

Re-presenting climate change in the alternative and mainstream press of New Zealand

Linda Jean Kenix, Ph.D.
Senior Lecturer
Media and Communication
University of Canterbury

New Zealand

- 2006 World Economic Forum:
 - NZ ranked first in world in Environmental Performance Index (EPI) by Yale & Columbia



also New Zealand...

- Moved to 7th in 2008 on EPI index
- Moved from 12th (2000) to 11th (2005) in per capita greenhouse gas emissions



also New Zealand...

- Ministry of Public Affairs:
 - 90% wetlands drained/degraded
 - Pest infestation: 70 million possums eat 21,000 tonnes of vegetation every day
 - Soil erosion of 400 million tonnes/year from rivers to oceans
 - Agricultural stock generates faecal waste equal to a population of 150 million
 - 2001: 3 mammal species; 44 types of birds; 165 plant species endangered

From science to morality?

- Professor Tim O’Riordan
 - British Sustainability Commissioner
 - Public speech:
 - “Not just communicating: How to share hard policy choices about climate change with the public”
 - Climate change as an opportunity not a sacrifice
- Professor Nisbet & Chris Mooney
 - Widely read *Science* article
 - arguing for less science & more morality

Mainstream coverage

- Environmental coverage has been found to be:
 - sensationalistic and confusing
(Cox & Vadon, 2006)
 - focusing on extreme predictions rather than a conceptual understandings
 - focusing on supposed scientific debates
(Helvarg, 1994; Wilson, 2000)
 - technical (Nisbet & Mooney, 2007) while avoiding any discussion of values or political/economic choices
(Wilkins, 1993)
 - inaccurate
(Reed, 2002)

Role of Alternative Media

- Transform existing social roles and routines by critiquing and challenging power structures
(Atkinson, 2006)
- Establish new ways of organizing media and social activity
(Albert, 2006)
- View their own role as “one of educating and mobilizing the ‘masses’ in the service of the cause or movement”
(Hamilton, 2000, p. 359)
- Forged alliances with social movements & social change
(Atton, 2002)
- Encourage cultural disruption
(Makagon, 2000)

Study Across NZ Media

- Comparison of *New Zealand Herald* & *Scoop*
 - *New Zealand Herald*
 - Average readership of 530,000/day
 - Owned by APN
 - *Scoop*
 - give voice to “perspectives not being addressed through traditional media”
 - “unique, independent and necessary”
 - readers with “discerning nature & social conscience”
 - 450,000 unique readers/month
 - aggregation of unedited material from various sources

Framing Analysis

- Frames help shape how the public interprets issues and events (Sotirovic, 2000)
- “Persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation” (Gitlin, 1980)
- “Promote a specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman, 1993)

Results

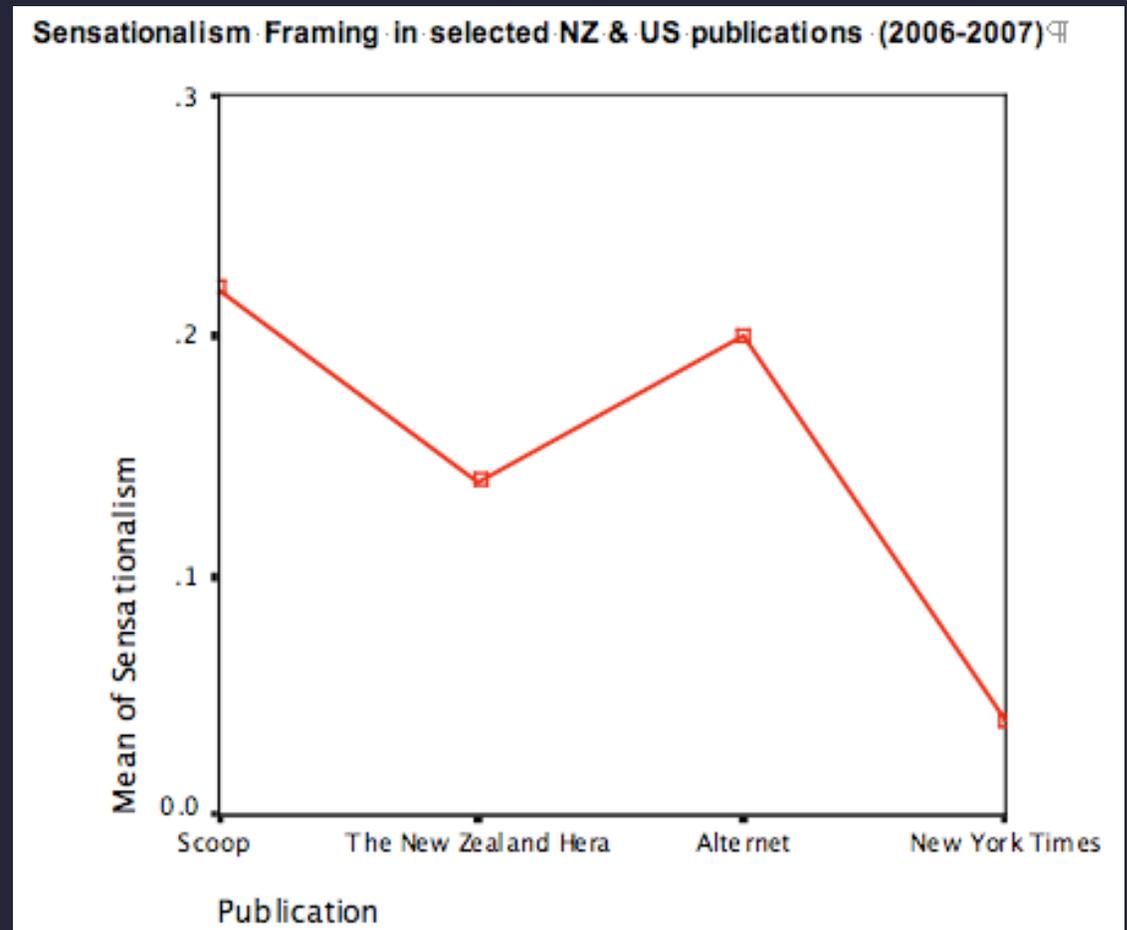
- *Scoop* did not emphasize morality more than *The New Zealand Herald*
 - “In the old days they did not need to be reminded, they lived it...you cared for the land and in return the land cared for you...showing respect today will pay generous dividends for tomorrow.”
- *The New Zealand Herald* did rely on business groups more than *Scoop*
- *Scoop* relied on official sources as much as *The New Zealand Herald*

Results

- *The New Zealand Herald* did not emphasize sensationalism, scientific debate, consequences or local politics more than *Scoop*
 - “*Tuvalu is drowning*”
 - “*Think tanks linking up with like-minded, contrarian researchers*”
 - “*Projections of worst-case scenarios*”

Results

- Larger international study found *Scoop* relied on sensationalism the most out of those sampled

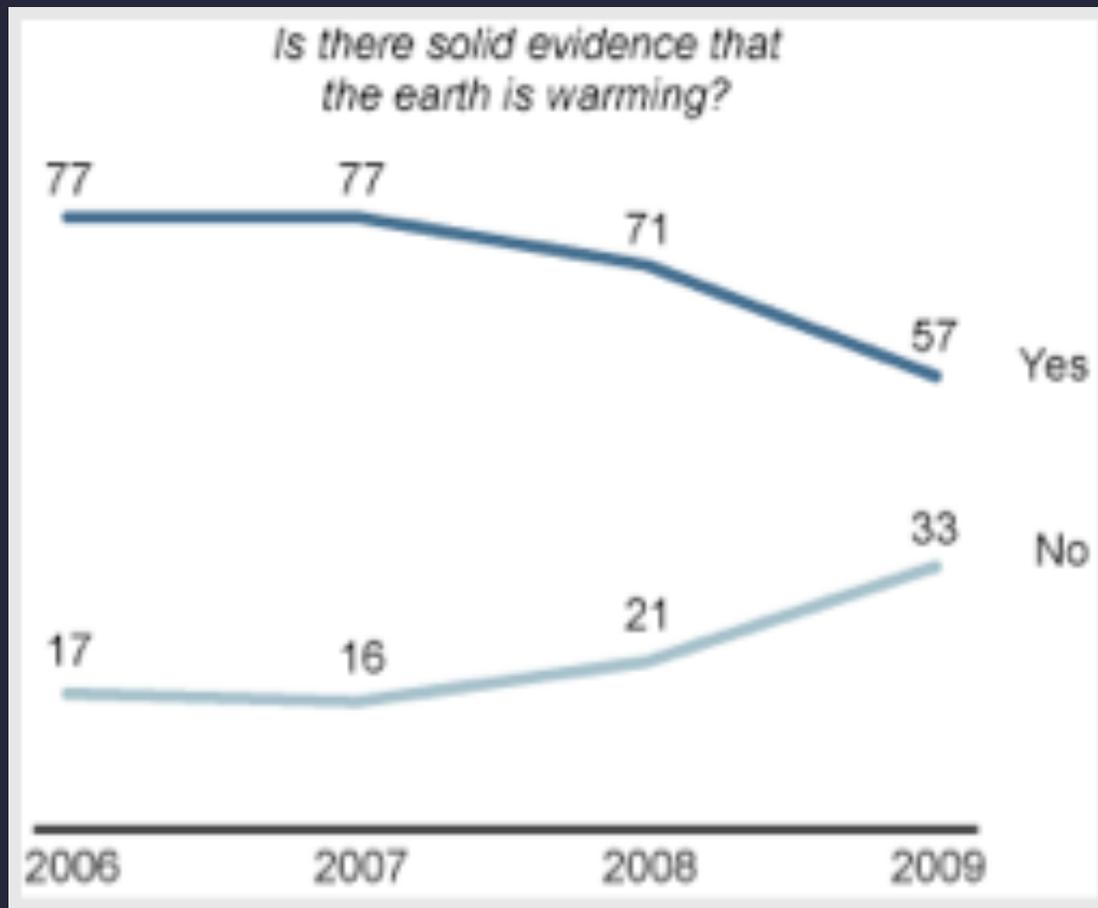


Results

- Very little difference between alternative and mainstream media in this study
 - Pervasive journalistic norms?
 - Ownership not important in relation to global issues?

Potential consequences

- More people believe the environment is not a problem
- Pew Research Centre:



Changing Opinions about Global Warming

	April 2008	Oct 2009	Change
<i>Is there solid evidence the earth is warming?</i>	%	%	
Yes	71	57	-14
Because of human activity	47	36	-11
Because of natural patterns	18	16	-2
Don't know (Vol.)	6	6	0
No	21	33	+12
Mixed/Don't know (Vol.)	8	10	+2
	100	100	
<i>How serious a problem?</i>			
Very serious	44	35	-9
Somewhat serious	29	30	+1
Not too serious	13	15	+2
Not a problem	11	17	+6
Don't know (Vol.)	3	3	0
	100	100	

Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

Environmentalism in Other Alternative Media

- Blogs
 - One of the top 20 blogs in New Zealand is focused on the environment (frogblog @ 10th)
- Radio
 - Two of 82 Plains FM programmes in Christchurch: Earthwise & Eco Living
- International Films
 - Documentaries: Earth (3rd grossing), An Inconvenient Truth (5th), Food Inc (21st),

Where to from here?

- Alternative media need to:
 - speak about values and morals
 - move away from sensationalism
 - reduce reliance on mainstream official sources
 - create a meaningful presence online
 - objectivity is no longer important : transparency!
 - cohesive portals of environmental information
 - networking integrated into environmental reports
 - reliance on visual material
 - focus on local politics/issues/behaviors/changes

Thank you.