NATIONAL MEDIA REPORTING OF THE 2018 FIJIAN GENERAL ELECTIONS

Dialogue Fiji

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FOREWORD

The media plays a critical role in elections in a number of areas. It provides space for political narratives by political parties, politicians and the public at large which shape voters' perceptions and choice; it can be used by competing groups engaged in self-promotion and image making; it is often utilized as a convenient tool for political and ideological competition as well as a vehicle used by some to perpetuate fake news and mind manipulation. All these are often carried out in the name of "democracy," a rather slippery concept in modern politics. Elections in Fiji come around every four years and when they do, they have the tendency to dominate the media soundbites including the social media space, displacing other newsworthy issues to the margin.

Election stories sell, especially when spiced with intrigue, scandals, mysteries, conspiracies and warring narratives. The more sensational the story the more sellable it is. The media can feed into election frenzies, inflame passion and at times encourage boisterous political behaviour and prejudice which can be socially destructive. The media can also be used as a means of sensible, intellectual and calm engagement to enlighten the ignorant and unite people across cultures, religions and political ideologies. Keeping an eye on what the media does requires an open, analytical and independent approach and this is what this report attempts to do.

This report by Dialogue Fiji provides a quantified content analysis of the media coverage of the 2018 election. It focuses on a number of indicators such as direct quotation space and time, frequency of appearance; directional balance in terms of "positive," "negative" or "neutral" representation of political parties/election candidates; and issue balance in relation to prioritizing of coverage of various issues. The results show how certain media outlets seem to privilege some political parties and issues over others. This could be due to several reasons including direct political and ideological alignment of the media company to a political party or conscious and subconscious bias of journalists and editors. Bias is part of human consciousness and sometimes it is explicit and sometimes it is implicit and unconscious. This deeper sociological exploration is beyond the mandate of this report. Nevertheless, the details of the content analysis are presented in brief summary form in the report.

The report is useful for the media outlets themselves to assess their own conscious and unconscious biases and how they can become fairer and more balanced in their coverage in the future. It is also for politicians and political parties to gauge how much of their political discourses are taken seriously or otherwise by the media. Equally important is how the voters critically assess and scrutinize the media imageries and narratives to make up their own minds in independent and critical ways.

Dialogue Fiji should be congratulated for producing this report. While there are still gaps to address, at least it is a good start in the right direction, especially in relation to how the relationship between the media and the political class is monitored, assessed and publicized. It is a means of enhancing the space for a transparent, open and just democracy in our beloved Fiji.

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CONTENTS

Abbreviations:

AF - Frequency of Appearance

CFL - Communications Fiji Limited

DQT - Direct Quotation Time

FA - Freedom Alliance

FBC - Fijian Broadcasting Corporation

FLP - Fiji Labour Party

HOPE - Humanity Opportunity Prosperity Equality

NBF - National Bank of Fiji

NFP - National Federation Party

SODELPA - Social Democratic Liberal Party

TLTB - iTaukei Land Trust Board

INTRODUCTION

This research project analyses news media coverage of the 2018 Fijian national elections, based on quantitative and qualitative methods. Because the media provide the people the template on which they form their political opinions and ultimately their electoral choices, it is important to monitor how they treated the different political parties and candidates.

It is this capacity of media to influence electoral outcomes that makes it an important stakeholder in electoral processes. Indeed, the media have come into the spotlight for the role that they can play in creating an even (and at times, an uneven) electoral playing field.

The existence of a robust and vibrant media sector with a multiplicity of independent media outlets is vital for democracy to thrive. The need for this is heightened during elections where a diverse range of political ideologies, views and positions need to be conveyed to the electorate. The dominance of one or two media actors can easily lead to a monopoly (or duopoly) over the type of news that will ultimately reach the electorate.

Having a diverse and independent media sector, although highly critical, is not a complete safeguard against media capture by certain political interests. The state can still enact legislative and other regulatory controls over the media that can impact on the free flow of information to voters. In jurisdictions where the state is a major financial player, the use of financial measures, such as withdrawal of government advertising can become an effective means for influencing media reporting of different political interests.

Consequently, this particular study examined how the media treated the different political parties and candidates in the 2018 Fiji elections in terms of the space and time allocated to them to get their messages across to the voters. It is envisaged that besides informing members of the public, political parties and political candidates, this study will also serve as a useful reference point for the news media in the coverage of future elections, especially given the allegations that Fiji's coup culture has seen the fragmentation of the media fraternity along ethnic and political lines, and claims that the sections of the media were either pro or anti-government.

> " Because the media provide the people the template on which they form their political opinions and ultimately their electoral choices, it is important to monitor how they treated the different political parties and candidates. "

Fijian 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. In the broadcast sector, there are three major players: the state-owned Fijian Broadcasting Corporation Limited (FBC) and three privately-owned operators, Communications Fiji Limited (CFL); Fiji Television; and Mai TV. Mai TV is not part of the study as it did not have a regular news service during the 2018 election campaign period.

As the largest broadcaster in Fiji, the FBC, launched in 1935, operates a network of six radio stations; two in each of the three major languages (i-Taukei, Hindustani and English). Two of the stations are classified as "public service" under a contract with the government and the remaining four are "commercial" in nature. The FBC's free to air commercial television service broadcasts local and overseas news and entertainment. The CFL, founded in 1985 with one English language station, today runs five stations in all three major languages, and it is listed on the Suva Stock Exchange. The company website states that the 2019 Tebbutt media surveys indicated "80.2% reach across our radio and online products".

Founded in 1994 as Fiji's first permanent commercial broadcasting network, Fiji Television Ltd is owned by the Fijian Holdings Limited Group company. It operates the free-to-view channel, *Fiji One*, and formerly the pay TV service, *Sky Pacific,* before it was acquired by Digicel in 2016. The country's third free to air commercial station, Mai TV, was Founded in 2006. Jointly owned by Fijian journalist Stanley Simpson and New Methodist Church, the fully private station claims to cover 80% of the Fiji group with local, regional and international content.

In the print sector, the two major English-language national newspapers published daily are *The Fiji Times*, and the *Fiji Sun*, both privately owned. *The Fiji Times*, founded in 1869, is the country's oldest newspaper. The paper is owned by Motibhai Group of Companies, which purchased it from Rupert Murdoch's News Limited in 2010.

The Fijian media are bound by the Media Industry Development Act, initially promulgated as a decree in June 2010. This replaced media self-regulation with government regulation, overseen by a Media Industry Development Authority and a Tribunal. The Act criminalises what were once regarded as ethical breaches, such as unbalanced reporting. Media organisations fines of up to F$100,000 while publishers and editors face fines of up to F$25,000 and/or two years' imprisonment for breaches.

METHODOLOGY

Period of Study

The period of study was from the issuance of the writ of elections to 48 hours before elections day. In Fiji, the issuance of the writ of elections by the President marks the beginning of the electoral period. Until the 2021 amendments to the Electoral Act 2014, the law did not designate a campaign period, therefore for the purpose of this study, conducted in 2018, the issuance of the writ was considered as the start of the official campaign period. The electoral act also imposes a silence or blackout period 48 hours before elections day, and no media coverage of electoral contenders or any campaign activity is allowed during this period. Therefore, the period of analysis extends from the official announcement of elections to the last day the media is permitted to report on the campaign.

What was included?

As with all studies to measure balance, fairness and objectivity in national news media, we have only include local news in the study. This is because the newsroom exercises total control over what is covered locally, how much time/space is allocated to the news and the slant that is given to it.

Specific to the print media, news stories (front page, local news, local politics) were included as these sections were generally dedicated to election campaign coverage and were authored by the news journalists of the two newspapers. The editorial comment, all opinion pieces, including those authored by political party officials or affiliates, were not included. Our analysis also excluded photo, choice of front page stories, photo captions and other visual elements which are also important indicators of media bias. Paid advertisements were also left out.

For the television stations, the only programmes included were the major news bulletins. For the state owned FBC TV, this was their 7pm 'FBC News' programme, whilst for Fiji One, their 'Fiji One News' programme aired at 6pm was monitored. For both the TV news programmes, sports, business, weather and other segments were excluded.

In the case of the media outlet CFL, their news website 'fijivillage.com', which publishes all news aired by their five radio stations, was used for the analysis. The news section was included in the analysis with sports, business, weather and other segments left out.

Analytical Framework
The three primary ways in which media coverage could influence party support are:

i) The amount of time provided to the party (stop-watch balance);

ii) The manner in which the party is portrayed- positive, negative or neutral way (directional balance), and;

iii) How issues are prioritized by the media (issue/agenda balance).

Stop-Watch Balance

Stop-watch balance measures the amount of air time or space allocated to each party contesting the elections. It is a popular variable used in election content analysis in media to determine whether all electoral contenders have been given equal or proportionate coverage. According to Norris and Sanders (1998), "the simple stimulus-response model behind this notion is that greater exposure means more persuasive influence"[1].
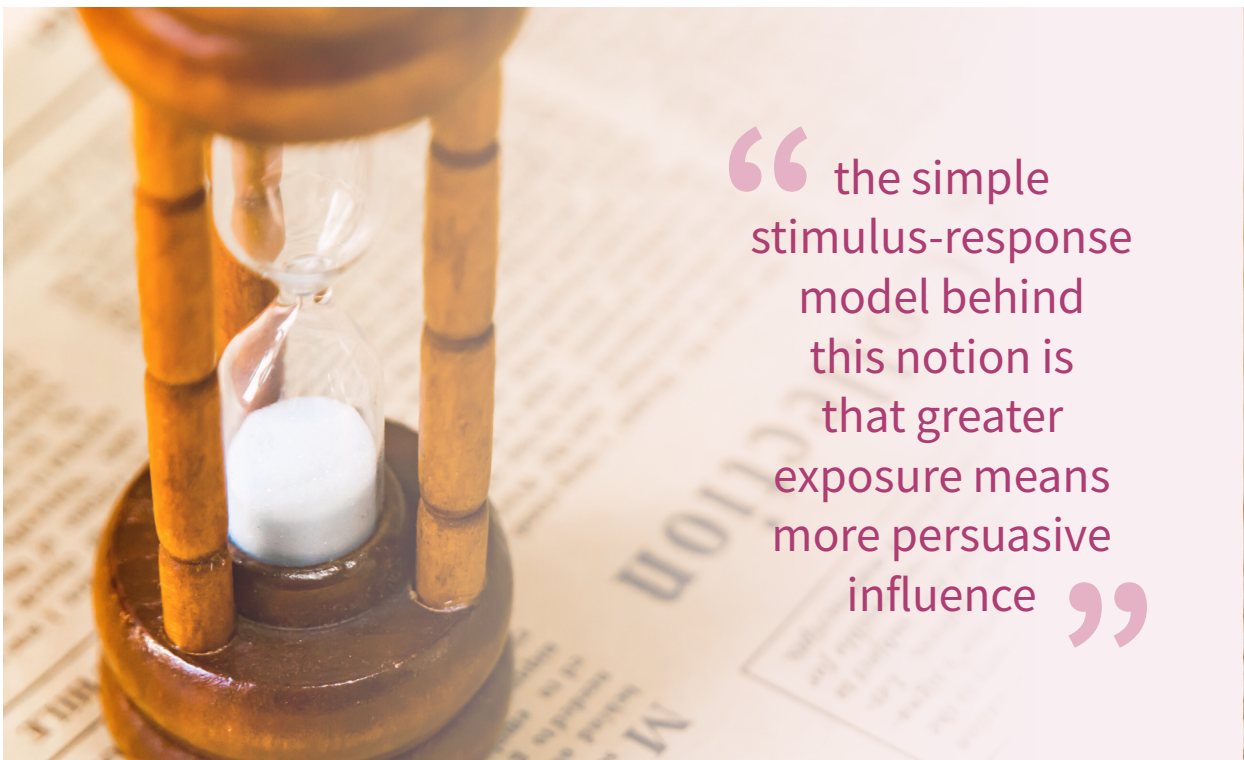
To determine the stop-watch balance of the 2018 elections news coverage, we measured the allocation and distribution of 'direct quotation' space/time to electoral contestants. For this we followed the research design and variable choice used by the Centre for Research in Communication and Culture at the Loughborough University for similar analyses of election campaign coverage. A 'direct quotation' is a verbatim rendition of a news source's speech/statements. In the print media, this typically entails producing an exact written version of what the news source has said. It may also involve a direct quote from a written statement of the news source.

In the broadcast media, a 'direct quotation' normally entails doing an audio/visual recording of a news source and using this in the news story.

Allocation of direct quotation space/time is an important measure for several reasons. In contrast to mixed quotations and paraphrasing, when an electoral contestant is afforded direct quotation time, this ensures that unadulterated and undiluted reproductions of what they said is passed on to the voters. Whilst cherry picking and malicious editing can still distort the message and key contentions that the speaker sought to relay, the allocation of direct quotation space is generally regarded as more advantageous to electoral contestants than having their statements paraphrased by journalists. Therefore, the amount of direct quotation time/space allocated provides an indication of the amount of access, or the availability of a 'platform' that the news media afforded to an electoral contestant

For print media, the amount of direct quotation time

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[1](Norris & Sanders, 1998)

" the simple stimulus-response model behind this notion is that greater exposure means more persuasive influence "

> ❝ Stop-watch balance is a popular variable used in election content analysis in media to determine whether all electoral contenders have been given equal or proportionate coverage. ❞

provided to each contesting party was measured in number of words. For each news story meeting the inclusion criteria that appeared in *The Fiji Times* and *Fiji Sun* during the 42 days, the amount of direct quotation space was determined by counting the number of words each party received for direct quotations of statements by party representatives — be it party leaders, officials and/or candidates. Opinions pieces authored/submitted by the parties published in the two newspapers were not included in the analysis.

For broadcast media, the direct quotation time allocation per party and its distribution was measured in the number of seconds. In the case of FBC TV and Fiji TV, their flagship news programmes "FBC News" and Fiji One News" respectively which air during evenings and are very popular, were the only content that were analysed. A stop watch was used to measure the exact amount of direct quotation time provided to each contesting party and the number of appearances that each party made in every news story. In the case of CFL news, which is broadcast on its five radio stations and published on its website, fijivillage.com, the methodology was similar to that employed for the TV stations. In presenting the results, we have provided both the absolute and relative

values. Absolute values show the amount of coverage per party while the relative values (percentages) provide an indication of the distribution relative to other parties.

In addition to direct quotation space/time, we also measured the number of appearances that each contesting party (its leader, officials and candidates) made on news bulletins.

This was done for broadcast media only (TV and radio). The rationale for quantifying the number of appearances separately is because the amount of quotation time allocated can be different for each appearance. For example, a particular political party can appear 3 times in a news story but only be afforded 20 seconds of quotation time, while another party could get 50 seconds of direct quotation time from a single appearance. A media with a deliberate bias can, therefore, accord higher quotation time to the party it supports while keeping the 'Appearance' count low. In determining the number of appearances, each time that an electoral contestant or party official appeared in a news story was recorded as an instance of an "appearance" for the party in that news media.

Directional Balance

The directional balance of news coverage measures the positive, negative or neutral contents of reporting. Unlike stop-watch balance which focusses strictly on the amount of coverage each party gets, directional balance involves assessing the tone and contents, and their effect on the electoral contenders. This attribute is a significant one because the public image of electoral contestants is shaped not only by the 'amount' of coverage they receive but also 'how' they are portrayed. News media can provide a lot of coverage and direct quotation time to a candidate but this could largely be negative: for example, a news media can run a lot of stories on the alleged criminal activities of a candidate and give him ample opportunity to respond, however, the net effect would still be negative if the stories portrayed the candidate as unfit for office. In contrast, the same story could be presented as the allegations being baseless or unwarranted against a top candidate and leave a favourable impression on the reader or viewer.

When determining the directional balance of a story, the key element was assessing the final impression the story left on the consumer of the news. Did it cast the candidate/party in a positive light? How would the opinion of a reasonable person be impacted after reading the story? Would it cause the reader/viewer to think favourably or unfavourably of the candidate/party?

A number of measures were taken to mitigate the impacts of subjectivity and researcher bias. Researchers were trained to make determinations of bias and neutrality using a stringent set of defined criteria. The researchers engaged for this exercise were also foreigners (political science scholars from Canada) in order to reduce the degree of bias that local researchers would have had, because of their own political/social orientations. A third measure was the use of intercoder reliability tests for selected variables to attain an acceptable level of reliability of assessments and findings.

Issue Balance

Issue balance determines the treatment accorded to different election issues by media outlets, and may also be used to asses if there was any agenda setting. Political parties and candidates tend to take ownership of certain issues, and the priority given to issues by media outlets can be a reliable indicator of media biases. In Fiji, for example,SODELPA has been championing indigenous issues and special group rights, land ownership rights, and other indigenous concerns, and as such, the party is likely to derive political points from the coverage of these issues in the news media. FijiFirst, on the other hand, has been a proponent of equal citizenry, non-discrimination and land utilization, and would benefit from positive coverage of these issues. In addition, there are certain issues which tend to be "embarrassing", "uncomfortable" or "negative" for some political parties and candidates, and a media outlet can deliberately give disproportionately high levels of coverage to these issues to hurt the electoral chances of the concerned parties.

> " Leaders debates are considered an integral part of election campaigns in many democracies and a popular element of special information programming. "

Direct Access and Special Information Programmes

Most media outlets provide special access to electoral parties and candidates to communicate their election promises, views and proposed policies to voters. In the case of the two print media in this study, political party leaders were invited to submit opinion pieces on various issues. In broadcast media, the state broadcaster invited party leaders and candidates to radio and TV talkback shows. CFL also ran special information programmes in the form of talkback shows which were broadcast on its radio stations and livestreamed on its online media platforms.

Leaders debates are considered an integral part of election campaigns in many democracies and a popular element of special information programmes. During the 2018 election campaign, CFL was the only broadcast media that was able to secure the participation of the leaders of the major political parties to a live debate that was moderated by the News Director of the organisation. The debates which drew most public attention were between (i) FijiFirst Leader and SODELPA Leader, and (ii) NFP Leader and FijiFirst General Secretary.

This study includes an analysis of the two debates and provides suggestions on how these can be strengthened for the next elections, as leaders' debates appear to have been significant influencers of voting in the 2014 and 2018 elections.

Limitations

Media content analysis is fraught with methodological challenges and is not empirically straightforward. Concepts such as bias, balance, impartiality, objectivity are often debated and experts, regulators and practitioners have struggled to define systematic criteria for the empirical measurements of these elements. Despite these shortcomings, quantitative approaches to media content analysis are increasingly gaining popularity in the communication sciences (Neuendorf, 2002:27[2]).

Quantitative data, however, tell only part of the story. Conclusive judgements of bias and balance cannot be made solely by considering how much time or space is allocated by party or contestant as there may be instances where it was legitimate for a news media to give more space or time to a contestant given their position, relevance to the electoral race, worthiness of their ideas, etc. however quantitative analysis can indicate the presence of a problem if a news media was consistently allocating disproportionate space to particular electoral contestants. The prevalence of a bias, can then be deduced from qualitative measurements of tone, balance, attempt to manipulate, etc.

A news media can also provide equal amounts of space to all electoral contestants but mostly present certain candidates/parties in damaging light, and this would not be captured in quantitative data relating to allocation of space. In order to address these deficiencies, data on directional balance has also been collected to determine the direction of the coverage (slant) relating to the different electoral contestants.

Determining the directional balance of a news story, however, necessitates qualitative judgements which bring in the element of researcher bias. This is in contrast to stop watch and issue balance measurements, where the researchers mechanically counted/tallied up the time or issue allocation. In content analysis, achieving intercoder reliability is generally accepted as a sufficient safeguard against researcher bias, and this study has employed this approach for the directional balance variable. Another measure to eliminate bias has been the use of non-Fijian researchers to determine directional balance, as political views and affiliations can easily cloud a person's judgements of fairness and balance.

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[2]Neuendorf KA (2002) The Content Analysis Guidebook. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE

> " Concepts such as bias, balance, impartiality, objectivity are often debated and experts, regulators and practitioners have struggled to define systematic criteria for the empirical measurements of these elements. "

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

In presenting the results, we have provided both the absolute and relative values. Absolute values show the amount of coverage per party while the relative values (percentages) provide an indication of the distribution relative to other parties.

Section 1   Stop-Watch Balance

1.1 Distribution of 'Direct Quotation Space' in the *Fiji Sun*
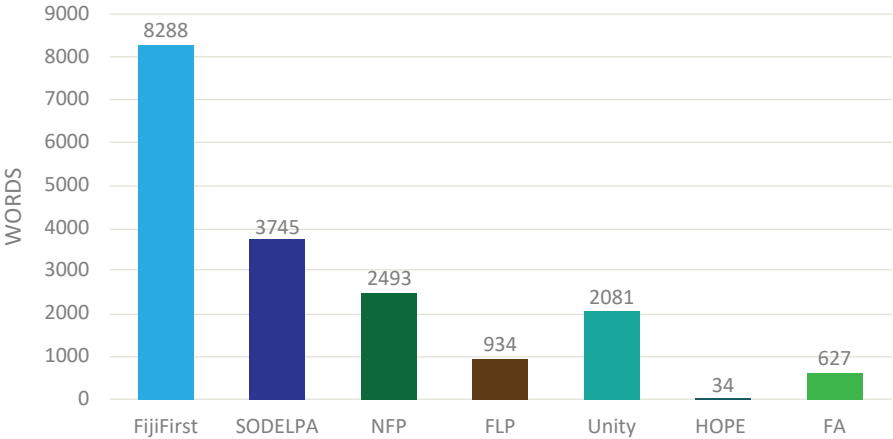

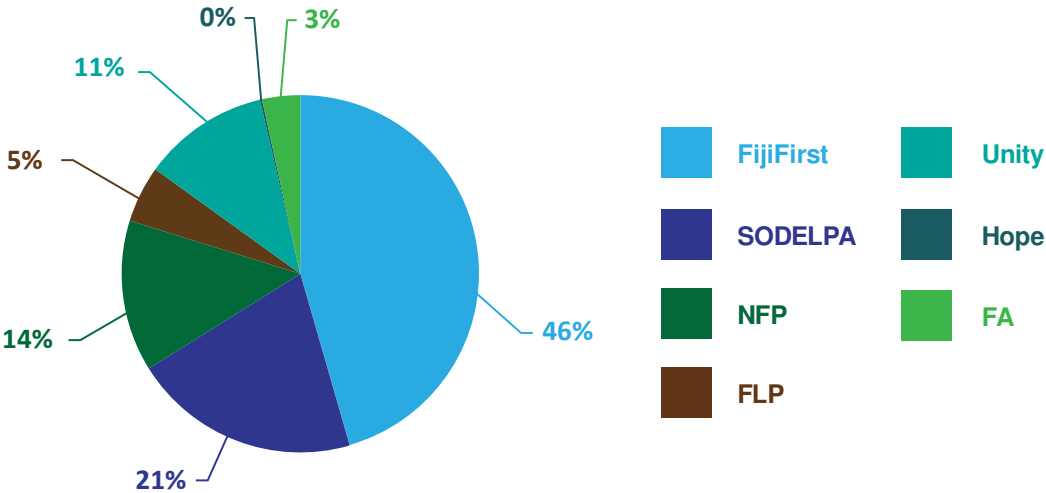Fig. 1: The *Fiji Sun* Direct Quotation Space (Words)

Fig. 2: The *Fiji Sun* Direct Quotation Space (Percentage)

Our quantitative results for the *Fiji Sun* show:

• FijiFirst received the majority (46%) of the direct quotation space, while the opposition shared the remaining 54%. SODELPA was second at 21%, with the 'quotation gap' between FijiFirst and SODELPA, a significant 25%.

• The NFP received the third highest direct quotation space at 14%, followed by the Unity Party, 11% , the FLP at 5% and finally HOPE at 3%.

• As a new party, Unity, received a more more direct quotation space (11%) than a well-established party like the FLP (6%).

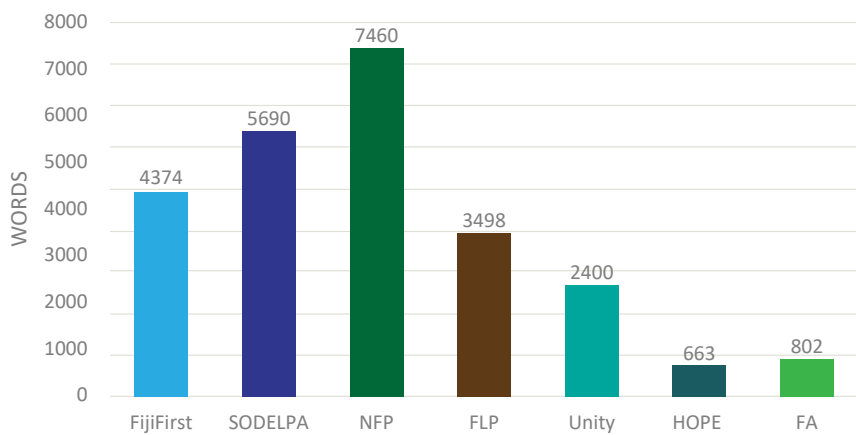## 1.2 Distribution of 'Direct Quotation Space' in *The Fiji Times*

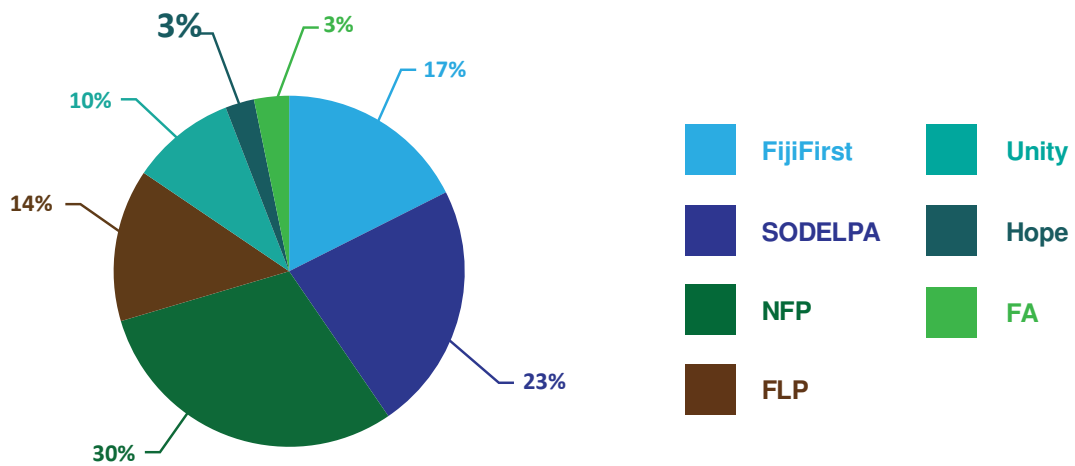Fig. 3: *The Fiji Times* Direct Quotation Space (Words)

Fig. 4: *The Fiji Times* Direct Quotation Space (Percentage)

Our quantitative results for *The Fiji Times* show:

• *The Fiji Times* provided the highest amount of direct quotation space to NFP at 30%, followed by SODELPA at 23%. This is despite the fact that the NFP had a smaller voter base than SODEPLA in the previous (2014) election.

• FijiFirst was third on 17%, in stark contrast to the 46% it enjoyed in the *Fiji Sun*.

• The FLP was fourth at 14%, followed by Unity at 10%, and HOPE and FA both at 3%.

• The challenger parties garnered a total share of 83% of DQS in *The Fiji Times*, compared to 54% in the *Fiji Sun*.

> " The challenger parties garnered a total share of 83% of DQS in The Fiji Times, compared to 54% in the Fiji Sun. "

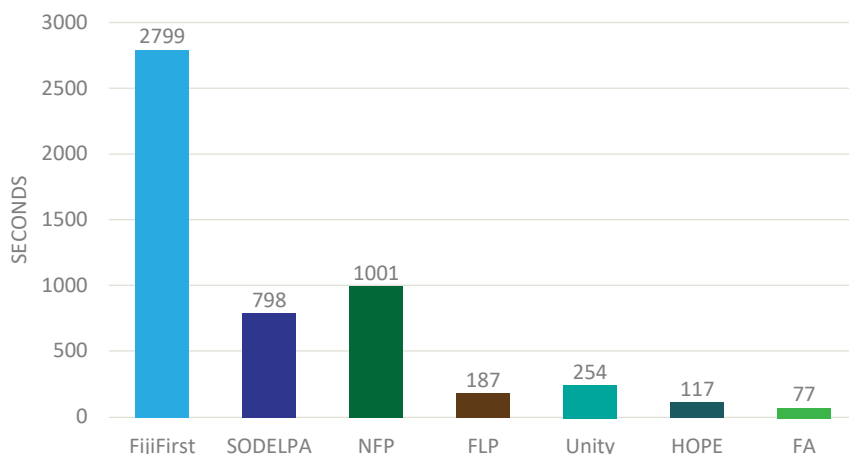## 1.3 'Direct Quotation Time' and 'Frequency of Appearance' on *FBC TV*

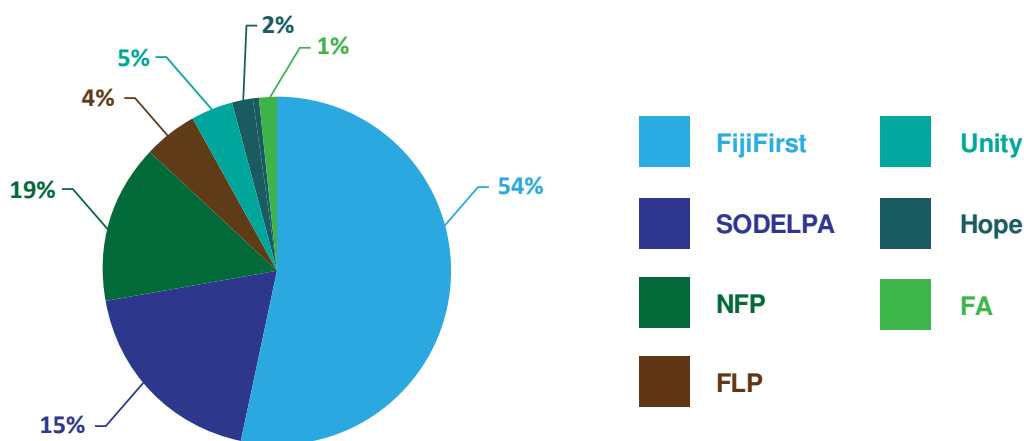Fig. 5: *FBC TV* Direct Quotation Time (Seconds)

Fig. 6: *FBC TV* Direct Quotation Time (Percentage)

	FijiFirst	SODELPA	NFP	FLP	Unity	HOPE	FA
No. of Appearances	113	66	51	18	17	12	9
Percentage	40%	23%	18%	6%	6%	4%	3%

Table 1: Frequency of Appearance - *FBC TV*

Our results for direct quotation time and number of appearances for the state broadcaster, *FBC TV*, show:

- The incumbent FijiFirst party received an overwhelming 54% of direct quotation time, while the challenger parties as a whole shared the remaining 46%.

- The highest direct quotation time amongst the challenger parties was accorded to NFP at 19%, followed by SODELPA at 15%, Unity at 5%, the FLP at 4%, HOPE at 2% and FA at 1%.

- The FijiFirst leader and candidates made 113 appearances on *FBC TV* in the 42 days under review, followed by the SODELPA leader and candidates at 66 appearances. The NFP appearances were third highest at 51.

1.4 'Direct Quotation Time' and 'Frequency of Appearance on *Fiji One* (Fiji TV)
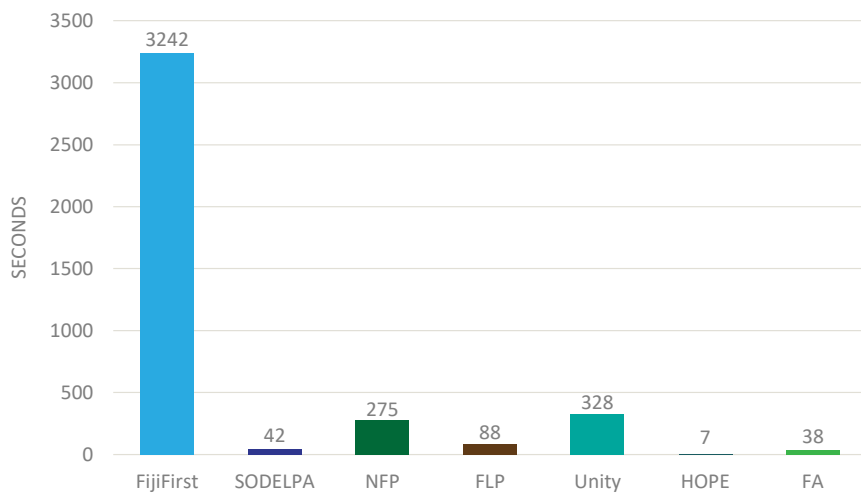

Fig. 7: *Fiji One* Direct Quotation Time (Seconds)
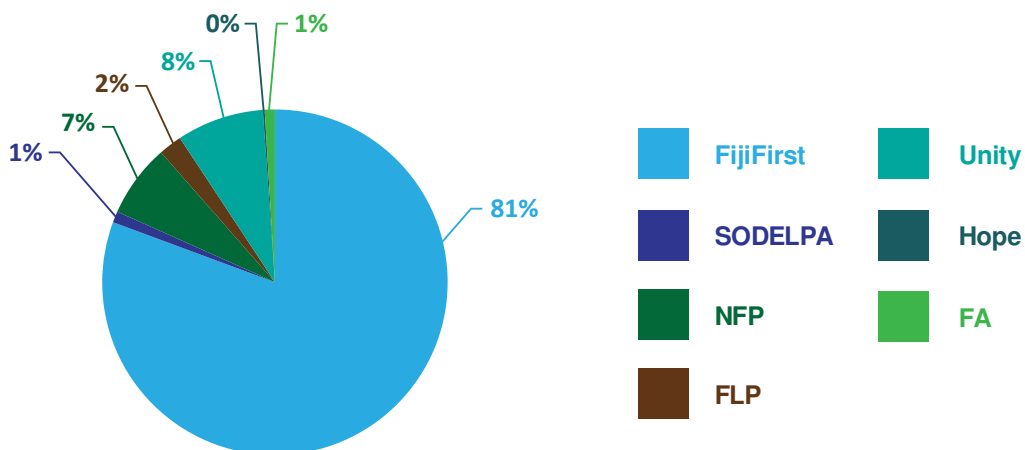
Fig. 7: *Fiji One* Direct Quotation Time (Percentage)

Our results for direct quotation time and number of appearances for *Fiji One* show:

• FijiFirst had an overwhelming 81% direct quotation time while all the challenger parties shared the remaining 19% between them.

• Unity Party at 8% scored second-highest, followed by NFP, 7%; FLP, 2%; SODELPA, 1%; FA, 1% and HOPE at 0%.

• With regards to frequency of appearances, the FijiFirst leader and candidates made the most number of appearances at 70%.

• The challenger parties shared 30% of AF between them: SODELPA, 12%; NFP, 7%; FLP, 3%; Unity, 5%; HOPE, 2%; and FA, 1%.

• In absolute terms, FijiFirst made 85 appearances; SODELPA, 14; NFP, 9; Unity, 6; FLP, 4; HOPE, 2; and FA, 1.

• FijiFirst's 85 appearances on *Fiji One* was more than double all the other parties combined.

• *Fiji One*'s direct quotation time and frequency of appearance figures indicate the gulf in the coverage between FijiFirst and all the other parties.

	FijiFirst	SODELPA	NFP	FLP	Unity	HOPE	FA
No. of Appearances	85	14	9	4	6	2	1
Percentage	70%	12%	7%	3%	5%	2%	1%

Table 2: Frequency of Appearance - *Fiji One*

1.5 'Direct Quotation Time' and 'Frequency of Appearance' on *fijivillage* (CFL)

Fig. 8: Direct Quotation Time on *fijivillage* (Seconds)
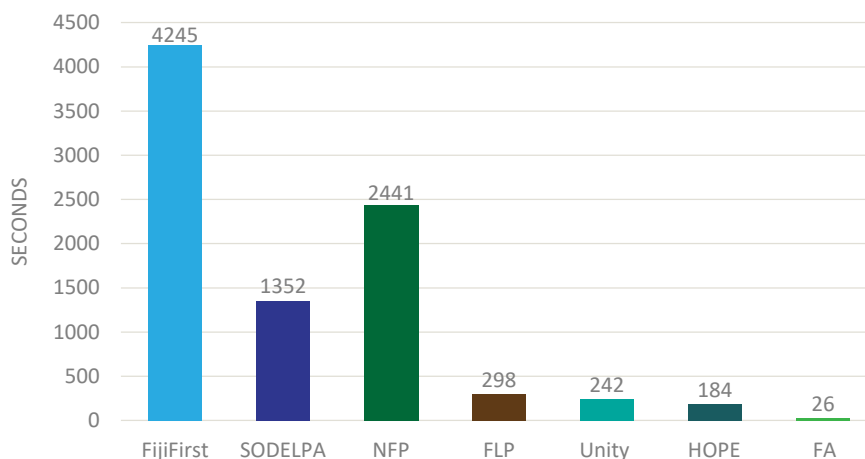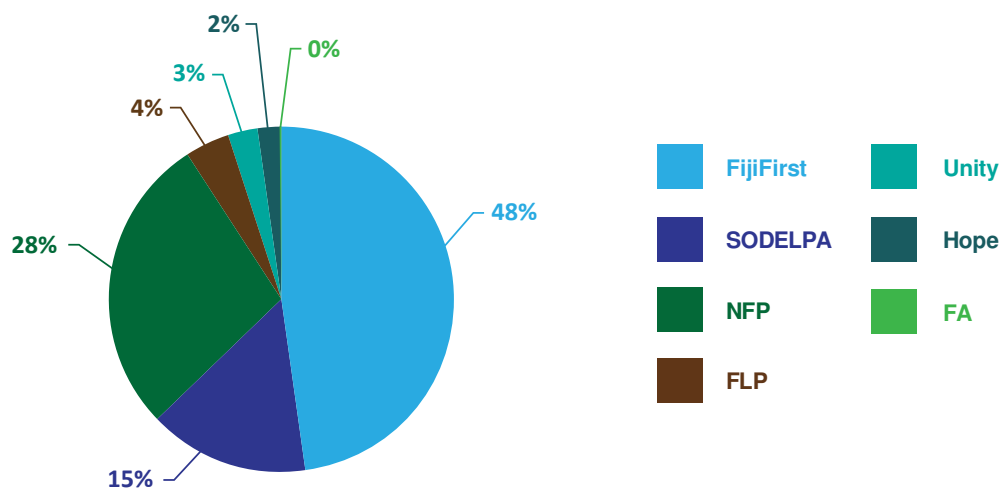

Fig. 9: Direct Quotation Time on *fijivillage* (Percentage)

	FijiFirst	SODELPA	NFP	FLP	Unity	HOPE	FA
No. of Apperances	64	40	48	9	8	3	2
Percentage	37%	23%	28%	5%	5%	2%	1%

Table 3: Frequency of Appearance - *fijivillage*

Our quantitative results for direct quotation time and frequency of appearance on *fijivillage* show:

- FijiFirst was allocated 48% of the total direct quotation time, with the challenger parties sharing the remaining 52%.

- The NFP was the leading challenger party at 28%, followed by SODELPA, 15%; FLP, 4%; Unity, 3%; HOPE, 2% and FA, 0%.

- With regards to frequency of appearance, FijiFirst led the pack with 37%; NFP in second place with 28%; SODELPA third, with 23%; followed by FLP and Unity, with 5% apiece; HOPE, with 3% and finally, FA with 2%. In absolute terms, FijiFirst made 64 appearances; NFP, 48; SODELPA, 40; FLP, 9; Unity, 8; HOPE, 3; and FA, 1.

- The direct quotation time gap between FijiFirst and the NFP was 20%, whereas the gap between the NFP and the main opposition party, SODELPA was 5 percentage points.

- However, the NFP's higher percentage is partly attributable to the high number of news stories being responses to allegations against NFP (often by FijiFirst).

- The time allocated to the party making the allegation (FijiFirst) was disproportionately higher than that afforded to the defending party (NFP). This trend is further captured in the section on directional balance of CFL news, discussed later in the report.

“ FijiFirst was allocated 48% of the total direct quotation time on fijivillage.com, with the challenger parties sharing the remaining 52%. ”

2.1 Directional Balance - *Fiji Sun*
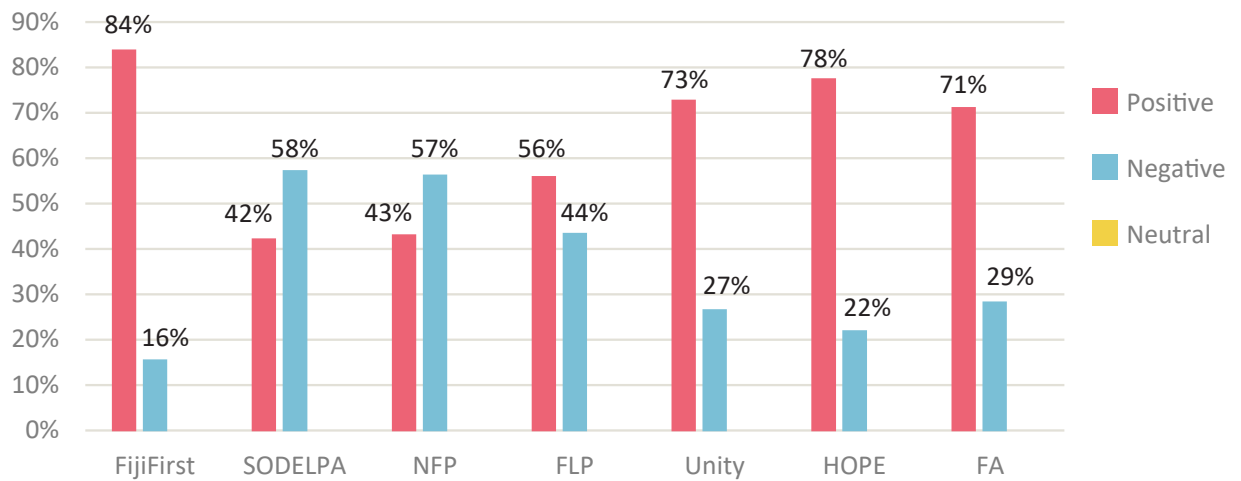
Fig. 10: Directional Balance - *Fiji Sun*

The results show:

• The *Fiji Sun's* coverage of FijiFirst, HOPE, Unity and Freedom Alliance was mainly positive at 84%, 78%, 73% and 71% respectively.

• The *Fiji Sun's* coverage of FijiFirst was overwhelmingly positive, with just 16% of its stories having a negative bent[3].

• The two opposition parties in parliament, SODELPA and NFP, received more negative than positive coverage.

• Apart from the two main opposition political parties in parliament at the time, the *Fiji Sun* generally gave positive coverage to the other parties in the race.

[3]The Fiji Sun is on the record stating that it holds a "pro-government policy" position.

2.2 Directional Balance - *The Fiji Times*
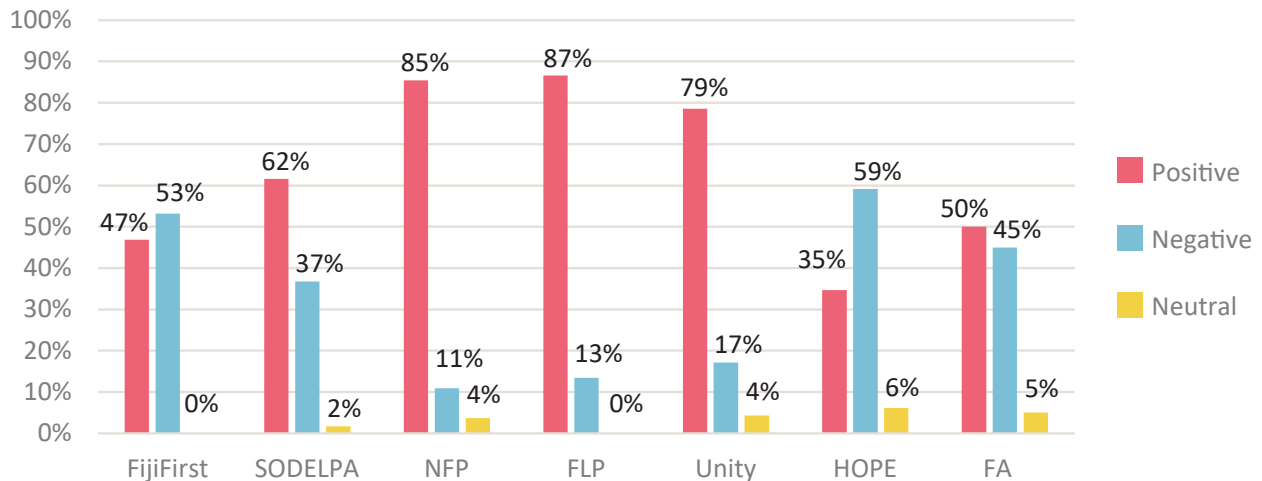
Fig. 11: Directional Balance - *The Fiji Times*

The results show:

• *The Fiji Times* ran a disproportionately higher number of news stories on the NFP, and these were generally positive (85%).

• The main opposition party in parliament, SODELPA, had a 62-37% positive-negative ratio.

• The incumbent FijiFirst had 47% positive, 53% negative coverage. The only other party to receive more negative than positive coverage in *The Fiji Times* was HOPE (35% positive, 59% negative).

• NFP, Unity and FLP received overwhelmingly positive coverage in *The Fiji Times.*

2.3 Directional Balance - *FBC TV*
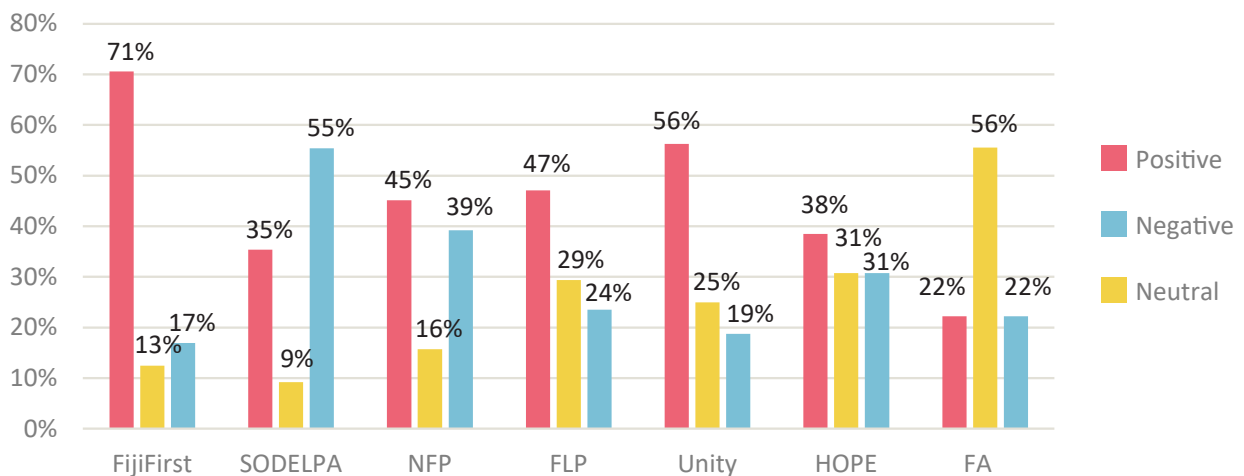
Fig. 12: Directional Balance - *FBC TV*

Our results show:

• The *FBC TV* News coverage of FijiFirst was overwhelmingly positive at 71%, however, the state-owned broadcaster also carried 17% negative and 13% neutral stories on the incumbent party.

• SODELPA received 55% negative coverage, 35% positive and 9% neutral, whereas the NFP received 45% positive and 39% negative coverage.

• The FLP received 47% positive and 24% negative coverage. Of the smaller/newer parties, Unity and HOPE received more positive than negative coverage.

2.4 Directional Balance - *Fiji One*
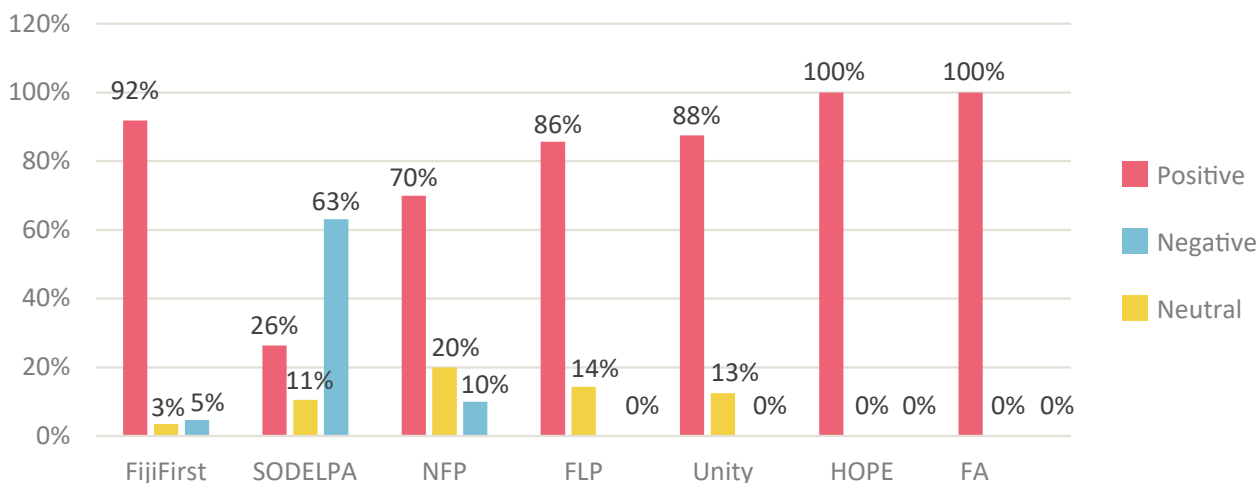
Fig. 13: Directional Balance - *Fiji One*

Our results show:

• All contesting parties generally received positive coverage on *Fiji One*, except SODELPA.

• The slant of the coverage was most skewed in favour of FijiFirst, which garnered 92% positive-5% negative coverage.

• SODELPA received 63% negative against 26% positive while the NFP received 70% positive, 10% negative.

• The smaller parties — FLP, Unity, HOPE and FAP all generally received a greater proportion of positive than negative coverage, but this advantage would have been counteracted by the infrequency of the coverage received by these smaller parties.

2.5 Directional Balance - CFL News *(fijivillage)*
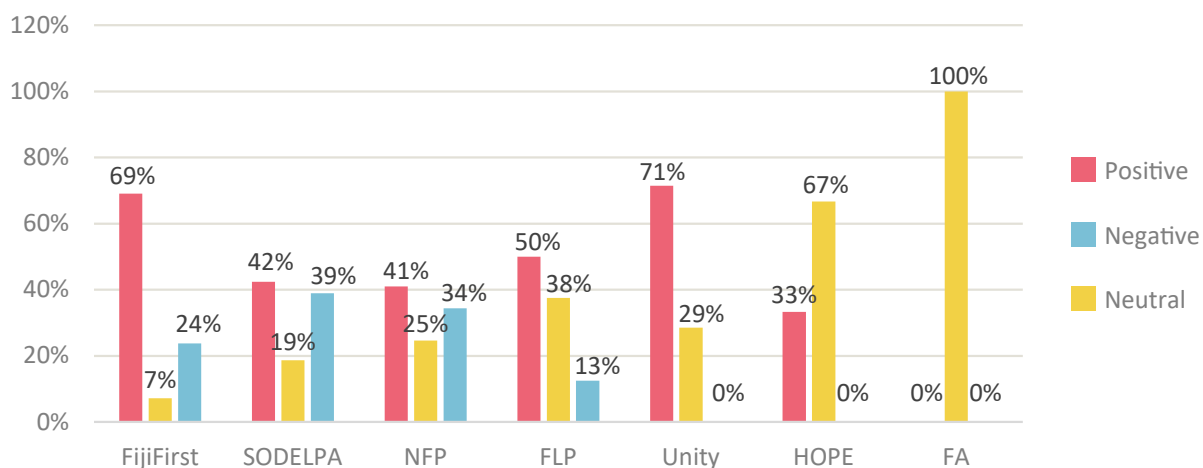
Fig. 14: Directional Balance - *fijivillage*

Our results show:

• CFL News coverage of FijiFirst was generally positive at 69%, with the negative proportion comprising 24%.

• SODELPA received 42% positive, 39% negative coverage, while NFP received 41% positive, 34% negative coverage. Of the smaller parties, the FLP has a positive-negative ratio of 50-38%; Unity had 71-29%; HOPE had 33-67%, whereas the FA had 100% neutral coverage.

• A large number of SODELPA and NFP news stories were responses to allegations against them. In other words, they were not the principals in these stories.

Section 3   Issue Balance

Issue balance provides some measure of the type of issues prioritized by the Fijian news media in their 2018 election reporting. It is important to note that some news articles touched on multiple issues and there is an element of researcher discretion that could not be completely overcome.

3.1 Print Media

For *The Fiji Times*, most articles were on 'electoral processes' (36%). Issues such as the economy (4%), minimum wage (5%), transport (4%) and ethnicity/race (5%), were other key election issues in *The Fiji Times* coverage. Other critical issues—housing (0.3%), women's issues (0.3%), environment (0.6%) crime (0.8%) and social security (0.8%) received scant coverage.

The *Fiji Sun* also gave significant coverage to 'electoral processes' with 31% of articles on various aspects of the conduct of elections, announcements by the EMBs, reactions, and so forth. The *Fiji Sun* also published a higher proportion of articles which centered on personal stories/accounts of politicians (18%). It is noteworthy that the *Fiji Sun* ran more articles on politicians' personal stories than on the economy (11), employment (4) and minimum wage (7).

ISSUE	FIJI TIMES		FIJI SUN	
	Freq	%	Freq	%
Economy	15	4.2	11	5.0
Employment	5	1.4	4	1.8
Minimum Wage	18	5.1	7	3.2
Ethnicity/Race Issue	17	4.8	9	4.1
Housing	1	0.3	1	0.5
Public Debt	5	1.4		0.0
Women's Issues	1	0.3		0.0
Media	3	0.8	5	2.3
Foreign Policy	2	0.6	1	0.5
Environment	2	0.6		0.0
Transport	15	4.2	4	1.8
Health	2	0.6		0.0
Local Government	3	0.8	4	1.8
Rural Affairs	13	3.7	1	0.5
Crime	3	0.8	4	1.8
Constitution & Laws	6	1.7	2	0.9
Common National Identity	2	0.6	3	1.4
Social Security (FNPF)	3	0.8		0.0
Personal Stories - Politicians	30	8.5	39	17.7
Electoral Processes	126	35.7	69	31.4
Land	8	2.3	4	1.8

Education	7	2.0	15	6.8
Religion	5	1.4	3	1.4
MOG	15	4.2	4	1.8
Rabuka Court Case	13	3.7	6	2.7
Other	33	9.3	24	10.9

Table 4: Issue Balance in the print media

3.2 Issue Balance - *FBC TV*

FBC TV ran the most stories on 'election campaign' (31), followed by 'ethnicity/race' issues (17); 'health' (16) and the 'election process' (15). The station ran 11 stories on the economy, 11 on unemployment and 10 on the minimum wage.

ISSUE	FREQUENCY
Election Process	18
Economy	1
Employment	9
Minimum Wage	5
Ethnicity/Race Issue	1
Housing	5
Women	4
Media	1
Environment	9
Transport	2
Health	13
Rural Affairs	5
Crime	3
Common National Identity	3
Personal Stories - Politicians	3
Campaigning	14
Social Media	4
Education	14
Climate Change	5
Infrastructure	6
Religion	1

Agriculture	11
Sitiveni Rabuka's Case with FICAC	8
Government Grants/Community Assistance	20
Tourism	2
Children	2
Foreign Policy	1
Poverty	3
Youths	5
Sugar Cane	2
Manifesto	3
Taxation	2

Table 5: Issue Balance - *FBC TV*

3.3 Issue Balance - *Fiji One*

Fiji One news gave the highest numerical coverage to 'Government Grants/Community Assistance' with 20 articles, followed by election process (18) and 'election campaigning' (14). There were comparatively fewer articles on what are normally vital election issues such as the 'economy' (1); 'employment' (9); 'minimum wage' (5); and 'ethnicity/race' (1).

ISSUE	FREQUENCY
Election Process	18
Economy	1
Employment	9
Minimum Wage	5
Ethnicity/Race Issue	1
Housing	5
Women	4
Media	1
Environment	9
Transport	2
Health	13
Rural affairs	5
Crime	3
Common National Identity	3
Personal Stories- Politicians	3
Campaigning	14
Social Media	4
Education	14
Climate Change	5
Infrastructure	6
Religion	1
Agriculture	11
Sitiveni Rabuka's Case with FICAC	8
Government Grants/Community Assistance	20
Tourism	2
Children	2

Foreign Policy	1
Poverty	3
Youths	5
Sugar Cane	2
Manifesto	3
Taxation	2

3.4 Issue Balance - CFL News (on *fijivillage*)

The CFL news prioritised the 'campaign conduct' (105), 'election process' (38), 'ethnicity/race' (31) and 'politicians' personal stories' (22). There were fewer stories on the 'economy' (17), 'employment' (12) and 'minimum wage' (18).

ISSUE	FREQUENCY
Election Process	38
Economy	17
Employment	12
Minimum Wage	18
Ethnicity/Race Issue	31
Housing	2
Public Debt	11
Womens' Issues	
Media	5
Foreign Policy	
Environment	6
Transport	5
Health	7
Local government	4
Rural affairs	1
Crime	1
Constitutional Issues	14
Common National Identity	2
Personal Stories- Politicians	22
Campaign Conduct	105

Land	16
Education	12
Agriculture	6

Table 7: Issue Balance - *fijivillage*

Section 4 Special Information Programmes

During election campaigns, news media allocate space/time to parties and candidates to give them access to the electorate. In the case of print media, this would be in the form of opinion pieces and columns allocated to contesting parties to contribute articles, which are published with minimal editing of the submitted articles.

Broadcast media create special elections programmes in the form of talkback shows, debates and panel discussions in which election contestants are given substantially more air-time to have their say than would be afforded by normal news bulletins.

Leaders' debates have a special status in election time coverage because of the amount of voter interest they command and the persuasive influence they can have on voter choice. During the 2018 campaign period, the CFL was the only broadcast media outlet able to secure the participation of the major political parties' leaders in pre-election debates on its 'Straight Talk' programme.

The two major debates that were held are assessed — one between the sitting Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama and and his leading opponent, Sitiveni Rabuka and the other one between the FijiFirst general secretary Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum and National Federation Party Leader, Biman Prasad.

The debate between FijiFirst leader Voreqe Bainimarama and SODELPA leader Sitiveni Rabuka, (largest challenger party) on Sunday 12 November concluded a few hours before the commencement of the media blackout period. This effectively meant that this was the last political message that the voters heard from the two leaders before the blackout period.

Given how the leaders' debate on 'Straight Talk' is structured, the moderator effectively drives the debate. The tables below present the allocation of questions, the directional balance of the questions posed, and the issue balance during the leaders' debate.

> " Leaders' debates have a special status in election time coverage because of the amount of voter interest they command and the persuasive influence they can have on voter choice. "

4.1 FijiFirst and SODELPA Leaders' Debate

The data indicates that the manner in which the debate was conducted was more favourable for the FijiFirst party leader. In total, the FijiFirst leader was asked fewer questions than his opponent, at 15 to 27. While the number of positive questions were equal (3), there was a major disparity in the number of negative questions. The SODELPA leader was asked 11 negative questions compared to only 3 such questions directed at the FijiFirst leader. While the SODELPA Leader was asked a greater number of questions, he was given fewer opportunities to respond (6), compared to the FijiFirst leader, who was asked fewer questions but afforded more opportunities to respond (14).

Table 8 shows the distribution of questions with directional balance.

	No. of Questions Asked	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Opportunities to Respond
FijiFirst Leader	15	3	9	3	14
SODELPA Leader	27	3	13	11	6

Table 8: Distribution of Questions and Directional Balance - Bainimarama vs Rabuka Debate

Table 9 (below) shows the issues that were covered in the debate, and the time allocated to each issue:

ISSUE	TIME (MINUTES)
Public Spending	19 minutes
Coup	18 minutes
Racial Divide	17 minutes
iTaukei Land	14 minutes
Truth and Reconciliation	7 minutes
Constitution	6 minutes
NBF Saga	6 minutes
Unemployment	6 minutes
Manifestos and why to vote for them	6 minutes
Housing	3 minutes
Domestic Abuse	3 minutes
Tertiary Education Loans Scheme	3 minutes

Table 9: Issue Balance – Bainimarama vs Rabuka Debate

The quantitative data shows:

• A disproportionately high amount of time was spent on two past events—the 1987 coup and 1995 National Bank of Fiji (NBF) $200 million loans scandal—with these taking up 22% of the entire debate time, even though these events took place decades ago with little relevance to the issues affecting voters of today. The SODELPA leader was the instigator of the 1987 coup and he was the prime minister when the NBF collapsed under the weight of its unsustainable lending. In contrast to the time spent on the coup and NBF saga, only 6% of the debate time centered on party manifestos, even though this would be deemed more current and relevant to voters about to make political choices days from a national election.

• Most of the questions relating to the 1987 coup and the NBF saga were framed in a manner that was detrimental to the SODELPA leader. The number of questions on these two events, the amount of time allocated, and the framing of questions, meant that for most of the debate, the SODELPA leader was on the defensive.

• The debate presented a rare opportunity for the two leaders to debate on their key polices relating to contentious issues such as iTaukei land, distribution of lease money, ethnic conflict, etc. and became the only forum where the two leading politicians from either side of the political divide discussed these critical issues in a showdown.

> " The number of questions on the 1987 coup and the NBF saga, the amount of time allocated, and the framing of questions, meant that for most of the debate, the SODELPA leader was on the defensive. "

4.2 NFP Leader & FijiFirst General Secretary Debate

The debate between NFP leader Biman Prasad and the FijiFirst General Secretary Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum on 25 October 2018 also garnered a lot of voter attention.

Table 10 shows the distribution of questions with directional balance. The results indicate that the interview was weighted in favour of the FijiFirst general secretary. Out of a total of 32 questions, the NFP leader was asked 22 while the FijiFirst general secretary was asked 12. The NFP leader was asked zero positive questions whilst the FijiFirst general secretary was asked eight such questions. There was a similar trend with regards to negative questions— the NFP leader was asked 16 such questions while the FijiFirst general secretary was not asked any negative questions. The NFP leader was given two opportunities to respond, while the FijiFirst general secretary was given twice as many opportunities to respond.

	No. of Questions Asked	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Opportunities to Respond
NFP Leader	22	0	6	16	2
FijiFirst GS	12	8	4	0	4

Table 10: Distribution of Questions and Directional Balance - Prasad vs Sayed-Khaiyum Debate

Table 11 shows the issues covered during the debate, and the allocation of time for each of these issues:

ISSUE	TIME (MINUTES)
Minimum Wage Rate proposed by NFP	37
Cost of Living	28
Alleged religious vilification by NFP Candidate	16
Civic Servants Contracts	8
Public Debt	7
Sustainability of FNPF	7
Manifestos	5
Constitution	4
TLTB Lease Money Equal Distribution	3

Table 11: Issue Balance - Prasad vs Sayed-Khaiyum Debate

In summary, quantitative data for both the leader's debates indicate the following:

- A higher number of questions were posed to the leaders of the two major opposition/challenger political parties, and a majority of these questions were negative.

- The ruling party representatives were asked fewer questions, fewer probing or negative questions, more positive questions and given more opportunity to articulate their responses.

- There was a disproportionate amount spent on issues such as criticising the minimum wage proposed by NFP (32% of entire debate time), and alleged religious vilification by a NFP candidate (14%). The questions on these two issues were framed in a manner that largely portrayed NFP in a negative light. This effectively meant that the NFP leader was on the defensive for most of the debate.

- There was minimal time accorded to the discussion of party manifestos (4%) which would conceivably be given more airtime during a debate of this nature.

“ There was minimal time accorded to the discussion of party manifestos (4%) which would conceivably be given more airtime during a debate of this nature. ”

CONCLUSION

Overall, the data indicates that most media coverage of the 2018 elections was favourable to the incumbent FijiFirst party. FirstFirst not only received the most coverage, but the most favourable coverage across four of the five media in this survey.

The larger and the more established opposition parties, SODELPA and NFP, were next in terms of the quantity of coverage, but they were more likely to receive a lesser amount of positive coverage and at times found themselves on the defense in responding to FijiFirst allegations, rather than being principles in the stories. The smaller, newer parties had to content themselves with marginal news attention.

This was generally consistent across four of the five national media that were surveyed — the *Fiji Sun*, FBC (TV and radio), Fiji Television Limited and Fiji Village. The only exception was *The Fiji Times*, whose coverage could be deemed to be comparatively less approving of the ruling party and also less critical of the challenger parties.

FijiFirst received the most exposure and the most positive exposure across all measurements –

- direct quotation time (number of direct quotes in words and seconds)

- directional balance (tone of coverage — positive, negative or neutral)

- issues balance (coverage/focus on election issues and their treatment), and;

- direct access programmes (leaders' debates).

Besides comparatively extensive and favourable coverage in the *Fiji Sun*, FijiFirst made more appearances on the major national television stations, FBC and Fiji One, as well as on the CFL radio stations and news website. The quotation gap with the challenger parties was quite significantly in FijiFirst's favour and the way the national debates were structured and conducted were also to the advantage of the incumbent party.

Even in special information programmes, where news media allow candidates extended time/space to have their say, the FijiFirst representatives enjoyed a distinct advantage over their opposition counterparts in the two national debates, with regards to the number of questions asked, the nature of the questions, and the opportunity to respond.

That FijiFirst received the most coverage was perhaps to be expected, given that it is the ruling party, but the variance in the quantity of the coverage in some media still appears to be somewhat high. Furthermore, the fact

> **"** This situation highlights the importance of training and development and staff retention, which are longstanding structural problems in Fiji and Pacific media. **"**

that much of the reporting was positive is an irregularity of sorts, considering that as the party holding the reins of power, FijiFirst was expected to come under greater scrutiny, in the line with media's widely accepted dictum, 'watchdog of government'. But this was not quite the case.

When the two major opposition parties were in the media, it was often in order to respond to allegations by the ruling party, or to defend themselves against negative questions.

The results could explain why the government accuses *The Fiji Times* of anti-government bias, and the opposition blame the *Fiji Sun* and FBC TV of favouring the government. However, there are other factors other than media/journalist bias that could be attributed to the lack of critical reporting.

These could range from the news organisation's and/or newsroom's partiality towards the ruling party politicians and its policies. The reporting could also be affected by the inexperience in the national journalists corps to report the elections in a critical manner. This observation is supported by 'issues balance' results indicating that key national issues, such as the economy, were understated. The focus was instead on election processes, procedures and conduct. Another factor in the reporting could be news media's financial links to the government

A major factor could be the Media Industry Development Act, which has been in place since 2010. According various media watch groups, the act has had a chilling effect on journalism and fostered a culture of media self-censorship.

This underlines the role of financial viability and newsroom professional capacity in news coverage. This situation highlights the importance of training and development and staff retention, which are longstanding structural problems in Fiji and Pacific media. Punitive media legislation on its own does nothing for training and development, which are key to improving professional standards.

About Dialogue Fiji

Dialogue Fiji is a civil society organisation based in Suva, Fiji. The organisation has the mission to engage with others to create inclusive spaces for dialogue and peace building, and develop capacities in Fiji's society for a culture of dialogue, resulting in dialogue processes being applied to increase understanding, respect and collaboration across divides. The vision of the organisation is "a Fiji where people respect each others' differences and share a common will to build a free, just, peaceful, and inclusive nation".

Dialogue Fiji's current projects are in a range of areas such as inclusive and sustainable democracy, democratic institution building, human rights, electoral processes, conflict transformation and climate change, which constitute key areas for peacebuilding work in the Fijian context. Our work involves convening dialogues, engaging in advocacy, providing community education, facilitating community engagement with statutory actors, undertaking research, social and political commentaries, policy analysis, media analysis, amongst other activities.

Dialogue Fiji promotes the use of dialogue and other deliberative processes to encourage and facilitate civic engagement in Fiji to strengthen a democratic culture, build social cohesion and advocate for the use of peaceful ways of dealing with conflict.

Dialogue Fiji