In February 1998 the NZ Government posted to all households a public discussion document entitled "Towards a Code of Social and Family Responsibility". Amid substantial controversy in the media, the public was invited to return a response form to a Response Analysis Team in the Department of Social Welfare, with comments on the 11 issues contained in the discussion document. A response rate of 10% was hoped for and received according to DSW figures. At the time of writing, a report summarising the findings of the RAT has yet to be released.

In this paper we report on results from a random telephone survey conducted in May of a little under 1000 households in Auckland and Palmerston North. The survey assessed how many respondents had received, read, discussed and responded to the issues in the discussion document, and explored their responses to the Government's initiative with such questions as: is this a good way or a poor way to find out community views? Is this a good use or a poor use of public money? Has the Discussion Document encouraged you to think about your own personal family responsibilities?

We were interested to discover whether the Government's exercise in communicating and consulting with the public had resulted in a representative response. Key findings to be presented and discussed include the surprising rates of delivery failure in both the metropolitan and provincial cities; the higher rate of response to the DSW from provincial residents; and the more limited access to the discussion document of the young and the urban poor. These findings suggest that the DSW Response Analysis Team has analysed a skewed representation of NZ public opinion.

We also explore the proposition based in Knowledge Gap Hypothesis literature that in any community there are people who are information rich and information poor; in our data we see a manifestation of this in distinct differences between those people who did return a response form and those who did not. However knowledge gaps related to socioeconomic factors did not necessarily occur in this study, unlike in several overseas precedents; we analyse possible reasons.
Voyaging Across the Knowledge Gap:
*A Study of The Code of Social and Family Responsibility*

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Abstract

In February 1998 the NZ Government posted out 1.4 million public discussion documents entitled “Towards a Code of Social and Family Responsibility”, one to each household. Amid substantial controversy in the media, the public was invited to return a response form to the Department of Social Welfare. We saw in this novel means of communicating with the public an opportunity to assess to what extent a saturation mail-out of government information would reach people and even change their thinking, as the government appeared to hope.

In this paper we report on results from our random telephone survey conducted in May 1998 of 945 households in Auckland and Palmerston North. We were interested to discover whether the Government’s consultation with the public had resulted in a representative response. This response was finally made public in a DSW RAT (Response Analysis Team) Report in October. We reflect briefly on this report in the light of our quantitative study which was carried out concurrently.

We outline the development of our “Code” project in the context of Knowledge Gap literature, and describe how we are developing from it further NZ studies into information poverty. This presentation is necessarily a brief overview of a complex study with many strands. It produced a dense set of data which will be reported on separately in other publications.

“The Code”

Since February this year we have been investigating the communication implications of the by now well-known Code of Social and Family Responsibility. This concept was originally mooted in 1997 by Winston Peters in the context of a Budget, but was not fully developed until the summer of 97/98. It was designed to encourage debate on issues of personal responsibility particularly in relation to welfare and child health, and was launched in a high-profile setting: Jenny Shipley listed the Code as one of a number of legislative priorities which were the platform for her maiden speech to

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In recent times communication researchers have begun to study knowledge inequalities within communities, especially in relation to widening socioeconomic gaps. This research has come to be described as the Knowledge Gap Hypothesis (KGH). Briefly this suggests that communities consist of people who may be categorised as information rich and information poor; “groups within a social system vary in the speed of knowledge acquisition.” (Gaziano, 1997: 239). Attempts are often made to equalise information gaps by the release of information into the community, usually through the news media; however “members of the public with higher educational levels gain more information more efficiently from the news media than those with less education,” so attempts to equalise gaps may result in the opposite effect. (Wanta & Elliott, 1995: 313).
Parliament as Prime Minister, on 17 February 1998. A Public Discussion Document (DD) outlining a possible Code emerged in February 1998 and was sent to all NZ households inviting individuals, families and groups to respond with comment. A Response Analysis Team (RAT) would analyse this feedback and report on it in July.

Here was a very good large-scale opportunity to test the concept of knowledge gaps in New Zealand. Studies have been done mainly in the US in the past 15 years which show a tendency for the release of information into a community to have a variety of different effects. Under some circumstances, release of information may indeed reduce gaps in knowledge within the community. Perhaps more commonly, a paradoxical effect occurs that widens the gap between the “information rich” and the “information poor”. The actual outcome depends on a variety of circumstances such as local interest in the issues concerned, the extent of conflict inherent in the situation, and people’s motivation to obtain information. The hypothesis needs further testing and development, especially, for our purposes, in the New Zealand context.

The trigger for this project was the lead article in the NZ Herald on the day following Shipley’s announcement, containing an insert feature which highlighted the comments of a young parent. His opinion was that it was not for the Government to tell parents how to do their job, and in any case the very people who might need such advice would not be reading a Code of Responsibility. Exactly who, then, would read this Discussion Document? Who would respond? Would people’s awareness about the social issues contained in the DD be increased? Would the government’s efforts to draw the whole community in, in effect to bridge knowledge gaps, be successful? If knowledge gaps were evident, would they be connected in any way with demographic characteristics, in that information poverty and richness can be linked to socioeconomic status (SES) and education? Could we measure any changes in knowledge over time?

It transpired that comment in the weeks and months that followed the release of the DD was largely negative: this “Code” was targeting particular groups in the guise of an all-embracing document, it was a wolf in sheep’s clothing, and in fact was all about seeking or creating an electoral mandate for cuts to welfare spending. It soon became apparent that The Code was a political liability. And so it is, finally: the longer it took for the RAT Report to emerge, the more likely its demise became; in October, the Code was laid to a dignified rest. We therefore completed the initial study (a large survey), the data analysis and interpretation which we will present to you today as discrete research into a unique if flawed experiment in mass communication.

Who or what killed the Code?

The Code has ‘died’ as a concept in large part because of negative media and public comment. To the extent that our survey of Palmerston North and Auckland respondents represents a cross-section of metropolitan and provincial New Zealand, the public rated the whole exercise of consultation very poorly, often feeling angry or slighted because a “Code” was demeaning and belittling. This anger was expressed in
incidental comment to our telephone interviewers. The methodological flaws of the government’s device were extensively noted, most tellingly by the NZ Statistical Association: its Survey Appraisals and Public Questions Committee stated that “The questionnaire is not able to produce sound quantitative information on the extent of the public’s views” (p. 7) and “Sending a single booklet and questionnaire to every household is an expensive, inefficient, and inaccurate way to gauge the extent of public opinion” (p.8). The NZSA document also pointed out that “the extent of public support for any particular view is impossible to assess from public submissions alone” (p. 7).

After a long official silence, the DSW RAT released its report in late October, opening it with a disclaimer which would perhaps allow it to dodge public criticism. However the admission that the exercise was not “a statistically correct survey of community opinion” was obscured by something of a non sequitur: “this exercise was not a survey. The objective was to gather the breadth of ideas and views...” (DSW, 1998, RAT Response Report Executive Summary). Roger Sowry, Minister of Social Services, employed similar phraseology in “a huge brainstorm of ideas”, "the ultimate massive public meeting...” (Press Release, 29 October 1998) and a reference to "mainstream NZ" (Howard, 1998), in an attempt to re-frame what the exercise had achieved.

Our findings show that rather than gathering the "breadth of ideas and views", the RAT has in fact analysed a skewed representation of public opinion. While the “public meeting” metaphor has a certain aptness, many people didn’t receive an invitation to the meeting, and those who were there came along with a tendency to express certain views.

Aims

It was not our intention to explore the methodological shortcomings of the Code already so amply established by the NZSA and others. Our study would have a different angle. We would conduct a survey by telephone interview to assess the proportion of people who had read the DD (and how much of it) and whether these people showed particular characteristics. It was also of considerable interest to establish to what extent people had discussed the issues in the DD, because this was said to be a priority for the Government as a means of starting a process of changed behaviour. The importance of interpersonal communication in initiating social change was an interesting and important concept to test and quantify. Thus our survey aimed to capture data which would establish to what extent knowledge gaps (KGs) existed on Code issues, whether any KGs were demographically marked, and whether discussion was connected in any way with knowledge retention or attitudes to the Code in general.
Methodology

We designed a telephone questionnaire which would test the extent to which respondents had received, read, responded to and discussed the Public Discussion Document, asking also for demographic data so that we could cross-tabulate. We included a series of 5 attitudinal questions to gauge respondents’ views on the process itself, with the intention of establishing any connection between media comment and public feeling. Finally we included an important question assessing respondents’ recall of the 11 issues highlighted in the DD, thus giving us an index of awareness knowledge.

Following a pilot study, telephone interviews were conducted in May after the deadline for return of responses to the DSW had passed. Paid Unitec and Massey students worked on randomly selected telephone numbers. Many people refused an interview. Media debate on the Code had aroused strong feelings so that those who agreed to be interviewed sometimes wanted to engage quite forcefully in discussion. This became hard work for the interviewers, so that the survey we had hoped to complete in perhaps two weeks instead took several. We called a halt to the process at 945 completed interviews, the bulk being done in Auckland and the balance in Palmerston North.

Alongside the survey was a content analysis of media response to the Code, carried out by Massey postgraduate student Michaela Scriver. Her work complemented the survey by keeping track of both the volume and nature of media comment as this singular communication event unfolded, developed and wound down.

Findings

Key findings to emerge following data analysis were:

- Auckland had a much higher rate of delivery failure of the DD (over 33% in Auckland, compared to 11% in Palmerston North)
- the provincial response rate (21% of those receiving the DD) was higher than the metropolitan (15%)
- young people and the urban poor in Auckland had more limited access to the DD
- response forms were sent in by people more knowledgeable on the issues in the DD
- lower income, least well-educated people discussed the issues least
- higher income, tertiary educated people discussed the issues most
- those who returned the response form in Auckland tended to have more favourable views on the way the government was consulting the community
- those who returned the response form in Auckland were more likely to reflect on their personal family responsibilities.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the DSW Response Analysis Team has analysed a skewed representation of New Zealand public opinion. However it is noteworthy that those who returned a response form were more likely to have read and discussed the issues in the DD; they also had better recall of the issues in the
document. The use of a response form therefore had some communication benefits. The apparent valuing of feedback from individuals and families or groups has motivated some respondents; reading, discussion and writing has heightened their awareness. It is unclear whether the reading led to the discussion and thus to the response form, or whether media comment led to discussion followed by reading and so on. What is clear is that there is a connection between these activities.

Behavioural differences seen in the key findings above seem to be a manifestation of an information gap between the returning and non-returning groups in our survey. In effect the responses that the Government received came from a more knowledgeable group, comprising people who were more aware of the contents of the Code than the non-returning section of the sample. An important Government objective (of initiating discussion and increasing awareness) was thus achieved, but with a specific group, the “responders” who

- read more of the DD than others
- discussed it more with other people
- were better able to recall the issues in it
- were somewhat better off than others
- were more likely to be women than men;

and in terms of attitude,

- were more favourable to this way to discern public views
- were more favourable to this use of public money
- were less sure that the Government was pressuring beneficiaries
- were more likely to reflect on their own responsibilities.

By way of contrast, the people not returning the response form

- read less of the DD
- discussed it less
- were less able to recall the issues in it.

It may be that the observable communication benefits seen in these findings - a connection between reading, discussing, returning a response form, being aware of the issues - have been largely in favour of a particular information rich group; in other words, the release of information in the form of a “Code” Discussion Document has widened a knowledge gap in this instance.

Other more generic findings for the two cities aggregated were:

- Almost 40% of the total sample said they read between 50% and the whole DD
- Over 40% said they were unsure or that they had read none of it.
  Almost a half (46%) agreed that they had discussed the DD with someone else.
  Of these, most discussed it with family, friends or a partner.
It is interesting that even fewer respondents said they had *sent in a response* as a member of a group (other than family) than those who *discussed* as a member of a group. Discussion and response was more likely to come from individuals and households: it may be supposed that this will have affected the types of views and suggestions sent in to the RAT, in that the ideas may not have been subjected to the filtering process which can occur in a larger group setting.

- The majority (57%) said this was either a poor or a very poor way to discover community views. Seventeen per cent thought it was a good or a very good way to find community views.
- Almost three people in four (72%) thought this was either a poor or a very poor use of public money by the Government. Nine per cent thought it was either a good or a very good use of public money.
- Approaching half (44%) of the sample thought the Government was using the DD to pressure beneficiaries to get off their benefit. Almost a quarter (24%) thought the Government was not doing this at all or doing it only a little.
- Ten per cent of the sample said that either the DD or the public debate on it had caused them to think about their own family responsibilities either much or very much. Over three quarters (77%) said they had thought about their own responsibilities either only a little or not at all.
- When asked, “What issues from the DD do you recall?” almost a quarter (23%) recalled the issue of “Looking after our children”. Of the 11 issues in the DD, three of the top five recalled had to do with children’s safety, learning or their health. This may reflect the fact that the issues in the DD were repetitious in content, amplified in the imagery of the front cover showing a lively, loving family with very young children, and reinforced in public and media comment subsequent to its release: at least four of the eleven issues concerned children; and three were to do with health.

**Conclusions and Future Research**

We will not develop our Code project as a study of knowledge gaps over time because it ‘died’ as an issue at the forefront of public awareness fairly quickly. We are continuing to assess its impact and meaning as a single event. Instead of a longitudinal study, then, we are developing a follow-on phase using in-depth interviews with some of the respondents from the first survey, whose incidental comment to the telephone interviewer showed strong indications of a sense of alienation in the community. “[It’s] such a different world today, you can’t even compare it”; “We felt under threat - [that there was] a hidden agenda as far as superannuitants were concerned” are typical comments. We aim to develop a model of information poverty based in part on this new phase of the work and influenced by the “internal perspective” of the subjects.

Other intriguing puzzles appeared in the study, perhaps warranting a follow-up at some point: for example, an indication that there were more likely to be SES-related knowledge gaps in the metropolitan city than the provincial, and more polarisation of views. Are these generalisable New Zealand phenomena? Culture appeared to have a role to play also in the concept of *social interest* which is a factor cited in KGH...
literature as narrowing knowledge gaps: Maori and Pacific Island people were more likely than average to have thought a little or to some extent about their family responsibilities, whereas the vast majority of respondents as a whole said they had not. Social interest - is this information useful for my interpersonal networks? - (Genova & Greenberg, 1981) may motivate a person or family group to avail themselves of information.

This has been a rich source not only of data about the relationship between the New Zealand Government and the New Zealand people, but also of questions which are forming the basis for future work. The project has recorded a picture of a unique moment in the socio-political history of the nation. We still have a good deal of work to do exploring the nuances, but the intriguing part about it is that there are other planes, perspectives, and patterns of light and shade the further into the image you look.

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