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# Aotearoa New Zealand Climate and Environmental Journalists: Profiles, Practices, and Perspectives

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the profiles, practices, and perspectives of leading climate and environmental journalists from Aotearoa New Zealand. Based upon semi-structured interviews, this study discusses the state of national climate and environmental reportage, as well as possible and desired futures in the round, as responses to the rapidly emerging climate and biodiversity emergency. Within a comparatively small national media ecosystem, the interviews reveal a diversity of backgrounds and degrees of scientific expertise, a collegial relationship amongst the journalists, and a relatively high degree of autonomy in their respective newsrooms. The research notes the journalists believe climate and environmental reportage has increased in Aotearoa New Zealand in recent years although the level of coverage is still insufficient, and there are ongoing struggles to locate climate and environmental journalism within existing news frames. The interview discussion also explores features of reportage such as source relations, workload pressures, and audience engagement. This study explores how journalists negotiate their personal commitments to environmental change within the context of their professional practice. It also discusses the issue of advocacy reportage in climate and environmental journalism and possible critiques of existing journalistic practices and dominant news frames within the contexts of a climate and biodiversity emergency.

**Keywords:** climate; environment; journalism; New Zealand; news



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## 1. Introduction

The reality and existence of a global climate and biodiversity emergency obviously lend crucial significance to journalism that reports on such a subject, as complex, long-term, and sometimes seemingly imperceptible environmental trends and phenomena are now rapidly intervening in the lives of communities and individuals in dramatically devastating ways. Such an evolving situation not only elevates the singular importance of climate and environmental journalism but correspondingly prompts the need to more specifically consider the practices of such journalists, their work, and industry contexts, and the placement of such journalism in the broader frameworks of news production. Responding to climate change in an effective manner is a complex and multi-faceted communicative and political challenge (Carvalho et al. 2017; Moser 2010). It is argued here that part of that challenge requires us to hear the voices of climate and environmental journalists as they negotiate and contribute to the public discourses and meanings of the climate crisis, and it is vital that we reflect academically on their statements about their practices and the progress and future of climate and environmental journalism.

This study examines climate and environmental journalism in Aotearoa New Zealand, drawing on interviews with leading reporters working in the field. All the interviewed journalists report on climate and the environment, but the round is not clearly delineated across news outlets: some journalists identify solely as ‘climate journalists’ while others in different newsrooms work more broadly in various concatenations of climate, environment, conservation, weather, science, technology, energy, and health. The terms ‘climate’ and ‘environment’ are used here to reflect their prominent usage by the interviewed journalists

and to emphasise the foundational concerns of the climate crisis and its environmental basis. It is acknowledged though that ‘climate journalism’ can be conceived as an area of reportage exceeding its environmental ramifications and it can challenge existing categories of news reportage (Robie, quoted in [Newlands 2020](#), p. 311). Equally, news media responses to the climate emergency and its centrifugal impacts on all areas of public and private life can be expressed in concepts such as ‘sustainability journalism’ ([Berglez et al. 2017](#)), which addresses the viability of interconnections between the environment, economy, society, and culture. Such observations attest to the fact that “journalism about the environment and climate change sits at a complex of intersections between politics, business, science, nature, and culture, in between, the individual and the common but also in between the local, regional and global levels” ([Bødker and Neverla 2012](#), p. 152).

As a nation, Aotearoa New Zealand is fundamentally defined through its environment, with a global public image predicated on its spectacular natural landscapes and scenery, and with an economy that is highly dependent upon not only the tourism sector but also its agricultural industry. This heavy economic reliance on the primary sector, primarily through dairying and forestry, has had deleterious effects on the nation’s environment. A famous and globally influential tourism slogan from 1999, titled ‘100% Pure New Zealand’, is now subject to substantive critique ([Carter 2019](#); [Desmarais 2015](#)), particularly given the way that intensive dairying has sullied the water quality of many of the country’s rivers. The nation’s environmental credentials have historically derived from its stance against French nuclear testing in the South Pacific, its nuclear-free commitments, and its ban on genetic modifications. The country has politically recognised climate change with the declaration of a climate emergency ([Taylor 2020](#)) and the establishment of an independent climate commission ([Daalder 2021](#)). At the time of writing just before a general election, the co-leader of the Greens, James Shaw, is the Climate Minister in the Labour-led government. Substantive reductions in emissions, though, have not yet been forthcoming and the farming sector retains a very powerful political influence with agricultural emissions excluded from the Emissions Trading Scheme, despite agriculture accounting for nearly half of the nation’s greenhouse gas emissions ([Smith 2023](#)). National attention to the reality of the climate crisis has been intensified by dramatic weather events, most notably cyclone Gabrielle, which brought flooding and infrastructure damage to the city of Auckland and other areas of the country in February 2023. More recently, work to address sustainability within Aotearoa New Zealand has drawn significantly on Māori understandings of environmental guardianship, captured in concepts such as kaitiakitanga ([Kawharu 2000](#)). While kaitiakitanga centres on environmental guardianship, it is a complex term that incorporates philosophical, pragmatic, and spiritual dimensions, it can be used regarding specific socio-cultural areas, and it is allied with social concepts, such as mana (authority), rahui (prohibition or conservation), and manaaki (hospitality) ([Kawharu 2000](#)). The environment has, thus, a prominent and problematic role in Aotearoa New Zealand’s history, economy, and society.

As a small nation, with a current population of about 5.2 million people, the country’s news media system is correspondingly not as extensive as in other more highly populated western developed nations. There are three state-owned broadcasters: RNZ (Radio New Zealand), Māori Television Service, and TVNZ, which is a state-owned but commercially funded entity. Another major television broadcaster, NewsHub, is owned by Warner Bros. Discovery. Among other major new sources, the NZME company owns *The New Zealand Herald* along with commercial radio assets, and there are several independently owned print and online companies, including Newsroom, The Spinoff, the National Business Review, the Otago Daily Times, and Stuff, which owns the major news site, stuff.co.nz, as well as a number of publications including *The Post* and *The Press*. As with other national media industries, the sector in Aotearoa New Zealand has been under financial stress in recent years and this, in turn, has influenced the breadth and viability of climate and environmental reporting.

This study discusses the current state of national climate and environmental reportage in Aotearoa New Zealand, and also possible and desired futures in climate and environmental reportage, as responses to the rapidly emerging climate emergency. The interviews with journalists reveal a diversity of backgrounds and degrees of scientific expertise, and different levels and types of reportage, dependent upon respective media outlets and audiences. The research notes that the journalists believe climate and environmental reportage has increased in Aotearoa New Zealand in recent years although the level of coverage is still insufficient, and there are ongoing struggles to locate climate and environmental journalism within existing news frames. The interview discussion also explores features of reportage such as source relations, workload pressures, and audience engagement. The study is premised upon beliefs in the growing importance of climate and environmental journalism; the need to give voice to, and understand, the current exigencies facing climate and environmental journalists; and the necessity of questioning existing journalistic practices and dominant news frames within the contexts of a climate and biodiversity emergency.

## 2. Literature Review

'The environment' has had a problematic status in the mix of Western news reporting since the rise in the 1960s of what might be termed the modern environmental beat, which arose with the beginning of a global ecology movement (Hansen 2019, p. 71; Sachsman and Valenti 2022). Levels of environmental reportage vacillated in subsequent decades in response to changing national and international economic fortunes, as well as changes to the news media industry, with journalistic job losses resulting from increasing concentrations of media ownership and closure of news outlets, as well as increased competition from 'new' and social media (Hansen 2019, p. 72). Environmental print journalist numbers fell strongly in the United States by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, particularly following the stock market crash and recession of 2008 (Sachsman and Valenti 2022, p. 181). In more recent years, it seems the dramatic rise of environmental disasters has begun to elevate climate change as a more permanent and prominent feature of news reportage even if it can be argued that daily news bulletins do not yet accurately convey the seriousness of the climate emergency and there remains an ongoing precarity to environmental journalistic positions. Perhaps in response to such a situation, climate and environmental journalism is *itself* receiving more news media scrutiny (see, for example, Trew 2019; Watts 2020; Kelly-Costello 2021; Hertsgaard and Pope 2021).

Journalism has always experienced challenges in rendering 'the environment' a meaningful phenomenon within the context of news discourse. The environment, and more latterly, the climate and biodiversity emergency, for all its direct existential impact, is nonetheless *made meaningful* by journalists and other social actors (Murphy 2011). As Lester (2010, p. 17) has summarised: "The 'environment' that is the subject of mediated public debate is constructed through complex processes of knowledge transfer, meaning making and symbolic interplay ... When combined with power and strategy ... 'the environment' becomes a site of contending interests and political intervention, but also a site where emotions run deep". It has been noted how journalistic challenges in reporting on the environment derive from the fact that environmental change is a scientific and complex phenomenon, often incremental and largely invisible (Hansen and Machin 2013). The newsworthiness of the environment has been manifested in event-based stories, such as the release of the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC); instances of conflict, such as environmental protests; and strategies of visualisation, where the environment is either rendered a spectacle or represented through the various actors who 'speak' for the environment (Lester and Cottle 2009; see also Peeples and Depoe 2014).

Environmental journalists experience a complex and changing relationship with the variety of sources they encounter in their daily production of the news. While it has been previously noted that tension can exist between the caution of scientific experts and journalists who must to some extent simplify that science for a general audience and work to capture the attention of media consumers (Boykoff 2007; Smith 2005), it is acknowledged

that environmental journalists have a close relationship with scientific sources and that a hierarchy of sources exists in environmental reportage, whereby a process of ‘indexing’ results in a primary reliance on the authority of institutional sources and the reproduction of their viewpoints and interests (Hansen 2019; see also Bennett 1990). That said, there is not a monolithic influence of powerful source groups and environmental reportage has also been found to give access and voice to more marginalised sources, such as environmental groups, particularly those who are able to exploit the newsworthiness of events and issues (Anderson 2022; Manning 2001). The traditional hierarchy of sources is also not replicated necessarily in online reportage and social media which can provide greater access to citizens (Anderson 2022). The character of source relations can also be linked to the scale of reporting where critical engagement with sources in national media is contrasted with more positive ‘local’ environmental reportage where there may be an explicit alliance with a perceived community interest (Craig 2010).

Environmental and climate journalism has attracted interest because of perceptions reporters may be more likely to possess personal pro-environmental views, and that the round is characterised by particular negotiations between conventions of balanced, ‘objective’ reportage and greater degrees of advocacy. There is historical evidence that environmental journalists stay longer in the round than other areas of reportage (Friedman 2004; Sachzman et al. 2006) with more ‘settled’ careers, perhaps now superseded by greater movements between freelance and institutional positions. Reporting on earlier times, Brüggemann and Engesser (2014) argued that environmental reporters constituted an ‘interpretive community’ (see also Zelizer 1993) in conjunction with scientific sources, promoting the ‘reality’ of climate change against the claims of climate denialists. Research has indicated that most environmental and science journalists publicly conceive of themselves primarily as journalists, over and above any personal pro-environmental beliefs, although some reporters do prioritise an advocacy role (Sachzman et al. 2005). As Tandoc and Takahashi (2014, p. 891) have noted, the role *conceptions* of environmental journalists are a combination of individual and organisational role conceptions and they do not necessarily correspond to each other, and, in addition, the role conceptions may or may not match the role *enactment*, or actual performance, of the journalist. Environmental journalists may perform different roles: disseminator, interpretive, adversarial, and mobiliser (Tandoc and Takahashi 2014, p. 891; see also Weaver et al. 2007).

Climate and environmental journalism is now undergoing a number of major changes, primarily due to the increasing impacts of the climate crisis and also the evolving character of the contemporary global media and information environment. While some laggard conservative news outlets may continue to give oxygen to those who have interests in downplaying the climate and biodiversity emergency, there is more general journalistic acceptance of the science and reality of the climate and biodiversity crises and, as such, debates about the ‘balance’ of reportage between climate ‘believers’ and ‘denialists’ have now been largely superseded (Gibson et al. 2016, p. 424). The growing incidences and physical impacts of climate change have meant that reportage of its consequences is increasingly informing other news rounds, such as business, transport and infrastructure, health, energy, and politics. The online and social media environment provides greater opportunities for citizen science/journalism (Allan 2022) and more general opportunities for sources to bypass journalistic gatekeepers (Anderson 2022, pp. 195–96). In addition, other social actors, notably non-governmental organisations (NGOs), are producing climate and environmental news, particularly where news deserts have arisen (Spyksma 2019).

The contemporary climate emergency has prompted some to consider alternative forms of journalism and also new manifestations of journalism, specifically tailored to assist in tackling the existential crisis which we all now face. The need to advance pro-environmental positions can prompt consideration of different forms of advocacy journalism (see Brüggemann et al. 2022, pp. 222–23 for an overview) and some have considered the merits of a more positive, ‘solutions-oriented’ journalism, for example, in accounts of constructive journalism (Mäder and Rinsdorf 2023). Brüggemann et al. (2022) contend

that conventional ‘objective’ journalism is ill-equipped to assess global ecological risks and that ‘transformative journalism’ are required to facilitate an overhaul of both newsrooms and society in general (Brüggemann et al. 2022, pp. 225–26). They describe transformative journalism as “a particular kind of progressive advocacy: promoting social transformations toward sustainability by doing journalism” (Brüggemann et al. 2022, p. 225). Drawing on the work of Kruger, they explain that transformative journalism provide “visibility to actors, processes, and structures that promote ecological transformations toward sustainability while retaining its professional independence and critical perspective toward these actors” (Brüggemann et al. 2022, p. 225). Such a statement about the ongoing importance of the independent and critical character of journalism attests to the challenge of formulating a climate and environmental journalism appropriate for the climate and biodiversity emergency. On the one hand, it can be argued that conventional mainstream journalism participates in the reproduction of the ideological contexts of industrial modernity, which have caused the ecological and biodiversity crises, while on the other hand, it can be proffered that conventions of journalistic reportage and writing can still be effective in mobilising public responses to these crises. Gibson et al. 2016 (p. 430, authors’ emphasis), for example, conclude from their interviews with environmental journalists that “traditional professional norms of reporters—norms like neutrality, accuracy, context, and immediacy—can, under certain conditions, *support* rather than undermine the production of high-quality environmental coverage”.

Climate and environmental journalism in Aotearoa New Zealand must engage with all these issues and, at the same time, there is a specificity to the national political, environmental, and journalistic culture that also requires elucidation. Aotearoa New Zealand climate, environmental, and science journalism has been the subject of some sustained research work in years past (Craig 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010; Kenix 2008; Russill 2008; Ashwell 2014), but more recently there has been less scrutiny, apart from the overview by Newlands (2020), even though, as noted, the national media landscape has changed and the impacts of climate change are now more prominent in the national public consciousness. It is therefore an opportune time to canvas the views of those journalists who report on climate and the environment in Aotearoa New Zealand to understand their profiles, their work practices, including their relationships with sources, and their views about the future of their craft.

### 3. Methodology

This research explores the profiles, practices, and perspectives of climate and environmental journalists in Aotearoa New Zealand, based on personal interviews. In addition to the interviews, the researcher engaged with the recent work by the journalists and the topics, reporting, and writing of these stories sometimes informed the discussion. Gibson et al. (2016, p. 420) have previously written that “relatively little research has been conducted on how journalists perceive climate change, how they go about the daily business of covering and framing the issue, and, in particular, how the organisational and economic changes sweeping the industry have affected their ability to produce what they view as high-quality climate coverage”. More recent research that has been conducted on the practices of climate and environmental journalists, in addition to the work of (Gibson et al. 2016), includes Figueroa (2020), and Tong’s (2017) study of Chinese journalists. This study does not seek to draw comparative national conclusions but hopefully contributes to a more comprehensive global understanding, delineating common traits with regard to practice, and also indicating the ways that practices and their effects can play out differently across the culture and society of various nations.

For this study, I interviewed eight climate and environmental journalists, covering most of the nation’s leading news media outlets. The interviews lasted between 30 to 56 min. The interviews were recorded through Microsoft Teams with generated transcriptions, and two re-viewings of the interviews took place where detailed notes and quotations were taken, along with the identification of common themes and individual differences across the cohort. In accordance with qualitative research that deals with limited samples,

the emphasis here is not so much to offer generalised conclusions but rather to explore more discursively the individual experiences of the journalists, giving them a voice while interpreting their views through the lens of appropriate theoretical frameworks, in accordance with the constructivist approach to building grounded theory (Charmaz 2014). In this sense, the research provides a rich opportunity to implement dialogue between professional practitioners and the literature of journalism academics in assessments of the merits and challenges of current and possible future practice. Interviewees were told they would be anonymised for the study to allow the journalists to feel they could speak more freely. The purpose of this study was to offer an overview of contemporary climate and environmental journalism in Aotearoa New Zealand without interrogation of the specific differences across print, broadcast, and online outlets, which was also partly prompted by the relatively small sample size.

The research deployed a semi-structured interview process (Wengraf 2001) whereby the journalists were provided with a list of questions prior to the interview so that more considered answers could be provided while sometimes follow-up questions were asked upon the basis of particular answers to the set questions. Interviews are formalised, rule-governed communicative encounters and the process of asking questions provides a particular framing of the research subject which partly circumscribes the discourse of the interviewees, however apparently open and consensual the discussion might seem. The final set question for each interview was an inquiry about any other matter that had not been covered in our discussion that the interviewee thought was pertinent to the study.

The questions posed to the journalists were broadly collected under three thematic categories: *individual profiles*, including educational backgrounds and journalistic experience, and motivations for working as climate and environment journalists; *work practices*, including source relations, and the experience of reportage and writing, including newsroom and managerial engagements; and *journalistic role perceptions*, including assessments about the current state of climate and environmental journalism, the question of the incorporation of a climate lens across different journalistic rounds, and also possible future roles of climate and environmental journalists, incorporating greater degrees of advocacy.

#### 4. Findings

##### 4.1. Individual Profiles

The interviews revealed an overall lack of unity in the individual profiles of the climate and environmental journalists, even though there was a recognised group identity. Five of the interviewees were women and three were men. As stated in the introduction, all the interviewees regularly covered climate and the environment but there was variety in the way such work was incorporated in job titles and the character and breadth of their reportage, spanning those who were specific climate correspondents to an individual who saw themselves primarily as a science broadcaster. The job title specificity was to some extent influenced by the medium of reportage, given that broadcast and digital journalists were more likely to have general titles with an informal role to cover climate and environment when required, while news outlets that were primarily print based were more likely to assign specific rounds. Even within this latter category though, there were some interviewees who were specifically climate reporters and some who had more broadly defined briefs.

The interviewees had a range of journalistic work experience and a variety of educational backgrounds, bringing different levels of scientific expertise to their journalistic work. The journalist who had the most experience had worked as a professional journalist for 18 years with a more specific interest in science and environmental journalism in the past 12 years while the interviewee with the least experience had been in their position for only two years. All the other interviewees had worked as professional journalists for between five and fifteen years. Two of the eight interviewees had undergraduate or postgraduate degrees in science, one journalist had previously worked as an environmental lawyer, and others had degrees in journalism or arts-based subjects, such as history and politics. Each

of the interviewees navigated their backgrounds in their own way. One science graduate stated their educational background was “extremely helpful and I can’t imagine doing … [my job] without it”, explaining it helped them access and understand the complexity of scientific research, while another interviewee articulated a more conventional journalistic perspective noting that “journalism for me is very much about learning a number of subjects very quickly. For me it’s actually about accessing the right people in the right places who have a deeper knowledge than me”.

For all the diversity in job titles, educational backgrounds, and work experience, every journalist articulated a personal as well as professional commitment to climate action and the environment when asked *why* they were climate and environmental journalists. The global significance of the climate emergency and its journalistic significance was expressed by all journalists with one stating: “Climate change is the story of the century. … It affects every other round that you could cover”. Two journalists explicitly said their motivation to be climate and environmental journalists stemmed from their childhood and personal connections with nature that had continued into their adult lives. One journalist spoke of their rural upbringing and how it had influenced their subjectivity: “Growing up I was always outside. … I just really believe in the need for nature to have a voice. … I just really care, almost too much. … the job is kind of interwoven with who I am”. Another journalist linked their concern for the environment to its intergenerational significance: I have children and they’ll be growing up in a different environment in every way. … And I don’t know what they’re going to face but I definitely know that the issues from one generation lead to another”.

#### 4.2. Work Practices

The journalists were asked whether they believed the level of climate and environmental reporting had increased in recent years in Aotearoa New Zealand and whether there was still sufficient reportage. In response, there was unanimity that the climate and biodiversity crisis was receiving more news scrutiny but that the levels of reportage were still inadequate and that it was an ongoing struggle to convince editors and management of the crucial significance of the issue. “There’s definitely more than there used to be”, said one reporter. “It’s definitely not enough when you consider the ways in which climate change will touch every part of our lives. … Look at how many climate journalists there are as compared to personal finance journalists or entertainment or lifestyle journalists, … it’s clearly not proportional to the seriousness and scale of the issue still”. This view, contrasting levels of climate and environmental reportage with other rounds, was echoed by other interviewees. Another journalist said: “I do think it has increased significantly in the time that I have been in journalism”. They added though that: “It’s certainly not enough. If you look at the size of a business reporting team at a typical news outlet or a sports reporting team … climate change is completely dwarfed … by those and I think if you look at the relative potential impacts on people’s lives that is still not matched by the scale of investment in journalism. So yeah, I still think that we’ve got a long way to go”. The increased levels of reportage were also partly attributed to the increasing frequency of large-scale weather events, particularly cyclone Gabrielle. “Yes, we have seen an increase [in environmental reportage] … partly because we’ve just seen, especially this year, so many extreme weather events”, said one journalist.

A few of the journalists noted that insufficient levels of reportage were linked to the lack of knowledge of other journalists and also due partly to public indifference. One journalist noted that when they had worked for a national environmental organisation many regional journalists had approached them with very low levels of understanding about the climate and biodiversity crisis. This view was countered by another journalist who had observed how the climate literacy of their colleagues in the newsroom had grown in recent years. Another journalist firmly believed that news media reportage levels of the climate crisis were a reflection of public indifference. They said: “I still just see this huge apathy problem that we have. You know, people say it’s too big or too dull or too boring or

it's something that's going to happen in the future, or if it is happening then there's nothing I can really do about it. . . . New Zealanders are very good at playing things down".

The journalists were asked questions about different aspects of their work, spanning the following topics: source relations, internal editorial and/or external source pressure about story selection and framing, whether staff cutbacks and cross-platform demands had negatively affected reportage, the challenges of writing climate and environmental news stories, and feedback from members of the public. The journalists noted that climate and environmental scientists were regular and valuable sources for their stories and good relations were established once the scientists knew they could trust the journalists to accurately report on their research. One reporter said that their main sources were academics who worked on climate across a range of disciplines. They said that these sources had "deep knowledge" about their respective areas while able to communicate complex ideas in a clear, accessible manner and that the academics were also more willing to recommend other sources who might take a contrary position on an issue. A number of journalists noted they could obtain direct access to the 'media-friendly' Minister for Climate Change but that access to public servants was difficult due to 'screening' by Departmental communications staff who handled media inquiries. One journalist said: "Comms departments . . . are sort of that barrier between journalists and sources who, particularly in the public sector, are really, really wary of any sort of attention, any news, anything that could be criticised in the climate space". One journalist also noted that proprietary research issues, stemming from the commercialisation of climate change-related technology, were also a barrier to the public release of information.

Without exception, the journalists replied they had high levels of autonomy with little editorial interference. One interviewee said they had autonomy because of their status as a senior reporter: "There's no kind of pressure on what I cover or what I don't". Another journalist said: "I have quite a significant degree of independence. . . . I've never had anyone have an issue with the climate reporting that I do or say that we give it too much prominence or something like that". Such positive comments were couched though in acknowledgments that their autonomy stemmed partly from their understanding of the specific requirements of their news organisation regarding climate and environmental news and their ability to work to those requirements. In this sense, while some journalists nominated particular topics of personal interest, such as waste management and conservation and fauna, the autonomy of the journalists was still circumscribed within existing frameworks of newsworthiness and a professional requirement to offer a broad range of relevant stories.

While the journalists had high levels of autonomy, they also noted that a combination of factors, such as staffing cutbacks, cross-platform demands, and the general precarious commercial contexts of the news organisations, cumulatively had a negative impact on the quality of their work. One journalist noted they were made aware of unique browser measurements: "Journalism has become a lot more based on competitive platforms. . . . It's almost like journalism has become more about sales rather than stories and that makes me disappointed". Another interviewee noted their story output was higher than when they first started their journalistic career and that it was a challenge in the current environment to balance output requirements with the requisite depth of stories. "We live in an environment now where we're basically trying to feed the beast that is the website", the journalist observed. One of the journalists worked on a regular freelance basis for their news organisation and this status impacted their work, trying to appropriately balance the amount of work they did with the pay they received: "I would love to be able to spend half a day having a detailed conversation or going out into the field . . . but it's just not possible". They added: "So that does mean that I'm under pressure and I do think that means that I don't always do my stories justice".

Journalists acknowledged two particular difficulties in writing climate and environmental news stories: the often complex, scientific basis to the story, and the predominant negativity to the climate crisis issue, with accounts of damage and loss and accompanying

responses of helplessness and despair from readers and viewers. As one journalist said: "I think one thing is it tends to be a bit more complex, particularly climate, than other issues which means you need to be A. quite careful in how you write things ... and B. it helps to be a bit of a subject matter expert in the field". Another interviewee nominated "anxiety saturation" as a major problem for climate and environmental journalists: "I know I find myself turning off frightening news because I'm just at my mental limit. And so, if I feel like that, it's not surprising that people feel that way about my stories". The journalist said it was possible to tell hopeful climate stories but that the "general tenor of climate change is not very fun ... [and] you have a responsibility to do the news. You can't pretend that bad things aren't happening". The reporter added that there was also a commercial factor that worked against climate change reportage given 'scary' stories were not attractive in a newsroom where "they're interested in getting people's eyeballs on stories". Another journalist concurred with such opinions but emphasised their attempts to provide some positive news stories: "One of the things that I really wanted to try and do well in the climate reporting space was not only kind of conveying the gravity of ... what's facing us but also try to build hope and optimism".

Understanding the public reception of climate and environmental news is important for journalists who work in the area and across the interviewees there were a range of comments, although many remarked about the positive responses they received from readers and viewers. One reporter said: "I definitely do get emails from people, not so much on social media or anything, and those are mostly really positive which I think is quite unusual for a reporter". Another journalist also noted they received mainly positive feedback although they acknowledged "I don't do much that's controversial, so I don't get much grief". Another reporter said there was a small but active stream of climate change deniers who regularly provided responses to stories but there was a larger number of people "who are grateful and relieved to see this kind of content in a mainstream media outlet and you know ... there is I guess a fan base for climate journalism because there is a really active community of people who are very worried and feel like nobody's listening or feel like nobody's understanding the truth". Another journalist repeated this observation, noting the existence of a critical contingent but an overall positive response from readers via email and social media. Another journalist was more critical in their response, expressing the opinion New Zealand was inheriting the culture wars from the United States, and stating that "remarkably, there still seems to be a fair amount of climate deniers". Cumulatively, the variation in the answers from the journalists may indicate that public feedback is one issue where the medium and specific character of the news outlet may be a determining factor.

#### 4.3. *Journalistic Role Perceptions*

Journalists were asked a series of questions about their perceptions of the roles of climate and environmental journalists and also the current and future shape and pervasiveness of climate and environmental news within the broader contexts of news production. The interviewees were initially asked if they believed environmental journalism should involve greater degrees of advocacy than other areas of reportage, and whether part of the job of environmental journalists was to be 'constructive' in their reportage, sometimes talking more positively about environmental 'solutions'. Opinion was somewhat divided on whether there should be greater advocacy in climate and environmental journalism. One journalist echoed a conventional perspective, saying "I can't be an activist or an advocate. ... I think it's really important to just give people the facts and they can decide for themselves". Alternatively, another journalist believed advocacy was legitimate when grounded in sound reportage: "I think when it comes to the environment, we do have a responsibility to be a bit in that advocacy space. ... It's that kind of space between analysis and opinion where it is your opinion, but it's backed with what you know from speaking to experts in the area and covering it extensively". Another interviewee argued that climate and environmental journalism was subject to a double standard compared to

other forms of journalism, pointing out that media outlets could engage in health campaign advocacy on issues such as vaccination but to argue for emissions reductions for planetary and public well-being was seen to be biased and political. There was greater and more uniform support for more constructive forms of climate and environmental journalism with one interviewee commenting "I don't think it is violating tenets of journalism to do solutions focused journalism". Another reporter said: "We know from research that people are more likely to be discouraged by 'doomism' and more likely to engage if we offer them solutions". A third interviewee linked the issue of constructive journalism to foundational principles of journalism and the political reality of dealing with the climate emergency, stating: "If you don't remind people that they do have some agency, and you know, humans as a whole can still have a huge impact on the outcomes of this, then you're also kind of not telling the whole truth".

The journalists were asked if they believed that 'the environment' was still considered a marginal news round, and also if climate and environment should be a specific round or, given the climate emergency, whether it should be folded more into all other journalistic rounds. The journalists were also asked if sustainability concerns should inform the framing of other news stories, such as business news. The interviewees generally agreed that the environment round was still considered a marginal news round although there were different approaches to a broader incorporation of sustainability into other areas of journalism. One journalist said: "The environment is really the foundation of the economy. You can't separate the environment and the economy, they're intertwined, and I think that reporting should reflect that more than it currently does". The reporter gave the example of property news which rarely incorporated concerns about climate change. Another journalist agreed climate journalism was going to be folded more into other rounds, saying "It's going to be forced to overtime inevitably". They added: "I think as journalists we need to be actively incorporating environmental reporting into every news round there is". Another reporter said: "We should be looking at every story with a climate lens because we're not just doing a story about the environment in isolation anymore". One journalist stated they did not think all journalists needed to be climate journalists, but added "I just think that they need to consider it in their reporting". Another journalist said that the climate emergency does not "mean that every single story needs to touch on climate change but there are a lot of stories that actually are affected by climate change and affect climate policy ... that aren't being written that way now. I think that is changing and I think the cyclone [Gabrielle] in particular did change that, at least temporarily". Another one of the interviewees thought that climate concerns were beginning to influence other areas of reportage and gave a recent example where reporters asked about the impact on emissions when a political party announced a new roading policy.

## 5. Discussion

The interviews in this study revealed the fluidity of the definition of the climate and environmental round with discussions alluding to the historicity of the environment round, the more contemporary manifestation of climate reportage, and the breadth of climate and environmental journalism, incorporating a spectrum from political skirmishes around an emissions trading scheme to the scientific complexities of national conservation efforts. The journalists acknowledged the individual difficulty of spanning such territory but many alluded to the respective strengths of their colleagues in other news media outlets, suggesting that together as a group they were able to provide overall coverage of the round. In this sense, there was a relatively clear group identity for all the individual differences across the cohort, and a number of the journalists mentioned an X/Twitter group they had established where there were regular conversations about their work. There was, as such, a stronger collegial rather than competitive relationship that was expressed in the interviews. This collegial orientation stemmed partly from the noted common personal commitments that the journalists had towards the subject of the reportage; they all gave voice to the crucial importance of addressing the climate emergency and a concern for

the environmental welfare of the nation. While personal commitments to addressing the climate and biodiversity emergency provided a sense of a loosely coherent group, this was not at the expense of productive engagements with editors and other colleagues who worked in their newsroom. That is, the relatively distinctive group identity was not strongly prioritised over and above identification with their own particular news outlets, in contrast to, for example, press gallery journalism, where a specific spatial context of reportage forges close relationships between journalists of that particular round.

The interviews revealed that part of the professionalism of the journalists was the conscious, pragmatic, and adept negotiations of their role conceptions, where there was a relatively harmonious co-existence of personal and organisational expectations about their work, and this flowed through to their role enactments or actual performances as climate and environmental journalists. While journalists did at times articulate concerns that news management did not sufficiently recognise the crucial significance of climate change, the stated personal autonomy the journalists had in newsrooms meant that the journalists could fulfil their personal desire to promote climate and the environment while understanding the limits of their work given other areas of reportage and the placement of public opinion. In keeping with [Tandoc and Takahashi's \(2014\)](#) findings, the interviewed journalists saw themselves first and foremost as professional journalists, but they were compelled to consider possible climate action because of a combination of their personal recognition of the importance of the issue *and also* because of the emerging political and social concerns about the issue. The interviews revealed that it is perhaps not helpful to consider journalistic roles as a binary of either advocacy or conventional reportage but rather that there is a spectrum along which journalists negotiate a more active interrogation of the climate emergency. In the context of contemporary understandings about journalistic roles, the individual journalists occupied a variety of role positions, with most positioned primarily in the interpretive role, while a couple could be respectively cast in the disseminator and adversarial roles, although none of the journalists could be placed in the mobiliser role.

The research confirmed the observation of ([Gibson et al. 2016](#)) that climate and environmental journalists have now moved beyond concerns about providing 'balance' in coverage of the climate emergency. For the journalists, the science was clear, there was a general political consensus about the reality of climate change, and the focus in reportage was how to respond to such a reality, even if there were some outliers in the public who were climate denialists. The research also confirmed the observation made by [Figueroa \(2020, p. 1497\)](#) that a significant frustration for journalists was dealing with intermediaries, particularly in the public service, who block or carefully control access to public servants and scientists who have valuable knowledge and information about the climate and biodiversity crisis. A number of journalists noted this access was often desired simply to gain greater background knowledge for a story but fears about the 'politicisation' of the climate crisis were driving the proactive screening of journalistic approaches. As with the study by ([Gibson et al. 2016](#)), the interviewees in this study expressed acknowledgment that the climate and biodiversity emergency was now beginning to filter through to other areas of reportage, although only in a preliminary way, and they expressed the view that more comprehensive consideration of the issue was required in all forms of reportage.

The interviews highlighted the evolving constitution of the climate and environmental journalism round in Aotearoa New Zealand. A surprising feature of the interviews was the acknowledgment by the journalists of the late formation of a specific climate change round in the country, despite obvious global and national awareness of the urgency of the crisis for many years. One journalist, though, identified the impetus of the formation of the round not from the agency of journalists or editors, nor from the establishment of global climate change policy infrastructure, such as the IPCC, but from the establishment of a national political climate change framework. The government passed climate legislation in 2019, established an independent Climate Change Commission, and in 2020, declared a climate emergency. As the journalist stated: "Prior to 2019 there wasn't really climate legislation and there hasn't been some of the things that you actually need to have to

have a discussion about it. So now we have a bureaucracy to question, we have ministers to ask questions, you know, like, there's an apparatus, there's people to OIA [Official Information Act], there are experts to appeal to who can talk about it in a more simplified way, because we're all learning I think in real time what this is and how to talk about it. So I think that while it has not always been very well covered, I think it's partly a factor based in where New Zealand was on its climate journey..." As such, it can be argued that climate and environmental journalism is a *responsive* phenomenon that follows the *political* recognition of the problem, and it is the *institutional framework* that provides journalism with the means to report on the subject. Finally, while several journalists believed that climate and environmental journalism would become more pervasive in the coming years and that news reporting more generally would incorporate a climate lens, there was not an articulation of the development of the round into something akin to transformative journalism, as outlined by (Brüggemann et al. 2022). Instead, and more in line with the recommendations by (Gibson et al. 2016), the interviewed journalists expressed a belief that the conventional principles and practices of professional reportage were valuable and sufficient assets in public communication about the climate and biodiversity crisis.

## 6. Conclusions

The interviews with the eight leading climate and environmental journalists in this study cumulatively provide a profile of a journalistic round located in a specific place and time, where committed practitioners skillfully engage with the ways that a burgeoning global issue is profoundly impacting the political, economic, and social foundations of a small nation-state in the South Pacific. Equally, the interviews also cumulatively portray a group of journalists who negotiate familiar professional practice exigencies that are replicated across newsrooms in other parts of the world.

The research found that the climate and environmental journalists came from a diversity of educational backgrounds, with three of the eight having expertise in scientific or environmental disciplines, and that there was no strict delineation of the climate and environment round with variations in the constitution of job titles. While a number of the journalists had reported on the environment for a number of years, there was recognition that there had been the emergence of a relatively coherent cohort of climate reporters only in the past few years, partly in response to the formalisation of climate change as a legislative phenomenon. The journalists shared personal commitments to environmental change and spoke of positive collegial relationships amongst themselves, despite a competitive media environment, and referred to respective strengths that different journalists possessed in their reportage. It is suggested that this recognition of a relatively loose group identity partly derives from the small national media ecosystem. The journalists said they had high levels of autonomy and respect within their news organisations, and that there was an emerging acknowledgment of the significance of the climate crisis in newsrooms, although they believed that there were still insufficient levels of reportage on climate and the environment, and also insufficient incorporation of a climate lens in other forms of reportage. The journalists noted two primary challenges in climate and environmental reportage: the scientific complexity of the issues and the sense of negativity and despair about the size and challenges of the climate and biodiversity crisis. Nonetheless, the journalists reported on positive source relations with scientists and academics although there was also frustration over communications staffers in organisations, mainly government departments, who limited access to important sources. While all the journalists expressed great personal concern about the urgency of the climate crisis, any openness to advocacy they might have had in their work was couched in the contexts of their primary role definition as professional journalists, cognisant of the need to negotiate the strictures of working in mainstream news organisations. The journalists believed that climate and environment were still considered a marginal round in Aotearoa New Zealand journalism, dwarfed by the number of journalists employed in areas such as politics, business, and sport.

The sample size of the interviews, as stated, did span representation of the nation's major news outlets but the study could have been broadened to capture a greater diversity of voices. One consequence of the interviews was an understanding of the benefits of possibly speaking to individuals of greater authority in news corporations about their perceptions of the placement and significance of climate and the environment in news production. It was occasionally articulated in the interviews that editors acknowledged the significance of climate and environmental news, and responded positively to the journalists of that round, but there was nonetheless an ongoing struggle to convince editors that the climate crisis was altering the shape of conventional news content. Equally, there were occasional references to news executives who did not have the climate crisis high in their contemplations about the viability and future directions of the companies. This study, as stated, also did not consider medium specificity and future studies could interrogate these differences, given issues such as informational complexity and visuality in climate and environmental news. The research focused on the views of mainstream climate and environment journalists, predicated on the belief of their ongoing influence on national understandings of relevant issues, but future research could explore in more detail the ways that such journalism intersects with, and is influenced by, different currents of social media.

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