

# **MEDIATING FLOWS: EXPLORING THE MEDIA'S ROLES IN CANTERBURY'S WATER DEBATES**

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## ***Introduction***

Landcare Research's 'Old Problems, New Solutions' is an innovative research project looking at ways in which researchers from different disciplines (such as economists, social scientists and legal scholars) can work together with policymakers and stakeholders to enhance the sustainable governance of natural resources.<sup>1</sup>



Sustainable use of natural resources is the foundation for primary industries that play a major role in our national and regional economies. Dairy and meat exports, hydroelectricity generation, and tourism, for example, are all reliant on abundant and high quality natural resources for their success. Apart from the economic value of natural resources, the integrity of natural systems is important to New Zealanders, and the role of tikanga Māori in resource management is important to the success of a bicultural society. Local authorities recognise the need to include different perspectives around resource governance in their decision making, but often grapple with how to do so effectively. Using water resource governance in Canterbury as a case study, the Old Problems, New Solutions research programme aims to inform improved governance of natural resources in New Zealand.<sup>2</sup>

This article explains a piece of research within the Old Problems, New Solutions programme that explored the role of media coverage in debates on water allocation in Canterbury. The research focused on newspaper coverage of the drought in 2007–08 and on coverage of water debates during regional elections in 2007.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see <http://opns.landcareresearch.co.nz>

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of some of the issues around water resource governance in Canterbury see Chapter 21: Water Allocation: Canterbury's Wicked Problem in *Hatched: The Capacity for Sustainable Development*, an e-book available at [www.hatched.net.nz](http://www.hatched.net.nz).

## ***The research problem***



In the early stages of this project interviews were conducted with key individuals<sup>3</sup> in Canterbury to gain a detailed understanding of their perspectives on decision-making processes around the allocation and use of water resources.

Many of the interviewees talked about water issues that they were directly involved in, for example, they may have attended public meetings about water allocation decisions or resource consent applications, submissions or hearings.

On occasion, some interviewees referred to water issues in areas with which they themselves had no direct involvement. For example they referred to issues in other parts of the country, or to debates in which they had not directly participated. Media articles, especially in newspapers, were identified by these interviewees as an important source of information on the issues in which they were interested but not directly involved. In addition, others said that they had written perspective and opinion pieces for local newspapers.

Media coverage appears to be a common source of information, as a way to distribute information, and as a place where opinions can be voiced. Therefore, stakeholders *interact* with each other and the public through the media. However, this interaction is *mediated* because journalists and editors can choose to exert an influence; for example, they may choose:

- *which* content is published and which is not
- *where* a given item is located (for example in which section of a newspaper, where on the page, and next to which other content)
- *whether* it is accompanied by photos or, in some media, video
- *who* is invited to comment, and
- *what* headline is used

These considerations raised a number of questions for us about exactly how stakeholder interaction is played out through media coverage of water issues in Canterbury. We analysed a selection of newspaper coverage in an initial investigation of some of the issues

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<sup>3</sup> Individuals interviewed included representatives from regional and local councils, the agriculture and viticulture industries, and others with conservation and recreation interests in the allocation and use of water resources.

embedded in stakeholder interaction through the media. This article introduces that investigation and makes suggestions for future research in this area.

### ***Exploring media coverage of water issues***

A very large volume of media coverage has been, and continues to be, generated on water issues. A sampling methodology was designed to select a sample of coverage which would be:

1. A manageable size for the small-scale investigation that was planned
2. Expected to provide useful insights into media coverage of water debates

We chose to focus on newspaper coverage, first because of the ready availability of archived newspaper content (compared with less ready availability, and higher costs, associated with sourcing archived television or radio content); and second because this project focuses on water in Canterbury, and relevant issues are covered much more extensively by local papers than by national media outlets (including National Radio, and TVNZ).



We also chose to limit our exploration by focusing on just two 'trigger events' where water made the headlines and led to questions of how to govern water resources. First, the drought in the summer of 2007–08 led to water restrictions, prompted calls for efficient water use, and eventually led to the then Labour Government forming a National Drought Committee. Second, the local elections in 2007 highlighted the politicised nature of

water debates, where, in Canterbury, four out of fourteen regional councillors were elected in connection with concerns about water.

We looked at the coverage of these issues in the region and considered the role of newspaper coverage in local water debates. In particular we sought to answer three questions:

1. How did an issue or an event develop into an ongoing story in the papers?
2. How did different stakeholders participate and interact in the telling of the story?
3. How were the knowledge, influence and legitimacy of different stakeholders represented in media coverage of the story?

We used online databases of media extracts, as well as archived copies of local papers, to identify relevant coverage; our sample yielded a total of 196 extracts from 10 different sources. Table 1 shows the sources from which the extracts used were obtained. The

extracts included articles, editorials, letters and public notices; 122 of the extracts related to the drought and 74 to water issues in the local body elections.

**Table 1: Source of extracts used**

**TABLE 1: SOURCE OF EXTRACTS USED**

Source	Drought	Elections	Total
<i>Hurunui News</i>	9	8	17
<i>Northern Outlook</i>	15	23	38
<i>New Zealand Press Association</i>	6	0	6
<i>The Dominion Post</i>	8	0	8
<i>The Evening Standard</i>	2	0	2
<i>The New Zealand Herald</i>	9	0	9
<i>The Press</i>	47	37	84
<i>Sunday Star-Times</i>	1	0	1
<i>The Timaru Herald</i>	22	6	28
<i>Waikato Times</i>	3	0	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>196</b>

Those sources that are local to Canterbury (*Hurunui News*, *Northern Outlook*, *The Press* and *The Timaru Herald*) contained more extracts relating to the region being studied than did the other sources. No sources based outside Canterbury were found to contain coverage relevant to water issues in Canterbury elections; in contrast some of these sources did refer to drought in Canterbury, often comparing it to conditions in their own local areas. National media sources did mention Canterbury as affected by drought but the national scope of discussions meant that there was little content specifically relevant to local debates. Those sources that publish more frequently (such as *The Press* – which is published daily) usually contained a larger number of relevant extracts than those sources that publish less frequently (such as the *Hurunui News* – which is published fortnightly).

### **Media coverage of drought**

The summer of 2007–08 was a dry one for much of New Zealand but Canterbury, and especially North Canterbury, was reported as being amongst the areas particularly hard hit.<sup>4,5</sup> Despite reports of shortages throughout the summer, ‘drought’ was only officially declared in February; towards the end of the summer. Almost as soon as the drought was declared the weather changed and heavy and consistent rain brought it to a swift end. Despite the official drought being very short lived it attracted considerable media attention. The economic and social impacts of droughts and water shortages usually increase in severity over time: the longer the drought holds, the more serious its implications. As the implications become more serious we can expect media coverage to increase.

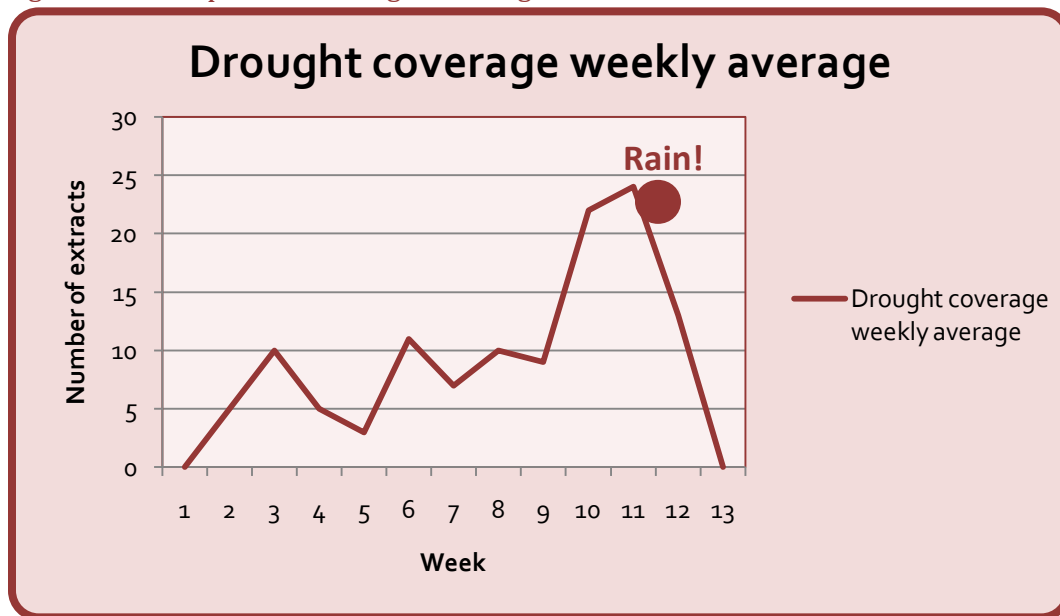
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<sup>4</sup> Prime Minister Helen Clark cited in *The New Zealand Herald*, 1 February 2008, ‘Government calls drought meeting as hot weather “here to stay”’.

<sup>5</sup> National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research cited in *The New Zealand Herald*, 7 February 2008, ‘Three reasons to fear the worst’.

Unsurprisingly then, we saw Canterbury's water shortages developing into a story following a pattern of increasing coverage as the time since significant rainfall lengthened. The chart here shows the profile of increasing coverage: the first stories were seen in 'Week 2' of the coverage (which represents the second week in December 2007) and coverage increased until rain began to fall in Week 11 (the second week in February 2008). As soon as rain fell the coverage dropped off sharply.

Figure 1: Development of drought coverage



Perhaps one of the features of an event that is expected to increase in severity is pre-emptive media coverage. In early December coverage focused on the *possibility* of a dry summer, before water shortages had really begun to be felt; articles took on a warning tone and statements like these were common:

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'Alarm bells are ringing over possible water shortages...'  
(15 December, *Northern Outlook*, Shortage Looming)

'...farmers are being warned to make plans to survive a potentially serious drought'  
(20 December, *The Dominion Post*, Rain brings short-term bliss)

'...residents are being warned of water restrictions and dry tanks...'  
(27 December, *The Press*, Waimakiriri water warning)

Forward-looking aspect to coverage continued throughout the extracts selected, even after the drought had been broken. In the last week of the sample in which there was coverage (Week 12, 16–22 February 2008) the focus of articles was the low levels of water in lakes and the possibilities of electricity supply disruption.



‘Last weekend’s rain...has not staved off the threat of power cuts this winter.’  
(19 February, *The Press*, Rain not enough to end cuts threat)

In this way, emphasis shifted from the immediate effects of a lack of rain, particularly on farmers, to the slightly less immediate concern of winter power shortages. The possibility of power shortages had been known for some time before it became the focus of media attention; this suggests that the immediacy of the issues being discussed is important in the prioritisation of issues for media focus.

Interestingly, in terms of the development of an issue into a media story, the coverage started prior to the drought being declared and continued in such a pre-emptive manner. The ongoing focus of stories is then not the event (for example the drought itself) as it unfolds but concern that the event *may* occur. It appears that *concerns* about possible events are newsworthy in themselves whether or not those events happen. In the case of the sample coverage, drought did eventuate but the suggested electricity shortages did not; the concern that each event *may* happen though, was present at the time of the coverage.

The range of stakeholders who are brought into discussions around water shortages and drought was wide and varied: farmers, gardeners, recreational users, engineers, weather forecasters, politicians and many more provided their comments and views. The broad range of stakeholders engaged in the coverage perhaps illustrates how the emerging water shortages affected a wide range of stakeholders from different occupations and groups. Each person who was directly affected by the drought had their own story to tell, in their own area of expertise, and, as such, was presented as a legitimate commentator.

‘...we are pumping a hell of a lot of water at the moment.’  
(Bruce Yates, Hurunui District Council Engineering Service, 2 February, *Northern Outlook*, Crunch time for water)



‘You have more chance of damaging your boat because of the rocks.’

(Devern Burchett, kayaker, 26 January, *The Press*, Coast to Coast kayakers face bumpy rides)

‘It’s pretty grim for farmers and there are a lot of pretty depressed people.’

(Neil Hislop, farmer, 31 January, *The Press*, Sheep given away as drought bites)

The incorporation of comments from these individuals who were affected in different ways may be representative of an inclusive approach to different perspectives on the drought. However, the perspectives represented commonly conveyed very similar pictures; the

drought was at best an inconvenience, and at worst a serious threat to daily activities. The result of the collation of very similar comments is to present a consistent and unvarying story of the drought. The authors of *Acts of God or Acts of Man*<sup>6</sup> note that the mechanisms behind the impacts of natural disasters are often not questioned, debated or investigated in the same way that other events might be because they are considered to be beyond human influence. Often, they explain, while the natural features of an event may be beyond human influence, the impact that the event has on people's lives is determined by the social, physical, political and economic organisation of communities and societies. The impact of a drought is dependent on the way in which water is used by, and available to, different sectors of a society.



The drought in Canterbury in the summer of 2007–08 was not a natural disaster; the newspaper coverage did, however, frame the drought as a natural event with uniformly negative impacts. Each stakeholder was presented as adding evidence to a consistent story; and, while there were a few minor exceptions to this model (such as some

discussion of the differences in impacts between sheep and dairy farms) there was little debate around the social organisation of the impacts of drought.



Differences in land use and water governance can influence the susceptibility of societies to the impacts of drought. The occurrence of a minor drought (like the one considered here) could be seen as an opportunity to trigger debate around water issues and governance. The presentation of a single consistent story of drought through newspaper coverage may not facilitate such a debate as it suggests that impacts are uniform, natural and beyond human influence. In contrast though, the presentation of a single story may galvanise support for a collective response to drought; indeed the formation of the National Drought Committee may have been influenced by concerted and coordinated pressure from different interests and supported through the consistent media coverage.

This initial investigation of media coverage of the impacts of the 2007-08 drought has highlighted the importance of the way in which an event is perceived – i.e. as natural event which is beyond human influence, or as the trigger for socially determined impacts.

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<sup>6</sup> Wijkman and Timberlake, 1984, *Acts of God or Acts of Man*, Earthscan.

## Media coverage of elections

Local elections were held throughout New Zealand in the spring of 2007. These elections were conducted using postal voting and voting papers had to be returned by 13 October. Representatives were elected for all of the bodies shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2: BODIES TAKING PART IN LOCAL ELECTIONS<sup>7</sup>

Body	Area of responsibility
<b>Regional councils</b>	Responsible for natural resources, environmental planning, and all regulations administered at a regional level
<b>City and district councils</b>	Responsible for local services such as water, rubbish collection, and sewage treatments; also responsible for processing environmental and building consents
<b>Community boards</b>	Responsible for representing smaller areas to the larger councils
<b>District health boards</b>	Responsible for publicly funded health and disability services in an area

Water issues attracting media coverage during the elections related largely to regional and city councils; there was no relevant coverage relating to the election of community boards or district health boards. Looking at which water stories featured in election coverage, how those stories developed, and which individuals commented is the focus of this section of the article.

Water issues were prominent in the regional and city council elections in Canterbury; an editorial in *The Press* (21 September) states:

‘The fashionable topic this [City Council] election is water and irrigation’

While the drought and the elections were both prominent issues in newspapers in Canterbury, there are a number of contrasts between the coverage of these different events. First, where the story development around the drought was largely pre-emptive, the coverage of the elections featured more retrospective content; a number of the extracts referred to historical issues such as:

‘Woods, the 2021<sup>8</sup> mayoral candidate, said this week that she would have voted against a recent council motion to approve a third party loan to cover a [Central Plains Water] project shortfall and fund the consent process’

(1 August, *The Press*, Moore warns against CPW ‘kangaroo court’)

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<sup>7</sup> More information on Local Elections in New Zealand can be found at: <http://www.elections.org.nz/>

<sup>8</sup> 2021, or ‘Christchurch 2021’, is an incorporated society to which political candidates and incumbents may choose to be affiliated, possibly alongside a traditional political party affiliation. The society has a vision statement towards which affiliated individuals work.



‘At the ‘meet the candidates’ meeting prior to the 2004 local body elections...I asked the candidates...which way they would vote on fluoridation’

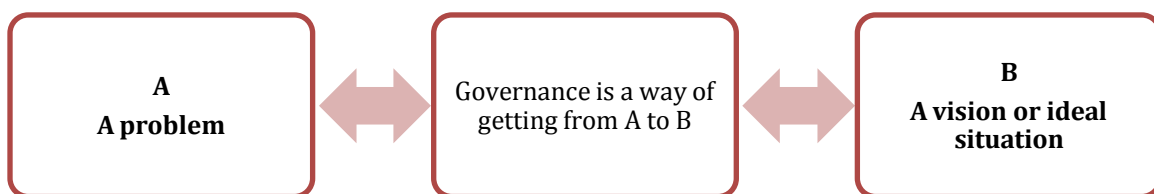
(4 August, *The Timaru Herald*, Letters, Imelda Hitchcock)

‘...The claim by Save Our Water (Aug 15) that regional councillors had failed to act on a recent, crucial decision to protect Christchurch’s aquifers failed to distinguish between the six minority Christchurch 2021 councillors who voted to protect our water from contamination and the Independent Citizens councillors, Alec Neill and Nicky Wagner, who voted with the rural councillors to defeat the measure 8–6 in 2006.’

(20 August, *The Press*, Letters, Poorly Served, Keith Thomson and Evan Harris)

While historical issues were sometimes discussed in some detail, the coverage contained little discussion of future policies around water. We found that media articles focussed on past water debates but not discussions of how things could be better in future. There was an absence of a discussion of a goal or vision, but some discussions of how to address the identified problem for example through the use of new decision-making processes or drawing upon different types of information.

**FIGURE 2: NATURAL RESOURCE GOVERNANCE<sup>9</sup>**



Mayors and councillors have been actively involved in water governance through resource consent hearings and the development of the Canterbury Water Management Strategy,<sup>10</sup> led by the Canterbury Mayoral Forum. So we expected coverage of regional elections to include all three of these aspects of water governance. For example, articles could discuss current problems, ideas around what would be better, and suggestions for what could be done to achieve that better situation.

Many of the views reported were those of well-known individuals or representatives of organisations. These people generally hold views on issues of water allocation that would be well-known to many of the readers. While the articles did not necessarily report on these

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<sup>9</sup> Adapted from: Gouldson and Bebbington, 2007, Corporations and the governance of environmental risk, *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, volume 25, pages 4–20.

<sup>10</sup> For further information on the Canterbury Water Management Strategy see [www.canterburywater.org.nz](http://www.canterburywater.org.nz)

views, they may have implicitly affected the meanings that readers ascribed to the explicit discussion. For example, if a known environmentalist said that the current system was ‘not working’, that might have been viewed differently to the same comment being made by a representative of a farmers’ association. This means that while there was little explicit discussion of visions and regimes, we expect that many readers would overlay their own understandings of these onto their readings of the coverage. It would be important to consider this dynamic in any work looking at the impact that media coverage has on wider debates around water allocation.

We noted in the coverage of drought that a wide range of individuals was brought in to comment on the development and impacts of the drought. In contrast, the election coverage drew on a very narrow range of individuals to comment, the majority of whom were either incumbents in local government or candidates for one of the positions. There were more ‘letters to the editor’ included in the election coverage than in the drought coverage, however, these were written by a relatively small group of individuals. Over half of the letters were written by incumbents or candidates for local government, and of the remaining nine letters, several were written by known members of large, politically active interest groups.

The larger number of letters but narrower range of individuals commenting on elections, rather than drought, could be indicative of differences in both

- which individuals decide to write to newspapers, and
- which comments the editor selects for publication.

Selection of comments for publication may involve consideration of both the issues being addressed in the letter and of the identity and credentials of the author. The larger volume but narrower range of comments in election coverage perhaps suggests that legitimacy of comment (which can both prompt the author to write and the editor to publish) is accorded most easily to those who have direct political experience. It seems that where almost anyone can be (and may be willing to be) an expert on issues around the drought (due perhaps to its direct impact on them), very few individuals are considered experts, or are willing commentators, on election issues relating to water.

From the point of view of stakeholder engagement it is interesting to note that, at least in this media snapshot, engagement seemed to be wide and open around the drought, an issue that was not contested and over which stakeholders may be perceived to have little control. Comment on the governance regime under which water will be managed, and which stakeholders have power to influence through the elections, was much more limited. Further work on how stakeholder engagement with different aspects of media debates is influenced by the same stakeholders’ abilities to control the situations being debated would be useful.

### **Avenues for future research**

This work has identified a number of questions for further work, including

- How have stakeholder groups used the media to engage in debates about water management and allocation?
- How does the media influence the discussion about the distribution and severity of the impacts of climatic events such as drought?
- How does the media, and those writing in the opinion pages, articulate visions about water should or should not be managed or allocated?

Other general questions that would form useful extensions to this work include:

- How does the drought and election coverage discussed in this article compare with coverage in other regions of New Zealand?
- How does coverage of water issues in regional elections compare with that in national elections – does water remain a regional rather than national issue?

### **Summary**

This article has discussed a small selection of issues identified during an initial investigation of media coverage of water debates. It has focused on coverage during the drought of summer 2007–08 and during the 2007 local elections. While the scope of this work was limited, it showed that different issues around water are framed quite differently in media coverage.

Coverage of the drought was pre-emptive, included a wide range of stakeholders, all of whom can be considered experts in their own area of comment, and took a largely non-contested, incremental, ‘natural event’ style approach to the range of perspectives available on the drought. In contrast, election coverage was significantly more retrospective, included a much narrower range of commentators, and implied that a legitimacy of comment came from direct political experience.

To date, this work has provided interesting background and discussion topics for ongoing work with stakeholders in debates around water issues in Canterbury. It could usefully be extended through a detailed consideration of literature on media roles in natural resource governance debates. An extension of the work to consider a wider range of coverage, both in terms of different media (such as radio, television, and online content) and of more events and the ways in which they trigger media coverage, would also expand the usefulness of the work. In addition, an investigation of how media coverage is perceived by different stakeholders to influence their attitudes on water issues could be enlightening.