

# The weather is never neutral

## Then and now

**Commentary:** Reporting on the weather may seem at first glance to be a very light story, but it can actually be a serious reflection of how we see ourselves and our changing perception of the world. In 1996, the author embarked on a light-hearted survey of 23 daily papers to find what New Zealand newspapers' weather reports said about their attitudes to the world. In the middle of the 2020 COVID lockdown he reran the survey to see what had changed.

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### Introduction

IN 1997, I wrote a column for the then *New Zealand Journalism Review* about the world weather in newspapers (Rees, 1997). It was a minor piece among all the media analysis, but it did have a point. It argued that you can learn a bit about unconscious bias in journalism by looking at some of the niches of the media—like the world weather reports.

For example, during the Cold War, some of the British broadsheets used to list the Western European democratic capitals under 'Europe' and eastern European capitals under 'the World'. (Rees, 1997) Conversely, the communist media would give temperatures in Havana, Moscow, Beijing and Pyongyang and relegate London and New York to the margins. And there was something of the Little England about the *Times* back then, dividing temperatures into just two categories—Britain and everyone else, under the heading 'Abroad' (Rees, 1997).

Locally, my survey of 23 daily papers in New Zealand from June 1996 showed they found space for Australia, but little for the Pacific. Europe featured strongly among weather temperatures—London was the most listed city. That hint of the 'Old Country' for many Pakeha readers seemed to be still strong. But Africa was largely forgotten and Asia, while important, was patchy, my survey found. Southeast Asia and North Asia were included, South Asia much less so. North America, likewise, was important, South America not. I wrote:

These are the places our newspapers think we are interested in for whatever reasons—perhaps their news value, proximity, size, impact on our economy, cultural links, tourist destinations or historical ties. (Rees, 1997)

The article went on:

Does all this matter? Probably not, only pedants and bores pore over temperature charts of daily newspapers. But what it does show is that newspapers have a very traditional idea of where in the world we are and what is important to our readers. Give them Europe, Australia, bits of Asia and a desultory look at the Pacific.

### Surprising changes

I happened to find the article during New Zealand's first COVID-19 lockdown in March and April 2020, and I wondered what had changed. What does the world weather report tell us about our attitudes now, 24 years on?

I was surprised at the changes—but not necessarily about world temperatures. My survey from 1996 happened to catch newspapers before the tectonic shift of the internet, possibly even at the height of their profitability, as equity firms moved in seeking profits (Ureneck, 2021). The survey occurred two years before Larry Page and Sergey Brin launched Google (Google, 2021), YouTube (Leskin, 2020) was nearly 10 years away and Facebook eight (Philips, 2008).

In 1996, my survey found many newspapers had very different weather pages—the layouts were different, choices on what was important varied. The place of weather has shifted in the media in the 25 years since then. Today, largely due to streamlined production, newspapers' weather pages are almost identical. The Stuff newspapers, including the *Dominion-Post* and *The Press* as well as regional papers, the NZME papers, with *The New Zealand Herald* and its stable of regional papers and the *Otago Daily Times*, all use page-ready weather pages provided by the MetService, New Zealand's State-Owned Enterprise for weather information. There is very little variation. MetService provides the same in-depth local and national weather. The world view is almost identical, with a list of world temperatures.

That means that gone are the eccentricities of weather reporting, like the *Wanganui Chronicle's* delightful listing of its city temperatures while lumping the rest of New Zealand in with the world, as it did back in the 1990s (Rees, 1997).

News websites receive the same service., with a similar feed of temperatures, weather and forecasts. Stuff (2021), *NZ Herald* (2021), Newshub (2021) and Radio New Zealand (2021) carry MetService data. Television New Zealand's OneNews website appears to be the same. (One News, 2021) The focus of these weather pages is local. They list main centres and regional towns, with a short forecast, temperatures and current weather. Each has a link to the MetService site for more information.

The main difference is in weather news, different to weather reports and temperatures; each site covers its own local weather news, often around upcoming weather events, like floods and droughts. Stuff has also launched a global climate change section (Stuff Climate Change, 2021). It is called the ‘Forever Project’ (Forever Project, 2021).

None of the websites appear to carry world temperatures. That space has largely been taken by giant websites like Accuweather (Accuweather, 2021)—it claims to be ‘the world’s most trusted name in weather’—or The Weather Channel (Weather Channel, 2021), which is both a global website and a cable channel. Both carry world weather, but also local forecasts using the geo-location of the reader to give local forecasts as well. Today every smartphone has a customisable weather app which can run up-to-the minute weather from Mt Eden to Marrakesh. They use data from around the world, but users can pick the locations they want (Niel, 2021).

The overall result is that world temperatures occupy a minimal space on local websites and are constrained in local newspapers by being so similar.

Having said that, there have been some changes in newspapers’ world weather. The most noticeable change is that the Pacific often gets more space. The *Herald on Sunday*, for example, lumps together Australia and the Pacific—Australia with nine entries, the Pacific with five. The most common destinations across New Zealand newspapers are Apia, Nadi, Nuku’alofa and Rarotonga. The most geographically mobile is Honolulu which sits equally as a Pacific entry or a World one. Often noticeably missing is the largest city in the most populous Pacific country—Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea (pop. 9 million). Also frequently missing is Vanuatu’s Port Vila, which loses out because of its low alphabetic position means it gets cut for space.

What of television’s prime time news shows? Both TVNZ’s OneNews and Mediaworks’ Newshub at 6pm follow the same system with a five minute weather bulletin at the end of the programme, zeroing in on local weather, but also highlighting weather in Australia and the Pacific (One News, 2021). Presenters cover the temperatures in the Cook Islands, Niue, Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, New Caledonia and Vanuatu (Newshub, 2021).

Australian weather on TVNZ and in MetService-sourced newspaper accounts tends to focus on the eastern seaboard nearest New Zealand, so Cairns, a tourist destination, gets more play than, generally, Adelaide.

Europe is still marginally the biggest grouping in newspaper lists—or equal top—depending on how many world temperatures can be fitted in (Stuff newspapers vary from around 40 to 50 entries from the MetService list, depending on space). But again, it is noticeable how they skew to Western Europe, a favourite tourist destination and part of the ancestry of many Pakeha. Among the most common are London, Amsterdam, Paris, Dublin, Edinburgh, Madrid and Berlin.

The old eastern capitals of Budapest, Prague, Warsaw, Bucharest or Kiev (or Minsk, now that Belarus is in the news), as well as the Scandinavian capitals of Oslo or Stockholm, normally miss out.

Asia has grown in relative size in newspaper world temperature lists, but it remains skewed to Southeast Asian cities like Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, and North Asian cities such as Beijing, Tokyo and Seoul. But two things are noticeably absent. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh remain under-represented despite the growth of New Zealand's Indian population. Delhi makes an appearance, but hardly ever Mumbai, Kolkata, Bangalore, Chennai or Dhaka and Islamabad. Equally, you would be hard-pressed to pick up the fact that China is now New Zealand's largest trading partner and the source of many foreign students and tourists. Hong Kong and Beijing are usually listed; Shanghai sometimes and massive cities like Tianjin or Chongqing never. New Zealand has consulates in at least two Chinese cities which are hardly if ever mentioned in newspaper world temperature lists—Chengdu and Guangzhou (MFAT, 2021).

Among the cities where New Zealand maintains a consulate, but which hardly make it into the world weather list, are Addis Ababa, Brasília and Sao Paulo, Ottawa, Brussels, Dili, Manila, Tehran and Hanoi (Embassy Worldwide, 2021).

In North America, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Washington DC and Vancouver are the weather staples. But the continent's largest metropolis, Mexico City hardly ever makes the list and nor do the eastern cities of Canada. Toronto and Montreal often miss out in our newspaper weather maps.

To round out the list, Africa, the Middle East and South America get a small nod; possibly marginally more than in 1996, though it would be hard to discern significant change. Perhaps because of the rugby links between New Zealand and South Africa, the Republic sometimes gets two mentions—Johannesburg and Cape Town. The great cities of Nigeria, predicted by global financial firm Price Waterhouse Cooper as one of the fastest growing economies through to 2050, are never mentioned (Price, Waterhouse, Cooper, 2021).

### **So, does any of this matter?**

Weather reporting of the world has shifted with the ease of access to global data on smartphones and apps; people can access weather from anywhere without waiting for a newspaper or primetime television broadcast, or even to consult their local news website. Moreover, much of New Zealand's weather data in the media now comes from one main supplier, MetService. But there are still places where newspapers and TV news show how this corner of the media sees the world and what we are thought to be interested in. If that is true, we have a bit more interest in the Pacific and Asia, but a lot of our focus remains on Australia, the west coast of north America and Europe, as it did 20 years ago. It is a small snapshot of what we see as important. As I wrote in 1997: 'The weather is anything but neutral.' It still is.

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*Jeremy Rees is the executive editor of Radio New Zealand. In 1997, his biography in the NZ Journalism Review said "he obviously spends too much time reading the weather." He clearly still does.*

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