Article

Referendum Campaigns in Hybrid Media Systems: Insights From the New Zealand Cannabis Legalisation Referendum

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Abstract

During New Zealand's 2020 cannabis legalisation referendum, advocacy groups on both sides widely debated the issue, utilising "older" and "newer" media channels to strategically influence voters, including through appearances in traditional media and paid advertising campaigns on Facebook. Comparatively little is known about the campaign strategies used by each camp and how they leveraged the hybrid media environment to advocate for their positions. We analyse the cannabis legalisation referendum campaigns using primary data from our digital ethnographic study on Facebook, a systematic quantitative content analysis of legacy media websites, and a review of published reports from other authors. We show how positive sentiment towards cannabis law reform in the traditional media was amplified via referendum campaigners' activity on Facebook. While campaign expenses on both sides were similar, money was spent in different ways and via different mediums. The pro-legalisation campaign focused more on new digital media channels, while the anti-legalisation campaign diversified across a range of mediums, with greater attention paid to traditional political advertising strategies, such as leaflets and billboards. The New Zealand case study illustrates how greater engagement with the "newer" media logics may not necessarily secure a favourable outcome during a national referendum campaign. We discuss how the broader media and political environment may have influenced campaigners' choices to engage (or not) with the different media channels.

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1. Introduction

Digital media has become a powerful political advocacy tool in recent years. Some commentators applaud the ways in which social media has reshaped power relations in contemporary politics and helped grassroot organisations exert influence (Loader, 1997; Loader & Mercea, 2012). Others see the new digital forums as destructive forces with the potential to undermine democracy, emphasising concerns about "fake news" and the polarisation of public debates (Flinders, 2013). A more moderate view proposes that digital media has not fundamentally transformed contemporary politics but simply introduced a new channel of influence. According to this view, technology *per se* does not cause change, but it may be leveraged, to different degrees, by political actors who "adapt" their strategies to harness digital media opportunities (Jungherr et al., 2020).

In this vein, scholars have challenged the dichotomous distinction between "old" (traditional) and "new" (digital) media, proposing that the contemporary political media system is "hybrid" in nature; it involves a range of media and networks of political actors who are intricately connected and shaped by both "older" and "newer" media logics at the same time (Chadwick, 2018). For example, in his book *Hybrid Media Systems:*

Politics and Power, Chadwick (2018) challenges the view that Obama's 2008 election campaign gave rise to a new digital politics paradigm. Instead, he demonstrates how Obama's digital strategy was carefully coordinated with traditional rallies and appearances on television guided by the "older media" logic. Similarly, the involvement of Cambridge Analytica consultancy in the 2016 US presidential campaigns of Donald Trump and Ted Cruz has been heralded as the dawn of a new digital politics era, sparking research into Facebook algorithms and psychological targeting of voters. However, some studies have questioned this narrative (e.g., Anstead et al., 2018), with some commentators arguing that fears around the psychometric targeting of voters were exaggerated (Jungherr et al., 2020).

The role of interconnected hybrid media environments in contemporary politics has been the focus of extensive electoral campaign research, as illustrated by the US examples above, while less attention has been paid to campaigns across "older" and "newer" media channels during public referenda. The 2016 Brexit referendum is perhaps the most analysed referendum campaign in the hybrid media environment. Campaigners utilised both traditional media strategies and new digital media tools, including social media bots, mass data-harvesting, and the sharing of traditional "legacy" media content on social media channels (Bastos & Mercea, 2017; Brändle et al., 2022). Analyses of the Brexit referendum have revealed how a hybrid media system facilitated both top-down and bottom-up political mobilisation, demonstrating the importance of the hybrid media landscape and elite political influence during public referenda (Brändle et al., 2022).

Although referenda are similar to election campaigns in many ways (e.g., they leverage similar channels to influence the public), they involve distinct policy questions, processes, and stakeholders, including the prominent role of grassroots interest organisations and non-partisan political messages (Langer et al., 2019). Referendum scholars have long argued that referendum voting often exhibits greater volatility than party elections, particularly if political parties are internally divided on an issue (Leduc, 2002). There are significant gaps in our understanding of how non-party political actors mobilise during referenda, and how hybrid media have changed the dynamics of public debates and campaigns during direct democracy votes. It also remains open to debate whether campaigning in the hybrid media environment and incorporation of social media into political communication strategies truly benefit grassroots organisations.

This article contributes to the understanding of political actors' strategic use of hybrid media systems during a national referendum on a controversial public policy issue through an in-depth case study of the 2020 cannabis legalisation referendum in New Zealand. We draw on an intensive digital ethnographic study of campaigning in the three months leading up to the ref-

erendum vote, alongside quantitative content and sentiment analysis of digital news media websites (i.e., the digital channels of mainstream "legacy" media), a review of the campaigns' post-referendum spending reports, and a review of other published studies and reports of media reporting during the referendum. Using this multi-source investigation, we analyse how campaigners on both sides of the debate strategically utilised the hybrid media environment, including through their engagement with paid advertising on social media and by leveraging their digital networks. We also explore the wider media and political environment to understand factors that may have influenced campaigners' strategic decisions to engage (or not) with the different media channels.

2. Theoretical Framework: Hybrid Media System and the Politics of Referenda Campaigns

The "hybridity" of contemporary political communication system means that a diverse set of political actors use multiple communication channels to influence the public debate. The interactions between political actors, media, and the public are interdependent, complex, and ever-evolving (Chadwick, 2018). While "newer" digital media channels, such as social networking sites, provide political actors with nimble and cost-effective ways of directly promoting certain information to the public, their strength also lies in the opening of opportunities for engagement by non-elite political activism (Chadwick, 2018), a feature particularly relevant for non-party grassroots interest organisations that often play an important role during national referenda (Buchanan, 2016). In turn, the arrival of "newer" digital media logic has also changed how "older" mainstream media operate, as they increasingly integrate information from the online realm into their own practices, thus providing space for non-elite actors to enter the news production process. Simultaneously, traditional media journalists and editors continue to act as "gatekeepers" to political information (White, 1950) in their role as creators and selectors of information, illustrating the continued relevance of "older" media logic. In this vein, mainstream media continues to play an important role by "framing" events (Entman, 1993) and promoting positive, neutral, or negative understanding of phenomena (Coleman et al., 2009). In turn, political actors and citizens can contribute to the shape of public debates by leveraging mainstream media coverage and increasing the visibility of mainstream news in digital spaces through sharing mainstream media content online (the so-called "secondary gatekeeping effect"; Singer, 2014).

Taken together, these changes in the political communication landscape have altered the ways actors can strategically mobilise to influence public debates. According to Chadwick (2018, p. 4), the hybrid media system rewards actors who strategically "steer information flows in ways that suit their goals and in ways that modify,

enable, or disable others' agency." Empirical research into political party campaigns demonstrates how integrating older and newer communication channels has now become a recognised feature of professional political campaigning during elections (Lilleker et al., 2015; Mykkänen et al., 2016) and also non-electoral periods (Ícaro & Lilleker, 2020). Similarly, in a national referendum context, a successful campaign will leverage the "older" and "newer" media logics recognising the interdependence of actors and mediums. However, by virtue of the different media logics—defined by Chadwick (2018, p. 4) as "technologies, genres, norms, behaviours and organisational forms"—some political communication channels are more amenable to actors' strategic activities than others. For example, mainstream media reports and commentary can promote or alternatively hinder campaigners' preferred narratives, while paid advertising affords greater level of control over the message. Studies of electoral campaigns have empirically demonstrated how political parties choose to emphasise different issues (Elmelund-Præstekær, 2011) and adopt different strategies (Walter & Vliegenthart, 2010) across communication channels, a phenomenon partly explained by the demands of different media and the parties' ability to control the message. These issues are relevant in the context of referendum campaigns and the communication strategies of non-party actors. Indeed, Chadwick (2018, p. 286) argues that the grassroots political activism enabled by the newer digital media logic "must be set in the context of the broad and continuing power of the political and media elites." Additionally, the political advertising strategies during a referendum campaign may be at least partly dictated by the campaigners' access to financial resources (e.g., Lupia & Matsusaka, 2004), as well as the regulatory environment (e.g., maximum allowed spending limits and/or advertising rules).

While the newer digital media channels afford non-party referendum actors with nimble, innovative, and cost-effective ways of campaigning during public referenda, the success, intensity, and choice of campaigners' strategies (including the allocation of resources and level of engagement with different media) will depend on a range of "environmental" factors, including the referendum regulatory framework and mainstream media landscape. Drawing on the hybrid media theory above, we expand the study of political communication strategies during direct democracy votes by analysing how referendum campaigners strategically engaged (or not) with "older" and "newer" media logics during the New Zealand cannabis legalisation referendum.

3. Political Background, New Zealand Media System, and Key Cannabis Referendum Campaigners

New Zealand is a long-standing parliamentary democracy with legislated, albeit infrequently used, mechanisms of direct democracy. Referenda can be initiated by a citizen petition (with a minimum signature require-ment of 10% of enrolled voters, and non-legally binding) or by the government (on any topic, including constitutional change; these may be legally binding if the law provides for it; Roper et al., 2020). Less than 20 public referenda have been held in New Zealand to date (excluding local votes on alcohol prohibition held in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand, 2020). The last pre-2020 referenda were held in 2015–2016, when the public rejected the proposal to change the design of the New Zealand flag.

The New Zealand cannabis legalisation referendum was notable as the first public vote on this issue to be held at the national level (in contrast to cannabis legalisation ballots in US states; Ballotpedia, n.d.-a, n.d.-b), and because it involved public voting on a detailed legislative bill (the Cannabis Legalisation and Control Bill) rather than a broad question about whether cannabis should be legal or not (Wilkins & Rychert, 2021). New Zealand has traditionally followed a conservative prohibition-based approach to drug policy, with no adoption of cannabis decriminalisation, and hence the proposal was viewed as controversial. The referendum was held on 17 October 2020, together with the general election. The referendum proposal was narrowly rejected, with 48.4% voting in support and 50.7% against (0.8% spoiled unusable votes).

The role of legacy and social media during the cannabis referendum has been controversial. After the announcement of the referendum result, some commentators suggested that the information space was dominated by the anti-reform campaign (Hutton, 2020; Mckenzie-Mclean, 2020), though published analyses of traditional media reports and one study of social media discourse on Twitter do not support this view (Dempster & Norris, 2022; Riordan et al., 2020; Rychert et al., 2022). For context, New Zealanders' trust in traditional news sources has declined in recent years, with government funding of news production being one of the key reasons cited (Myllylahti & Treadwell, 2022). A recent study expanding Hallin and Mancini's seminal typology of media systems identified New Zealand's public media system as a mixed "liberal-pluralist" model, which is characterised by comparatively moderate levels of less secure funding, weaker regulatory protections, and smaller audience shares (Neff & Pickard, 2021).

During the New Zealand cannabis referendum debate, the government adopted a neutral stance, leaving the ground open for lobbying by various non-party interest actors. The government's "signposting" public information campaign merely aimed to direct voters to official resources about technical aspects of the proposed reform and referendum process, rather than promote voting in support of cannabis legalisation (Roper et al., 2020). This self-imposed neutral stance reflected the different views on cannabis legalisation among the governing coalition partners and within the respective parties. The proposal to hold a referendum first emerged during the 2017 coalition negotiations between

Labour and the Green Party, with the latter being a long-time advocate for cannabis law reform. In contrast to the proactive, pro-legalisation campaigning by the Green Party spokesperson for drug reform (MP Chlöe Swarbrick), the highly popular Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern (the leader of the NZ Labour Party) decided not to reveal her stance on this issue, explaining that she did not want to influence voters (Rychert & Wilkins, 2021).

Referendum campaigners generally operate in a regulated environment. Under New Zealand electoral and referendum advertising rules, campaigners who intended to spend more than NZ$13,600 (US$9,700) in the two-month period prior to the voting date were required to register with the electoral commission, and those spending over NZ$100,000 in this period were required to submit a mandatory budget report. Additionally, electoral commission rules specified that each registered campaigner could spend a maximum of NZ$338,000 (US$240,000) during the two months prior to the referendum vote (Electoral Commission New Zealand, 2020b). Of the 15 registered cannabis referendum campaigners, only two lobbied for a vote against legalisation (Electoral Commission New Zealand, 2020a). Key campaigners for a "yes" vote included the New Zealand Drug Foundation (a well-known charity that advocates for drug policy reform) and Make It Legal, an ad-hoc grassroots campaign rallying pro-cannabis legalisation activists and supporters. The leading anti-reform campaign, Say Nope to Dope, was coordinated by the Smart Approaches to Marijuana Coalition, a group linked to Family First, a long-standing organisation promoting conservative values in New Zealand (Family First was itself a registered referendum campaigner lobbying against the reform). In addition to the key registered campaigners, many other actors became involved in the public debate, including politicians, celebrities, academics, the New Zealand Medical Association, and other civil society actors.

4. Methods

The analysis draws on our digital ethnographic research of the referendum campaigns on Facebook, systematic quantitative content analysis of traditional legacy media during the referendum debate, a review of post-referendum reports on campaigners' budget expenses, and a synthesis of other published research on the cannabis referendum debate in New Zealand. The key components of the original research involved quantitative content analysis of media articles and commentary published on the websites of leading New Zealand digital news providers (i.e., the digital channels of "mainstream" legacy media) and unobtrusive digital ethnography observations of registered referendum campaigner accounts on Facebook, complemented with quantitative analysis of their social media activity, in the three-month pre-referendum period. Details of the methods are described below.

Firstly, we conducted daily visits to the six leading mainstream digital news websites in New Zealand—i.e., *NZHerald*, *Stuff*, *The Spinoff*, *Newshub* (TV3), *One News* (TV1), and *Otago Daily Times*, each visited once a day in the afternoon, i.e., between 6 and 9 pm, from 31 July to 17 October—recording all articles about cannabis and the cannabis referendum (including article placement on the news website and instances of republished stories). The recorded articles were subsequently coded by sentiment (i.e., pro-legalisation, anti-legalisation, neutral) and actors used as sources of information/opinion. The dataset comprised 245 unique articles (486 publication instances due to articles being published multiple times on the website and/or on consecutive days). Two researchers independently conducted sentiment coding of the entire legacy media sample (Cohen's Kappa coefficient: 0.85), using a five-point coding scale: −2 = *strongly opposing legalisation*, −1 = *moderately opposing*, 0 = *neutral*, +1 = *moderately supportive*, and +2 = *strongly supportive*. The coding protocol and scale benchmarks were discussed and agreed upon during the preliminary coding of a sub-sample of 20 articles. Sentiment coding involved consideration of the overall "slant" of the article, with attention to the title, a picture illustrating the story, accompanying video, balance in sources, word choice, and inclusion or omission of information (e.g., only one side of the argument presented). Disagreements were resolved through a score by a third independent coder. The average sentiment score for all unique articles was calculated by dividing the total sentiment count by 245 (i.e., the number of unique media items).

Secondly, we conducted a digital ethnography of campaigner accounts by following registered referendum campaigners on Facebook, taking written memos during daily observations of digital campaigns in the three-month pre-referendum period. Our digital ethnography approach involved unobtrusive observations of campaigners' activity (i.e., the researcher as a "lurker"; see Murthy, 2008; Uberti, 2021). This was complemented by systematic recording and coding of campaigners' advertising activity and the sharing of legacy media content on the campaigners' Facebook accounts. Systematically coded indicators included the posting and promotion of traditional legacy media content by campaigners, spending on paid promotion advertising, and the patterns of sharing content between campaigners. We utilised "political and social issues" advertisement data on Facebook to track campaigners' weekly advertising spending. We focused on Facebook as it is by far the most widely used social networking site in New Zealand (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2020) and is the third most-accessed channel for news consumption (after broadcast news and digital news outlets; McVeagh, 2016).

Descriptive findings from the research have been previously reported, alongside a comprehensive description of the research methodology and coding procedures (Rychert et al., 2022). In this article, we contextualise

the broader academic and theoretical implications of this analysis to describe how actors on both sides of the debate utilised the opportunities presented by the new hybrid media environment. We discuss how and to what extent campaigners incorporated social media into their strategies and how the "older" mainstream media practices and regulatory environment may have impacted their campaign choices.

The article is structured in three parts. Firstly, we outline features of the referendum debate in the digital channels of traditional legacy media, focusing on the sentiments (i.e., neutral, pro-, and anti-legalisation) and the actors who were featured most frequently in these articles. Secondly, we discuss how referendum campaigners strategically engaged with the hybrid media logics, focusing on the sharing of traditional legacy media content on Facebook, paid promotion of that content, and other strategies for leveraging online social networks to influence the public. Thirdly, we compare the expenditures of anti- and pro-reform campaigns using official post-referendum reports and analyse the different levels of attention the respective campaigners paid to advertise via different media. Finally, we discuss the implications of the case study for wider media and referendum theory.

5. Findings

5.1. Referendum Debates in the Legacy Media: Sentiments and Actors in the Mainstream Media Debates

Of the total of 245 unique articles published by the six leading digital news providers, most (48%) were neutral in sentiment towards legalisation, with 42% supportive of legalisation and 10% opposed to reform. We found that the *average* sentiment of legacy media articles was mildly supportive of legalisation, i.e., 0.4 sentiment score (on a scale of −2 = *strongly opposing legalisation* to +2 = *strongly supportive*; Rychert et al., 2022). Legacy media articles with pro-reform sentiments were, on average, republished more often on legacy media websites than those with negative sentiments (Rychert et al., 2022). These results are broadly consistent with other published reports on media coverage during the referendum. For example, one small-scale study (*N* = 37 articles) found the majority of articles on the digital website of the leading national newspaper (the *NZHerald*; i.e., 54%) had a balanced or neutral tone, 43% were "explicitly for legalisation," and only one article was "explicitly against legalisation" (Dempster & Norris, 2022). Similarly, a post-referendum analysis commissioned by the anti-legalisation conservative campaigner Family First found that a neutral tone dominated news headlines (46%), followed by pro-legalisation news headlines (36%) and a minority (18%) that were anti-reform (*N* = 203; Family First, 2021).

In terms of stakeholders driving the debate in traditional legacy media, the pro-reform actors featured significantly more often than the anti-reform campaigners, with frequent appearances by pro-reform politicians and civil society actors. Overall, we found that politicians featured prominently as subjects and sources of information (23% of unique articles in the dataset, *n* = 56), followed by NGO and civil society campaigners (22%, *n* = 54) and academics (21%, *n* = 50; Rychert et al., 2022). Secondary analysis conducted for this article found that politicians supporting cannabis legalisation (i.e., primarily the Green MP Swarbrick and former Prime Minister Helen Clark) featured in the media more often (11% of unique articles in the dataset) than politicians with a neutral stance towards the reform (8% of articles) and politicians opposing legalisation (i.e., opposition MPs and minority coalition partners; 7%). Similarly, pro-reform NGO actors featured more than twice as often (16% of articles) as anti-reform campaigners (7%) in the articles we analysed. The latter result concurs with findings in a report commissioned by the anti-legalisation campaigner, which found that advocates for a "yes" vote were quoted twice as often as those advocating for a "no" vote (Family First, 2021).

In summary, sentiment in the legacy media towards cannabis law reform was mostly neutral, with a mild skew towards pro-legalisation reporting and commentary. This suggests legacy media largely endeavoured to provide balanced reporting in line with the norms of legacy journalism. However, the pro-reform actors, particularly politicians and civil society organisations, featured in media reports more often than the anti-legalisation actors. There could be many reasons for this, from the ideological and political leanings of editorial teams to the fact that pro-reform campaigners simply outnumbered the anti-reform campaigners or made themselves more available to media enquiries. The frequent featuring of "yes" campaigners supports both the "top-down" (pro-reform political elite) and "bottom-up" (civil society and grassroots organisations) mechanisms of mobilisation in the legacy media. While our analysis of media sentiments and actors helps understand the mainstream media environment in which campaigners operated, it does not reveal actors' strategies to engage (or not) with "newer" and "older" media. As we show in the next section, the pro-reform referendum actors appeared to leverage their social media networks to influence the legacy media content to a greater extent.

5.2. Leveraging the Hybrid Media System: Campaigners' Strategic Uses of Facebook

The hybrid theory of contemporary media implies that traditional "older" media logics are intertwined with "newer" online media tools, and vice versa. During the New Zealand cannabis legalisation referendum, this hybrid media landscape manifested in several ways: the sharing and promoting of traditional "legacy" media content online, the use of social media content in journalists' reports (see, for example, Cheng, 2020), and

finally the leveraging of referendum stakeholders' networks in social media to influence the narrative in the traditional media. The latter was evidenced during our digital ethnographic research; for example, when a pro-reform advocate posted on Facebook that they were "helping a TV news show" to find heroes for a media story and requesting volunteers to come forward (Figure 1). This illustrates one way that referendum actors leveraged their digital social networks to influence information environments in the hybrid media world. Of note, a study of pre-referendum debate on Twitter, a platform known to attract political and media elites, also found that New Zealand tweets had mostly positive sentiments towards legalisation (Riordan et al., 2020).

Figure 1. A civil society organisation lobbying for greater access to medicinal cannabis shares a post by a high-profile cannabis legalisation supporter looking for cannabis market participants for a traditional media story.

The frequent sharing of "legacy" media content in social media was a notable feature of the campaign. Using the Crowdtangle plug-in for Chrome internet browser, we determined that nearly all articles captured during the daily monitoring of six leading "legacy" media outlets were shared on Facebook (i.e., 96%, *n* = 236; Rychert et al., 2022). Overall, articles with pro-legalisation sentiment had disproportionally higher average interaction rates (i.e., shares, likes, and comments) on Facebook than those with negative sentiment (i.e., mean 1,129 interactions for pro-reform articles vs 771 for anti-reform), suggesting more prominent engagement with the "newer" digital media logics by pro-legalisation stakeholders, or perhaps more receptive audience engagement with their messaging on Facebook. A review of the high-profile shares revealed that one in four articles from the dataset were shared by a *registered* referendum campaigner. Other shares were by media outlets themselves, non-registered campaigners (e.g., legal medicinal cannabis companies, smaller NGOs), key individuals, and political actors (for an illustrative network map of how posts about cannabis were shared between those accounts, see Rychert et al., 2022). These interactions across stakeholders and media illustrate what

Chadwick and colleagues (2015, p. 14) call "campaign assemblages" comprised of diverse "multiple, loosely coupled individuals, groups, sites, and media technologies" that work together towards a desired campaign outcome (Chadwick et al., 2015).

The steering of information flows in desired directions sometimes involved individuals outside the narrow campaign networks. For example, when a seemingly unrelated press release about a new dangerous synthetic drug discovered on the New Zealand illegal drug market was issued in late September (a month before the voting day; Science Media Centre, 2020), subsequent news headlines and academic expert commentary focused on how cannabis legalisation could reduce demand for synthetic drugs, supporting the case for reform (e.g., "Cannabis referendum," 2020). As such, the original press release warning drug users of a new dangerous substance progressed into a pro-reform elite commentary. One headline on the website of a national broadcaster quoted a celebrity media presenter who had previously expressed an anti-legalisation stance and was now considering changing his vote in view of this new development ("Duncan Garner," 2020). A couple of news items from this information cycle, one quoting an independent academic researcher and another with the above celebrity, were subsequently used by pro-reform campaigners in paid advertising campaigns on Facebook (see Facebook Ad Library 2020a, 2020b). This illustrates how grassroots activists and civil society were able to capitalise on the positive elite commentary in legacy media.

Indeed, in order to leverage the reach of traditional "legacy" media content on Facebook, the pro-legalisation campaigners used paid advertising to promote mainstream media articles more widely. Using Facebook database, we estimated that the three major pro-legalisation pages (i.e., Make it Legal, NZ Drug Foundation, and NZ Norml) spent between 5 to 20% of their total Facebook advertising budget promoting links to digital media, including news sites and blogs (Rychert et al., 2022). An example of such promotion is provided in Figure 2. In contrast, the anti-legalisation campaigners, while also sharing "legacy" media content on their Facebook channels, did not actively promote any news articles through paid advertising. Instead, their paid Facebook advertising campaign consisted exclusively of custom-designed campaign messages (see an example in Figure 3). This illustrates how anti-legalisation campaigners took a more conventional approach with paid promotion online, whereas the pro-legalisation campaigners made fuller use of social media platforms and the hybrid media landscape by repurposing traditional media content in their online advertising. Of note, both pro- and anti-legalisation campaigners utilised some audience targeting based on age, location, and gender, illustrating how campaigners "narrowcasted" specific messages to different segments of the social media audience (see detailed examples of targeted advertising in Rychert et al., 2022).
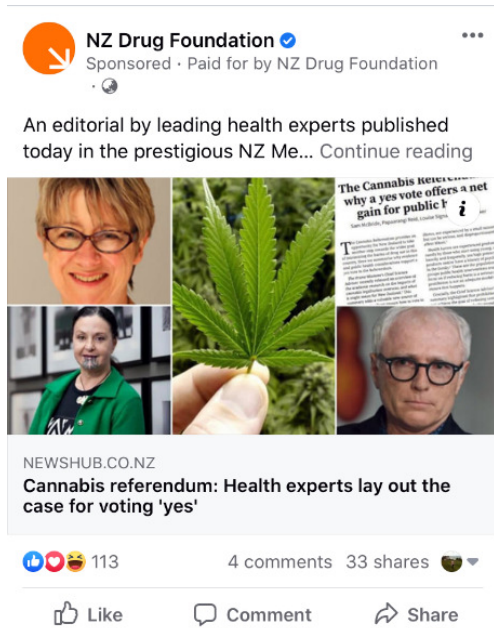
Figure 2. Example of a news article originally published on the digital channel of a TV broadcaster, shared and promoted via paid advertising by a registered referendum campaigner.

Figure 3. Example of anti-legalisation campaigner advertisement on Facebook.

5.3. Referendum Campaign Budgets and Advertising Expenditures in "Newer" and "Older" Media Channels

Although the results of empirical studies on the impact of campaign spending on public referenda remain inconclusive (i.e., some studies have found campaign spending *against* a ballot more effective than spending *in favour*, while other recent analyses argue that spending is similarly effective for both sides; see De Figueiredo et al., 2011; Garrett & Gerber, 2001; Jaquet et al., 2022; Lupia & Matsusaka, 2004), the size of campaigners' budgets does matter. As might be expected, the higher a campaigner's budget, the more resources and power they have to influence voters, including through advertising (Broder, 2001; De Figueiredo et al., 2011; Matsusaka, 2004). In New Zealand, referendum advertising was controlled by rules about disclosure (i.e., register of campaigners and mandatory post-referendum reports by those who spent more than NZ$100,000 in the two-month pre-referendum period) and maximum spending limits (i.e., maximum NZ$338,000 spending in the regulated period).

Some post-referendum commentary claimed that the anti-legalisation campaign was better funded (Mckenzie-Mclean, 2020), influencing the result. While it is difficult to estimate campaign budgets precisely (i.e., only *registered* campaigners who spent more than NZ$100,000 were required to file a report to the electoral commission), the available data suggests the campaign budgets of the two camps were not significantly dif-
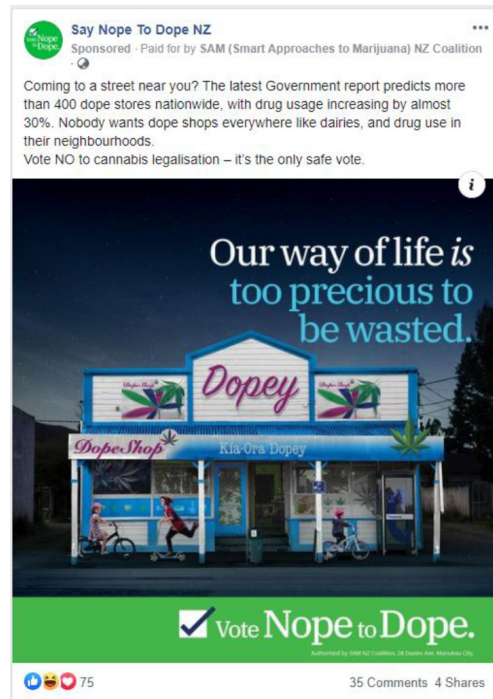
ferent, i.e., two anti-legalisation campaigners declared cumulatively spending NZ$461,500, and two major pro-legalisation campaigners declared NZ$442,000 (Electoral Commission New Zealand, 2021). Overall, the two leading campaigners on both sides came close to the maximum spending limit allowed by the regulations. There is no official data on spending by the other pro-legalisation campaigners who fell below the mandatory reporting threshold. What is evident from the available data is that pro-legalisation campaigners, and particularly one group (Make It Legal), spent more money on advertising in social media, whereas anti-legalisation campaigners diversified their spending across different mediums, including traditional political advertising strategies such as pamphlets, sponsored articles in print newspapers, and public billboards (Table 1).

The more traditional approach to referendum advertising was evident in the way some of the sponsored content was used in the anti-legalisation campaigners' online communications (e.g., via sharing a photograph of a physical newspaper with a sponsored print article; see Figure 4). The posting of a photo with a physical print newspaper advertorial may have been a strategic or unintentional way of capitalising on the prestige of print media and "traditional" media brands. In the words of the anti-legalisation campaigner, they were motivated to pay for the sponsored newspaper content because of a perceived "lack of balanced reporting" in the mainstream media. Post-referendum expenditure reports show that the major pro-reform campaigner

Table 1. Referendum campaign spending by the top four campaigners.

Two months (16 August–October)	Pro-legalisation		Anti-legalisation	
	NZ Drug Foundation	Make It Legal	Smart Approaches to Marijuana Coalition	Family First
Total declared spending (NZ$)	$337,242	$104,781	$320,300	$141,224
	$442,023		$461,524	
Leading expenses	• Advertising ($214,000), including TV broadcast advertising (approx. $132,000), Facebook and Instagram advertising (approx. $25,000), Google ads (approx. $12,000), and print magazine advertising (at least $11,500) • Production of TV, digital, print ads, and social media content (creative agency): Approx. $80,400 • Flier and poster printing and distribution: Approx. $9,000	• Facebook advertising and social media content creation: Approx. $103,000	• Multi-channel advertising package: Approx. $81,000 • Newspaper advertising: Approx. $69,000 • Television advertising: Approx. $34,000 • Creative agency fees: Approx. $28,000 • Facebook advertising: Approx. $31,000 • Billboards: Approx. $17,000	• Pamphlet printing, translations (Samoan, Tongan, Korean, Māori, Arabic) and courier/delivery: Approx. $130,000

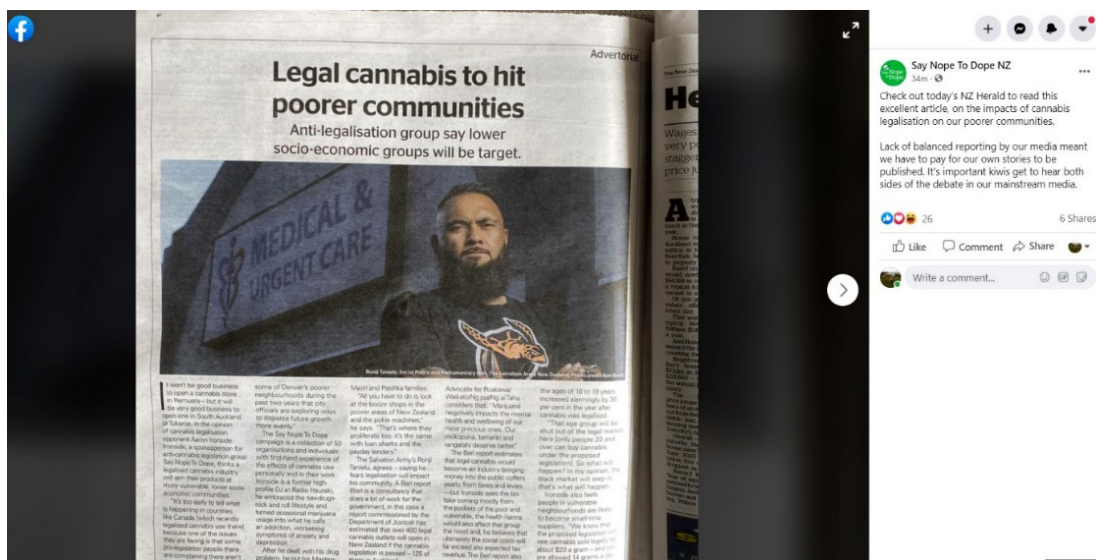Source: Electoral Commission New Zealand (2021).

Figure 4. Sponsored article in a national newspaper, shared by the anti-legalisation Facebook campaigner account. Note: Facebook post reads, "Lack of balanced reporting by our media meant we have to pay for our own stories to be published. It's important that kiwis get to hear both sides of the debate in our mainstream media."

(NZ Drug Foundation) also engaged in print advertising, although to a lesser extent (Table 1).

6. Discussion

This study of a referendum on a highly controversial policy issue contributes to the understanding of political communication strategies in the hybrid media environment during direct democracy voting by investigating *how* campaigners strategically engaged (or not) with the "older" and "newer" media and exploring *why* they may have taken their respective approaches. We found that pro-cannabis legalisation campaigners engaged with the "newer" digital media logics to a greater extent than the anti-legalisation campaigners. This included leveraging their social media networks to influence the debate in traditional legacy media, the greater sharing of pro-legalisation posts on Facebook (including content from legacy media), and paid advertising on social media. The sentiment and actor analysis of mainstream media and review of post-referendum spending reports provided important *context* for understanding campaigners' strategic choices within the wider media and the regulatory and political environment in which they operated. Campaigners' strategic choices were shaped by the factors they perceived they were able to control. For example, the "gatekeeping" function of traditional media combined with the anti-reform campaign perception of media bias during the debate (see Figure 4) may have reinforced the decision to invest resources in traditional political advertising such as billboards and household leafleting rather than attempt to influence mainstream journalists and elite commentary through *tactical* use of the internet (see Chadwick, 2018, p. 288). On the other hand, the pro-reform campaigners appeared to skilfully enter the news production cycle to influence legacy press and television coverage through timely interventions, and this tactic may have been reinforced with the positive feedback loop, as evidenced in their more frequent appearances in the legacy media.

In terms of mainstream media reports and commentary, we found that while the pro-reform stakeholders appeared in the traditional media more frequently, overall, the majority of articles were neutral towards legalisation, followed by those with a mild pro-legalisation sentiment. This suggests that, in general, traditional mainstream media largely endeavoured to provide a balanced overview of the issue. However, this was outlet dependent. For example, we previously reported that the *One News* website, a digital channel of the Crown-owned television station, provided the most balanced overview of the issues (Rychert et al., 2022). This could reflect the national broadcaster's commitment to the principles of balanced journalism characteristic of the pre-internet era, or, as noted in the introduction, the Government's self-imposed neutral stance on the issue. As other political communication academics have previously argued, the traditional mainstream media still matters (Langer &

Gruber, 2020), and even in these times of hybrid media systems, the traditional media continue to enjoy prestige, loyalty, and trust among the mainstream public. The anti- and pro-reform campaigners' expenditures on advertising in newspapers and television (see Table 1), along with the pro-legalisation campaign efforts to influence mainstream media reports, as well as promote the traditional news in their online campaigns (e.g., Figure 2), illustrate that both sides of the debate displayed awareness of the continued power of the older media.

Interestingly, this reliance on the prestige of legacy media and the adoption of more "traditional" political campaigning was evident even in the social media content of the anti-legalisation campaign, despite their perceived challenges in influencing mainstream media. The posting of a photo with the sponsored newspaper article is a notable example of this. Additionally, all paid advertising content on Facebook by the anti-legalisation campaign included the same layout with a characteristic green banner and the campaigner logo, reflecting the more conventional, traditional top-down "command and control" campaign model (in contrast to the more diverse campaign of pro-legalisation NGOs and grassroots organisations, characterised by decentralised and bottom-up influences). The latter may reflect the challenges of coordinating a referendum campaign across traditional and new digital media channels, particularly when conducted by a loosely connected network of activists.

The analysis of post-referendum expenditure reports shows the financial resources of the pro-reform and anti-reform camps were not significantly dissimilar, with the two leading campaigners spending close to the maximum regulated pre-referendum budget. While the financial "constraints" on campaigns were similar, money was spent in different ways and in different mediums. This was particularly evidenced in the stark contrast between the advertising strategy of the pro-reform Make It Legal campaign, which spent nearly all available budget on social media Facebook advertising, compared to the anti-reform campaigner Family First, who spent most of their funds on leaflet printing and drop-offs to households (Table 1). Ultimately, the high campaign spending on Facebook by one of the two major pro-legalisation actors (i.e., Make It Legal) may have been a strategic mistake (i.e., missing the undecided demographic of older voters). Although Facebook has good coverage of a cross-section of the New Zealand population (estimated 70% coverage), younger users aged 25–34 dominate the platform (i.e., 25% of New Zealand accounts), followed by users aged 18–24 (17.4%; NapoleonCat, 2021; We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2020). This comparatively young user cohort may have already been supportive of cannabis legalisation, making campaigners' promotion on Facebook less efficient. Indeed, pre-referendum polls and analyses of voter intentions found that younger people were much more likely to vote in favour of legalisation (e.g., Vowles, 2020). In contrast, the anti-legalisation campaign diversified efforts across a range of mediums,

and their greater focus on traditional advertising and via leaflet drops may have reached a wider cross-section of the population who were likely to vote.

Finally, it is important to reflect on the campaigners' respective positions as "challenger" (vote "yes" campaign) or "status quo" actor (vote "no" campaign) in the referendum debates as this may have also affected the respective campaign styles. The *status quo bias* phenomenon suggests that voters faced with uncertainty about the likely effects of policy change tend to vote against the proposal (Bowler & Donovan, 1998; Kahneman et al., 1991). Currently, scientific uncertainty remains about the long-term social, public health, and safety impacts of cannabis legalisation (Decorte et al., 2020). In this environment, even the "neutral" mainstream media posts that drew attention to gaps in knowledge and unknown consequences may have ultimately favoured the anti-reform argument.

7. Limitations and Outlook

The analysis drew on an in-depth investigation of six mainstream legacy media channels and campaigners' activity on Facebook, alongside other published reports and studies. We did not systematically analyse televised broadcast news or print newspapers. Instead, we made inferences about campaigners' activity in those channels from their mandatory post-referendum reports, alongside our non-structured observations as expert stakeholders. The analysis of mainstream media covered four digital news providers with the highest unique visitor numbers (Nielsen, 2018) and the websites of two major television news broadcasters. Websites of other news outlets with lower unique visitor numbers were not included in the analysis, meaning no digital channels of radio stations were included. We took a number of steps to ensure careful operationalisation of media sentiment coding (e.g., involvement of three independent coders); however, subjective influences cannot be completely eliminated. In terms of social media analysis, we focused on Facebook, reflecting its strategic importance for campaigners and the fact that referendum-related social media advertising mostly occurred on this platform. We relied on digital ethnography observations and analysis of posts and advertising data made available by Facebook. This approach did not involve scrutinising Facebook algorithms, which are another important factor determining campaigners' power in the hybrid media environment. Although much more difficult to decipher, even for the referendum campaigners themselves, the way algorithms decide who gets to see certain posts make Facebook another important "gatekeeper" to public opinion. Our analysis did not involve an evaluation of the accuracy or persuasiveness of the statements promoted by the respective campaigners. It may be that some messages resonated with the public more widely than others. As noted above, given the still unfolding consequences of cannabis legalisation overseas, it is not easy to determine the accuracy of statements regarding reform consequences. Finally, we did not empirically analyse the impact of campaigners' political advertising strategies on voters, or how the mainstream media content influenced their decisions.

The study provides a detailed account and analysis of the recent New Zealand cannabis legalisation referendum. The findings progress understanding of referendum campaigners' strategic choices regarding older and newer media channels and how their choices may be shaped by the wider media and regulatory environment. By analysing both older and newer media channels, we provide comparative insights on the referendum debates across media channels and demonstrate the relevance of hybrid media theory in the study of referendum campaigns. The findings also have methodological implications for future referendum campaign research—i.e., the need to clearly define referendum campaign channel(s) and consider possible biases in narrowly-cast studies—and campaign strategies to achieve change through a referendum in regard to controversial topics.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors provided unpaid advice to the New Zealand Ministry of Justice with regard to the development of the Cannabis Legalisation and Control Bill and provided unpaid presentations of scientific evidence concerning cannabis law reform to media and community groups. The authors did not collaborate with any advocacy groups or political actors campaigning in the referendum and undertook to maintain a neutral position.

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