



News Coverage of Fiji's 2018 General Election Campaign: Insights from a Content Analysis of the National Print and Broadcast Media

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DOI: [10.25911/6NXR-CM05](https://doi.org/10.25911/6NXR-CM05)

28 July 2022

Introduction

This landmark study examines how Fiji's national news media reported the 2018 Fiji election based on an analysis of the coverage of the six competing political parties: the incumbent FijiFirst party and the challenger parties — Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), National Federation Party (NFP), Unity Fiji, Fiji Labour Party (FLP) and Humanity Opportunity Prosperity Equality (HOPE).¹

The time frame of the study is from the issuance of the writ of elections to the start of the media blackout period 48 hours prior to election day (2 October to 12 November 2018).

Combining quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods, this study was founded on the premise that in a healthy democracy, it is incumbent upon the national news media to provide citizens with an objective portrayal of public affairs, based on equitable coverage of all political contestants and parties. This is in keeping with a key component of a functioning democracy being a well-informed citizenry actively engaged in debates about governance, social and economic issues, and relevant government policies (Watson 2022). Towards this end, the media's role in providing citizens timely information to formulate opinions and the means to communicate these opinions and concerns is critical (Watson 2022). It is part of the media's watchdog role, premised on the theory of the fourth estate — the media as an independent entity keeping check on government and corporate power, for the sake of the people (Romano 2010).

Consequently, research into how the media cover national issues is crucial for a critical understanding of news reporting trends, methods and outputs, both for the benefit of news consumers and for media organisations themselves. In Fiji this is pertinent due to frequent allegations of biased reporting and media self-censorship, partly due to the punitive Media Industry Development Act 2010 (henceforth, Media Act). For instance, the Reporters Without Borders 2022 World Press Freedom Index states that Fiji journalists who are overly critical of the government are often subjected

to intimidation, while the Multinational Observer Group (MOG) report on Fiji's 2018 election highlighted the media's preference to not test the boundaries of the Media Act due to its fines and jail terms (MOG 2018 election n.d.; Reporters Without Borders 2022).

When it comes to content analysis of news coverage, the national elections in any country provide a good case study. Because of their reach and power, the media are an important stakeholder in the electoral process, conveying a diverse range of ideas in the public sphere. Therefore, the dominance of one or two media actors could easily lead to a monopoly (or duopoly) over the type of news that ultimately reaches the electorate. Indeed, the media often come into the spotlight for their role in creating an even (and at times, an uneven) electoral playing field. This is particularly the case in a relatively small Pacific Island country such as Fiji, where a limited number of news outlets exist, and the government and a few private enterprises dominate the advertising market. It exemplifies small media systems wherein media institutions tend to be more reliant on the government for advertising revenue and as a source of news, compared to counterparts in larger media systems (see Singh 2020; Sutton 2007).

According to the MOG report on the 2014 election, some parties claimed that the campaign environment was restrictive and not a level playing field. The challenger parties protested about being unable to get their views into the media, with some media outlets allegedly favouring the incumbent FijiFirst party (Bhim 2015; Robie 2016). While the MOG observed some bias, it concluded that the parties had enough media access to enable voters to make an informed decision (MOG 2014 Election n.d.).

This study on the 2018 election is timely given reports that the Fijian media are divided along ethnic and political lines, including alleged pro or anti-government stances, especially since the 2006 coup (Morris 2015; Pareti 2009; Robie 2014; 2016). The election serves as an appropriate case study to test some of these claims, since debates about national issues are at their peak during campaigning, with

concentrated, round-the-clock media coverage. The analysis was based on how the media treated the different political parties and candidates in terms of space, air-time and tonality of news reporting. The crux is to what extent the country's five major media organisations examined in this study — *The Fiji Times*, the *Fiji Sun*, the Fijian Broadcasting Corporation (FBC), Communications Fiji Limited/fijivillage.com (CFL) and Fiji Television Limited — attempted to provide political parties and candidates balanced, objective and equitable coverage. Social media was not included as this study is focused on mainstream media.²

The results indicate that of the six parties competing in the election, the incumbent FijiFirst party received not only the giant's share of the coverage, but overwhelmingly positive coverage in five of the six media organisations, confirming opposition claims. *The Fiji Times* was the only exception in that it tended to favour the challenger parties. Besides the advantages of incumbency (see Lal 2021), it is moot whether the nature of the coverage gave FijiFirst an edge in the election, which it won by a narrow, 50.02 per cent margin under an Open List Proportional Representation system (although the margin of victory, the gap between the first and the second party in the race, was more than 10 per cent). The content analysis results raise questions not only about the impartiality of some Fiji media organisations, but also the professional capacity of the national media corps to fulfil their obligations to hold power to account, with a survey indicating that Fijian journalists are among the youngest and most inexperienced in the Pacific (Singh and Hanusch 2021). Another question is how the Media Act might have shaped the coverage given claims that its punitive measures had forced and forged a culture of self-censorship on the Fiji media. Dobell (11/4/2022) has written how 'Fiji's hacks have had to bend and bow and dodge and shade the strength of their daily effort to serve truth with the facts'.

In some respects, the 2018 election coverage seems contrary to the basic journalistic tenets of fairness and impartiality — ethical norms that have been controversially turned into legal requirements under the Fiji Media Act. Under Schedule 1 (s 18(1)) clauses 1(a) and 1(d), media 'shall report and interpret news and current affairs honestly' and 'Media organisations shall show fairness at all times, and impartiality and balance in news on political matters, current affairs and controversial questions' (Government of Fiji 2010:36). Under section 24, breaches of the Act could result in a fine of up to FJ\$100,000 for a media organisation, and up to FJ\$25,000 for a publisher or editor, and/or imprisonment of up to two years; to date, no one has been charged (Government of Fiji 2010:11).

The extent to which the Fijian news media conformed with the impartiality and balance

requirements of the Media Act and whether the Act was a help or hinderance with regards to professional standards are among the issues that this research is attempting to address.

Notably, while it is often assumed that one-sided media coverage is simply the product of biased journalists or biased owners, publishers and editorial managers of media organisations, the reality can be far more complex. In small media systems like that of Fiji, a multitude of other variables affect the quality of journalism. These include a small national economy and limited advertising revenue; resource constraints, including insufficient staffing and operating budgets; the political and economic domination of the national government; restrictive media legislation; and the comparative lack of training and education opportunities for journalists. While The University of the South Pacific and Fiji National University offer academic courses in journalism, research indicates that just about half (49.2 per cent) of Fijian journalists have completed a bachelor's degree, which is not only lower than the global average, but also below that of smaller neighbouring countries such as Samoa (69.2 per cent) and the Solomon Islands (68 per cent) (Singh and Hanusch 2021).

The diseconomies of scale in small media markets such as Fiji mean that journalists are generalists or 'Jacks of all trades' rather than specialists, which limits the opportunity to focus on and build expertise in specific areas such as politics or economics (Singh 21/9/2019). Writing in the context of Icelandic journalists, Ólafsson (2020) has stated that the lack of specialisation can seriously impair in-depth reporting on politics. He argued that it was 'difficult for journalists to be critical gatekeepers if they know little about the areas in which they work' (2020:153). This means that in small media markets, some factors that compromise journalistic quality are embedded in the broader macro-environment, such as small advertising markets and a limited revenue base, which not only hampers training and development, but can contribute to journalist attrition as well. These, and some other factors external to the media sector, are often beyond the control of media organisations or individual journalists, who normally face the brunt of criticism for alleged low journalistic standards (see Singh 2020).

Because the news media do not usually conduct research into their own reporting, it is envisaged that this study provides an opportunity to reflect on the 2018 election coverage and identify possible measures to help improve news/election reporting. It is also expected that this study will inform the national authorities about possible actions to help the national media sector, be it media legislation reforms or assisting in training and development, rather than put the blame for any shortcomings solely on individual journalists and media organisations.

Background and context

The major players in the Fiji media landscape

Fiji has the largest and one of the more developed national news media sectors in the Pacific, comparable only to Papua New Guinea, with two major national newspapers and four established broadcasters, besides a range of magazines and publications. The major players in the broadcast sector are the state-owned FBC and three privately owned stations — CFL, Fiji Television Limited, and Mai TV. Because Mai TV did not have a regular news service in 2018, it was not included in this study.

Fiji's largest broadcaster, the FBC, was established in 1954 as a public service radio station and today operates a network of six stations, two in each of the three major languages (iTaukei, Hindustani and English). Two of the stations are classified as 'public service' under a government contract, and the remaining four are 'commercial' in nature. The FBC launched its free-to-air television station in 2011. According to the station's 2017 annual report, FBC is the number one television and news service in Fiji, with a national survey by Australia-based Pulse Insights showing 72 per cent audience preference for its daily 7 pm television news (FBC News 13/6/2018; FBC 2018).

The CFL, founded in 1985 with one English-language station, today runs five stations in all three major languages and a news website 'fijivillage'. According to a company statement, the CFL's media outlets — FM96, Radio Navtarang, Viti FM, Radio Sargam, Legend FM and news website fijivillage.com — reach 80.2 per cent of Fijians, as per a 2019 Tebbutt media survey (CFL 13/8/2019). The other private broadcaster, Fiji Television Limited, was launched in 1994 as the country's first commercial broadcasting network. It is owned by the Fijian Holdings Limited Group and operates the free-to-view channel Fiji One, and formerly operated the pay TV service Sky Pacific, before it was acquired by Digicel in 2016 (Singh 2014).

In the print sector, the two major privately owned English-language dailies are *The Fiji Times* and the *Fiji Sun*. *The Fiji Times*, founded in 1869, is the country's oldest newspaper. It is owned by the Motibhai Group, which purchased it from Rupert Murdoch's News Limited in 2010 in accordance with the Media Act's local media ownership provisions. The newspaper claims that it has the highest circulation in Fiji and the Pacific, with a 2010 Tebutt Research survey indicating an average of 72,993 readers from Monday to Friday (The Fiji Times 1/1/2019).

The *Fiji Sun* was launched in September 1999 and is owned by Sun News Limited. The major shareholder, the CJ Patel Group of Companies, is a multi-sector company with food procurement and distribution operations across Fiji and the Pacific (Narsey 7/2/2013). The *Fiji Sun* does not have independently audited sales figures, although in 2011 it received a Pacific Area Newspaper Publishers' Association advertising award in the 25,000-circulation category (PMW 19/8/2011).

Fiji media and the national political dynamics

Fiji's national news media have been paradoxically described as both champions of democracy and an internal security threat. On the one hand, the media are lauded for holding leaders to account and exposing corruption, but on the other, they have been accused of breaching professional ethics and condemned for alleged inflammatory reporting (Robie 2001). These conflicting sentiments reflect the challenges that the media face in Fiji's complex socio-political setting. The convoluted nature of Fijian politics in general and specific to the national elections is well captured in the most comprehensive book on the 2014 Fijian general election, *The People Have Spoken*, edited by Ratuva and Lawson (2016). This complexity is superimposed on a news media sector with inherent structural weaknesses not untypical of small media systems in developing nations. For instance, Singh and Hanusch's (2021) research into the demographic profile of 209 Pacific journalists in nine Pacific countries indicates that at an average age of 33 years with 7.81 years on the job, Fijian journalists are not only the youngest, but among the least experienced in the region. It confirms similar findings by Robie (2004) based on demographic research in 1999, indicating Fiji's slow progress in the national journalist corps' professional development and retention rates in the media sector in the intervening period of two decades.

Cumulative survey results are indicative of Fiji's high rate of journalist attrition stemming from uncompetitive salaries, a brain-drain due to the country's coup-culture, and concerns about Fiji's punitive Media Act with its steep fines and stiff jail terms for offences (Singh 2021). Consequently, at any given time, there is a young, inexperienced, underqualified and undertrained national journalist corps in the front line of covering complex issues rooted in the country's colonial history, socio-political context and demographic make-up (Singh 2021).

Fiji's two major ethnicities — indigenous Fijians (iTaukei) and Indo-Fijians — feel equally aggrieved (Ramesh 2010). The iTaukei believe that they are marginalised in business and the professions, with fears of losing political control. On their part, Indo-Fijians feel that they have been denied their fair share of political power, besides discrimination in government jobs (Lal 1992; Ramesh 2010; Singh 2014). A history of ethnic differences, political tensions and elite power struggles since independence in 1970 triggered four coups — two in 1987, and one each in 2000 and 2006 — with an oversized, well-armed and well-trained military capitalising on the situation to seize control (Lal 1992).

Given the context in which they operate, the Fijian media inevitably get caught in the political crossfire, with their alleged adversarial approach and misreporting of sensitive issues, such as land ownership, blamed for exacerbating pre-existing tensions. Governments have used these supposed media provocations to call for stronger media controls while media see it as a case of 'shooting the messenger'. The media's attempts

to preserve their independence and maintain the watchdog role, even in the face of coups, has been quite challenging (Morris 2015; Robie 2014).

The first two coups in 1987, staged by the then Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka in the name of indigenous rights, were the Fijian media's first serious brush with censorship. The military closed *The Fiji Times* and *Fiji Sun* newsrooms and took control of the state-owned Fiji Broadcasting Commission (now the Fijian Broadcasting Corporation) to churn out coup propaganda (Robie 2001; Singh 2014). Once a semblance of order was restored, *The Fiji Times* was allowed to reopen after agreeing to not publish stories likely to cause social tensions, while the *Sun* closed for good (Fiji's second daily, the CJ Patel-owned *Fiji Sun*, established in 1999, has no links with the original *Fiji Sun*) (Singh 2014).

Three years after the 1987 coups, Fiji adopted its second constitution, with Rabuka elected prime minister, but the pro-indigenous charter lacked international legitimacy as it discriminated against Indo-Fijians. A political compromise resulted in the more equitable 1997 constitution, and these constitutional guarantees coupled with market deregulation and the introduction of British-style media self-regulation under the newly constituted Fiji Media Council stimulated further growth in an expanding Fiji media market (Singh 2014). The voluntary media council was set up on the recommendations of a 1996 Fiji government-commissioned study funded by the United Kingdom's Thomson Foundation (Tarte 2008). With financial support from the media industry, the council was overseen by an independent chairman, Daryl Tarte, with an equal representation from each media outlet and from members of the public. Unlike the Media Industry Development Authority established under the Media Act, the council had no government involvement and no power to impose punitive sanctions. Instead, once the independent Complaints Committee reached a verdict on a complaint, media organisations that were voluntary members of the council published it in their media outlets (Tarte 2008).

In response to criticism that the council was ineffective and that the media received a mere slap on the wrist for professional misconduct, Tarte stated:

Some may argue that the Complaints Committee should have more teeth and power to impose fines or other sanctions. However, the council is a voluntary organisation with no legal status. The Complaints Committee judges complaints on the basis of ethics and not law, though these inevitably do overlap. The adjudication takes the form of a reasoned judgement upholding or rejecting the complaints and the media organisations are committed to publishing that adjudication. This is a moral rather than a legal obligation. (Tarte 1997:4)

The restoration of democratic freedoms and media rights, including media self-regulation through the media council, resulted in a robust media environment, with a bigger and brasher journalist corps making

strides into previously uncharted territory, including increased investigative journalism and tabloidisation (Singh 2014).

The media's boldness led to greater friction with the state, peaking in 1999 with the election of Fiji's first Indo-Fijian prime minister, Mahendra Chaudhry. After a short honeymoon, the Chaudhry government became embroiled in a bitter feud with the media, especially the Rupert Murdoch-owned *Fiji Times*, and threatened a 'swift justice' media tribunal to curb what it labelled as a 'distorting', 'lying', 'racist' and 'seditious' press (Robie 2001).

However, before he could make good on his threat, Chaudhry was ousted in the 2000 nationalist coup, ostensibly led by Suva-based businessman George Speight, with some media blamed for inflammatory reporting and certain journalists accused of consorting with rebels (Robie 2001). The 2000 coup was a watershed for the Fiji media sector: alarmed by Chaudhry's fall, future governments intensified their media censorship efforts. The post-2000 coup government of prime minister Laisenia Qarase even proposed the Media Council of Fiji Bill (Government of the Republic of the Fiji Islands 2003), empowering the information minister to make key appointments and regulate media content, but dropped the idea in the face of a fierce 'Kill The Bill' campaign, mounted by the media.

The Qarase government's own fall in the 2006 coup was preceded by a prolonged and bitter public debate with the military, played out in the national press, with Bainimarama dubbing his coup a 'clean-up campaign' against what he labelled a 'corrupt' and 'racist' administration. Unlike the previous coups, the 2006 coup did not have an overt indigenous/nationalistic agenda; Bainimarama instead invoking 'multiracialism' as his mantra (Morris 2015).

The 2006 coup planners apparently expected the media to support their ideals given that, initially, they did not put any reporting restrictions in place. But a media weaned on the Anglo-American free press tradition had a mind of its own and, over time, started criticising the coup. This saw a government clamp-down to contain the situation. An April 2009 Fiji Court of Appeal ruling that the 2006 military coup was illegal led to President Ratu Josefa Iloilo abrogating the 1997 constitution and imposing emergency regulations. Among the various restrictions on the media was the placement of state censors in all the newsrooms to vet stories before publication (Morris 2015; Pareti 2009).

The emergency regulations were the precursor to the most comprehensive, pervasive and systematic media crackdown in the country's history with the promulgation of The Media Industry Development Decree in June 2010 (later converted to the Media Act). The decree rendered the media council redundant, with media self-regulation replaced by government regulation. Under the Decree, what were once considered ethical breaches were reclassified as criminal offences, complete with fines and jail terms. Section 22 barred any content 'against the public

interest or order; ... [or] against the national interest' (Government of Fiji 2010). Critics described these provisions as ill-defined and uncertain (Morris 2015).

After eight years of rule by decree, Fiji returned to the polls in 2014 under the new 2013 constitution promulgated by the leaders and supporters of the 2006 coup, with the media decree 'preserved' in the constitution by section 173. Bainimarama's FijiFirst party emerged victorious in 2014, and with a handy 60 per cent voter endorsement, doubled down on its much-criticised media law (see Bhim 2015; Morris 2015; Singh 2014). At the 28th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva in 2015, attorney general and communications minister Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum stated that Fiji's constitution recognised 'freedom of expression, but not the freedom to incite violence or racial hatred' (Sayed-Khaiyum 2015:10–11).

While the Fijian media recovered fairly well from both the 1987 and 2000 coup ordeals once democratic order was restored and the restrictions on media rights were relaxed, the post-2006 coup situation was more permanent, with the Media Act in place for 12 years in June 2022. Although the free-speech situation gradually improved following the 2014 and 2018 elections, persistent concerns about the Media Act saw Fiji drop 47 places in the Reporters Without Borders 2022 World Press Freedom Index to place 102 out of 180 countries, with an overall score of 56.91 out of 100 (Reporters Without Borders 2022). But the government shows no signs of relaxing the laws, insisting that they are necessary given the history of political and ethnic tensions in Fiji.

Methodology

The methodology for the 2018 election content analysis is derived from the Loughborough University Centre for Research in Communication and Culture's analysis of the national news coverage of the UK general election campaign (Loughborough University 2019). It is based on two cross-cutting criteria:

1. Stopwatch balance (quantitative): the amount of time or space media allocate to each party.
2. Directional balance (qualitative): the manner in which media portray party candidates, officials and messages (positive, negative or neutral).

Stopwatch balance

'Stopwatch balance' determines whether the political parties and electoral contestants were given proportionate coverage. It includes:

- *Direct quotation time/space*: the amount of time or space that parties and candidates received in election-related news.
- *Frequency of appearance*: the number of times party representatives appeared in election-related news.

Direct quotation represents the opportunity that media gave to candidates/parties to address voters in their own specific words — their unadulterated, undiluted statements. It covers both print (direct quotation space) and broadcast media (direct quotation time). Direct quotation assesses which parties' representatives

have been quoted the most, or the least. It is distinct from mixed quotations and paraphrasing, which can distort the message — either accidentally or deliberately through cherry-picking or malicious editing. Because direct quotation is regarded as generally more advantageous for the party, it can be taken as a measurement of the level of access or 'platform' that a news media afforded to an electoral contestant.

To determine direct quotation space in print media, we counted the number of words in full direct quotations in news stories for the different political parties and their representatives during the research time frame. To determine direct quotation time in broadcast media we used 'stopwatch balance' to measure the number of seconds allocated to direct quotes. In addition, we tallied the number of appearances by each party representative or candidate in broadcast news. This is necessary because in broadcast media, neither direct quotation time nor the number of appearances, on their own, provide a fully accurate account of the situation. Both the variables must be considered together for a more complete picture. For example, a particular political party candidate can make three appearances for a total of only 20 seconds direct quotation time, while another party candidate could make a single appearance but amass 60 seconds in all. A media organisation with a deliberate bias can accord higher quotation time to the party it supports, while keeping the number of appearances low.

Directional balance

As the qualitative element, directional balance assesses positive, negative or neutral coverage, since the public image of political parties and contestants is shaped not only by the amount of coverage but also by its tone; that is, how the parties/candidates are portrayed in the news. Media can provide a candidate with lots of coverage and direct quotation time but if it is largely in the negative sense, the net effect could be unfavourable. In contrast, a positive portrayal could leave a more favourable impression, even if the appearances are less frequent.

When determining directional balance, the key element is the final impression of the coverage on the public — would it cause the reader/viewer to think favourably or unfavourably of the party/candidate?

Period of study

The study period ran from the issuance of the writ of the new election to 48 hours before election day, when the media blackout period began (2 October 2018 to 12 November 2018). The issuance of the writ of the election in Fiji marked the beginning of the electoral period and, with no clear definition of 'campaign period' in the electoral legislation at that time,³ it was taken as the start of the official campaign period. According to Fiji's 2014 Electoral Act, the blackout period starts 48 hours before election day, with the media banned from covering any election campaigning.

What was included in the data

As a measure of objectivity, balance and fairness in elections coverage, the analysis is confined to election-related news stories in Fiji's mainstream news media, with all forms of opinion left out. This differentiation and elimination was necessary because while those in the news media are professionally-bound to report news objectively, they are permitted to take a position in opinion sections such as editorials, columns and commentary. In other words, journalists expressing their opinion in news stories is considered a breach of ethics whereas expressing an opinion in the editorial sections is not necessarily a breach.

We only used local news stories as data because the newsroom exercises total editorial control and responsibility over local news in terms of story angle, newsprint space or airtime, as well as story placement/prominence.

For the national print media, only news stories dedicated to the election authored by local journalists were considered. As discussed above, editorial comments and other opinion pieces authored by in-house writers, political party affiliates or guest writers were excluded. Also excluded were analysis of photographs and other visual elements, including paid advertisements. For the two television stations, we included Fiji Television's and FBC's major news bulletins at 6 pm and 7 pm respectively. For radio, we used CFL's news website, 'fijivillage.com', which publishes all news stories aired on their five radio stations.

Limitations

Media content analysis has its limits when it comes to complex concepts such as balance, impartiality and objectivity. Independently, quantitative or qualitative content analyses tell only part of the story, with a greater risk of an incomplete or biased picture. To mitigate this risk, both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed for a more thorough cross-examination of the data.

For instance, conclusive judgements of bias cannot be made solely on the amount of time or space allocated to a party or contestant. Indeed, a greater amount of media space or time could be justified on

the presence of public support and confidence in the ideas being expressed. Likewise, a news media outlet may provide equal amounts of space to all electoral contestants but present some in a damaging light and others in a positive light. This disparity would not be captured in quantitative data, but it would show up in qualitative measurements. Integrating complementary qualitative and quantitative methods addresses some of the gaps in each strategy.

In some respects, the risk of researcher bias in qualitative judgements is higher than in quantitative measurements, where the researchers mechanically count/tally the computed figures. In order to mitigate researcher subjectivity, we engaged foreign researchers (political science scholars from Canada) in data collection and collation to reduce the risk of local bias. Another measure was the use of intercoder reliability tests for selected variables to attain an acceptable level of reliability of assessments and findings.

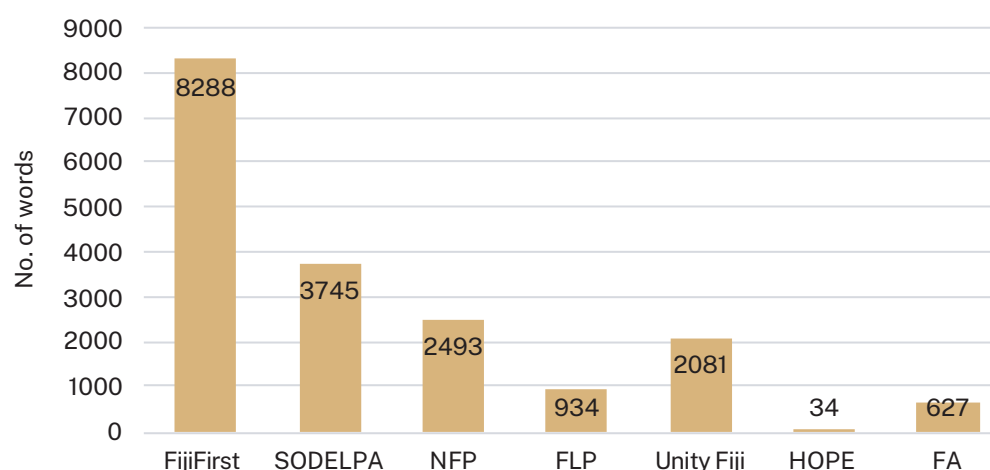
Results and discussion

Section 1 — Stopwatch balance: Direct quotation space and frequency of appearance

The *Fiji Sun* results (Figures 1 and 2) show that the incumbent FijiFirst party received the highest proportion of direct quotation space at 46%, while the six challenger parties shared the remaining 54% (see Figure 2). Of these, the two main challenger parties, SODELPA and NFP, received 21% and 14% respectively, while Unity Fiji, FLP, Freedom Alliance (FA) and HOPE shared 19% between them.

Because greater direct quotation space is generally regarded as beneficial, FijiFirst enjoyed an advantaged position in the *Fiji Sun*, as evident from the 25% difference in quotation space with the largest challenger party, SODELPA. This imbalance could partly explain why the *Fiji Sun*, which has an exclusive advertising contract with the government, is often seen as a pro-government newspaper, with some challenger parties claiming that it does not run their media statements and rebuttals against government statements (Singh 2021). The *Fiji Sun* has publicly stated that it is 'broadly supportive' of government policies which had 'strong public support'

Figure 1: The *Fiji Sun* direct quotation space (words)



(University of the South Pacific 2014). This editorial stance could be linked to the *Fiji Sun*'s direct quotation space results favouring FijiFirst. It could also indicate that government's dominant role in small media systems could make media organisations financially dependent, if not beholden to the state, with possible impact on journalistic independence (see Sutton 2007).

Interestingly, as a new party, Unity Fiji received more than twice as much direct quotation space (Figure 1) than the well-established FLP. But if news media coverage is relative to a political party's prominence/popularity, then the FLP in 2018 was no longer the major political force that it once was. Its fortunes had waned since forming a majority government in 1999, and it was not able to win any seats in the 2014 and 2018 elections. Unity Fiji was only 4% behind another well-established party, the NFP, which won three seats in 2014 and 2018.

Figure 2: The *Fiji Sun* direct quotation space as a percentage

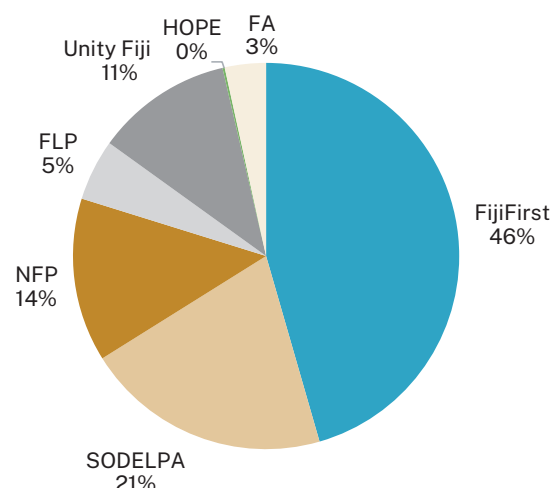


Figure 3: The *Fiji Times* direct quotation space (words)

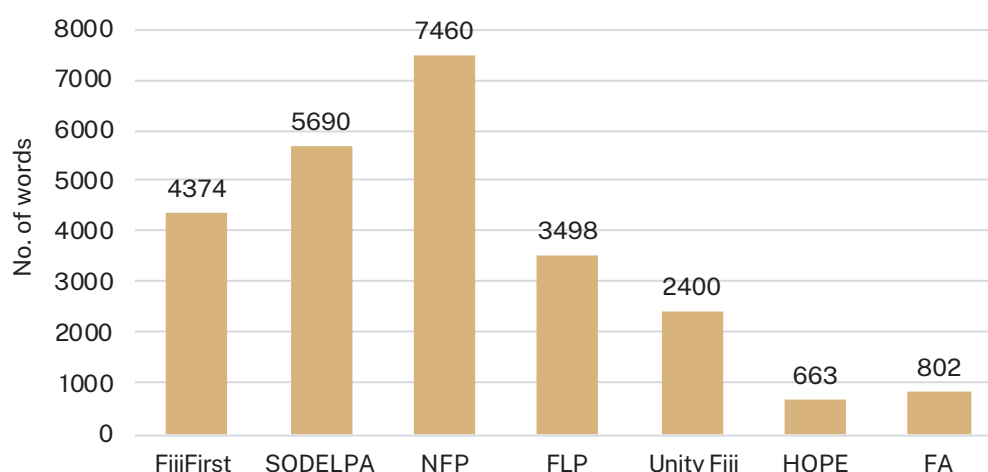
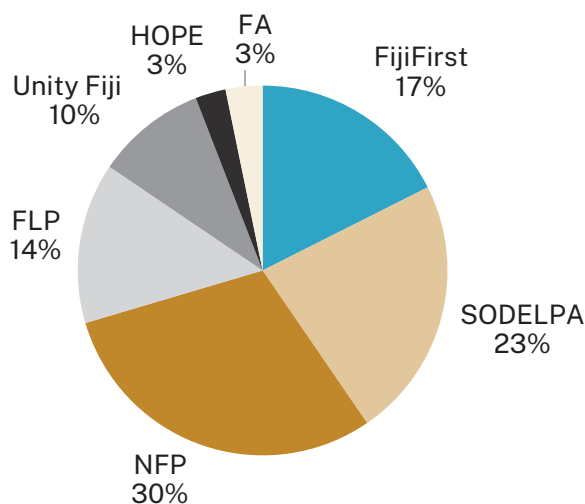


Figure 4: The *Fiji Times* direct quotation space as a percentage



The *Fiji Times* direct quotation space (see Figures 3 and 4) puts FijiFirst third with 17%, which is 29% less than in the *Fiji Sun*. Even as the incumbent party, FijiFirst still finished behind the two major challenger parties, NFP at 30% and SODELPA, 23%. The FLP, Unity Fiji, HOPE and FA parties comprised the remaining 30%.

FijiFirst's lower proportion could partly be due to its apparent unwillingness to engage with *The Fiji Times*. The newspaper's editor-in-chief, Fred Wesley, claimed that FijiFirst often ignored their interview requests (Singh 2021). In August 2016, Attorney General Sayed-Khaiyum, while addressing farmers in the Northern Division, accused the *Times* of politicising issues. He stated that he never read the newspaper and urged the farmers to do likewise. Both the attorney general and Prime Minister Bainimarama have frequently accused the newspaper of an anti-government stance, which it has denied (Singh 2021). FijiFirst's accusations aside, its apparent failure to engage with the newspaper could have contributed to its relatively poor showing.

It is somewhat remarkable that the NFP not only achieved higher quotation space than the ruling party, but also more than SODELPA, the largest opposition

Figure 5: FBC TV direct quotation time (seconds)

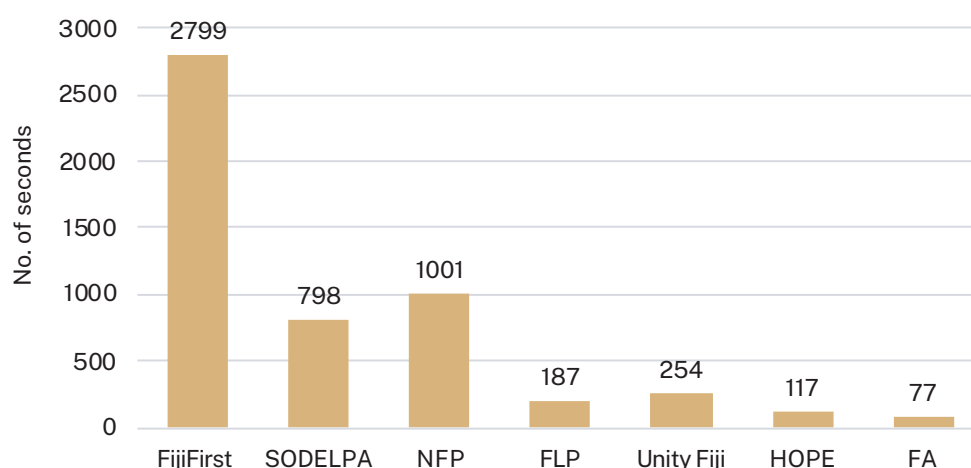


Table 1: FBC TV frequency of appearance

| | FijiFirst | SODELPA | NFP | FLP | Unity Fiji | HOPE | FA |
|--------------------------|-----------|---------|-----|-----|------------|------|----|
| Frequency of appearances | 113 | 66 | 51 | 18 | 17 | 12 | 9 |
| Percentage | 40% | 23% | 18% | 6% | 6% | 4% | 3% |

party in parliament (Figure 3). A number of reasons could explain the NFP's high value, such as making itself more accessible to *The Fiji Times* or its messages having greater appeal for the newspaper's editorial team. In contrast, possible explanations for SODELPA's relatively low value range from insufficient efforts to engage with the newspaper to the newspaper's and/or its journalists' lower level of interest in the party's pro-indigenous manifesto.

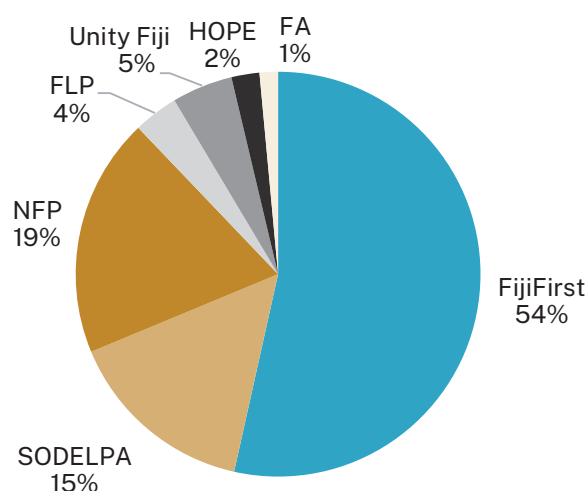
FBC TV gave FijiFirst more than half the direct quotation time which could reflect claims that it is pro FijiFirst government. Regarding the challenger parties, the NFP had the highest proportion of direct quotation time at 19%, followed by SODELPA, 15% (Figure 6). Both these values were well below FijiFirst. The four remaining parties shared 12% between them. In the number of appearances (Table 1), FijiFirst graced FBC TV more than any other party, with 113 appearances (40%), followed by SODELPA at 66 (23%) and the NFP with 51 (18%).

FBC TV's direct quotation time and frequency of appearance results could confirm opposition claims that the station does not give them equitable coverage (Singh 2021). The opposition links the FBC's alleged stance to the multi-million-dollar government loans and public service broadcasting fees that it receives (Narayan 10/9/2021).

While it can be argued that FijiFirst's status as the ruling party means that it is more newsworthy, thus commanding greater media attention, its clear dominance in both direct quotation time and frequency of appearances raises questions: does FijiFirst's news dominance reflect its greater level of newsworthiness as the ruling party, or are there other factors at play? Does FijiFirst's status as the financier

of the state broadcaster mean greater leeway and access to the station?

Figure 6: FBC TV direct quotation time as a percentage



Notably, in his public remarks, the FBC chief executive officer, Riyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, has called for a cooperative rather than adversarial government-media relationship. Sayed-Khaiyum stated that the Fiji context requires 'solutions-orientated development journalism' without abandoning the watchdog role (Vandhana 10/11/2012). Whether this outlook, based on the FijiFirst government's emphasis on nation-building and multiracialism, influenced the FBC's coverage is a consideration.

Regarding the challenger parties, once again the NFP outsourced SODELPA, a bigger party, in direct quotation time, although SODELPA had a higher

Figure 7: Fiji One direct quotation time (seconds)

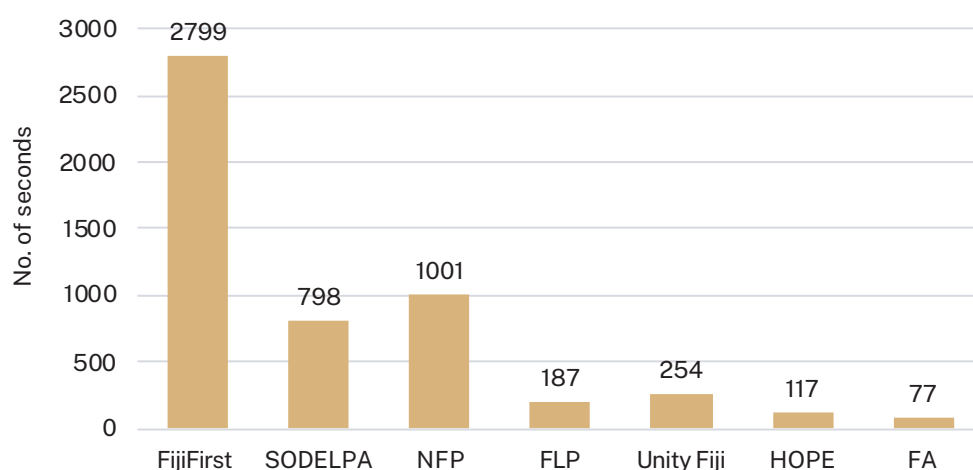


Table 2: Fiji One frequency of appearance

| | FijiFirst | SODELPA | NFP | FLP | Unity Fiji | HOPE | FA |
|--------------------------|-----------|---------|-----|-----|------------|------|----|
| Frequency of appearances | 85 | 14 | 9 | 4 | 6 | 2 | 1 |
| Percentage | 70% | 12% | 7% | 3% | 5% | 2% | 1% |

frequency of appearance. Presuming that SODELPA as the second-largest party should receive a proportionate share of coverage, several questions arise: is the NFP better at securing media spaces than SODELPA? Is SODELPA let down by its lack of media savviness? Is SODELPA's emphasis on indigenous paramountcy rather than multiracialism less appealing for FBC TV?

Fiji One's direct quotation time (Figures 7 and 8) and frequency of appearance (Table 2) were tilted heavily in favour of FijiFirst. The incumbent party's 81% of direct quotation time reflects its overwhelming dominance, with the six challenger parties sharing the remaining 19%. The party with the second-highest direct quotation time, Unity Fiji, managed only 8%. The 73% difference in quotation time between the highest and second-highest values is quite pronounced.

In frequency of appearance, FijiFirst with 70% dominated while the challenger parties shared 30% between them. In absolute terms, FijiFirst made 85 appearances to SODELPA's 14 and the NFP's 9, while Unity Fiji, FLP, HOPE and FA made 13 appearances between them. The frequency of appearance gap between FijiFirst and SODELPA, the second-highest scoring party, is a significant 71 appearances. In total, FijiFirst appeared on Fiji One more than twice as often as the other six opposition parties' combined 36 appearances.

There could be any number of reasons for Fiji One's slant, including self-censorship to protect against the Media Act, affinity with FijiFirst policies or its well-publicised internal problems. The company's poor financial position was at its worst in November 2016, when its value dropped by over 50% on the South Pacific Stock Exchange, with staffing reduced from 120 to 76 (Valemei 14/9/2016).

Furthermore, in February 2017, the NFP accused Fiji Television's owners, Fijian Holdings Limited, of interfering in editorial matters with a 'pro-government' agenda (National Federation Party 19/2/2017). A few months later, in May, Fiji Television came under the scrutiny of the International Federation of Journalists over the dismissal of reporter Anish Chand for voicing concerns about objective news coverage (IFJ 15/5/2014).

These developments have been linked to Fiji Television's ownership ties to government. As an investment company set up in 1984 to further indigenous Fijians in business, Fijian Holdings was the recipient of a FJ\$20 million government grant. As a benefactor of the company, the government appoints

Figure 8: Fiji One direct quotation time as a percentage

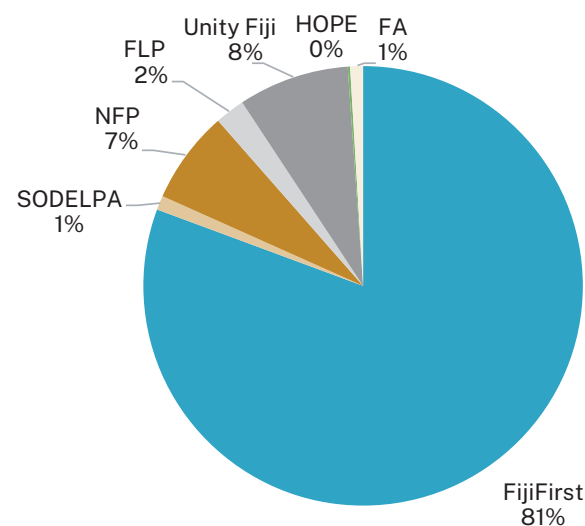


Figure 9: Fijivillage.com direct quotation time (seconds)

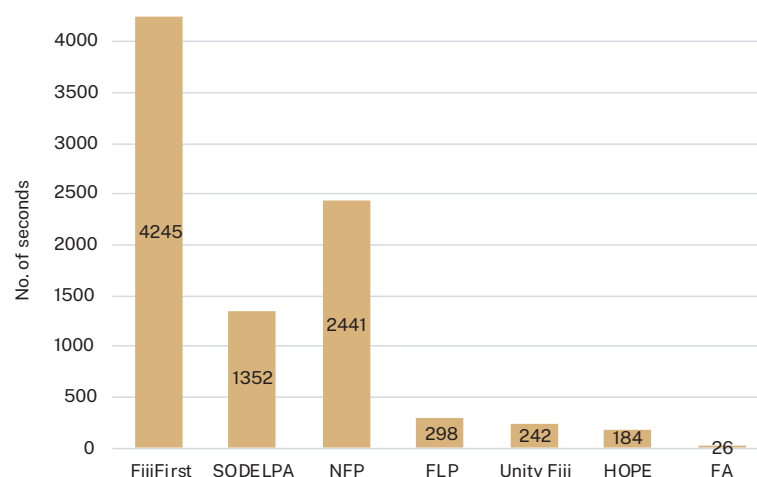


Table 3: Fijivillage.com frequency of appearance

| | FijiFirst | SODELPA | NFP | FLP | Unity Fiji | HOPE | FA |
|--------------------------|-----------|---------|-----|-----|------------|------|----|
| Frequency of appearances | 64 | 40 | 48 | 9 | 8 | 3 | 0 |
| Percentage | 37% | 23% | 28% | 5% | 5% | 2% | 0% |

its board and chairman, giving it considerable traction within Fijian Holdings and, by extension, possibly Fiji Television (Singh 2014). This reflects the pervasiveness of governments in countries with small media systems (see Sutton 2007).

Fijivillage.com news gave the most direct quotation time (Figures 9 and 10) and frequency of appearance (Table 3) to FijiFirst at 48% (Figure 10), which shows just how much FijiFirst dominated coverage in major broadcast media, be it radio or television. This was followed by the NFP at 28%, and SODELPA, 15%, with the smaller parties sharing the remainder (see Figure 10). In number of appearances, FijiFirst again was first at 37%; NFP in second place with 28% and SODELPA third with 23%. In absolute terms, FijiFirst made 64 appearances to the NFP's 48 and SODELPA's 40.

The 33% quotation gap between FijiFirst and SODELPA, Fiji's second largest party, could be deemed significant. It was larger than the NFP–FijiFirst 20% quotation gap. This difference could be due to one or more of the following: fijivillage.com's affinity for FijiFirst policies, as opposed to SODEPLA policies, or SODELPA's lack of initiative to court the media.

In the NFP's case, the higher quotation time was not wholly positive in that it was partly due to the high number of news stories in which it had to respond to various allegations of a political nature in its debates with FijiFirst. Notably, the time allocated to the party making the allegation (FijiFirst) was disproportionately higher than that afforded to the party defending

the allegations (NFP). But even if the NFP was the secondary party in the news stories, it was at least having a presence in the media, unlike SODELPA, which was less visible. This is another result that not only brings into question media objectivity, but also SODELPA's media savviness and level of effort to court the media to communicate and promote its manifesto.

Figure 10: Fijivillage.com direct quotation time as a percentage

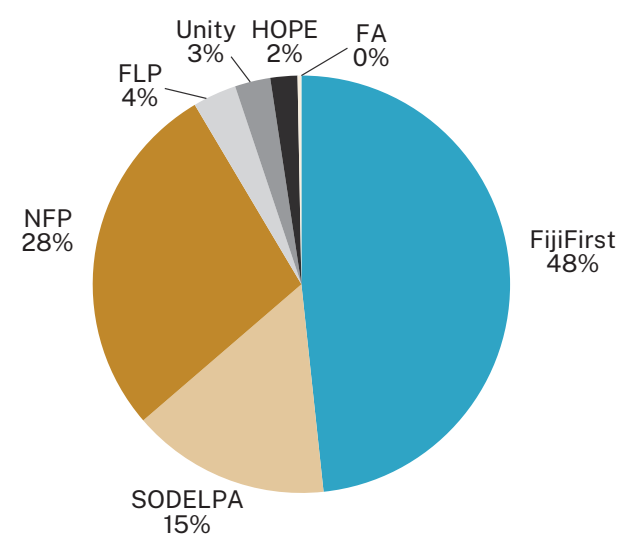
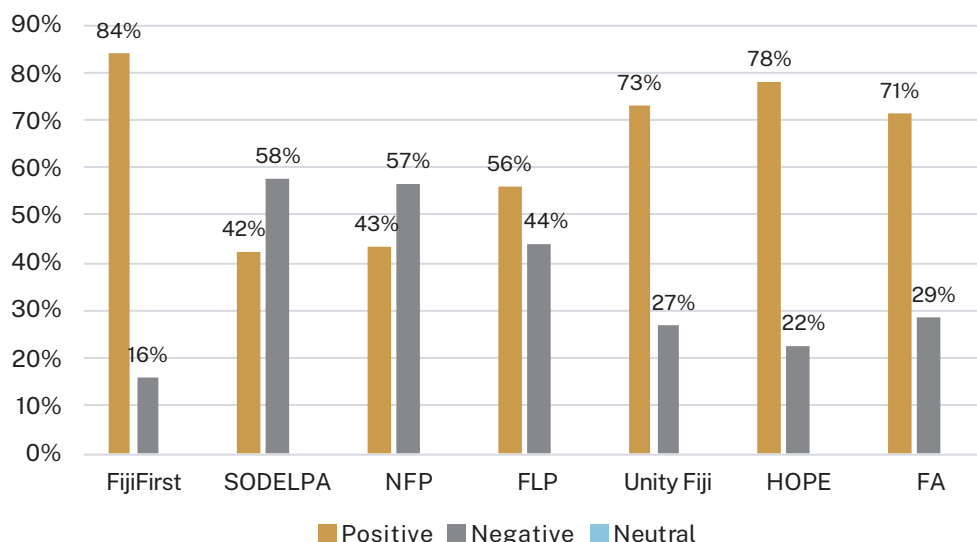


Figure 11: *Fiji Sun* directional balance



Section 2 — Directional balance

The *Fiji Sun* directional balance (Figure 11) shows that the coverage was positively skewed in FijiFirst's favour at 84%, while the coverage of the two major challenging parties, SODELPA and NFP, was proportionally more even at around 40% positive, although both parties received more negative than positive coverage. Unity Fiji, HOPE and FA each received 70% or more positive coverage, followed by the FLP at 56%. Generally, the smaller parties' directional balance, whether positive or negative, can be said to be of negligible significance because of the comparatively small amount of overall coverage that they received.

Although the *Fiji Sun* is on the record with its 'pro-government policy' position, the comparatively low-level criticism of a ruling party is remarkable, especially during the crucial election period. In a functioning democracy, it is expected that a ruling party that holds the reins of power and controls the

national budget would be routinely questioned and critiqued by the media, and even more so during elections, in line with media's role as the watchdog of government. Editorially and journalistically, the relatively low critical coverage is difficult to explain, especially when both the main opposition parties received 55% negative coverage, even though they were not in power and not accountable to the public in the same manner as the ruling party.

While the research findings reflect the *Fiji Sun*'s publicly stated support for the government's policies, the question is where to draw the line? When does media impartiality, journalistic objectivity and the holding of power to account come in, notwithstanding the constraints of small media systems?

Overall, *The Fiji Times* ran more positive than negative stories on all challenger parties except HOPE (see Figure 12). In contrast, FijiFirst, whose leaders criticise *The Times* for 'anti-government' reporting,

Figure 12: *The Fiji Times* directional balance

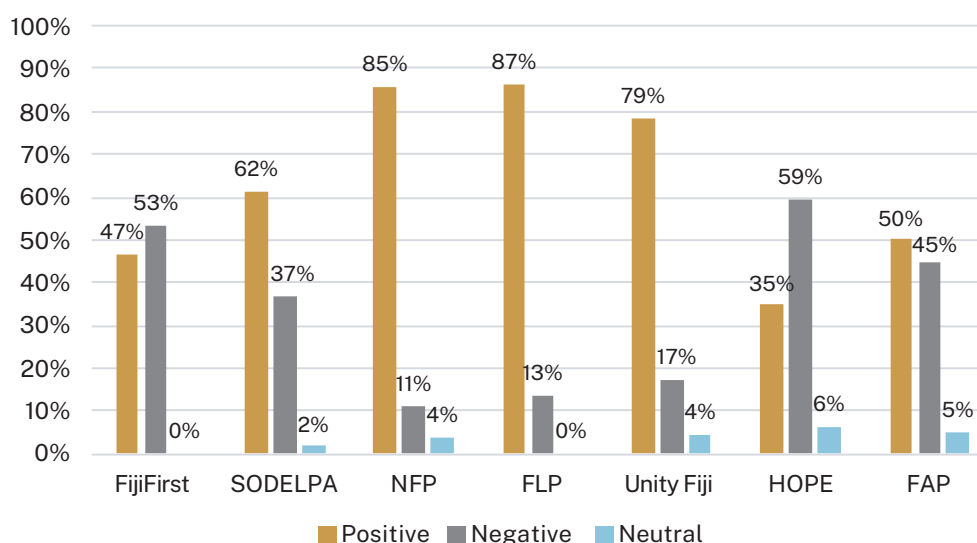
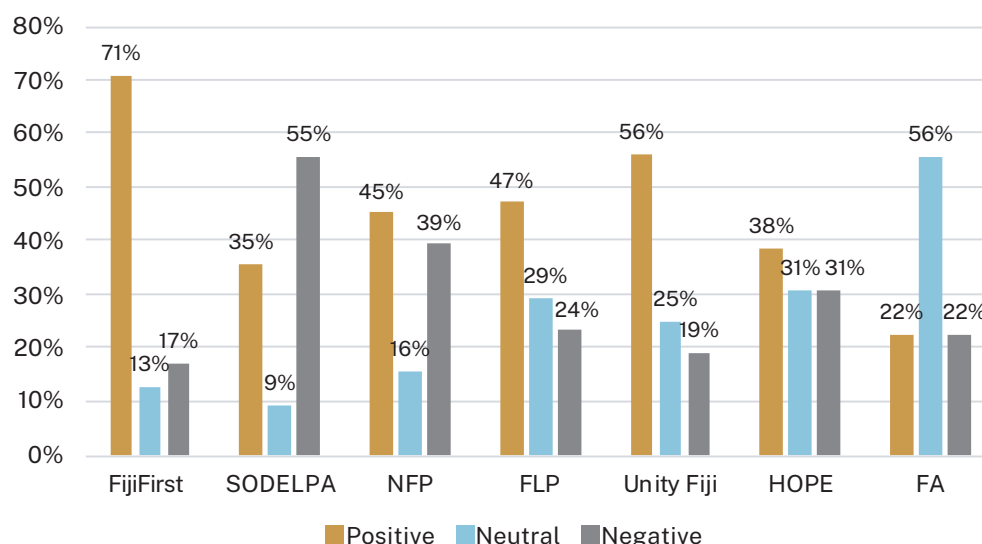


Figure 13: FBC TV directional balance



received more negative (53%) than positive (47%) coverage. The positive coverage of the two main opposition parties, the NFP and SODELPA, was 85% and 62% respectively, well above the positive coverage afforded to the incumbent party.

The difference between FijiFirst's positive and negative coverage is not much, which calls into question the incumbent party's frequent accusations that *The Fiji Times* is anti-government, most recently by iTaukei Affairs assistant minister Selai Adimaitoga in parliament in September 2021, that the paper's 'anti-government motives are evident on most of its front pages' (Nacei 25/9/2021).

The FBC TV directional balance (Figure 13) gives FijiFirst a clear lead with an overwhelming 71% positive coverage, against 17% negative and 13% neutral. In comparison, SODELPA received 55% negative, 35% positive and 9% neutral coverage. The NFP received 45% positive, 39% negative coverage, while the FLP received

47% positive, 24% negative coverage. Of the smaller/newer parties, Unity Fiji and HOPE received more positive than negative coverage, whereas the FA received an equal proportion of positive and negative coverage.

As pointed out previously, the incumbent party's positive-negative coverage ratio could be deemed unusual since the sitting party is expected to come under greater media scrutiny during election campaigns and to be subjected to rigorous questioning. As far as the smaller challenger parties are concerned, the directional balance could be deemed inconsequential because of their relatively small proportion of the overall media coverage.

FBC TV's directional balance corresponds with its stopwatch balance results indicating both overwhelming coverage and overwhelmingly positive coverage of the ruling FijiFirst party, unlike FijiFirst's major rival, SODELPA, which received more negative than positive coverage.

Figure 14: Fiji One directional balance

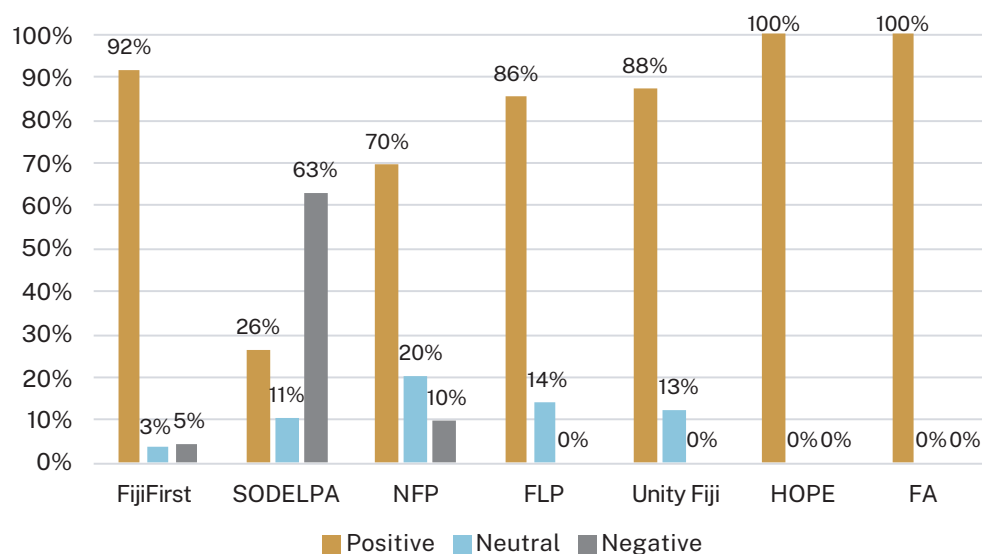
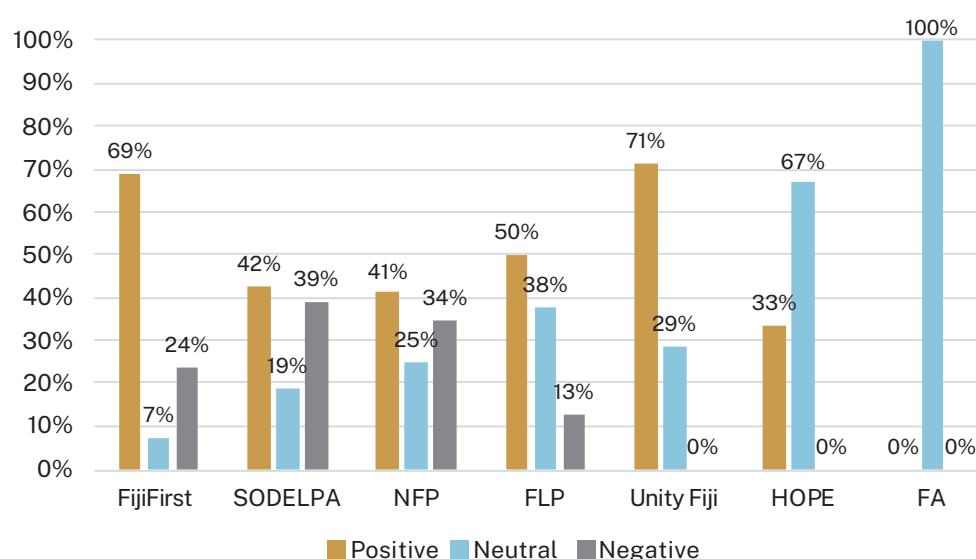


Figure 15: CFL fijiivillage.com directional balance



The question is whether FijiFirst's directional balance results reflect FBC TV's support for the FijiFirst government's policies or is it instrumentalist/clientelist in nature, in that the broadcaster benefits from public service broadcasting fees and government guaranteed loans? Some multiracial policies of the FijiFirst that FBC TV is on the record supporting are somewhat at odds with SODELPA's stance on the paramountcy of indigenous rights.

The Fiji One news directional balance graph (Figure 14) shows that apart from SODELPA, the other five contesting parties received more positive than negative coverage. But FijiFirst's 92% positivity ratio dwarfed the rest. SODELPA received 63% negative, 26% positive coverage while the NFP received 70% positive, 10% negative coverage. The smaller parties — FLP, Unity Fiji, HOPE and FA — all received a greater proportion of positive than negative coverage, but this advantage was negated by the overall infrequency of the coverage — the 'out of sight, out of mind' phenomenon.

As pointed out previously, Fiji One's consistently comprehensive and complimentary coverage of FijiFirst raises concerns about its editorial independence and the professional capacity of its journalists due to its well-publicised staffing challenges. It is conceivable that the coverage was affected by its internal problems, including financial woes and apparent pressure from its owners. The 'chilling effect' of the Media Act could be a factor as well.

The CFL fijiivillage.com directional balance (Figure 15) shows that while coverage of all the parties was generally more positive than negative, the ratio was highest in FijiFirst's favour at 69:24, compared to SODELPA's 42:39; NFP's 41:34 and the FLP's 50:38. The qualitative analysis shows that a large number of SODELPA and NFP news stories were responses to the incumbent party's allegations, which is somewhat of a disadvantage for these opposition parties as they were not the principals in these stories, but secondary elements.

CFL fijiivillage.com's directional balance results correspond with its stopwatch balance findings with regards positive coverage of FijiFirst. CFL fijiivillage.com does not have any known ties with the ruling party, financial or otherwise, so the question is whether coverage reflects broad support for the government and/or government policies, either by individual journalists, or by the editorial team as a whole.

Conclusion

Overall, the data indicate that the news reporting of the 2018 Fiji election favoured the incumbent FijiFirst party, in both the quantity and the tone of the coverage. This was found across four of the five media organisations in this analysis. The only exception was *The Fiji Times*, whose coverage was comparatively more balanced, and more critical of the incumbent party. The fact that so much of the reporting on FijiFirst was positive is problematic in that the party in power is expected to be covered in a critical manner, consistent with the media's role as a 'watchdog of government', especially during elections, when opposition scrutiny and criticism of government performance is at its peak, and duly reported by the national press.

For the most part, the results show a direct correlation between the size/prominence of a party and the amount of news time/space. The incumbent FijiFirst party and the other two parties in parliament, SODELPA and NFP, dominated the coverage, while Unity Fiji, FLP, HOPE and FA had to contend with scraps of coverage.

While it is reasonable that FijiFirst, as the ruling party, is more newsworthy than the opposition parties, and as such, likely to attract a greater level of media interest and attention, it is the overwhelming positivity of the coverage that is questionable, given that ideally, media should strive to give all parties equitable, objective and critical coverage. This is not only in line with media's professional obligations, but also

in accordance with Fiji's Media Act, which mandates balanced, objective and fair reporting.

Besides overwhelming favourable coverage in the *Fiji Sun*, FijiFirst made far more appearances on the television stations, FBC TV and Fiji One, as well as on the CFL radio stations. In directional balance, positive coverage on Fiji One at 92%, the *Fiji Sun* at 84% and FBC TV at 71% seem disproportionately high compared to *The Fiji Times*' at 47%. It shows FijiFirst's dominance in the national media sphere.

While biased media is a constant hazard in journalism, it should be noted that skewed coverage is not always entirely the product of deliberate bias but also a reflection of the overall national media landscape. The landscape includes variables such as journalists' professional capacity, the media organisation's financial situation, the financial and political domination of government in the media sector and the freedoms enshrined in the country's media legislation, or lack thereof.

The literature shows that Fiji has a relatively young, inexperienced and underqualified journalist corps, in addition to the aforementioned limitations of a small media system, superimposed by the potentially chilling effect of the Media Act on critical journalism (Singh and Hanusch 2021). The restrictions could be a defining factor given that the Fiji media have been under constant pressure since the 2006 coup and the threat posed by the Media Act would be on the minds of journalists every time they sit down to type out a story.

The research results raise some key questions:

- Why did FijiFirst receive such disproportionate coverage in sections of the national media? Besides FijiFirst's incumbency and the apparent media partiality towards its policies/manifesto, were there other factors at play?
- Did FijiFirst's status as the ruling party allow greater access to the state broadcaster, which is the recipient of government guaranteed loans and fees?
- Likewise, to what extent was the *Fiji Sun*'s coverage affected by its exclusive advertising deal with the government? To what degree was the coverage influenced by the *Fiji Sun*'s support for government policies?
- In similar vein, was Fiji Television's coverage influenced by its owner, Fijian Holdings, which is financially tied to the government? Was it affected by operational challenges due to financial and staffing issues?
- What about journalist age, experience and qualifications? What impact did these variables have?
- To what degree did the Media Act, which had been in place for eight years when the election was held, influence the coverage? Were journalists and media organisations holding back because of the punitive measures in the Act?

The research findings bring into question the Fiji media sector's ability to fulfil its watchdog role by reporting elections critically and holding government to account. Because voters need sound information to

make good decisions in elections, a bold, competent and well-trained, financially well-compensated national media corps unencumbered by excessive legislation and undue interference is indispensable. Consequently, the results of this research indicate some areas that could be considered for improvement:

- The government could re-examine the punitive Media Act given claims by international media watchdogs and local observers that it has been fostering a culture of self-censorship in the Fijian media sector (Bhim 2015; MOG 2018 election n.d.; Morris 2015; Reporters Without Borders 2022). Whether the Media Act had a bearing on the media's reluctance to critically engage the ruling party is a moot point considering the 2018 MOG report highlighting 'ongoing concern among some media practitioners and others about self-censorship resulting from the penalties attached to the MIDA Act'.⁴
- The government could reconsider exclusive advertising contracts with a single media entity to avoid the risks of a conflict of interest. Spreading taxpayer-funded advertising more evenly among the Fijian media organisations will not only allay doubts and suspicions about bias, but also reduce the likelihood of biased reporting.
- Similarly, the government could consider looking at any potential/suspected conflicts of interest with the state broadcaster, financial or otherwise, and if need be, see how to remedy them. For instance, the government could spread the public service broadcast budget equitably in the country's broadcast media sector. Besides reducing the state broadcaster's dependence on the government, any additional revenue allocated to private media organisations for public service broadcasts would help them meet their financial challenges to, among other things, strengthen their editorial departments. A good example is Fiji TV, apparently facing financial and resource constraints. These measures could contribute to building a stronger national media landscape.

As stated previously, the election coverage analysis results are not exclusively caused by biased media organisations or prejudiced journalists. Inexperience coupled with lack of training and qualifications can inadvertently lead to one-sided reporting, not to mention the presence of restrictive media laws. Research indicates that Fijian journalists are among the youngest and most inexperienced in the Pacific and this needs to be considered in the analysis (Singh and Hanusch 2021). Punitive media legislation alone does nothing to address the deficit in training and development. This needs to be considered by all the stakeholders and affected parties, including government, by, among other things, looking at the possibility and viability of material support for the media sector in whatever forms necessary.

Author notes

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Endnotes

1. While seven parties registered for the 2018 election, only six fielded candidates. The Freedom Alliance ended up not fielding any candidates, but because it took part in the campaigning and received media coverage, it is included in this report.
2. For social media usage in the 2018 election, see Tarai (2019).
3. This has since been addressed in an amendment to the Electoral Act in 2021. Section 109A gives treatment to the issue of the campaign period.
4. See also, Pacific Media Centre and RSF (2014), a submission on the state of freedom of expression and access to information in Fiji, which made several specific recommendations pertinent to the 2018 election.

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ISSN 2209-9476 (Print)
ISSN 2209-9530 (Online)

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