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The electoral reform campaigns in New Zealand: a political communication case study

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Communication professionals employed in the public relations and advertising industries play a central role in the democratic process. They research, design, and implement the campaign strategies that attempt to influence voter choices and public policy. In New Zealand, some special legal restrictions are placed on the campaign activities of politicians during election campaigns. But, for corporations and interest groups, the ability to pay is the major controlling factor. It was within the context of this 'free market' of ideas that New Zealand held a referendum to decide whether or not to adopt a new electoral system. In spite of a government-sponsored campaign aimed at educating the public about the issues involved, the main discourse of the debate emanated from two interest groups. One, the Campaign for Better Government, was a predominantly corporation-sponsored lobby group which worked to maintain the status quo. The other group, the Electoral Reform Coalition, was a grassroots organisation, led mainly by academics, trade unionists, and members of the Women's Electoral Lobby, which worked for proportional representation. In this paper, we analyse the campaigns run by the two protagonists. We examine the strategies and techniques, such as poll-driven advertising, used by communication professionals, and then compare the professional campaign with that produced by amateurs. We conclude by discussing the wider implications of communication professionals' involvement in the political sphere.

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The electoral reform campaigns in New Zealand: A political communication case study

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Abstract

Communication professionals employed in the public relations and advertising industries play a central role in the democratic process. They research, design, and implement the campaign strategies that attempt to influence voter choices and public policy. In New Zealand, some special legal restrictions are placed on the campaign activities of politicians during election campaigns. But, for corporations and interest groups, the ability to pay is the major controlling factor. It was within the context of this 'free market' of ideas that New Zealand held a referendum to decide whether or not to adopt a new electoral system.

In spite of a government-sponsored campaign aimed at educating the public about the issues involved, the main discourse of the debate emanated from two interest groups. One, the Campaign for Better Government, was a predominantly corporation-sponsored lobby group which worked to maintain the status quo. The other group, the Electoral Reform Coalition, was a grassroots organisation, led mainly by academics, trade unionists, and members of the Women's Electoral Lobby, which worked for proportional representation. In this paper, we analyse the campaigns run by the two protagonists. We examine the strategies and techniques, such as poll-driven advertising, used by communication professionals, and then compare the professional campaign with that produced by amateurs. We conclude by discussing the wider implications of communication professionals' involvement in the political sphere (Putnis, 1993).

Background

New Zealand has operated under the British Westminster electoral system of first past the post (FPP), since 1853. Under FPP, the political

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party that wins the most seats in an election is invited by the Governor-General to form the Government. An alternative to FPP, the mixed member proportional system (MMP), was favoured by a Royal Commission held in 1986. This Commission was the government's response to increasing levels of electoral dissatisfaction with the existing FPP system. The Commission stated that the MMP system was fairer than the FPP system because it distributed parliamentary seats on the basis of the actual number of votes received by each party (Wallace, 1986).

The question of electoral reform was initially put to the public in a referendum held in October 1992. Voters were asked to make two decisions. The first decision involved a simple choice between change and the status quo. The second decision was a choice between four alternative electoral systems. Given the Royal Commission's carefully considered preference for the MMP system, it is not clear why four alternatives were presented to voters. The four systems were complex and it is doubtful that many people fully understood the choices they were being asked to make. The suspicion remains that the Government intended to make the electoral reform process as difficult as possible. Certainly, FPP was strongly supported by many Members of Parliament prior to the election. Of the five contending electoral systems, only MMP was championed by an organised campaign, which was run by the Electoral Reform Coalition (ERC). Fifty-five percent of eligible voters participated in the referendum. Of these voters, eighty-five percent opted for change and seventy-one percent selected MMP as their preferred option. This referendum was, however, held only to determine whether or not a further referendum should be held on the issue of electoral reform.

The real battle between FPP and MMP took place during the second referendum held to coincide with the 1993 general election. This time the government had promised to abide by the results of the referendum even though it had much to lose if the vote went against FPP. In New Zealand, two major parties, Labour and National, have dominated the modern political landscape. An MMP system was likely to dilute, if not end, this dominance by increasing the ability of minor parties to win parliamentary seats. But the major parties were not likely to be the sole losers under MMP. The ideological gap between these two parties, while never great, has narrowed considerably in recent years. In 1984, the newly elected Labour Party Government derived its main policies from new-right economic theories (Collins, 1989). Its goals included the corporatisation and, eventually, privatisation of state assets (Easton, 1989). The current National Party government, elected in 1990, was motivated by the same economic ideology and subsequently adopted similar policies. Such policies have created a climate which has supported business growth while considerably weakening the New Zealand trade union movement. One of the implications of an MMP electoral system, however, is the strong

likelihood of coalition governments being formed with members from more than the two leading political parties. Anyone who wanted to influence government decisions might then have to deal with the minor parties who were not so predisposed to support business interests. There would be a strong likelihood that policies such as privatisation, with their inherent benefits for large corporations, would be curtailed.

At that time, Telecom was one of the major state-owned enterprises that had been privatised in recent years. It is not surprising to find that the referendum's display of public support for electoral change led the head of Telecom, Mr Peter Shirtcliffe, to publicly oppose MMP. Shirtcliffe set up the Campaign for Better Government, CBG, to organise the defence of the status quo. He has always maintained that he acted as an individual rather than as a corporate leader, stating that he viewed the exercise as 'a matter of community service' (Nichol, 1993). However, he has acknowledged that 'the initiative was discussed at a private meeting in March with an advertising agency (patronised frequently by the government), Saatchi and Saatchi; Sir Michael Fay (a leading merchant banker); two cabinet ministers, Messrs Birch and Upton; and a Government back-bencher, Mr Tony Ryall' (Herbert, 1993).

His eventual campaign manager, Mr Brian Nicolle, was a founding member of the Backbone Club, formed in support of the New Right ideology of 'Rogernomics'. ('Rogernomics' is the name given to the economic policies of Roger Douglas, Labour Minister for Finance between 1984 and 1988 [James, 1989]). A former president of Federated Farmers, Mr Owen Jennings, also became a prominent leader of the campaign. FPP was openly supported by groups such as The Business Roundtable and various Chambers of Commerce. It was also supported by major business leaders such as the head of PDL Holdings, Sir Robertson Stewart, and the chairman of Fletcher Challenge, Sir Ron Trotter (Hubbard, 1993). In an initial effort to raise funds, Peter Shirtcliffe targeted businesses and 'prominent individuals' with a nationwide drop of 14,000 letters ('Anti-MPP appeal', 1993). In June 1993 he stated that, while support for his campaign was community wide, 'I will seek money from wherever I can get it - I am going unashamedly to the business community and the wealthy' (Booker, 1993). No-one from the CBG has ever revealed the exact value of the donations they received, but estimates of the cost of their campaign have put it at close to \$2 million (Macdonald, 1993).

In contrast, the ERC was set up in 1986 under the leadership of Colin Clark, a retired public servant and a former president of the public service trade union. Other spokespeople on the Coalition Management Committee included Dr Helena Catt and Dianne Yates, both university lecturers. The list of active members is extensive and includes people from a wide range of backgrounds. Their purpose was to bring about the

introduction of proportional representation to the New Zealand electoral system. They supported the findings of the 1986 Royal Commission on the Electoral System, which favoured the MMP system and lobbied for a referendum on electoral reform. All of their money has come from individual rather than corporate donations, generally worth less than fifty dollars each (Colin Clark, personal communication, 1994).

Corporate public communication campaigns

During the 20th century, democracy and corporate power have grown hand in hand with the communication industries of advertising and public relations. Governments and major business interests attempt to use these industries to, in Carey's words, '[take] the risk out of political democracy' (Carey, 1995, p. 144). Methods used in the shaping of public opinion have become increasingly sophisticated and specialised. Campaigners who have the resources to employ professionals to measure public opinion, to determine its weaknesses, and to disseminate information appropriate to their clients' needs have the advantage over opponents without such resources. Robins, Webster, and Pickering argue that, today, '[w]hat we have is an ever more extensive information apparatus – propaganda, censorship, advertising, public relations, surveillance, etc. – through which opinion management has become not only authoritarian, but also routine and normative' (Robins, Webster, & Pickering, 1987). As Bernays (1955), a leading public relations professional and scholar, states, an increasing use is being made of 'trained professionals who can deal with increasingly difficult problems of adjustment, interpretation and persuasion' (p. 5). Communication professionals now play an integral role in promoting the interests of business and government as well as major interest groups.

Opinion polls have become a major tool of the public relations, marketing, and advertising industries (Wilson, 1989; Penman, 1990). From a marketing perspective, such research constitutes the means by which clients keep in touch with the expectations and desires of customers. Advertisers will have greater success in selling products if they clearly understand the audience they are selling to (Myers, 1983). It can also be argued that public opinion measurement is a tool of democracy if it is used by business and government to keep policies and products in line with public will. The process is, however, frequently inverted. Polls are used not to discover what people want but rather what the perceived weaknesses of an opponent's arguments are or how best to market unpopular policies. Polls are also used to identify which groups in society are most vulnerable to persuasion. Campaigns are then constructed to target these vulnerable groups and their fears. This paper goes on to explore the use made of just such a poll by the CBG.

Method

In order to identify the extent to which the eventual campaign was poll-driven, simple qualitative content analysis techniques were used to compare the findings and recommendations of the leaked Insight Research report with the campaign material published and broadcast by the CBG. The main verbal and visual messages contained in each advertisement were listed and then this list was compared with the recommendations of the Insight report. No such comparison was possible for the campaign material issued by the ERC because they did not commission public opinion polls.

Keyword techniques derived from the work of Williams and Edelman and adapted by Leitch were also applied to the press releases and advertisements for television, radio, and press issued by CBG (Williams, 1976, Edelman, 1985; Leitch, 1990, Motion, 1993). Campaign materials were deconstructed to identify the 'keywords' and 'keyphrases' used. Keywords were identified by both their frequency and their saliency to the debate. For comparison, the same keyword analysis was applied to the press releases issued by the ERC. Because much of the Coalition's campaign material was distributed at local branch level, their chairperson, Colin Clark, was interviewed to gain an overview of the tactics and strategies employed.

The Insight Research poll

The CBG employed a public relations firm, Consultus, and an advertising company, Saatchi and Saatchi, to help with their campaign. One month before the campaign was launched, Consultus commissioned Insight Research, a polling and public relations company, to conduct a public opinion survey on MMP and FPP. In the course of the survey, members of the public were questioned to assess their depth of commitment to MMP and to discover what fears they held about MMP. The resulting report became public knowledge when it was leaked to *The Independent*, a weekly business and political journal.

The demographic results of Insight Research's opinion survey showed that there were four groups who were most likely to be influenced away from MMP: those aged under 35; women; the lesser educated; and heavy TV viewers. The survey also showed that public opinion was so much against the current electoral system that there was no point in defending it. The only way to defeat MMP was to discredit it. Negative campaigns of this kind, employing fear-inducing tactics, are a well-established feature of political life in western-style democracies (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1991).

Insight found that, among undecided voters and those who supported MMP only weakly, there were four arguments that were most likely to

effect a change in public opinion. According to McManus (1993), the arguments revolved around:

the party lists of anonymous politicians decided by head office; the increased instability and infighting that would come with more politicians and more parties, thereby making parliament less accountable; the risk of jeopardising our economic recovery because businesses will be afraid to invest in a more unstable New Zealand; and the fact that countries with MMP are trying to get rid of it (p. 4).

Since 1984, politicians have become increasingly unpopular with the New Zealand electorate. A spate of 'broken' election promises has done little to improve their standing (McLoughlin, 1992). Insight saw that, given this low standing, arguments that played on public distrust of politicians were most likely to succeed. The use made under MMP of party lists, which could be portrayed as lists of anonymous politicians, was seen as the most useful aspect of the MMP system to capitalise on. The idea that politicians selected from party lists would be less accountable to the people than those who represented electorates was a relatively simple theme to communicate. The fact that MMP would give the public more members of parliament to endure (and pay for) was also an easily understood point. But that MMP would dilute the power of the Labour and National parties by increasing the overall number of parties was seen by Insight as an electorally popular point in MMP's favour and thus one which would have to be handled carefully (McManus, 1993, p. 4).

The equation of the free enterprise system with democracy has long been a popular argument with business organisations seeking to influence public opinion in their favour (Carey, 1987). The third argument suggested by Insight – that MMP would discourage business investment – drew on this equation. To succeed as an argument, however, the link between the interests of New Zealand business and the interests of the New Zealand people had to be clearly established. Given that business leaders were also widely regarded with distrust since the sharemarket crash of 1987, this argument was not likely to be as popular as the previous two. The fourth argument – that countries with MMP were trying to abolish it – was considered to be 'not strong in its own right' but one that 'sticks in people's minds' (McManus, 1993, p. 2). The Insight report stated that all four points 'should be presented in a form that is both anxiety increasing and educational' and should contain 'easily digestible, alarming material' (McManus, 1993, p. 2). The report cautioned, however, that the CBG should not be seen to oppose the referendum per se.

The campaign for better government

Oddly, the CBG's first newspaper advertisement used the fourth argument offered by Insight Research. It stated that the Italians had

rejected their MMP electoral system because it was held 'responsible for decades of waste, corruption and Mafia control'. CBG's decision to launch the campaign with this argument was strange, because it was clearly the weakest of the four. A complaint lodged against this advertisement was upheld by the Advertising Standards Complaints Board on the grounds that it inaccurately described Italy's proportional voting system as the MMP model. Although the ruling meant that the advertisement could not be re-run, the suggestion that New Zealand could face the same problems as Italy under MMP had already been made. Overall, however, the controversy generated by the advertisement probably did little to establish the credibility of the CBG campaign.

The second advertisement headlined MMP as 'the greatest constitutional decision in New Zealand's history', stressed the importance of the referendum, and informed the public about some aspects of MMP. Within this 'educational' format, two out of five points concerned party lists. The advertisement's keywords contained emotive references to 'post-election manoeuvring', 'horse trading', and 'back-room dealing'. This theme was repeated in the third and fourth advertisements, with further references to 'back-room deals' and 'bitter infighting'. The themes and language of these advertisements were entirely consistent with Insight recommendations.

Advertising became increasingly frequent as the referendum drew closer. Television, radio, and press advertisements featured images which were designed to arouse the target publics' fears about MMP. One advertisement featured people with paper bags over their heads, who represented both the extra members of parliament that MMP would bring and the facelessness of the MMP list system. Another advertisement contained crying babies, who represented the betrayal of youth by voters who opted for MMP. Other advertisements featured the smoke-filled back rooms in which politicians were bargaining for their position on the party list. The radio advertisements joked that MMP means 'More mates in parliament', a further reference to the party list system. Advertisements also stressed the alleged danger MMP posed to the nation's economic recovery, using the slogans 'It's not worth the risk' and 'Is it a risk we can afford?'.

As recommended by Insight, the content of the television advertisements was both 'anxiety-increasing' and 'educational'. Women were favoured as a target group over men, and so all television voiceovers were done by women. The only television advertisement with a person who spoke to the audience featured a woman. Five of the eight radio advertisements featured women and included background noises of children playing. The themes of 'party lists' and 'not worth the risk', the 'anxiety-increasing' images, and the targeting of women were all consistent with the Insight report.

One of the tactics used by the CBG campaign was not, however, derived from the Insight recommendations. The fear of communism has been a theme used to effect by conservative New Zealand politicians since the start of the Cold War but its worth in the current political climate is doubtful. The currency of such 'reds-under-the-beds' arguments must have been debased internationally by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the break up of the old USSR. That Insight did not recommend the tactic nor find any evidence in its research that the tactic would succeed is not, therefore, surprising. Regardless, the CBG chose to publish an extensive list of ERC members who, it alleged, were communists or trade unionists which, they implied, amounted to the same thing (Hunt, 1993b). The claim was dropped, but not until after it had been the focus of several speeches to community groups by campaign spokespeople and had 'served its purpose' (Hunt, 1993a). Exactly what this purpose was or the extent to which it helped the CBG campaign, however, remains unclear.

In line with the Insight Research recommendations, the CBG campaign was wholly negative. None of the advertisements focused on the merits of FFP or tried to defend it as a fair system. Instead, the aim was to discredit MMP. A keyword analysis of press releases issued by the CBG revealed that 'MMP' was the dominant keyword, indicating that their campaign was strongly negative. MMP was associated with keyphrases such as 'political paralysis', 'damaging consequences', 'witch's political brew', and 'transfer power from voters to parties'. These keyphrases all employed emotive language and were clearly intended to induce anxiety about the consequences of any change to the electoral system. Other keywords were 'politicians' (who were not to be trusted), 'party lists' (which gave more power to politicians), 'parties' (who would take power from the people by using party lists), and 'power' (which was to flow away from the people).

The first four advertisements were placed on full pages in all major newspapers and were produced by Saatchi and Saatchi. Subsequent advertising, beginning a few months later in the press and on radio and television, was produced by a smaller, less famous agency, The Flying Zucchini. Brian Nicolle said that the reason for changing agencies was that Saatchi and Saatchi were too expensive. But, given the high level of corporate donations to CBG, it is likely that the CBG were in a position to afford Saatchi and Saatchi's fees. The agency had, however, recently been responsible for producing a Government information campaign covering health reforms (Bethune, 1993). This campaign had been neither effective in changing public opinion in support of the health reforms nor well received by the public. Negative publicity about the costs of this campaign had created the public image that Saatchi and Saatchi was, at worst, morally suspect for its involvement, and, at

best, an extremely expensive company (Laugesen, 1993; Bethune, 1993). There was already considerable public criticism in the news media about the financial advantage the CBG had over the ERC. It is likely, then, that Saatchi and Saatchi's 'expensive' image, rather than the actual expense of their campaign materials, contributed much to the decision to switch to the Flying Zucchini agency. That the services of the less visible but 'expensive' public relations consultancy, Consultus, were retained lends credence to this argument.

Public disdain for the influence of those with 'big money' also appears to have led to the decision to create the illusion that the CBG was running a tightly-budgeted, grass roots campaign similar to that of the ERC. From the time the Flying Zucchini took over CBG's advertising, there was a conspicuous effort to make the campaign appear to be run on a limited budget. For example, brochures, press, and even television advertisements featured messages in Courier font, the font commonly used by typewriters. Although full page advertisements printed in Courier font are just as expensive as those printed in Helvetica or Times Roman, they appear to be cheaply produced. The CBG's brochures were produced on non-glossy paper using black type and one spot-colour. The spot colour, orange, was used over portions of the text to give the impression that someone had gone through the brochures with a marker pen. The impression of 'cheapness' was reinforced by the use of 'static' in some of the television advertisements, although the centrally-framed, inset picture was always clear. To the uninitiated, these advertisements also had the appearance of having been cheaply produced with inferior equipment and expertise. Overall, the campaign showed all the hallmarks of a well researched, professionally conducted public communication campaign. Indeed, the only weaknesses in the campaign identified in this paper occurred when the advice of the Insight report appears to have been ignored.

The Electoral Reform Coalition campaign

The ERC took a grass roots approach to its campaign. Limited resources meant that it had no need to pretend to be running on a low budget. The onus was put on to local branches to raise their own money because the centre was unwilling, and probably unable, to run a fundraising campaign. Billboards, car stickers, and a variety of other stickers were produced by the Wellington headquarters and sold to branches and individuals nationwide for local use. The billboards and stickers were widely placed, and distinctive in yellow and black. Similarly, brochures were produced and sold for distribution through local branches. Each of the brochures contained specific information on one aspect of MMP and had titles such as 'MMP and the Economy', 'How

MMP Works' and 'MMP and Women'. The only graphics used in the brochures were charts which presented statistics.

The ERC, which formed as early as 1986, had attracted a large group of people committed to achieving proportional representation. These volunteers had had time to become knowledgeable about their cause and to train other volunteers to become part of a speakers' bureau. This bureau provided speakers for small meetings in communities throughout New Zealand. Initially, meetings were set up by ERC members through groups which were known to have an interest in public issues, such as church groups, Rotary and Lions clubs, and trade unions. As the ERC became better known, the bureau received invitations to address a wide variety of other groups and to appear on local talkback radio programmes. Colin Clark maintains that this widespread, knowledgeable group of speakers was the Coalition's primary resource (personal communication, 1994).

Strategies were planned nationally but action was primarily localised. Because of the ERC's limited resources, no nationwide advertising campaign was planned. However, in response to the CBG's extensive advertising campaign and to the influence, obvious in polls, that the campaign was having on voters, the ERC eventually borrowed money to produce its own radio and television advertisements. Production expertise, equipment, and actors were provided voluntarily but the Coalition had to pay for air time. These advertisements appeared during the week preceding the referendum. But they were outnumbered at least six-to-one in terms of frequency by the CBG's advertisements. The ERC still owes some of the cost of the advertisements.

The keywords of the press statements issued by the ERC revealed a positive, pro-MMP, campaign strategy. Just as the CBG avoided defending FPP, so the ERC spent little time attacking it. Negative campaigns are, of course, much easier to construct than positive ones and, in New Zealand, have been used with great success during elections. The decision to go with a positive campaign probably reflects the lack of professional advice available to the ERC. It also reflects the desire of the ERC leadership to 'educate' the public about proportional representation. This stance made sense in the early days of the ERC's existence when no pro-FPP lobby group existed.

The keywords of the ERC campaign included 'fairness', 'MMP', 'list MPs', and 'parties'. The latter two were presented as positive features of MMP, with party lists providing 'balanced teams' and an increased opportunity for representation by women and minority groups. Unlike the CBG, the ERC supported their statements with statistical information. For example, they showed the percentage of women in parliament in Western countries with cultures similar to that of New Zealand and with a system of proportional representation. 'Fair representation',

which was the theme stressed by the chairman of the 1986 Royal Commission, Mr Justice Wallace, was also the main theme of the ERC's campaign material.

Overall, the ERC's campaign was low key and 'unprofessional', conducted without the benefit of public relations consultants. Face-to-face communication was the major method used by the ERC – an unusual feature of a modern campaign and one ill-suited to the mass electorate. The ERC enjoyed only two advantages over the CBG: that public opinion was on their side before the campaign began, and that the coalition had been in existence since 1986 and had had time to build community links. In the end, these advantages proved sufficient to win the referendum.

Implications

Although the second referendum result saw FPP narrowly defeated, the CBG was successful in significantly eroding public support for MMP. Opinion polls taken a month before the referendum showed that the voting trends of undecided voters were in favour of FPP and that the difference between the two was small (Hunt, 1993c). Despite their failure to block change, the CBG's campaign represented the most public attempt in recent history by business interests to directly influence the New Zealand democratic process. As such, the CBG campaign threw the role that public relations and advertising agencies play in society into the limelight. And the issues it raises are much broader than the success or, in this case failure, of a single campaign.

Common industry definitions of 'public relations' link it with 'goodwill', 'mutual understanding', and 'public interest' (Mackey, 1992). But public relations consultants must, of course, work for whoever can pay their bills. The 'public interest' they pursue is in fact the interest of their client public. Thus, large corporations and governments enjoy the advantage of being able to hire the considerable expertise of consultants and to use this expertise in their bid to gain public support for policies. Individuals and community-based interest groups with few resources are clearly disadvantaged in the political arena. As a result, advertising and public relations consultancies have created for themselves the public image that they represent the voices of the already powerful. The ethical issues which arise from this development are immense. And, ethical considerations aside, such an image can only damage the ability of consultants to deliver results to their clients. Saatchi and Saatchi's experience of losing the CBG account for reasons other than incompetence may become a more common phenomenon.

In New Zealand, both the public relations and advertising industries are largely self-regulating. Thus, the onus for addressing the ethical

and other issues involved in political communication lies with their professional bodies. But, while there is a possibility that change could occur in the more tightly controlled advertising industry, there is little likelihood that the Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ) would be able to effect any change, even if it wanted to. Membership of PRINZ is not required by either law or custom. The influence that any change to the PRINZ code of professional conduct could have, would, therefore, be dependent on the voluntary compliance of public relations consultants, many of whom are not even PRINZ members.

The problem of unequal access by different groups to communication expertise and resources is, in any case, an issue too complex to be resolved by improving professional codes of practice. It may be that the kinds of restrictions placed on political parties during election campaigns are needed during the political campaigns of interest groups and corporations. The corporate right to freedom of speech is assured by their ability to buy it. But, unless one believes that the best formula for democracy is a vote for every dollar rather than a vote for every adult person, the free market cannot be portrayed as an adequate protector of free speech or of democracy. The challenge facing New Zealand society is to protect such ideals in the face of an increasingly sophisticated and costly communication industry.

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