The People’s Voice? The *One News* Election Roadtrip 08

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Abstract

There has been considerable debate over the growing use of ordinary citizens as news sources: is it a praiseworthy broadening of people’s access or a tabloid technique that merely lends colour to stories (for instance, Blumler, 2001)? In particular, the use of vox pops in political stories has been blamed for creating a passive public by restricting public voices to apolitical comment, and remarks conveying apathy, disengagement and cynicism (Brookes, Lewis & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004; Lewis, Wahl-Jorgensen & Inthorn, 2004).

In New Zealand’s 2008 prime time news election coverage, both free-to-air channels gave considerable space each night to a variety of brief citizen interviews. However, state-owned TVNZ went one further with its innovative Election Roadtrip 08 – 11 items put together by current affairs reporter Hadyn Jones. Starting from Bluff on 27 October and moving through to Rawene in Northland, he asked locals about the election in a light-hearted yet insightful journey that brought seldom seen places and faces to the news.

Jones says they were looking for something beyond vox pops where ‘you can get anything you want’. He hoped to go to places not normally visited by news teams and provide a context for people’s responses, helping show why they said what they did.

This paper examines the Roadtrip items in the light of other prime time news election coverage on TVNZ and TV3, and discusses some implications of the small town, non-elite perspectives that emerged.

Keywords

political communication, television, news, elections, citizens, journalism
Introduction: Politics and TV News

Television has long been recognised as the main source of political information for most voters (Kuhn, 1985) and has maintained its importance despite the ever-expanding communication possibilities of the internet (Bennett, 2009; Meijer, 2001). While newspaper and television audiences have shrunk and “control of these media over the flow of political news into the political system has diminished…they still dominate the political scene, and stakeholders continue to struggle for inclusion” (Graber, McQuail & Norris, 2008, p.2). In fact, Patterson (2008) argues that journalists have become increasingly influential political actors as political parties’ grassroot support has faded.

However, as Patterson also points out, politics is not the central concern for journalists: “The first fact of journalistic life is that reporters must have a story to tell” (p. 23). Moreover, pressures to make that story exciting and exploit every nuance of television’s emotional power have rarely been greater (Bennett, 2009). Technological changes, producing media abundance and intermeshing modes of delivery, underpinned the push for deregulation and resulting volatile competition since the 1980s (Sassoon, 1985). Ongoing channel fragmentation, the explosive growth of the internet, shrinking audiences and debts incurred by mergers among media and technology companies have simultaneously reduced newsroom resources and increased demands for bigger news audiences.

There has been widespread commentary on the consequences of commercialising the news across the Western world’s broadcasting system. Bennett (2009) is among many describing the “blurring of news and entertainment content, along with the emergence of journalists as more active storytellers and experts” (p. 21). This ‘infotainment’ approach is described by Franklin (1997) as ‘newszak’ and, in 2003, as ‘McJournalism’, a highly standardised, packaged McDonalds-style of journalism. ‘Soft news’ is the term favoured by Bennett (2009) and Patterson (2000b) among others, while Weishenberg (in Plasser 2005) talks about the ‘hybridization of news’.

This trend in news style has caused most concern in relation to political coverage because as Graber et al. (2008, p. 1) say:

Reporting political news is a political process, regardless of the intentions of journalists and other news disseminators. What they choose to cover, what they ignore, and how they frame political stories influence the perceptions of elite and mass audiences.
Much research has been done in the United States, but findings there have been reflected across the globe. Picard (2008) is one of many noting that important but less provocative issues are neglected in the ratings-driven approach that “emphasizes the sensational: scandals, conflicts, mud-slinging, allegations and investigations that produce little results” (p. 222). Capella and Jamieson (1997) reported that news concentrates on the strategic game of politics, neglecting issues in favour of the horserace aspect of elections. Political coverage has become increasingly personalised and concerned with politicians’ private lives (Bennett, 2009; Sabato, 2007), and the reduction in policy-centred coverage has been accompanied by shrinking soundbites (Hallin, 1992, Farnsworth & Lichter, 2003). Patterson’s (2000a) study of political coverage showed that for every minute that candidates spoke, journalists spoke for six minutes. Journalists are becoming more active and critical (Patterson, 2008), indulging in mindless ‘attack journalism’ (Sabato, 2007) or “sensationalized watchdogism” (Louw, 2005, p.60).

At the same time, because of the reciprocal impact of mass media on the subjects of media coverage (Kepplinger, 2007), politics has become ‘mediatized’ and ‘packaged’ (Street, 1996). As Corner and Pels (2003, p. 2) say: “politics has become more of a ‘culture industry’, increasingly resembling a talent show or popularity contest”. Moreover, broadcasters’ need for good video and punchy soundbites makes them vulnerable to “snares set by the campaign consultants – airing verbatim the manufactured message and photoclip of the day” (Sabato, 2007, p. 83).

One way journalists, in their turn, try to regain control of the agenda from media managers is by what Mark Levy (1981) termed ‘disdaining the news’. The resulting critical, journalistic mocking tone is a natural partner of the strategy story frame and is allowed free reign in extended pieces to camera favoured by current news formats. The practice has been noted in New Zealand. Atkinson (2006) decried New Zealand’s 2002 election coverage for its prevalent cynicism and mockery. This posture is unjustified, Atkinson contends, because of the relative lack of political spin resulting from the exceptional access journalists have to New Zealand politicians.

This systemic vicious cyclic is described by Altheide and Snow (1991) as a part of “media logic”, where “society is ordered largely through the sense-making strategies developed in the mass media” (p. 241). Their conclusion is that journalism is being replaced by “information mechanics” and media culture cannot be altered (p. 251). However, others such as Keane (1991) and Picard (2008) argue that, while current market-driven media economics
make it hard for media to fulfil public service obligations, a true diversity of media organisations, combined with well-funded but independent public service broadcasting, would do much to improve the quality and content of media.

**Infotainment News and Voices in the News**

While a significant number of scholars condemn the infotainment or tabloid new style for impoverishing political debate and short-changing citizens, others argue that practices such as personalising politics and placing private issues in the public arena, can make political news more relevant and could be seen as a democratising force (Harrington, 2008). Harrington, reviewing both sides of the scholarly debate, uses Australian examples to argue for a wider view of what is considered news and a new paradigm that distinguishes between what is popular and what is merely populist and which examines journalism in terms of its purpose.

While a body of research shows that official and elite sources dominate (Atkinson, 1994; Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1991; Gans, 1979; Grabe, Zhou & Barnett, 1999), there is some evidence that commercialised approaches have broadened the variety of voices in the news (Atwater & Green, 1988; Comrie, 1999; Grabe et al., 1999) and there is considerable discussion about the growing place of ordinary citizens on television news. Comrie’s (1999) analysis of sources on TVNZ news from 1985-1990 concluded that the range of source voices had increased as the news had shifted to infotainment, but also noted that a high percentage of sources that could be claimed as non-routine or from enterprise journalism were really simple, potentially-exploitative vox pops.

Winston (2002), looking for evidence of increasing tabloidization techniques on British television news since 1975, notes that the number of sources in each story has increased. This, along with the generally noted, long-term reduction in the length of soundbites (for example Atkinson, 1994; Hallin, 1992), gives a generally faster pace to the news. As part of this approach, playing swift, vox pop-style responses from a variety of citizens can add colour or inject needed spice to issue coverage by introducing elements of conflict. Blumler (2001, p. 205), recognising the populist roots of the practice, says whether such populist participation is “empowering or merely symbolic … will depend on the aims of its producers and on how it is received by audiences”. Winston says it is difficult to reach conclusions about the range of voices heard on the news, but added that when citizens speak “it is no longer the case that ‘lower class = lower case’ as we noted in 1975” (p. 17). He said that speakers were now more likely to be fully identified – except in the case of true vox-pops on the BBC – and that commercial news provider ITN had eschewed vox pops in its election coverage.
Overseas studies of vox pops in political stories (such as Brookes, Lewis and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004; Lewis, Wahl-Jorgensen & Inthorn, 2004) condemn news programmes for creating a passive public by restricting public voices to apolitical comment, and remarks conveying apathy, disengagement and cynicism.

**New Zealand Television News & 2008 election Coverage**

These trends in Western news systems have been clearly noted in New Zealand and have been linked to the development of a highly competitive media market in this small country, which grew out of political and regulatory changes in the late 1980s. New Zealand has arguably the most deregulated media market in the world (Cocker, 1992) where there are no restrictions on overseas ownership and little limitation on cross-media ownership. Throughout the 1990s there was minimalist public service television, with licence fee money allocated on a contestable basis to state-owned TVNZ, overseas-owned TV3 and independent companies (Norris, Pauling, Zanker & Lealand, 2003). TVNZ was virtually indistinguishable from its overseas-owned competitor TV3.

However, a decade of mounting concern, particularly from academics and politicians, led to the introduction in 2003 of a hotly-contested TVNZ Charter by the Labour-led government, along with some limited funding for public service ‘charter initiatives’ (Comrie & Fountaine, 2005). Nevertheless, with the licence fee now abolished and a government reluctant to spend on public service broadcasting, there was little relief for its proponents. TVNZ remained over 90% dependent on advertising revenue and the government continued to take a dividend which equalled any money provided for charter programming (Thompson, 2005). Further, any drop in TVNZ news ratings meant questions in Parliament about the charter and loss of the asset potential of the Crown Owned Company.

The result has been that, despite the charter, TVNZ’s One News is ratings-driven. It is firmly locked into competition with 3 News, whose MediaWorks Company also controls about half New Zealand’s commercial radio stations and is in turn owned by Australian private equity company Ironbridge. The stakes are high because Kiwis remain loyal primetime news followers, with about 70 percent of the viewing audience generally watching the 6 pm news. Overall, TVNZ pulls in the bigger audience, but this is among older viewers, and TV3 has gained ground especially among the desirable younger urban demographic. The upshot of a decade of rivalry is look-alike formats and often near-identical coverage on both channels.
Against this background it is encouraging to note that both of New Zealand’s main free-to-air television channels put significant resources into covering the 2008 election, featuring political stories and analysis prominently in their prime time news programmes.

TVNZ walks a particular tightrope. As a state-owned entity it is always vulnerable to criticism about political timidity or bias. Politicians of all shades keep a close eye on coverage, wanting both extended ‘coverage of record’ and high ratings. Moreover, TVNZ went into the 2008 election knowing that the front-running National Party intended to abolish its Charter and reduce its funding.

TVNZ’s planning for the election went back three years and the extent of its coverage reflects the greater resources it puts into news. Across the campaign, from October 8 to election eve November 7, TVNZ ran 106 stories - a total of three and a half hours of coverage. Expressed in averages, that is 3.4 stories a night, each just under 2 minutes long. TV3 ran considerably fewer stories – 88 stories at three and a quarter hours total coverage, an average of 2.8 stories a night. 3 News stories were on average slightly longer than those on One News.1 On both channels during the campaign, twice as many political stories as crime stories made the top headlines; a contrast to other times when crime and human interest items vie with politics to the top of bulletin position (Comrie & Fountaine, 2005/6).

The channels presented a nightly mirror image in the content and style of their political coverage, which featured campaign trail photo-ops and other updates on policy announcements along with political editors analysing winners and strategies. The exception to this was the TVNZ Election Roadtrip series. This began in mid campaign, items were not headlined and appeared in the second half of the bulletin. Despite its low visibility, the Roadtrip made a significant difference in TVNZ’s news sourcing patterns.

Voices in the Election Coverage

Not surprisingly an analysis of news sources in the 2008 campaign coverage demonstrated the overwhelming dominance of the political leaders of the two major parties – Helen Clark, Labour leader and incumbent prime minister, and John Key of the National Party, with his

1 These and the following figures are taken from a content analysis of prime time news campaign coverage in press: Comrie, M. (2009. The election campaign on television news, in C. Rudd & J. Hayward (Eds.), Informing voters? Politics, media and the New Zealand election 2008 (pp. 33-50). Dunedin: Pearson.
long term lead in both leadership and party polls. Other party leaders were well behind. Perhaps surprisingly for an election, both channels gave little time to various lobby groups or to experts, instead allowing much more airtime to ordinary citizens than either of these sources. However, there was a big difference between the two channels, largely attributable to the Roadtrip items. On TVNZ, 96 citizens were interviewed during the campaign; they spoke on air for a total of 648 seconds (an average of 6.8 seconds). Meanwhile on TV3, the total was 42 citizens, totalling 235 seconds of on-air speaking time (an average of 5.6 seconds each).

As noted above, British researchers Lewis et al (2004) claim the typical use of vox-pops constructs a passive public. However, this was not the case in the New Zealand campaign coverage. Citizens’ sound bites tended to be almost as long as those of political leaders and other elites – although it should be said the channels generally only used each citizen once in a story, while they tended to return to leaders and experts in subsequent bites. On the campaign trail, citizens were approached, for instance, following the speech about a major policy initiative at a factory, or were sought out in locations particularly affected by various issues. The result was that comments were frequently thoughtful, sometimes unexpected and were given real space in the news programme. At times, the channels could be accused of using citizen’s comments to support a prearranged angle for their stories. However, comments from ordinary people were afforded respect that was lacking in the treatment of political leaders, who were frequently the target of what Levy (1981) identified as disdain and Atkinson (2006) has catalogued as characteristic of New Zealand television journalists’ reporting of politics.

While the place of citizens in the general run of campaign stories was not negligible, the role they performed in the Election Roadtrip 08 on TVNZ was central. Ordinary people were the core of these stories, rather than providing illustrative evidence.

**The Election Roadtrip 08**

The Roadtrip 08 series opened with little fanfare halfway through the official campaign on October 27, with presenters simply announcing: “We’ve given reporter Hadyn Jones a campervan, a road map and two weeks to get from the bottom of New Zealand to the top. Along the way he’ll find out how you really feel about the upcoming election.”

The eleven items were an interesting mixture of travelogue, entertainment mini documentary featuring ‘real Kiwis’, and understated political and social commentary. The bespectacled,
slightly puckish Jones is a current affairs reporter and his casually dressed appearance and matey persona was in marked contrast to the formally dressed political correspondents leading the bulletins most nights of the campaign.

The roadtrip was Jones’ own idea and he persuaded TVNZ management it was a good one: “Originally I’d thought of doing a full six week tour – but there were financial issues and in the end I was very glad … I thought it worked well to just do the two weeks” (personal communication, February 3, 2009). Primarily, Jones says, he wanted to speak to ‘real people’ and to get to grassroots New Zealand. “It exists out there. TV stations’ coverage tends to be the same – event based and concentrating on the leaders. I wanted to get more.”

The opening shots of the first item featured Jones backed by the sea and beside New Zealand’s iconic southern-most signpost: “We’ve got some rules: no politicians, no candidates, none of that electoral strategists stuff – just you and me having a yarn about the election.” Jones then crossed the rocks to speak to a fisherman. Alongside the feel-good Kiwiana trappings of the item is the underpinning political premise in the introduction – Bluff has also been chosen because in the last election residents split their vote, electing National candidate Eric Roy, but giving their party vote to Labour.

One fisherman, come to Bluff for a job, says, “I’ve always grown up believing that National’s for big business and rich people and Labour’s down to earth”, but he worries about politicians squabbling rather than solving the country’s problems; a nine-year old collecting sea snails tells Jones that Winston Peters (NZ First leader) is “the best”; while an older man building a waka (traditional canoe) talks about how to reach troubled youth and how Labour has done well with Treaty claims: “That’s how we become one nation”. As Jones saunters through the market and buys a souvenir beanie, he finishes: “Bluff, you see, is a one-party town and it’s no coincidence that the ten dollar hat at the market just happens to be red.”

The touch is light, with the brief description of the electorate coming before the short Roadtrip cartoon credit opening. Jones is part of the story, aiming to represent TVNZ news, not as expert journalist, but as a friendly face seeking out ‘your’ views. It is a difficult task to prevent the items from sinking into cliche or coming across as patronising. Jones’ on-screen, friendly, slightly nerdy persona and his enthusiasm for the places and people he meets helped prevent this.
The strength of the items lies in the fact that people are talking as they work or play and this feeling of interviewees entwined with their background was what Jones was seeking: “We wanted to build in the context, to show and help us understand why they said what they did.”

So, the next night Jones was in Otago at Oturehua “which has a population of about 30 and that’s on a good day”. He stands – a skinny figure – in the middle of a deserted street taking in the silence. Then he waits outside the general store, finally meeting Nick Terry “who reckons he doesn’t know much about politics but he knows some blokes that do”. Terry takes Jones to meet two other friends building an elaborate mai mai. These three quintessentially Kiwi young ‘men of the land’ are happy, Jones tells us, because someone finally is asking them about the election: “If this is a poll that we’re on now, this is the first time that I’ve ever been polled, so I don’t know who they ask.” Like the bulk of the electorate these are firm National voters: “As long as Helen doesn’t go and do what she did last time, making a whole lot of promises just before the election to get the students votes and all that sort of stuff, then hopefully National will be alright.” Bottle of beer in hand, one says that politicians have got distracted from the big picture by side issues like the ‘anti-smacking’ Bill and another says he wants “Something that makes it easier for us farmers … if they can realise that we need a bit more for product prices.”

The casual “let’s just stroll into town and see what we can find” approach seen in the items was no pose. “We generally just showed up,” Jones said. For instance, they headed straight for the café in North Auckland’s vineyard tourist centre of Matakana. On the trip the only real arrangements made ahead of time were to visit a sawmill, where health and safety protocol needed to be observed, and to film at a school, where a suitable class of young voters needed to be found and issues of consent dealt with.

Notably, the first two episodes played on a number of myths of New Zealand nationhood – a beautiful rural country of self-reliant people, at home in the outdoors, exhibiting mateship. They were also dominated by archetypal ‘southern men’ – a concept used to some commercial advantage in the advertising of a beer.

The first females had their say the following night when Jones visited Methven’s Mt Hutt high school in the Rangitata electorate to talk to first time voters in the Year 13 accountancy class. While the two males in the class were following family tradition and voting National, the ‘ladies’, as Jones called them, were undecided, saying they knew more about the American election than the New Zealand one. These young women realised people were “getting sick of Labour” but there was “a lot of stuff going round about National”. The
teacher, a new citizen from Britain, also said she did not “really understand it”. As Jones travelled north, the Roadtrip gender balance improved and his on air chauvinism dwindled.

Television plays an important part in making and reinforcing the myths of nationhood, which in New Zealand, as in Australia, centre around a rural saga often peopled by masculine ‘heroes. Jones was, of course, conscious of Kiwi stereotypes. At times, he says, the location and the people they met “played out the cliché of the place” but as the trip continued he was often surprised. For instance, by night four Jones was at a sawmill in Ruatapu on the West Coast, a safe labour stronghold for 18 years. He chose the mill because Labour’s policy of not cutting native timber had seen mills close and jobs lost. Jones was surprised that, despite some discussion about the need for a decent hospital service, the workers remained staunch Labour supporters. He told this story: “We heard about one polling booth in 2005, where a mill had been closed and they had all decided to vote National … However, the results showed that when it came to it at the last minute in the privacy of the voting booth … National got only one vote” (pers. comm. 2009). The West Coast, in fact, shifted to a National MP in the 2008 election.

In Nelson (where the electorate again split its vote, supporting National candidate Nick Smith but giving the party vote to Labour) Jones visited the country’s largest holiday motor camp speaking to permanent residents with a variety of loyalties. They gave him views on the Winston Peters’ party funding scandal: “all that rubbish is overshadowing what they actually stand for,” made clear their opposition to Labour’s ‘muckraking’ search into Key’s earlier career, and even, in one case, declared that the only party was that of God’s.

Jones, who intended to concentrate on smaller centres, had to spend time in Wellington after his van was broken into. Here, brief vox pop style interviews in the streets of the inner suburb of Thorndon revealed support for Greens in the capital, along with distrust of National contender John Key’s financial background, but also a potential swing to National. Next he visited a hair salon in Feilding in the National stronghold of Rangitikei, where there was serious talk about political parties from women business owners, discussion of manifesto promises from a female public servant, and comment about church lobbying on family issues by yet another customer.

In Atiamuri, a small former Ministry of Works town, another all-female group of interviewees were staunchly Labour and made thoughtful comments about the nature of MMP and national debt. Three days out from the election, Jones called in at the Auckland electorate of Mt Roskill where half the voters are new New Zealanders. He talked to two Chinese first-time
voters, one of whom spoke movingly of what would be his first ever voting experience. With just two days to go, Jones was at that café in Matakana, once a rural centre but now home for lifestylers and a magnet for Auckland weekenders. He got a surprising variety of perspectives, including the first person on the series to discuss the needs of Māori and who planned to switch from Labour to the Māori party. There were also a number left leaning voters, including a potential green voter, all wanting change for a variety of reasons.

The final programme came from Rawene in the far north. While Northland is a staunch National electorate, it is also the poorest in New Zealand. Jones interviewed people on board the ferry going across to Hokianga. In this largely Māori area, voters showed a concern for health and welfare, and therefore favoured Labour.

**Conclusion**

If the series had set out to tap the ‘mood of the country’ it had not succeeded. Jones closed the last item admitting that he “still no idea who will win”. Of course, even the most basic statistician knows that talking to 40 people across the country could not provide any answers. What the series did do, more clearly than any political science lecture, was to show how people’s voting preferences are rooted in the broad range of their experiences and backgrounds. It also showed these preferences are no longer to be taken as immoveable, and that MMP gave people a feeling they had options in voting.

The series was also notable in that these items, unlike most other political news stories during the campaign, did not direct the viewer to a clear interpretation. The Roadtrip set up the premise – a broad description of the voting history of the electorate, followed by some indication (often light-hearted) of the demographics or characteristics of the selected location. From then on, the item was a lucky dip of perspectives summed up in only the broadest way by Jones.

The Roadtrip items certainly were not hard news, exhibiting none of the usual news values. Neither were they the typical ‘soft news’ of politics decried by Bennett (2009) and others. Arguably were not ‘news’ at all, although Harrington (2008) would argue that clinging to narrow definitions can eliminate significant journalistic achievements from consideration. What the 11 stories did provide was a space on what remains one of the nation’s top ten programmes for ordinary people to air their views.
There is no doubt the series was entertaining. Jones says that TVNZ was pleased with the response and with the number of hits on his accompanying blog. For TVNZ another major plus was that the Roadtrip provided a point of difference from competitor 3 News. Jones managed a light touch, generally devoid of the cutesy presumably unconscious patronising tone correspondents can assume when reporting on ‘soft’ items outside the main centres.

Harrington (2008) argues that commercial pressures in news are real but this does not mean that popular items will either be, as some claim, ‘democratising’ or as others contest merely mindless entertainment. To assess the Roadtrip, we might pay heed to Harrington’s instruction, “We should not simply pass something off merely because it is popular – or indeed emotional, feminine, personal, sensational, and so on… or because it does not conform to the key textual features of journalism” (p.229). If we ask, instead, as he suggests, what information is being used and for what purpose, this will allow us to claim the Roadtrip as a noteworthy piece of journalism.

Jones’ Roadtrip made an additional contribution. The provinces and small towns have become almost invisible on New Zealand television since the demise of regional news in 1988 (Fountaine, Comrie & Cheyne, 2005) Even the major South Island cities of Christchurch and Dunedin are rarely seen on the network news, while smaller centres usually appear only at the top of the bulletin in stories of crime and tragedy, or at the bottom as the origin of the occasional human interest item. Fountaine et al argue that in a country which continues to depend on primary industry “the quality of journalism can only be enhanced by the networks developing an understanding of life outside Auckland” (p. 108).

During the election campaign, political reporters from TV3 and TVNZ left the Beehive in Wellington and the studios in Auckland to criss-cross the country visiting key electorates along with political leaders. However, it was the left to the Roadtrip to more truly fulfil an objective of TVNZ’s Charter, “to reflect the regions to the nation as a whole”. Perhaps more unexpectedly, these ‘soft’ two to three minute features on primetime news did bring up issues of importance, reflecting some of the complex of ways people engage with politics as we shared a glimpse of their lives. In the words of the Charter, the eleven unpretentious items allowed TVNZ to “provide shared experiences that contribute to a sense of citizenship and national identity”.

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