart the progress of, and to evaluate, these reforms as they were implemented. The research took place between 2002 and 2005. This paper is one of a series reporting on findings from the research. The papers in the series focus on:

- *Health Reforms 2001 Research: Overview Report*
- *Governance in District Health Boards*
- *District Health Board Strategic Decision Making*
- *Financing, Purchasing and Contracting Health Services*
- *Devolution in New Zealand's Publicly Financed Health Care System*
- *Māori Health and the 2001 Health Reforms*
- *Pacific Health and the 2001 Health Reforms*
- *Overview Report of the Research in Five Case Study Districts*
- *Print Media Reporting of the DHBs*
- *Performance of New Zealand's Publicly Financed Health Care System: A Focus on Performance Under the New Zealand Public Health and Disability Act (2000)*
- *Public Sector Management and the New Zealand Public Health and Disability Act*

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This report is based on a separate but associated piece of research focused on print media reporting of DHBs. The Research Team warmly acknowledges the support of Board members, DHB staff, providers and stakeholders who have contributed to the various strands of this research. We thank all those who so willingly shared their knowledge and opinions with us.

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Executive Summary

The news media can play an important role in the democratic process, disseminating policy information and acting as a watchdog in public affairs. But the news media may not adequately fulfil these roles due to a lack of resources or because the news media prefers sensationalistic or trivial reportage.

To test those theoretical positions, we consider press news reportage of a major form of local democracy recently established in New Zealand: the district health boards (DHBs).

The DHBs were widely covered in the local newspapers. Despite complaints from DHB members that the news media focused on sensationalistic stories, most reportage was neutral in tone. This was particularly the case at the community newspapers. But some fundamental aspects of DHB activity go largely unreported, and several stakeholders, including the news media itself, acknowledged that reporters frequently lacked the technical skills to adequately cover the DHBs.

1 Introduction

Although the relationship between the health sector and the media is frequently the topic of scholarly research and comment both in New Zealand and overseas, these studies typically confine themselves to looking at how health issues are depicted in the media. For instance, studies have been published which look at how those with mental illnesses are depicted in the print media, the influence of the media on reducing health disparities, and the extent to which nutritional issues are reported in the press (Nairn and Coverdale 2005, Seivwright and Lyons 2004, Gillanders 2001). The studies do not look at how the providers of health care, such as the DHBs, are depicted in the media.

Given this, and the fact the DHBs are partly elected local democratic agencies, to gain an understanding of how the media depicts such organisations we considered studies on the role of the media in democratic countries. The media's role in democracies has long been studied, but often the analysis does not discuss what and how precisely the media informs the public about political activity (Keane 1991, Hackett and Zhao 1998, McNair 2000). One notable exception is a classic study by Dunn (1969), which examines the relationship between local government officials (both politicians and public servants) and local government reporters in the United States. Dunn observes that:

“Most people, if they have given any thought to the matter at all, instantly recognize that they obtain most of their information about public affairs from the newspaper. They do not have to talk directly with public officials, moreover, to know that policy makers view the press as important”. (Dunn 1969, 1).

This report considers how the print media reports on DHB activity and the nature of that coverage. It seeks to answer the question, how well does the print media inform the public on what the DHBs are doing?

We begin with a literature review, considering the interaction between the news media and public officials. The research method is derived from this analysis. The relationship between the print media and two DHBs, one large urban DHB and one small, provincial DHB, is considered. The research includes a content analysis of print media coverage of the two DHBs and the results of interviews with key informants in this relationship. The conclusions are then presented.

2 News Media/Public Official Interaction

The seminal work by Dunn (1969) examined the relationship between public officials and local government reporters in the state of Wisconsin, the results based primarily on interviews with political reporters and state officials (state employees and politicians).

Dunn found that reporters recognise they must do more than merely report the news. As Dunn put it, reporters believe that the “complexity of many government activities, coupled with the paucity of knowledge and interest of the public, requires a translation of political activity into the ‘language of the people’ and an interpretation of its meaning” (Dunn 1969, 8). As one reporter told Dunn: “It is the reporter’s responsibility to make clear what the government is doing and why it is important” (Dunn 1969, 8).

Dunn notes that reporters are not neutral observers of public officials but actually interact with officials. Reports do this in two main ways:

* **Precipitator of action.** By focussing attention on a matter, reporters may hasten officials to make a decision about it. Reporters may also exacerbate conflict by publicising disagreements between officials.

* **Policy advocate.** Public officials may promote certain policies as they know these are the policies that will garner favourable publicity in the press. Further, reporters may openly support or disapprove of policies in their reports, especially in editorials and features. They may also suggest policies in discussions and interviews with policy makers.

On the other side of the fence, Dunn found that the public officials believe that newspaper reporters have the following roles to play in the policy-making process:

* **Informer and protector.** Officials strongly believe that the press are the media by which citizens learn what is occurring in local government. As one official observed: “Without the press there would be a pretty big void. We would lose our way of getting our message across” (Dunn 1969, 60). According to the officials, newspapers can focus the public’s attention on pressing issues.

The officials noted that the press is an expeditious way of getting information out. The press’s coverage is wide, including the general public, special groups and other officials. Officials issue information in a number of ways, including press releases, public meetings, tours, speeches, conducting meetings and interviews with editors and reporters, and holding press conferences.

Officials may use media to try to build support for existing or new programmes. Politicians, indeed, live or die on publicity (Dunn 1969, 121) and so want to be associated with favourable press coverage. Information may be purely neutral, such as on the public’s eligibility for grants under a new programme, or the dates of local government meetings. Media can also be used to trial new programmes – the officials can put a proposal into the public arena via the media and see what the public’s reaction is.

Officials also like press coverage as it indicates to the community that the officials are operating in a transparent manner in that they are operating in the public arena.

Officials frequently regarded editorials as very important. This was because editorials are read by officials and so give an indication of public perception of programmes. Officials said that when they garner favourable editorials, this can be seen as a feather in their cap.

* **Protector of the public interest.** Public officials believe reporters are there to keep officials honest, guarding against corruption, undue influence by special interests, and lax performance.

* **Communicator.** In particular, communicating the views and demands of the non-government sector to decision-makers.

Nevertheless, in the Dunn study officials had several criticisms of the press:

* **Emphasis on conflict.** Rather than concentrate on the issue at stake, the press focuses on conflict surrounding issues. As one official commented: “We try to do a good job of informing the public, yet the newspapers want to emphasize the sensational, the dramatic, the controversial” (Dunn 1969, 68). Another commented, “Reporters are sceptical. They look for the angle, the controversial. Their interests do not always coincide with ours” (Dunn 1969, 68).

* **Lack of objectivity.** Officials complained that the media frequently displays a negative bias. But Dunn wasn’t convinced by the officials’ claims, noting that the officials “can see innuendo or negative connotations in stories where those with less well-developed sensitivities would see nothing...Few, needless to say, criticize newspapers or reporters on grounds of objectivity when favorable editorials or news stories appear” (Dunn 1969, 69).

* **Lack of experience and technical knowledge.** Officials say that news organisations are unwilling to pay the money required to hire and keep local government reporters with the knowledge and skills needed to report on local government. Reporters move on, leaving inexperienced reporters to take their place. This leads to factual and interpretative errors in stories.

* **Poor editorial writing.** Despite officials regarding editorials as very important, Dunn notes that officials vent their most scathing criticism on editorial writers. The officials believe editorial writers are isolated from officials and frequently base their criticisms on inaccurate information.

* **Lack of in-depth analysis.** Given the pressure of deadlines, reporters rarely publish in-depth, interpretative analysis of issues. Instead, the news coverage tends to be superficial.

Dunn's analysis is very helpful as a starting point for the present analysis, but other scholars have since investigated more fully the relationship between the news media and local government officials, particularly the news media's role as an informer and influencer of public opinion and its role as a public watchdog.

Informer and influencer

Some commentators argue that news media reportage is a vital part of the conversation between government and citizens, which is in turn a fundamental part of democratic action. That is to say, media reports stimulate conversation between government and citizens (Jooan 1999).

The process of public opinion formation can be regarded as proceeding in four stages, with the news media playing a key role (Bryce 1973):

1. Reading newspapers. The reader learns of the events of the previous day.
2. Political conversation. The reader discusses those events with others.
3. Opinion formation. On the basis of this information and discussion, the reader forms opinions on political matters.
4. Participatory action. The reader acts when required, such as by voting.

Although this can be beneficial in terms of promulgating public policy initiatives, some see this process as simply a mechanism whereby political elites can use the media to impose their agenda on the public (Graber 1997). As one public relations academic has advised her audience: "the mass media have also become one of the most effective means of communicating ideas, disseminating information, and educating the public on public policy issues" (Fontaine 1998, 287).

The extent to which the media actually shape public opinion has been much studied. Some empirical work confirms the existence of this process, finding that the more people read the news media, the more likely they are to offer opinions in political communication and to participate in political activity (Kingdon 1984, Koch 1994, McLeod et al. 1996, Joohan 1999, Myers 2003, Moy et al. 2004). Lemert (1981) refers to the media providing its readers with mobilising information. That is to say, information that allows citizens to become involved in political activity, such as details on where local government meetings are to take place, deadlines for public submissions on public policy proposals and details of how to become a candidate for an upcoming local government election.

Other studies sound a note of caution. Stamm et al. (1997) find some evidence to suggest that reading local papers creates a sense of community among the readers, but finds stronger evidence that it is interpersonal communication that primarily determines the extent of community integration. Further, both studies comment that it is hard to discern the direction of causation: does local media use lead to greater community integration or vice versa?

Indeed, Neuman and Fryling (1985) find that the link between news media coverage and public opinion formation does not always hold. Neuman and Fryling compared content analysis of print and television media with the results of regular public opinion surveys to see if the issues at the forefront of respondents' minds were the same as the main issues in the media at the time. The study was conducted in the US for the period 1945 to 1980 (1972 onwards for television). Focussing their attention on 10 prominent issues, they found that, whereas there was a casual link between media coverage and public opinion salience over issues such as inflation, pollution and Watergate, public opinion salience ran ahead of media coverage on the issues of poverty and Vietnam, and changes in public opinion salience acted independently of media coverage on crime and unemployment.

Smith (1987) uses a statistical technique known as Granger causality to estimate the direction of causation between local media coverage and community concerns about local issues. Smith finds that there is a two-way effect, but the analysis is unable to determine why this may be so. Smith speculates that it may be to do with agenda-setting influences generated by both the newspaper and its readers. That is to say, a newspaper reports on an issue. This, in turn, generates significant reaction from readers, in the form of phone calls, letters to the editor, responses in the newspaper's market research, etc. This leads to the newspaper publishing further reports on the issue.

Some studies indicate that the nature of the print media determines the nature of its coverage. Observing that newspapers are not in existence to serve their local citizens but to make money, Adkins-Covert et al. (2000) look at how a local newspaper, the *Sagamore News*, owned by a large newspaper chain, reported three high profile local events in Sagamore: the proposed repeal of a city bylaw banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, the firing of the university's women's basketball coach, and protests surrounding the hiring of a new director of the university's Black Cultural Center.

Adkins-Covert et al. considers the extent to which the papers presented the news on these three items that exhibited the following four biases:

* **Personalised.** That is, the news is presented as reports of individual actors or in terms of its impact on the individual reader, downplaying political and historical forces and contexts. A news item is regarded as personalised if, for instance, it focussed exclusively on a single actor or specified a possible impact on the reader.

* **Dramatised.** Events are presented as simple stories, with no discussion of the abstract concepts important to understanding the events. News stories are regarded as dramatised if, for instance, the item emphasised a strategy pursued by an actor involved in a social conflict rather than the issue over which the conflict arose.

* **Fragmented.** Events are not considered in relation to other events, irrespective of how interrelated they may be. A story was regarded as fragmented if it reported a fact or facts about a single event without reference to any other event or issue.

* **Normalised.** Official sources often have the final say in stories, providing comforting images of authority. Further, stories of injustice are seldom reported. A story is regarded as normalised if, for example, the item reported a conflict and suggested that the conflict could be resolved through the use of some routine means.

Adkins-Covert et al. find high rates of such biases in stories about all three events, concluding that frequently the *why* element is missing from stories:

“Why was the city council considering a motion to remove the ban on discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation? Had there been a broad shift in public opinion? Was it the work of small well-organized minority? Was it a result of a change in the power structure of local party politics?” (Adkins-Covert et al. 2000, 241)

Adkins-Covert et al. suggest that local papers that belong to large newspaper chains may merely be seeking to support the prevailing system of government and uphold conformity.

Some researchers suggest that community newspapers deliberately manipulate the news to seek to create a sense of community. Olien et al. (1980) found that small community newspapers frequently avoid writing about conflict in the local area. They suggest this is may be because community papers see their role as promoting the local area, and publicising conflict might lead to a break down of social cohesion. Olien also found some statistical support for the hypothesis that papers are less likely to report conflict if their editors have significant standing in the local community. This is presumably because such editors do not like to publicise conflict in an area which they represent. Olien suggest this suppression of news about conflict is ultimately detrimental to the community as societies need a certain degree of conflict in order to precipitate social change.

Another potential bias in local reporting is termed “boosterism”. According to this theory, as local newspapers benefit from increased economic activity in their area, they tend to support projects that will boost economic development in their area and, accordingly, circulation (Kaniss 1991).

But a counter-example is provided by Hindman (1998): the inner-city newspaper the *Alley* in Minneapolis. It deliberately seeks to present all views. For instance, it prints all the letters it receives (editing only for length) thereby giving all those who wish to express a written opinion the opportunity to do so. Local government politicians regularly write for the paper as well. In contrast to the papers discussed by Olien, the *Alley* is prepared to discuss conflict in its area, balancing this with the paper’s desire to boost its neighbourhood.

Public Watchdog

From at least the 1940s, some commentators have questioned just how effective is the news media’s watchdog role. Appleby (1940) argues that the media take a snapshot view, rather than genuinely scrutinising the policy formation process.

Nakamura and Smallwood (1980) argue that the media can have a positive or negative impact on policy implementation. On the positive side, the media can expose cases of inflated government claims of success or publicise truly successful programmes. On the negative side, the media’s obsession with the here and now means the media frequently emphasises policies that seek to address problems in the short term rather than long term solutions.

Kingdon (1984) agrees. He found that public officials do not regard the media as having a great influence on their decision-making. In fact, officials frequently expressed disdain over what they regard as media sensationalism about some issues. Echoing Appleby, Kingdon found that the media’s short term interest in issues contributed to the media’s lack of real impact. This point was even conceded by media representatives Kingdon interviewed.

That said, Kingdon found that that media can facilitate public policy in a number of ways. First, the media acts as a communicator within the public policy network. Kingdon observed that officials are busy people who do not always meet, and so may learn about what their peers are doing via the pages of the newspaper. Second, the media can magnify issues that officials are already aware of, making the issue's resolution all the more important. As one journalist told Kingdon: "Media can help shape an issue and help structure it, but they can't create an issue" (quoted in Kingdon 1984, 63). Leaking is a good example of this – an official secretly releasing confidential information to the media is a simple way officials can publicise concerns about policies, but the story is generated by the officials leaking, rather than by the media investigating. Thirdly, the media can influence public opinion and so, indirectly, elected representatives' assessment as to what is a pressing issue.

One of the most careful studies in this area is Swoboda (1995), who considers the impact of newspaper coverage on local government budget decision-making. Swoboda considers four variables:

- * **The range of public budgeting articles published.** Swoboda suggests that newspapers can make public officials accountable by fulfilling the public's need to know about budget policies. That is, the act of publishing stories about public budgeting activities can potentially influence government policy direction.

- * **The depth of the coverage.** Swoboda argues that the better trained and informed reporters are, the more likely it is they will produce useful and influential articles.

- * **The complexity of the stories.** The more complex the stories are, the less likely they are of being read.

* **The orientation of the article.** Swoboda wondered what relationship might exist here. Does the tone of an article, that is, whether it is positive, negative or neutral, affect the accountability role of the media? Swoboda noted that widespread positive coverage may reduce accountability, in that it discourages the public to get involved in the budgeting process, whereas a preponderance of negative stories (reductions in programmes, increased taxes without discussion of services), can mean citizens are more likely to become involved through the public consultation process, protests, etc.

Conversations with veteran reporters suggested to Swoboda that the wording in the first paragraph of a story sets the orientation the article will take. Swoboda determined that an article had a negative orientation if the first paragraph contains the most controversial aspect of a story without any language to balance the negativity, or it shows clear negative bias. Positive wording in the first paragraph would consider only the best aspect of the story or contained language revealing a favourable attitude towards the subject. Neutral first paragraphs contained balanced language or language that does not show reporter bias.

Swoboda obtained data from a survey of two elite policy-making populations, newspaper managing editors and city finance directors. Editors were surveyed as they exert great power in deciding what gets published in newspapers. Finance directors were surveyed because they control information on local government agency budgets, making them highly influential in determining local government financial decisions. Questionnaires were sent to editors and directors across a number of cities in the United States. As such questionnaire data is subjective, a secondary source of data was obtained in the form of content analysis of several US newspapers, focussing on such factors as frequency of articles, subject matter and article orientation.

Asked to rate the newsworthiness of various budgeting news topics, editors rated cutting budgets and addressing deficits as most important. This was because budget cuts were seen as potentially affecting local government employees and local government customers. Swoboda also found that, as city size increased, so the likelihood that newspapers would put local government budget stories on the front page declined. Swoboda did not speculate as to why this might be so.

Swoboda found that public officials and newspaper editors agreed that local government agencies provided quality budget information to papers. That is to say, there was agreement that newspapers have the raw material to produce stories that contribute to the accountability of public agencies.

But Swoboda also found that editors regarded complex budget stories as less newsworthy. One editor commented that “complex stories do get published, but how well we do on them is the question” (Swoboda 1995, 80). Another observed that “the more difficult stories do get in, but it takes longer because of the need to translate the numbers” (Swoboda 1995, 80). Editors and officials agreed that news reporters generally had not received enough training to adequately understand and explain complex budget stories. One editor commented that “the intricacies of local government are so complex that years of training, both formal and on the job, are required for full understanding” (Swoboda 1995, 82). One official noted: “Most reporters need to be hand-held through budget or finance issues and even after that only the good ones understand it” (Swoboda 1995, 82). In light of these findings, Swoboda concludes: “A lack of understanding could adversely affect attempts by the press to make government accountable to the public” (Swoboda 1995, 82).

With regard to orientation, Swoboda found that whereas officials frequently complained about there being too much negative press, positive stories dominated the smaller newspapers in the study and neutral stories dominated the larger papers. Swoboda suggests that the propensity to publish positive stories in smaller papers “may be due to the close relationships that can develop between editors, reporters, and city official in smaller settings...the larger newspapers may have less opportunity for social relationships to occur, placing less pressure on newspapers to ‘get along’ with public officials” (Swoboda 1995, 85).

Swoboda concludes that the study raises doubts about the effectiveness of newspapers as an accountability measure. While newspapers have the raw material to write strong articles, they frequently have difficulty with the complexity of budget stories, and it is of concern that so few newspaper budget articles are negative – that is, few stories take budget policies to task.

Conclusions from Literature Survey

There is general agreement in the literature that in the interaction between the media and officials the media can play two roles: informer and influencer of public opinion and public watchdog. The relationship between officials and media can be a productive one, providing information to the public and thereby mobilising the public's political activity, as well as monitoring the policy formation and implementation process.

However, the media is frequently criticised for emphasising short-term concerns, negativity and sensationalism, and for lacking the technical skills and experience to properly report stories. Media representatives themselves have acknowledged at least some of these points. It is also questionable the extent to which the media engender an informed citizenry, with local media apparently preferring to publish good-news stories in order to promote the interests of local media.

3 The Current Study

Under the New Zealand Public Health and Disability Act 2000, each DHB has a range of obligations, most notably:

- * To improve, promote and protect the health of the people in its local area.

- * To reduce health disparities by improving health outcomes for Māori and other groups in society.

- * To exhibit a sense of social responsibility by taking into account the interests of the population to which it is providing health care.

- * To foster community participation in health improvements and in the planning of the provision of health care.

- * To produce a district strategic plan, detailing its plans for meeting its objectives over the next five to 10 years, and review this plan every three years. Before a DHB can establish or significantly amend a strategic plan it must assess the current health status of its population and health care provision, prepare a draft plan or amendment and consult its population on the draft.

- * To issue an annual plan, including financial statements, detailing the intended outputs of the DHB for that year, how these relate to the strategic plan and the funding for those intended outputs.

Seven members of each DHB board are elected every three years, up to four additional board members may be appointed by the Minister of Health.

In light of this and our literature review, we sought to answer four essential questions with regard to the DHBs:

- * What role(s) do the New Zealand media and DHB officials believe the news media should play when reporting DHB activity?

- * What topics do the news media choose to cover when reporting DHBs?

- * What is the tone of this coverage? That is to say, what general impression does media coverage seem likely to create in the minds of its readers?

- * Are there any differences in coverage between large daily newspapers and community newspapers?

4 Research Method

There are a large number of DHBs throughout New Zealand, and we did not have the resources to assess news media coverage for all of them. Instead, we considered two contrasting DHBs, a large, urban DHB and a small, provincial DHB. Following Swoboda (1995), our research consisted of a content analysis of media coverage of the two DHBs and interviews with key informants.

Anonymity

To facilitate this research, we agreed that all interviews would be anonymous and that neither DHB would be identified. To maintain this anonymity, we have not identified by name the papers included in our content analysis. If we were to identify the papers by name, this would reveal the identity of the two DHBs.

Content Analysis

Content analysis can be briefly defined as the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics (Neuendorf, 2002). Content analysis enables an objective, systematic, quantitative description of newspaper content (Berelson, 1954). A content analysis of newspaper coverage of the work of DHBs identified and quantified the patterns in newspaper coverage to reveal coverage trends.

We used content analysis to assess newspaper coverage of these two DHBs for the year ended 31 May 2002. This covered the first elections of the DHBs in October 2001 and the DHBs' issuing of strategic and annual plans in February 2002. We looked at newspaper coverage in the three metropolitan dailies and seven community newspapers that operate in the areas in which the two DHBs are based. The metropolitan newspapers were all published daily, whereas all but one of the community newspapers were published weekly (the exception being published bi-weekly).

Each of the three metropolitan dailies is identified as “Daily 1”, “Daily 2” and “Daily 3”. Likewise, the seven community newspapers are identified as “Community 1”, “Community 2”, and so on.

Two coders carried out the coding, with each coder coding half the population. A coding protocol was created, comprising a coding book - which detailed each of the themes - and a corresponding coding form on which each category was recorded.

Many of the community newspapers were housed under an umbrella organisation. Journalists reporting on a story for one newspaper may have their story published several times in different publications within the umbrella group. This means that the same story could appear in a number of local publications. The researchers were concerned that this would mean that certain themes would be over-represented due to the occurrence of these duplicates. Following Lewis (2001 and 2004), duplicates were used to calculate the amount of coverage generated by newspapers about the DHBs but only the first incidence of the story was coded.

A trial comprising 10 per cent of the population was undertaken to ensure all text could be coded exhaustively and to ensure all themes were mutually exclusive (Neuendorf 2002 and Berelson 1954).

When conducting inter-coder reliability testing, we followed Neuendorf (2002) and coded 10 per cent of stories in common. We calculated a reliability figure using Cohen’s Kappa. Kappa is a reliability formulation that takes into account the instances when researchers would code alike by chance. The kappa calculation for the original coding themes was 0.95, “indicating excellent agreement beyond chance” (Neuendorf, 2002, 143). After revisions, the full content analysis was undertaken.

The content analysis discovered 493 articles that were written about DHBs during the period under consideration. It should be noted that although most stories in the papers related to the local DHB, not all the stories were about the local DHB. In both the daily newspapers and the community newspapers 86 per cent of stories were about the local DHB, the remainder about other DHBs in the country. We report results for all stories.

Two measures of prominence were considered. The first was the location of the article in the newspaper. Generally speaking, the nearer to page one a story is the more newsworthy it is, with the most newsworthy material on page one (Swoboda 2001, Tuchman 1980). The second measure of prominence was whether a photograph accompanied the article. Many readers simply scan the newspaper and photographs are an important device to encourage readers to stop and read the accompanying item. This means stories with photographs have greater prominence in the reader's mind (Lee 1996).

The general tone of each article - positive, neutral or negative - was also considered. A story was determined to be positive if the information presented the DHB in a favourable light, with either little or no countervailing negative information in the story. An example of a positive story is one that reported in its first paragraph that local radiation therapists "have won pay rises of up to 25 percent, staving off the potential for strikes which hit other centres" (Daily 1, May 8, 2002 p.3). The article reported that the wage settlement should discourage therapists from seeking employment elsewhere, which would have led to patients waiting a long time for treatment. A union representative said the settlement "would help ease the problems the DHBs had in recruiting and retaining therapists", and a DHB representative said he was "pleased at the settlement" (p.3). The use of terms like "won" and "pleased", and the lack of any concerns raised about the settlement means we determined the overall tone of this story to be positive.

A story was determined to be neutral if there was no overtly negative or positive language but rather simply a recitation of facts, or the story presented an even balance of negative and positive comment. An example of a strictly factual story was one that simply stated that people will “have the chance to hear from local body candidates”, including DHB candidates, at an upcoming meeting (Community 1, September 10, 2001, p.7). The story went on to detail the time, date and venue of the meeting. An example of an evenly balanced story is one that reported on the use of an abortion drug at the DHB hospital (Daily 1, March 1, 2002, p.15). The first paragraph noted that the drug was “controversial”. The article went on to factually describe its use. An anti-abortion representative was quoted as expressing “dismay” over the use of the drug and that the effects of the drug were “harrowing for the mother”. But virtually the same amount of space was given to the director of the company that imported the drug, a doctor, who was quoted saying “the drug could be more painful than a surgical abortion but some women wanted it because they felt in control of the process”.

A story was determined to be negative if the information presented the DHB in an unfavourable light, with either little or no countervailing positive information in the story. An example is a story that begins by noting that the payment of bonuses and performance payments is “rife in the health sector despite the Government’s aversion to them”. (Daily 1, May 22, 2002, p.15). The newspaper had obtained information on payments from its own Official Information Act request. The article lists various payments and notes that while the local DHB “made the highest number of payments, 300 were in the under \$ 3000 band, 12 DHBs made 59 payments worth more than \$ 15,000” (p.15). The story says that the local DHB “defended its payments” and reported that the Minister had said she “had never promised to stamp out performance payments” (p.15). Although the DHBs are given the opportunity to comment on the performance payments, the use of terms like “rife”, “defended”, and “stamp out” and the fact the information only came to light following a newspaper investigation led us to conclude that the overall tone of this story was negative.

Our content analysis revealed seven main themes in the newspaper coverage:

* **Management.** This covers basic management of the DHB, including financial management, staffing issues, bed numbers, DHB meetings and managing waiting lists.

* **Election.** This is reportage on the DHB elections, including information on how to stand in the election, how to vote, details of the candidates and the results of the elections.

* **Lobby groups.** This is reportage on comments from various lobby groups petitioning either the government about the actions of the DHB or the DHB itself. The category includes opposition political parties.

* **Consultation.** This covers the DHB's consultation process, including stories of consultation that has occurred or will occur, and announcements regarding how the public can be involved in the DHB's strategic planning process.

* **Health outcomes.** This covers the DHB's public health programmes, (such as drug and alcohol programmes and schools programmes) and the DHB's work on community health issues (such as water quality, infections in hospitals and fighting infectious diseases).

* **Government interventions.** This covers central government involvement in the running of the DHBs, including instances when the government has had to pay assist the DHB financially and where the government has signed off the DHB's strategic plan.

* **Other.** This covers a myriad of other topics, including reducing inequalities (DHB activities to reduce health disparities across different groups in society) and stories that mention DHBs in passing (for instance, where a DHB board member is identified as such in some other news story).

The unit of measurement for categorising coverage was one paragraph. While most themes could be categorised as relating positive, neutral or negative news, election coverage was universally neutral and the “Other” category was not classified by tone.

Our graphs do not report results for community and daily newspapers combined, as the combined results are essentially the same as for daily newspapers. This is not surprising, as 75 per cent of all stories were published by the dailies. This frequency no doubt reflects the fact the dailies come out every day, whereas the community newspapers are primarily weekly. As a high proportion of total stories were daily stories, the characteristics of the daily coverage largely determine the characteristics of combined coverage.

Interviews

In addition to the quantitative data collected in the content analysis, qualitative data was collected by way of interviews. The interviews were held from July to December 2004. Ten interviews were conducted in total.

The interviews were with the key informants involved in the interaction between the press and the two DHBs studied. Those interviewed were: the DHB chief executives, DHB chairpersons and other board members, the health reporters at the daily press and the editors of the community newspapers (as they do not have separately assigned health reporters). Some interviews were face to face, others were by telephone. The interviews were conducted by the lead author of this paper and researchers attached to Victoria University’s Health Services Research Centre. The object of the interviews was to understand the working relationship between the media and the two DHBs in our study, and the views of the key informants on this relationship. The interview questions covered the following broad areas:

- * What is the media’s role in reporting DHB activity?
- * How does the media decide what is newsworthy about DHBs?
- * How does the media research DHB activity?
- * How well does the media report on DHBs?

5 Content Analysis

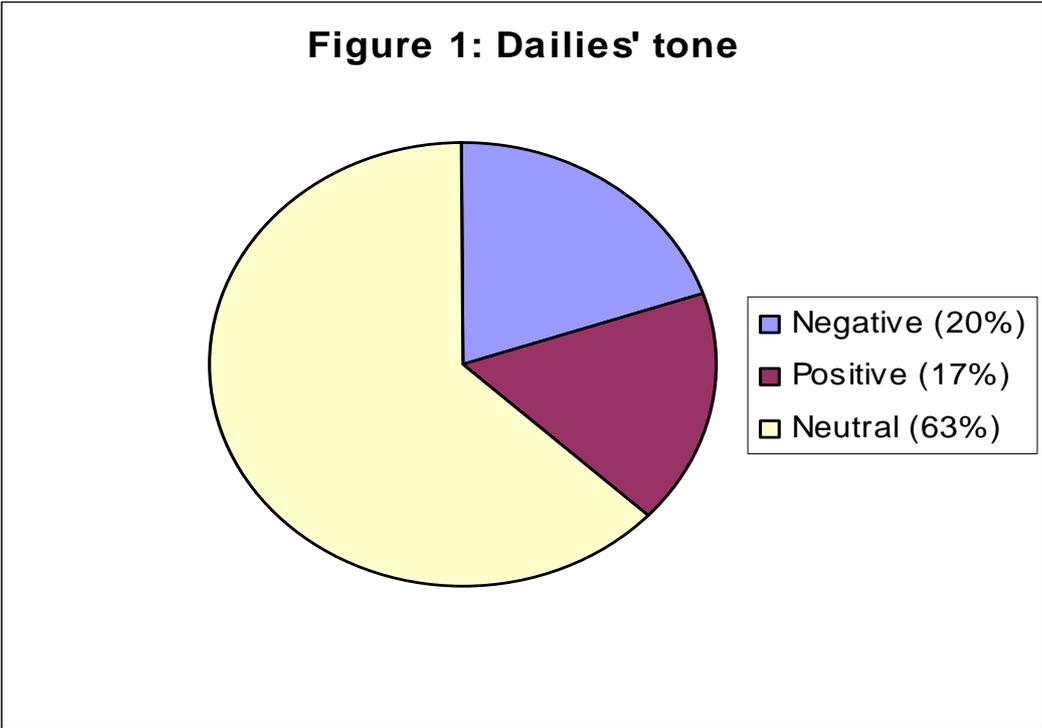
Prominence

Judging by the stories' placement in the paper, daily newspapers regard DHBs as relatively highly newsworthy. Forty-nine percent of daily newspaper articles appeared on pages one to three of the paper. Community newspapers were less impressed with the newsworthiness of the DHB stories they ran, with only 38 per cent of DHB stories appeared on pages one to three.

Tone

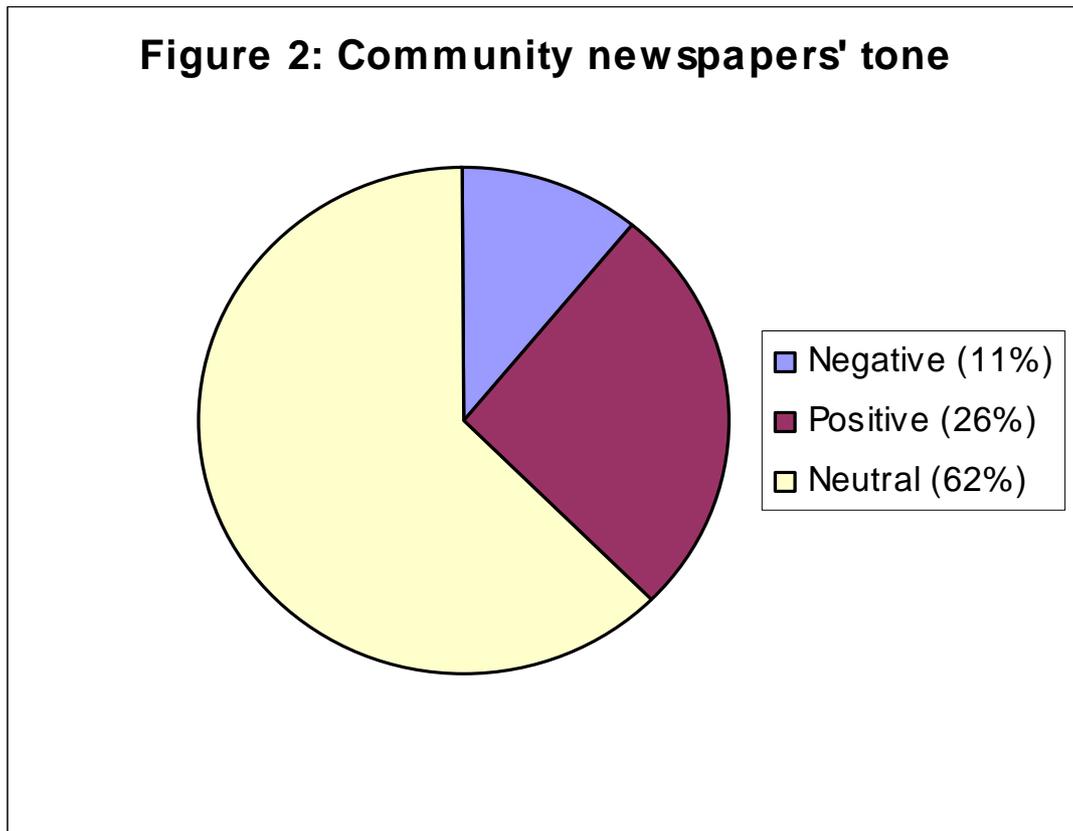
Figures 1 and 2 look at the overall tone of the dailies and community newspapers' articles. In both cases, neutral reporting predominated, with just over 60 per cent of coverage being neutral. This presumably reflects the general desire of newspapers to report straight news. An example of such neutral reporting of facts is this lead: “[The main hospital’s] neonatal intensive care unit has been at maximum capacity in recent weeks handling a high number of babies needing specialised care” (Daily 1, 20 May 2002, 1).

However, the tone of 20 per cent of the dailies' articles was negative. An example was a report on the urban DHB's expected large deficit, with one critic saying he was concerned that the area the DHB serves “would become the target for service cuts as the board struggled to stay viable” (Daily 2, 29 August 2001, 6).



By contrast, only 11 per cent of the community newspapers' articles were negative. Clearly, community newspapers favour news which is either neutral or positive. This may reflect the fact that community newspapers prefer to be seen by their readership as generally supporting a major institution in the local community rather than reporting criticisms of it.

Themes in Coverage



Looking first at dailies' coverage (Figure 3), the management theme predominated, accounting for just over half of all coverage (53 per cent). Next was election coverage (13 per cent), followed by lobby groups (10 per cent), health outcomes (6 per cent), government interventions (6 per cent) and consultation (5 per cent). Coverage of reducing inequalities is negligible, despite being a major objective of the DHBs, appearing in the "Other" category.

Figure 3: Dailies' themes	
	% of total
Management	53
Election	13
Lobby groups	10
Health outcomes	6
Govt interventions	6
Consultation	5
Other	6
Total	100

There are some striking differences in community newspapers' coverage (Figure 4). Management comprises far less of the total, only 29 per cent. Election coverage is correspondingly higher, at 30 per cent. Typical of the community newspapers' election coverage were paragraphs like:

“notices will shortly appear in local and regional newspapers giving election details and seeking nominations for prospective candidates for mayor, councillors, ...members of Community Boards and District Health Boards”. (Community 2, 16 July 2001, 4).

This is classic mobilising information, encouraging readers to become involved in local politics by telling those who might be considering standing as candidates when details on nominations are to appear.

Figure 4: Community newspapers' themes	
	% of total
Management	29
Election	30
Lobby groups	8
Health outcomes	6
Govt interventions	3
Consultation	15
Other	9
Total	100

Coverage of government interventions is half that of the dailies', whereas reporting of consultation is three times greater in proportion. An example of community newspapers' consultation reportage is the lead: "The health of [the city's] youth is a major concern, community consultation undertaken by the [urban DHB] has revealed" (Community 3, 23 April 2002, 16).

It seems, then, that the community newspapers do more to inform their readers about DHB elections and DHBs' consultation with their communities. Daily newspapers, by contrast, prefer to provide more coverage of straight news on DHBs. This may reflect daily newspapers having somewhat less engagement with their local community.

Comparing the coverage with the DHBs' obligations under the Act, it is clear that some of the DHBs' statutory obligations are frequently the basis for news stories. Most obviously, the DHB elections are extensively covered in the press. Further, the DHBs' strategic and annual planning process appears as part of the management coverage and DHB consultation with the local population is covered in the consultation coverage. However, other major DHB activity - promoting and protecting the local population's health and reducing health disparities - does not figure in the major components of media coverage.

Looking at the tone of the dailies' coverage by theme (Figure 5), half the management coverage was neutral. This was characterised by straight reportage of DHB news. A third of the management coverage was negative news. An example of this negative tone is a report of a medical researcher previously employed at a DHB, who successfully argued at the Employment Relations Authority that “the board had failed to provide good and safe working conditions” (Daily 3, 5 November 2001, 28).

Figure 5: Tone of the dailies' themes		
	% of theme	% of total
Management neutral	50	27
Management negative	32	17
Management positive	17	9
Election neutral	100	13
Lobby groups neutral	32	3
Lobby groups negative	64	6
Lobby groups positive	5	0
Health outcomes neutral	6	0
Health outcomes negative	19	1
Health outcomes positive	75	5
Govt interventions neutral	63	4
Govt interventions negative	13	1
Govt interventions positive	24	1
Consultation neutral	44	2
Consultation negative	16	1
Consultation positive	40	2
Other	100	6
Total		100

Election coverage was all neutral. That is to say, it was all straight reporting without any positive or negative tone. It seems daily newspapers do not seek to endorse and challenge DHB candidates, but simply to report that the candidates are standing for office. As with the community newspapers, election coverage was characterised by mobilising information. Consider: “Health Minister Annette King says District Health Boards need members who have a genuine interest in a wide range of health issues. Nominations for the DHB elections opened on July 27, and close at noon on August 24” (Daily 3, 20 July 2001, 10).

The tone of most of the dailies' coverage of lobby groups was negative. This is what one would expect – lobby groups are usually calling for change and so emphasise what is wrong with the current situation. For instance, one article quotes the general manager of a private hospital as saying that the hospital's falling share price is due to the local DHB halting the funding of cardiac surgery at the hospital. The general manager claims the change in policy is because the DHB "has had a roasting for financial mismanagement and I think they are going to make sure they don't do that again" (Daily 1, 21 November 2001, 28). Health outcomes coverage emphasised positive news. Government intervention coverage was largely neutral, merely reporting on the working relationship between the government and the DHBs, and most consultation coverage was either neutral or positive.

Comparing the community newspapers' coverage with that of the dailies (Figure 6), we find very similar trends. As with the dailies, around half the management news was neutral. However, the community newspapers gave more weight to positive management news, with nearly a third of the community newspapers' coverage being positive, as against 17 per cent for the dailies. All the community newspapers' election coverage was neutral – as with the dailies, the emphasis was on mobilising information and there was no attempt made to endorse or criticise candidates. In fact, some community newspapers actually reserve space for the equal coverage of all local candidates. As with the dailies, lobby group coverage emphasised the negative, although the community newspapers' gave relatively more positive coverage than the dailies did. Most health outcomes coverage was positive (although the community newspapers provided relatively more neutral coverage) and most government interventions coverage was neutral (although the community newspapers did give slightly more negative news). As with the dailies, most consultation news was either neutral or positive (although communities gave relatively more coverage to negative consultation news).

Figure 6: Tone of the community newspapers' themes		
	% of theme	% of total
Management neutral	46	14
Management negative	23	7
Management positive	31	9
Election neutral	100	30
Lobby groups neutral	17	1
Lobby groups negative	59	5
Lobby groups positive	24	2
Health outcomes neutral	20	1
Health outcomes negative	14	1
Health outcomes positive	67	4
Govt interventions neutral	52	2
Govt interventions negative	22	1
Govt interventions positive	26	1
Consultation neutral	32	5
Consultation negative	27	4
Consultation positive	41	6
Other	100	9
Total		100

Although these results may seem at variance with the overall tone results, in fact, if we sum the total percentage of neutral, negative and positive coverage by theme, the same general results as for the overall tone are obtained. Fifty per cent of the dailies' coverage by theme was neutral, 26 per cent was negative and 17 per cent was positive. With the community newspapers, 52 per cent of coverage by theme was neutral, 17 per cent was negative and 21 per cent was positive. So, while the dailies and community newspapers' thematic coverage provides the same emphases in tone, the interplay between the tones in each case means the following overall effect is obtained. Half the dailies and community newspapers' thematic coverage was neutral; but whereas a quarter of the dailies' coverage was negative, by contrast nearly a quarter of the community newspapers' coverage was positive. These results are in line with the overall tone of the articles.

6 Key Informant Interviews

We now turn our attention to the interviews with key informants.

The Role of the Media

The news media sees its role as basically to serve its readers. As one health reporter stated: “Our role is to provide stories on what readers are interested in – use or misuse of taxpayer funds. Good news for the region - new services or other developments.” The reporters see themselves as the reader’s surrogate. As one observed: “DHB meetings are open to the public but nobody goes. My job is to sift through the whole thing, be independent, and give insight for the public. Tell people what’s going on, what’s being discussed.”

In essence, these comments are saying: we are the news media, so we report the news. There does not seem to be any deeper philosophy on the role of the media sitting behind such comments, such as what actually constitutes news.

By contrast, some of the DHB representatives took a wider perspective on the role of the media. One DHB communications person gave a very full response, emphasising the twin media roles of providing information and acting as a watchdog:

“There are probably four or five different roles that the media should play. The first one is promotion of health-related activities in a DHB...Smoke Free, diabetes prevention, breastfeeding...The media should also play a role where appropriate and necessary for public health and safety information, and examples there would be if we’ve got a sudden outbreak of meningococcal or perhaps there is a growing number of whooping cough cases. Then there are some really important key messages to get out to the media and we need to get out to the public and we need the media to do that and we will turn around a press release really quickly...Media can be seen as the first draft of history. They can be seen as the voice of the people and so in that way the media plays a role in contacting the hospital when it needs to follow up something...So if we get a whole lot of money from the Ministry of Health then the paper has an absolute job to ring us and find out what we’re doing with the money. They are the voice of the people”.

This view was not shared by the politicians. As with Dunn's results, it seems these politicians are remarkably thin-skinned in their assessment of the media. When asked what the role of the media is, one DHB member said their role is to "be fair. It's got to report things that are bad – I don't mind that. But it's also got to report things that are good so there is balance." Another added: "Honesty would help. Sensationalism, removal of, would help." A further commented: "Media loves sensationalism and if you're not sensationalising anything you're not going to make front page."

Such comments are at variance with our content analysis, which clearly shows that the media mostly reports positive and neutral DHB news. It is perhaps the case that the politicians only remember the negative news.

Determining Newsworthy DHB Activity

The above impressions were echoed when the key informants were asked to define newsworthy DHB activity. The news media representatives simply said news is what people regard as news. One commented that "We regard as newsworthy anything we feel will interest or affects our readers." Another offered this as the test of whether something is newsworthy: "Is the community interested?...Most of the things worthy of reporting on. Good news, such as a new linear accelerator, 50 years of the pink ladies volunteers, a hospital open day, new programmes such as hydrotherapy pool. Bad news, such as people being poorly treated at A&E, inadequacies in mental health services." Another media representative simply recited a list of regular DHB news stories to show what is newsworthy.

When the DHB communications representatives were asked what is newsworthy, they explained that the news is about conflict, angles, benchmarks or photo opportunities:

“What makes news is conflict. If you’ve got a member of the public saying that something the DHB is doing is appalling then you have a story because of course the DHB will probably say that something is not so appalling...You need a news angle. You need what is called a hook, a news angle means something has to be news or it has to have reached a benchmark. If I just wanted to do an update of how well our outreach immunisation service is going. I’m not going to be able to get the media interested in that. But if I can tell them that the outreach immunisation service has now just seen its 100th patient, suddenly I’ve got a news angle. That’s a milestone that’s been reached...Our newspapers are also always looking for photo ideas. So when I’m doing a promotion I’m always thinking: what could they take a photo of that’s interesting?”

Indeed, the rural DHB has taken to producing its own newsletter, which is included regularly in the local daily newspaper. In this way, the DHB can communicate directly with the public via the media.

Despite all this, the DHB members generally took a rather aggrieved approach. One commented that the media are “having a quite adverse impact frankly. Because all of this fuels public opinion, public prejudice, particularly in terms of mental health or the A&E, things go a bit haywire there or there’s a waiting list.” Another said that a lot of the coverage “is actually used as scaremongering...it’s, oh you know, someone has escaped from somewhere. There’s no wish whatsoever 99 per cent of the time to tell a good luck story.” Again, this is not in accordance with our content analysis, and in fact not all DHB members shared this pessimistic view. One acknowledged that good communications people can get stories placed:

“I think with good communications people you try very, very hard. I don’t think it always works and you know they might put 10 stories in to get 2 back if they’re lucky once a week”.

One DHB chair emphasised the personal relationship between himself and the local press editor, and how he uses this to try to influence coverage of the DHB:

“If I don’t like what they say, I’ll ring up [the editor]. Well, I know him. I’m on committees with him. Or I see him and I say, ‘Oh, you know, Why did they? We didn’t get - or whatever - and he just ‘Oh’ and grins. I don’t care [editor’s name], it’s not good enough you know, and I don’t think people realise that...I’ve been around in this town for a long time and you do get to know them. And you get to know them personally”.

How Stories are Researched

As to where the media find their stories, there are three main avenues: the DHBs themselves, media investigations and the public. As one health reporter said:

“They approach us. We find out. Readers approach us. The media liaison person is an ex-journalist and produces good-news stories. Hard news comes from what people tell me - negative stories and patient complaints. I get stories from what people tell me, sometimes confidentially, local angle on a national story. I attend DHB meetings and use press releases”.

Another health reporter emphasised the importance of attending board meetings:

“A reasonable amount comes from what the DHBs produce themselves – board meetings, reports to board meetings. I go along to board meetings and check the minutes of committee meetings that I don’t go to. I also use contacts in the DHBs – communications people and clinicians. I look to write matchers, that is, I localise a national issue”.

Not all media attend DHB meetings, however. One community newspaper editor stated, “We do not attend DHB meetings as it is too time consuming. We do attend launches and write stories from press releases. We watch other newspapers, listen to the radio, look at what’s happening elsewhere in New Zealand.”

The media acknowledged the technical and resource difficulties they face. One editor said that health “is difficult to report as it is a specialist round. We are under-resourced.” A health reporter added that, “Some health issues are complex and pretty damn difficult.”

Some media representatives expressed frustration that some DHB communications people usually prefer to make only written responses, or cannot be contacted at all.

But DHB communications representatives emphasised the two-way nature of their relationship with the media. “They need a good relationship with me so that when they’re asking me the tough questions I’m going to give them a hand.”

The Quality of Reporting

Most of the key informants said there was newsworthy DHB activity that was not covered by newspapers. One health reporter said that:

“Lots of good-news stories never get out because communications people and clinicians do not tell us about them. Stories like research or great recoveries. Some clinicians are good at ringing us up but others aren’t. It is easier to find out about concerns and negative stories from members of the public contacting us”.

Another said a lack of technical skills in the media prevented some stories being told: “One issue is the devolution of spending for over 65s. This story has never been covered as I don’t understand it and would get it wrong.”

Some in the media expressed frustration on how health professionals will not go on the record. “We find we can’t report all the strong stories we’d like to cover because people won’t go on the record. It is hell working at the hospital, but staff won’t go on the record to say that as it is slagging off the employer – just like the DHB can’t slag off the government as its funder.”

One local reporter even acknowledged that, because they live in the same town as the DHB people, they prefer not to run aggressive news stories: “We are more balanced because we live here. We don’t come in from out of town and write a sensationalist story.”

In fact, some of the DHB communications representatives admitted that these limitations meant the media gave them a relatively easy time, despite the fact health reporters regular attend DHB meetings:

“I do think they are a little, I can’t believe I’m saying this, they’re actually a little easy on us. So if we had a stronger media or more ruthless journalist I should probably be getting more phone calls from them...I would encourage their reporters to dig a little deeper, to be a bit more aggressive and to perhaps use some of the ideas that come out of the meetings as story ideas more than they’re doing at the moment”.

A DHB chief executive made similar comments, saying that he was happy with the relationship with the media: “We haven’t had that much to test that relationship over that time because there haven’t been that many controversial things that they might have wanted to run a juicy story on, so yes I think it’s pretty good.”

The community newspapers were seen as being particularly useful. As one DHB member commented, “The giveaways [ie, community newspapers] are easy to put things in and giveaways are always very interested in getting anything and that’s important.”

One DHB communications person went so far as to say that the media sometimes gives them such an easy ride that this is detrimental to local democracy:

“There are still too many people here who are overweight, who have diabetes, who are smoking. So if you wanted to really get down to it, they could be asking us harder questions: what are you doing? How are you fixing it?...It would force our staff, our chief executive, our board to be more accountable. You might actually get more public interest in health and if people are interested in health they start taking more care of their own health. And, for instance, we’ve got the district health board elections coming up and we had a public meeting last night for anybody interested in standing: there were about 10 people there – all white males”.

Despite the communications people talking about a compliant media, DHB members claimed some public health programmes struggle for coverage. “The Pacific Island hospital, the Pacific unit in the hospital, was a real good story about changing and about changing attitudes...all the press releases, never even made the grade.”

6 Conclusions

Our review of the literature revealed that the media is typically expected to play two roles in the interaction with public officials: as informer and influencer of public opinion, and as public watchdog. That is to say, the media can provide information to the public on public policy and monitor public officials' performance, two roles that can enhance democratic processes.

However, the media is frequently criticised for falling short of these lofty goals, preferring negativity and sensationalism, and lacking the technical skills and experience to properly report stories. Further, local media apparently prefer to publish good-news stories in order to promote the interests of local media.

Our study of media reportage of two DHBs, one urban and one rural, essentially confirms these results. Key informants in the interaction between the media and the DHBs acknowledge the media's dual roles of informer and watchdog. While the DHB members denounced the supposed sensationalism of the media, the generally neutral nature of most coverage suggests this criticism has little merit or is over-emphasised. As politicians survive on publicity, it is reasonable to suggest that they are hyper-sensitive to negative publicity, according it far greater significance than the figures would suggest.

The content analysis revealed that the media regards DHB activity as relatively newsworthy, especially the daily media where many stories appear towards the front of the newspapers. The media provides extensive coverage of several fundamental aspects of DHB activity, such as the election of DHB members and DHB management. Community newspapers give relatively more coverage to DHB elections and public consultation, and consequently less coverage to DHB management issues. It is likely this coverage helps to empower the readers of community newspapers. However, two major aspects of DHB activity - promoting and protecting the local population's health, and reducing health inequalities - are not covered in any significant degree by the media.

The DHB members have little understanding of what constitutes newsworthy DHB activity. Strikingly, the media also has a rather superficial view of what is newsworthy: it will report whatever DHB activity interests its readers. The most insightful comments came from the DHB communications people, perhaps indicating why they regard themselves as successful in placing stories in the newspapers. Indeed, at the rural DHB the communications people are able to speak directly to the public via the daily newspaper's distribution of a newsletter, totally unmediated by the health reporter for the paper.

In fact, one DHB communications representative admitted that the media frequently gives them an easy ride, preferring simple news stories to difficult investigative work. The media representatives themselves acknowledged their lack of technical skills and resources. Further, community newspapers prefer good news or neutral stories to negative reporting. It seems likely that the local media feels it has to maintain a good working relationship with the DHBs and be seen by its readers as supporting the local community and so runs proportionately fewer negative stories.

The media are to be commended for valuing the newsworthiness of DHB activity. But it seems the media must invest more in the technical competence of its health reporters before it can fulfil its full potential in contributing to the democratic process of the DHBs. And there is no room for complacency among the DHBs. They should be doing more to ensure the promotion of the local population's health and reducing health inequalities, two fundamental DHB objectives, are adequately reported in the media.

7 Limitations and Further Research

Two major limitations in this study must be acknowledged. The first is that this analysis is confined to two DHBs. We cannot generalise from this analysis to conclude that what is true for these two DHBs is true for other DHBs. Further research could be undertaken that provides an assessment of print media coverage of the DHBs more generally.

The second limitation is that no statistical analysis has been undertaken on the perceptions and influence of the newspapers' readership. While the newspapers in this study claim they are providing what their readers want, we have not tested this claim by objectively measuring what readers want from their newspapers or, indeed, determining in what direction the influence between newspaper coverage and readers' perceptions travels. This is another area that could be fruitfully researched in the future.

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