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The ‘team of 5 million’: The joint construction of leadership discourse during the Covid-19 pandemic in New Zealand

Christoph A. Hafner * , Tongle Sun

Department of English, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong
Department of English, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic that swept the world in 2020 demanded action from political leaders around the world to lead their people through the crisis. Leadership in a crisis involves a range of activities, such as making responsive decisions, communicating those decisions to the public, envisioning goals, generating trust and cooperation, and appealing for collective actions. Effective communication plays an essential role in this process. New Zealand has been regarded as a successful case globally in its crisis response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This study investigates the role of language and discourse in New Zealand’s Covid-19 crisis leadership and communication practices. Informed by an interactional sociolinguistics approach, the study draws on frame analysis, positioning theory, and rhetorical analysis to examine how the Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, her leadership team, and New Zealand mainstream media jointly negotiated and co-constructed the leadership discourse. Drawing on a corpus of 98 New Zealand government press briefings, a selected subset of press briefings surrounding significant events at the beginning of the first wave (March 2020) and second wave (August 2020) were coded and analyzed. The study identified a range of discursive strategies employed by Ardern at press briefing speeches and the question and answer sessions. Multiple self-positionings of Ardern and interactive positionings of the virus, the New Zealand government, and New Zealanders were identified. Ardern’s metaphorical framings of the crisis as a ‘fight’ and the response as a collective action provided the basis for rhetorical appeals to the public in the management of the pandemic. A close examination of the ways Ardern responded to media resistance of her discursive framing demonstrated that New Zealand leadership during the pandemic was not only discursively constructed, but also jointly and collaboratively achieved by multiple actors.

* Corresponding author at: Tat Chee Avenue, Kowloon Tong, Kowloon, Hong Kong SAR, China

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constructed not just in the words and deeds of the leader but also the rest of her team (including co-leaders and advisors), the media, the public, and other social actors. All of these actors are important because, at every stage of the process of crisis response, they can choose to either acquiesce to or resist a leader’s (and her team’s) management and direction. Such choices in turn influence the success of the collective action.

It is important to note that doing leadership is not conceptualized as individual action here. As Kranert (2017, p. 183; see also Reisigl, 2008) points out, the political speech genre is a complex one that is ‘multi-authored’ and ‘multi-addressed’. Furthermore, ‘party leaders usually speak on behalf of complex networks of political institutions such as their party, their parliamentary group or indeed the government’, whilst at the same time needing to present a coherent individual identity as leader, creating a tension in the discourse (p. 183). In the data set analysed, the speech is not just about the government, whilst at the same time needing to present the leader as ‘competent’: actively engaged in material action and sustaining their message and performing impression management. In their study of United States leadership claims at the United Nations in the context of nuclear proliferation, Schnurr et al. (2015, p. 201) noted that the media ‘can themselves influence the actions of social groups’. In a crisis, the media serve both to disseminate information as well as to frame (see below) the crisis for the public, among other roles (Garnett & Kouzmin, 2009).

In this article, we are particularly interested in this process of framing, a process that may be negotiated and contested. By examining the interactions between leaders and members of the media at press briefings, this article aims to shed further light on this discursive process of negotiation in the context of a mediated performance of leadership in a crisis.

Some existing research has illuminated the particular challenges that a political leader faces in times of crisis. First of all, it has been pointed out that politicians can play a valuable role in facilitating the ‘flow of timely and accurate information’ that is needed in order to cope with situations of crisis and disaster (McLean & Ewart, 2020, p. 2). However, leaders must also attend to affective dimensions of followers in order to potentially unite and sustain them around common, shared goals of the crisis response. According to McGuire et al. (2020, p. 364), this involves presenting a ‘hopeful yet realistic’ future vision, which is based on reasoning that is ‘caring and just’; it also involves framing the crisis as something that is ‘normal and solvable’ (p. 365). McGuire et al. go on to describe the kind of balancing act required of leaders in a crisis, noting that: ‘a leader is meant to perform a demeanour of courage and confidence in contexts of extreme uncertainty but at the same time, may be expected to display authentic vulnerability without appearing weak’ (p. 365).

2. Key dimensions of discursive leadership action

When it is performed, leadership can be broken down into different kinds of activities, with discourse that is oriented towards transactional concerns on the one hand, or relational concerns on the other (Schnurr, 2013). Transactional concerns have to do with the business of ‘getting things done’. Relational concerns have to do with the business of maintaining relationships in the group: motivating team members and attending to their affective needs. Similar to this distinction that sociolinguists make between ‘transactional talk’ and ‘relational talk’, other work on leadership discourse refers to the ‘task’ dimension and ‘maintenance’ dimension (Vine et al., 2008), ‘task behaviours’ and ‘relationship behaviours’ (Charteris-Black, 2007), or ‘competence’ and ‘responsiveness’ (Fetzer & Bull, 2012). Leaders often mix transactional and relational talk, simultaneously attending to task-related concerns and relationship issues, for example, using humour to call subordinates to account, while simultaneously maintaining the relationship (Holmes & Marra, 2006).

Fetzer and Bull (2012) focus on this dimension of ‘transactional’ and ‘relational’ talk. Analyzing leaders’ speeches at party political conferences in the U.K., they identify linguistic strategies that construct ‘competence’ (more transactional) and ‘responsiveness’ (more relational). Some forms (e.g., I intend or I want) tend to present the leader as ‘competent’: actively engaged in material action and decisive, aware of intentions and consequences. Other forms (e.g., I said, I understand, I know) tend to present the leader as ‘responsive’: caring and in solidarity with listeners. The study is a good example of the way that discourse analysis can be used in order to produce detailed accounts of the way that particular linguistic forms can be used in leadership performance.

Another important dimension of discursive leadership action is ‘vision’. According to Bennis and Nanus (1985, p. 92; cited in Charteris-Black, 2007), ‘by focusing attention on a vision the leader operates on the emotional and spiritual resources of the organization, on its values, commitments and aspirations’. Thus, in presenting a vision, it is important for leaders to align with the values of the community. Furthermore, a vision can be effectively constructed by drawing on metaphor, a resource that politicians can use in order to frame the way that political issues are understood (Sowinska, 2013). For example, a political movement could be metaphorically represented as a ‘struggle’ and discursively eliminate other possible interpretations. Charteris-Black (2007) points out that a metaphor can act as a political argument because the associations that it carries with it warrant and legitimize certain actions. For example, if a political movement is considered to be a struggle, then perhaps the use of violence could be argued for.

Another aspect of the representation of vision is that it is linked to time. Leaders, especially charismatic leaders, can influence the actions of others by contrasting negative representations of the status quo with a positive vision for the future (Charteris-Black, 2007).

In summary, research shows that leaders make use of a range of discursive resources in order to perform leadership discourse on a number of key dimensions, including transactional talk, relational talk, and the communication of a vision. In this article, we aim to build on existing understandings of the way that this can be done by providing a detailed analysis of the discursive construction of the NZ government’s Covid-19 response. Focusing on interactions observed in regular press briefings provided by the NZ government to the media, we examine the following research questions:

1. How is leadership discursively constructed by Ardern and her team?
2. In particular, how is leadership jointly and collaboratively co-constructed by Ardern, her team, and the mainstream media?
3. How does the joint discursive construction of leadership change as context and circumstances change over time?
3. Background and context: Covid-19 in NZ

NZ adopted an aggressive response to Covid-19, taking action relatively swiftly. The Ministry of Health set up a team to monitor the outbreak as early as January 24\(^1\), and on February 3, the government placed entry restrictions on foreign nationals arriving in NZ from China. On March 19 the government closed the country’s borders to all but NZ citizens and permanent residents. On that day, NZ had just 28 confirmed cases of Covid-19, with zero deaths. The first coronavirus-related death in NZ was not recorded until March 29.

On Saturday, March 21, the PM delivered a ‘presidential’ style statement to the nation from her office in the ‘Beehive’ (NZ’s parliament building). Seated at her desk and flanked by NZ flags left and right, Ardern announced the introduction of a four tier Covid-19 alert system (with 1 being the lowest level and 4 the highest). On March 25, a state of national emergency was declared and the entire country was placed in level 4, going into self-isolation and lockdown. The lockdown lasted 5 weeks. It was effective in reducing cases and by June 8, Covid-19 had been eliminated in the community.

During this time and beginning in mid-March, the government provided regular, daily press briefings to the media about the Covid-19 pandemic. These were given by senior members of the government including the PM, Jacinda Ardern and the Director General of Health, Ashley Bloomfield, among others. These regular briefings served as an important source of information for NZers, especially during lockdown.

A second wave of Covid-19 infections appeared in NZ in August 2020, with cases detected outside of managed isolation (quarantine facilities). On August 12, Auckland was placed in level 3, meaning that residents again had to self-isolate and lock down. The rest of the country was placed in level 2. The practice of regular press briefings was resumed. However, there was some controversy about the PM’s role in these briefings, as members of the opposition political party claimed that the briefings gave the PM an advantage in campaigning for the upcoming general election. Measures taken limited spread of the virus and by October 7, Covid-19 had again been eliminated from the community.

At the time of writing, NZ has seen just 2669 cases of Covid-19 and 26 deaths (https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus/covid-19-data-and-statistics/covid-19-current-cases), comparatively a very successful response in public health terms. Ardern enjoyed high popularity and her leadership in the crisis likely contributed to her re-election as PM in the October 17, 2020 election, which she won by a historically high margin. Regarding the success of the pandemic response, it is worth pointing out that Ardern came into the crisis having previously handled two other national crises in a competent way. These included the Christchurch mosque shootings on March 15, 2019 and the volcanic eruption of Whakaari (White Island) in the Bay of Plenty on December 9, 2019.

4. Methods

4.1. Data sources and selection

We collected video footage of NZ government press briefings from official online sources; 98 in total, from January 27, 2020 to September 2, 2020. Official transcripts were checked for accuracy and, where no official transcripts were available, transcripts were made. We selected a subset of 13 press briefings involving Ardern for close analysis, targeting periods of great uncertainty, anxiety and rapid change at the beginning of the first wave (March 21-29, 8 briefings, 4 hours and 11 minutes) and second wave (August 11-14, 5 briefings, 3 hours and 57 minutes), when decisive leadership on how to respond to the crisis was called for. While these two periods present similarities, there are also differences. At the beginning of the second wave, the leaders and the public had some familiarity with the pandemic, having already successfully eliminated it once, and in this study we explore whether this change in the situation led to a different response in terms of the leadership discourse observed.

Limiting analysis to the interactive genre of press briefings, an important source of information for NZers during the pandemic, allows us to provide an in-depth qualitative analysis of interaction. This genre is broken into two clear phases: an introductory briefing when leaders speak; and a question and answer (Q + A) session when journalists ask questions. While one might think of the introductory briefing speech as essentially ‘monologic’ in nature, it is perhaps more productive to consider the entire press briefing with its follow up questions as a kind of interaction (see Fetzer & Bull, 2012 on the nature of political speeches as interactive events), which is therefore very much amenable to techniques of interactional sociolinguistics. In this article, we draw on such techniques to see how, in this case, leadership is not only discursively constructed but also how it is negotiated and co-constructed by the leader working in collaboration with other members of her team and with the assembled media.

4.2. Analytical methodology

In our analysis, we draw on interactional sociolinguistics, an approach to discourse considered especially well-suited to discursive leadership studies (Fetzer & Bull, 2012; Schnurr, 2013; Vine et al., 2008). This is an approach that examines the social actions that are achieved in talk and interaction, especially the way that ‘individuals build and maintain relationships, exercise power, project and negotiate identities, and create communities’ (Gordon, 2011, p. 67). It does so through a fine-grained analysis of the interaction, which not only attends to micro-level linguistic and non-linguistic cues in the interaction, but also allows the analyst to engage with an understanding of the macro social context.

Theoretically, interactional sociolinguistics (IS) draws on the Gricean notion of conversational implicature and the linguistic pragmatic notion of the speech act, positing that participants to an interaction are engaged in discerning the communicative intent of a speaker, as it evolves over the interaction. As Gumperz (2001, p. 218) puts it: ‘The aim is to show how individuals participating in such exchanges use talk to achieve their communicative goals in real-life situations, by concentrating on the meaning-making processes and the taken-for-granted, background assumptions that underlie the negotiation of interpretations’. IS links discourse with social action by conducting a moment-by-moment analysis of interaction which takes into account the full sociocultural context of the interaction. One important conceptual and methodological tool is the ‘contextualisation cue’, which signals communicative intent by conveying the intended frame. Formally, contextualisation cues are bundles of linguistic features that include ‘such varied phenomena as prosody, code and lexical choice, formulaic expressions, sequencing choices, and visual and gestural phenomena’ (Bailey, 2015, p. 4). IS treats the mechanisms for achieving action in an eclectic way, drawing from multiple theoretical orientations in analysis.

In our analysis, we examine how positioning, framing, metaphor, and rhetorical structure are combined in the co-constructed leadership discourse of press briefings because these are the categories that have emerged as salient upon detailed consideration of the data. These concepts are defined as follows:

\(^1\) A full timeline of key events in the NZ Covid-19 response is available here: https://shorthand.radionz.co.nz/coronavirus-timeline/index.html
**Framing**: How the leader creates culturally grounded ‘schemata of interpretation’ that are used in order to understand events and occurrences, and that tend to emphasize some aspects of reality while concealing others (Goffman, 1974, p. 21), for example by making use of metaphor (Charteris-Black, 2007). More specifically, framing may allow leaders to communicate and manage meaning, develop a collective sense of aspirations, generate confidence and cooperation, and construct a meaningful shared identity (Fairhurst, 2011).

**Positioning**: How the leader dynamically locates the self in conversation by making ‘subject positions’ available: either making them available to the leader him/herself (called ‘reflexive positioning’) or to others (called ‘interactive positioning’). Such positions are understood with reference to commonly known cultural ‘storylines’, a kind of cultural background knowledge (Davies & Harré, 1990).

**Persuasive appeals**: How the leader seeks to influence others with calls to action that appeal not only to reason, but also to emotions and morality (or, in the rhetorical tradition: logos, pathos, and ethos respectively).

We took a qualitative approach to data analysis, suited to the complex, multi-faceted nature of the interactive data. This process was facilitated by the use of MAXQDA 2020 (VERBI Software, 2019), a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software tool. We began by jointly viewing extracts of the data and making notes, always keeping in mind Goffman’s (1974) question: ‘What is it that is going on here?’ to identifying important ‘discursive actions’, i.e., what leaders and members of the media are ‘doing’ with language. The next step was for both authors to work together and inductively code observable discursive actions – a form of language-focused content analysis (Herring, 2004) – in one press briefing, including the leader’s speech and the Q + A session. The second author applied this limited code set to remaining data from the first wave and the resulting codes were checked by the first author. Any differences were resolved at this stage. Finally, the second author applied the code system to the second wave data. The process involved multiple viewings and reading of the data set as well as a process of constant comparison (Richards, 2003) to enhance trustworthiness.

### 5. Findings

In this section, we first examine the way that leadership is discursively constructed in Jacinda Ardern's speeches at the press briefings, as seen in positioning acts, key framings, and rhetorical appeals. We then extend the analysis and consider how Ardern and the press jointly negotiate leadership communication in interactions in the Q + A sessions, focusing especially on ‘critical questions’ from the media. As noted above, the discourse produced must be seen as a joint construction, with Ardern giving voice to (‘animating’ in Goffman’s (1981) terms) government positions in the speech and also some parts of answers that have likely been carefully planned and scripted by her and her team.

#### 5.1. Overview of discursive actions in the briefing speeches

In the speeches, the most frequent discursive action was explaining practical issues and information plans to the public, for instance, explaining different levels in the NZ Covid-19 alert system. Another important discursive action is what we refer to as ‘coaching’: giving instructions, setting goals as aspirations, explaining goals, and explaining strategies that NZers should implement. More coaching was observed in the first wave when compared to the second wave. Ardern also consistently showed empathy by acknowledging and relating to people’s emotions and feelings, seen as an effective discursive action in leadership communication (Charteris-Black, 2007). During the first wave, the framing of the crisis as a fight was prominent, whereas in the second wave, going hard and/or going early appeared more salient.

Table 1 displays the prominent discursive actions and positions adopted in speeches during the two waves.

| Discursive action | First wave (March 21–29) | Second wave (August 11–14) |
|-------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
|                   | No. of coded segments (per 10,000 words) | No. of coded segments (per 10,000 words) |
| 1 Explain practical issues and information plans | 53 (60.12) | 87 (98.63) |
| 2 Coaching | 46 (52.18) | 44 (49.88) |
| 3 Showing empathy | 43 (48.77) | 32 (36.28) |
| 4 Advocating a course of action | 42 (47.64) | 25 (28.34) |
| 5 Ardern as an authority | 38 (43.10) | 25 (28.34) |
| 6 We the government | 27 (30.63) | 25 (28.34) |
| 7 Ardern and government as planners | 23 (26.92) | 20 (22.67) |
| 8 Fight and battle | 21 (23.82) | 20 (22.67) |
1. Today I am announcing an alert system for Covid-19. (Statement to the nation, March 21, 2020)
2. Over the next 48 hours, those who provide, for instance, take-away services must move to close their operations also. All indoor and outdoor events cannot proceed. (Press briefing speech, March 23, 2020)

While a task-oriented authoritative role was adopted at times, a ‘humanistic approach’ to leading (Gigliotti, 2016) was also seen, where Ardern discursively performed relational acts aimed at relationship-building and nurturing mutual trust, understanding, and respect (Charteris-Black, 2007; Schnurr, 2013). She positioned herself as a caring and empathetic leader through the consistent use of ‘I understand’ and ‘I know’, as evident in extracts 3 and 5. In extract 4, she demonstrated confidence in government leadership (‘we are constantly monitoring’) and in the whole ‘team’ of five million, as shown in extract 5 (‘as a team we have also been here before’), reassuring NZers that the nation was prepared and experienced when facing the second wave. By using ‘we’ she positioned herself as a part of the government team. She also positioned herself as part of the NZ team, an ordinary member of the public just like other NZers, also seen in extract 4 (‘as a mum’).

The relational work that Ardern did can be seen in both waves.

3. I understand that all of this rapid change creates anxiety and uncertainty, especially when it means changing how we live. (Statement to the nation, March 21, 2020)

4. [...] I can assure you we are constantly monitoring these settings to keep children safe. As a mum, I can assure you that is my key consideration. (Statement to the nation, March 21, 2020)

5. I know that this information will be very difficult to receive. We had all hoped not to find ourselves in this position again. But we had also prepared for it and as a team we have also been here before. (Press briefing speech, August 11, 2020)

Another elaborate self-positioning that can be observed is what we refer to as the position of ‘coach’. This involves discursive actions of instructing and directing, setting goals, and explaining goals and strategies in the time of the crisis. One salient coaching pattern in the briefing speeches was explaining coping strategies by providing possible negative consequences if measures were not followed by NZers. An illustration of this coaching pattern can be seen in extract 6, where Ardern explained the reason for staying at home and expanded on a life-threatening scenario if the actions were not taken. It is interesting to note that more such coaching actions were seen in speeches during the first wave of the outbreak than the second wave.

6. I have one simple message for NZers today as we head into the next four weeks: stay at home. It will break the chain of transmission and it will save lives. If people do not stay at home, other than to go to the supermarket or the GP or to get some fresh air close to your home, then you risk both spreading the virus to others and you risk getting it yourself. Breaking the rules could kill someone close to you, and that is why it is so important. (Press briefing speech, March 25, 2020)

5.2.2. Positioning the virus, the government, and NZers

In addition to reflexive positionings, interactive positionings are also observed. Early on in our data set, Ardern positioned the virus as ‘unprecedented’, having the potential to bring about ‘devastating impacts’ and cause ‘the greatest loss of NZers’ lives’ (Press briefing speech, March 23). She also envisioned negative consequences if the virus were ‘left unchecked’ (Press briefing speeches, March 25 and 29). These discursive actions are evident in extracts 7 and 8. While this positioning of the virus as unprecedented was frequently seen in the first wave, understandably, it did not appear as often in the second wave.

7. We are now a matter of hours away from an unprecedented lockdown of our country, in order to combat an unprecedented virus that, left unchecked, would have an unacceptable toll on NZers. (Press briefing speech, March 25, 2020)

8. Lifting restrictions now and seeing a potential toll on NZers. (Press briefing speech, March 25, 2020)

In her positioning of the NZ government, Ardern represented the government as responsive planners and responsible, trustworthy decision makers. To this end, she used a self-referential ‘we’ to refer to the government team, a stance that we coded ‘we the government’. Extracts 9 and 10 show how she sought to convey government responsiveness and responsible planning and decision-making. Compared to her briefing speeches, this form of self-reference appeared more frequently in her answers to media questions.

9. While we have all worked incredibly hard to prevent this scenario, we have also planned and prepared for it. We have a resurgence plan that we are now activating. (Press briefing speech, August 11, 2020)

10. These three days will give us time to assess the situation, gather information, make sure we have widespread contact tracing so we can find out more about how this case arose and make decisions on how to respond to it once we have further information. (Press briefing speech, August 11, 2020)

Further, the positioning of the government as protectors was seen in Ardern’s speeches in both waves. Expressions such as ‘protect(ing) NZers’ (Press briefing speech, March 23) and ‘keep(ing) you safe’ (Statement to the nation, March 21), as evident in extracts 11 and 12, positioned the government as guardians protecting the safety and wellbeing of NZers.

11. That is the best way that we can assure the NZ public that we are protecting their public health with urgency, and that’s exactly what we’re doing. (Press briefing speech, March 21, 2020)

12. As before, we will use what tools we have to protect jobs, incomes, and businesses, as well as people’s health. (Press briefing speech, August 14, 2020)

As for NZers, Ardern positioned them as ‘creative, practical, and community-minded’ in her statement to the nation (March 21); she also positioned them as caring, kind, and cooperative, as evident in extracts 13 and 14:

13. We may not have experienced anything like this in our lifetimes, but we know how to rally, and we know how to look after one another, and right now what could be more important than that. (Statement to the nation, March 21, 2020)

14. Many Kiwis, I know, are keen to ensure that, collectively, the rules are being followed. (Press briefing speech, March 29, 2020)
A recognition of NZers’ traits, this collective positioning attended to the ‘emotional commitment to the category membership’ (Davies & Harré, 1990) as a NZer, and evoked the moral obligations associated with this national identity. Ardern’s relational acts of this nature communicated human empathy (Charteris-Black, 2007), which can be effective in crisis communication.

5.3. Key frames and appeals to action

In our data set, it can be seen that Ardern employed different layers of metaphors in constructing her political arguments. As we explain below, not only did she metaphorically frame the crisis itself as a ‘fight’ but she also framed the response in terms of a collective, team action, ‘going hard and going early’, using language evoking the highly valued domain of sport. The fight frame was clearly an important one initially, as she used it four times in the first 139 words of her Statement to the nation speech, while the sport frame was evident in numerous metaphors and pervaded the discourse. The framing provided the basis for persuasive appeals to action: by framing the crisis as a ‘fight’, it was possible to justify a potentially extreme course of action (‘going hard’) and its timing (‘going early’) in terms that would appeal to NZers.

5.3.1. We are fighting the virus by going hard and going early

Early on, Ardern metaphorically framed the Covid-19 crisis as a collective ‘fight’, as shown in her remarks, ‘we fight the virus’ and ‘we continue to fight the virus together’ (Statement to the nation, March 21). This metaphor evoked tough competition and combat, and communicated expectations of NZers’ behaviors. It presented the situation as a serious one requiring a serious response. In addition, this metaphorical frame allowed Ardern to present a vision for ‘winning’ the ‘fight’, through the collective action of ‘going hard and going early’, as seen in extracts 15 and 16.

15. This is because we are experiencing an unprecedented event, a global pandemic that in NZ, we have moved to fight by going hard and going early. (Statement to the nation, March 21, 2020)

16. Going hard and early is still the best course of action, and we all have a part to play in that. (Q + A, August 13, 2020)

Fairhurst (2011) describes cultural discourses as a ‘framing tool bag’ in developing powerful mental models, as a collective cultural experience provides a unique perspective to the understanding of the world. The ‘going hard and going early’ metaphor drew on the domain of sport, a highly valued domain in NZ culture: ‘we are going hard and going early’ is a phrase that one might associate itself as a ‘team of 5 million’. First introduced in April, this frame play a clear role in jointly constructing political leadership, picked up the ‘be kind’ appeal, as shown in extracts 18, 19, and 20:

18. Media: How frustrating is it when you hear about these businesses flouting the wage subsidies, or landlords flouting the tenancy protections - how frustrating is that when you’re telling people to be out there and be kind and be strong? (Q + A, March 26, 2020)

19. Hon Grant Robertson (Minister of Finance): It is important for everybody to try to be patient and be kind to one another. (Press briefing speech, March 27, 2020)

20. Dr. Ashley Bloomfield (Director-General of Health): [...] be supportive, reach out to people, and, most importantly, be kind. (Press briefing speech, March 29, 2020)

In these examples, the media and members of the government team play different roles. First, repeating directly the persuasive appeal to ‘be kind’ (extracts 19 and 20), key members in the NZ government thereby demonstrated a united commitment to the kindness value by the government team. Second, the media question in extract 18 is much more nuanced. The question itself contrasted the everyday actions of ‘these businesses’ and landlords ‘flouting’ requirements, on the one hand, with the government appeal to ‘be kind and be strong’ on the other, and invited comment. The contrast drawn may suggest a possible government failure. At the same time, by repeating the government language (‘be kind and be strong’) the question also echoes the government appeal, repeating it for viewers. In addition, the question provides an opportunity for a response that reinforces that appeal. Ardern in fact responded by conceding problems but seeking to minimize the criticism and positioning landlords and employers, as well as all NZers, positively, using language that focused on unity and solidarity of the collective. She said,

21. But I don’t think people should lose sight of the vast majority of landlords and employers who are actually working really hard to do the right thing, just like all New Zealanders. (Q + A, March 26, 2020).

Recall that this exchange would have been viewed live by many NZers from their locked down homes. The interaction itself was a co-constructed performance with the leader attending to multiple audiences: 1) the assembled media, whom Ardern would like to impress favourably; and 2) the live public, which is itself splintered into many competing groups, including not only the businesses and landlords targeted in the question but also all other NZers as well. By adopting government frames, the media make it easier for the leader to co-construct responses in a way that reinforces government appeals.

5.3.2. We are a team of 5 million

In her call for a collective response to Covid-19, Ardern framed NZers as a ‘team of 5 million’. First introduced in April, this frame was frequently seen in the second wave, as shown in extracts 22 and 23:

Further, the ‘fight’ frame, along with ‘going hard and going early’, underpinned a metaphorical persuasive appeal to action, as Ardern advocated that NZers ‘be strong, be kind, and unite against Covid-19’ (Statement to the nation, March 21). It is notable that Ardern promoted values of ‘kindness’ as part of the crisis response, as this has been an important theme in her leadership, including in a statement made to the United Nations in 2018 (The Spinoff, 2018). Her argument allowed the framing of the solution as a morally bound, collective action, providing meaningful criteria for implementation for other members in the society (Fairhurst, 2005). Government members and the media, who both play a clear role in jointly constructing political leadership, picked up the ‘be kind’ appeal, as shown in extracts 18, 19, and 20:

18. Media: How frustrating is it when you hear about these businesses flouting the wage subsidies, or landlords flouting the tenancy protections - how frustrating is that when you're telling people to be out there and be kind and be strong? (Q + A, March 26, 2020)

19. Hon Grant Robertson (Minister of Finance): It is important for everybody to try to be patient and be kind to one another. (Press briefing speech, March 27, 2020)

20. Dr. Ashley Bloomfield (Director-General of Health): [...] be supportive, reach out to people, and, most importantly, be kind. (Press briefing speech, March 29, 2020)
22. I know how hugely frustrating this current situation is for every single member of our team of 5 million. (Press briefing speech, August 12, 2020)
23. It’s also a sign you care about your community and the members of our team of 5 million. (Press briefing speech, August 12, 2020)

Again, this frame presents the solution to the crisis as a collective action grounded in collective values of national sports excellence, deriving persuasive appeal by continuing the sports metaphor to appeal to unity. The power and flexibility of the ‘team’ metaphor was seen in her explanations of the Auckland lockdown during the second wave of the outbreak and her strategic persuasive appeals.

24. […] while this initial three-day lockdown will mainly affect the Auckland region, I am asking the team of 5 million to stand ready again as well. Together we’ve beaten the virus before and with fast action and by acting together, we can do so again. (Press briefing speech, August 11, 2020)
25. One point five million NZers in our biggest city are carrying a heavy load for our team of 5 million right now. But, together, we will overcome an obstacle that we knew had the potential to come our way, which is why we have a plan, why we are rolling out that plan, and why we once again can pull together to eliminate Covid. (Press briefing speech, August 14, 2020)

Extracts 24 and 25 illustrate persuasive appeals that highlight common goals of the ‘team’ and seek cooperation from NZers. They further appeal to people’s emotions and actions, motivating and calling for support from members of the ‘team’. As well as positive, winning outcomes (e.g., ‘together, we will overcome’), negative visions were also observed, alerting the team to the potential consequences of being uncooperative, as seen in extract 26.

26. None of us can do this alone. Your actions will be critical to our collective ability to stop Covid-19. Failure of anyone to play their part in coming days will put the lives of others at risk […] (Q + A, March 23, 2020)

During one second wave press briefing, the ‘team of 5 million’ frame was challenged by one member of the media (extract 27), calling into question whether NZ could be considered a team at a time when one part of the country (Auckland) faced tougher restrictions than others.

27. Media: With a third of the population now in much more severe restrictions for a much longer time, does NZ still consider itself a team of 5 million?

Jacinda Ardern: Yes. You know, not everyone in a team is on the field at the same time. Some of us, currently, are on the sidelines really rooting for those who are experiencing that level of restriction. That’s why I just ask the rest of the team to be really supportive – just to be mindful of that. […] (Q + A, August 14, 2020)

In response to this critical question, Ardern made a strong argument for the ‘team’ metaphor, continuing to frame the crisis response as a collective effort. She extended the metaphor, explaining that some people were on the ‘sidelines’ while Auckland took a hit for the ‘team’. In this interaction, we see a process of negotiation of the frame, with the media and leader suggesting competing understandings of how to interpret events. While the data do not disclose whether Ardern’s frame was ultimately incorporated into this particular journalist’s reporting, we see how she, as leader, made the case for it, striving to negotiate a frame to give the crisis a particular definition, shape moral evaluation, and promote collective sensemaking (Entman, 1993; Fairhurst, 2005).

5.4. Interaction with the media

A systematic coding of questions raised by the media during Q + A sessions revealed the most prominent themes in the media’s interest, as displayed in Table 2. In the first wave, the media were most interested in the social distancing measures rolled out by the NZ government and the operation of the government during the crisis. In the second wave, the media’s main focus was testing and tracing (e.g., confirmed cases, NZ Covid Tracer app); community transmission and the upcoming election were also major concerns in the second wave. This shows that media interest and focus shifted in reaction to changing circumstances. As a result, the focus of Ardern’s discursive actions was seen to change as well. In the second wave, her reminding acts appeared more frequently (e.g., ‘keep in mind’), for example, reminding the public of the social distancing and testing measures that had been in place during the first wave; further, she was seen to refer to science and scientific sources more frequently, such as genome testing and genome sequencing.

One of the most interesting findings from our data set was the way Ardern responded to critical questions from the media. In our coding criteria, a critical question is a question (or part of a question) that is critical of the NZ government or the PM, such as where the media challenged the ‘team of 5 million’ frame (see above). Such challenges were on the whole rare, but interesting because these are the moments where the leader was seen to defend her argument, justify her vision, and reinforce the actions she intended to take. An analysis of how Ardern managed these particular moments can help us understand how a leader can use language to respond to questions by aligning with the positioning and framing important to an overall call for action. In the following, we

| First wave (March 21–29) | Second wave (August 11–14) |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| **Topic**               | **No. of coded segments (per 10,000 words)** | **Topic**               | **No. of coded segments (per 10,000 words)** |
| Social distancing     | 42 (60.09)                | Testing and tracing     | 111 (191.49)             |
| Members of Parliament and the operation of the government | 39 (55.80) | NZ Covid-19 alert levels | 39 (67.28) |
| Business concerns      | 38 (54.37)                | Members of Parliament and the operation of the government | 32 (55.20) |
| Travel and flights     | 35 (50.08)                | Social distancing measures | 31 (53.48) |
| Essential services     | 35 (50.08)                | Community transmission  | 15 (25.88) |
| Overseas or returning NZers | 29 (41.49) | Election               | 12 (20.70) |

Table 2

Prominent topics in media questions during Q + A.
present one example of the critical questions raised (extract 28), where the media was seen to challenge a negative vision.

28. Media: You’ve painted a fairly grim picture of what might be possible for NZ and admitted that many NZers will be scared.

Are you scared?

Jacinda Ardern: No, because we have a plan. And so that’s my message to NZers: we have a window that we are utilizing in a way that some countries did not, and so we have the opportunity to make sure that we’re not like other places. Now, because of the natural trajectory and the lag time of Covid, there will be a period where we will see cases continue to rise, but I ask NZers that while we’re in that four-week period, our hope is that we see that then start turning around. But no, I am not – I am not afraid, because we have a plan. We’ve listened to the science, we are moving early, and I just ask NZers now to come with us on what will be an extraordinary period of time for everyone. (Q + A, March 23, 2020)

Here the reporter draws attention to the topic of fear and, through the question, invites Ardern to position herself as ‘scared’, a position that is difficult to reconcile with strong leadership. By implication, the reporter challenged the ‘grim’ vision that Ardern constructed, a negative representation of the status quo linked to her metaphorical frame of a ‘fight’. Ardern responded by rejecting the suggested frame of fear, reasoning that ‘we have a plan’. This action demonstrated her confidence and positioned her and the government as responsible and responsive planners. She continued the argument by presenting positive visions, a ‘window’ and an ‘opportunity’ that NZ could utilize; this vision was reinforced by making comparison to countries that had failed to do so. Next, she provided information on the trajectory of Covid-19, preparing NZers for the reality that case numbers would continue to rise. This was followed by another positive vision that the situation would ‘start turning around’ if the four-week lockdown measures were followed. To reinforce her positioning of the government as responsible planners, she noted the government had ‘listened to the science’, referenced the ‘going hard and going early’ frame, and appealed to NZers to cooperate (‘come with us’) by empathizing during this ‘extraordinary period of time for everyone’.

In her interaction with the media, Ardern was seen to model her thinking and behavior to align with her self-positioning as just another member of the NZ ‘team’. In extract 29, we can see that she explained her own behaviors in terms of the recommended government guidance.

29. I follow the same guidance that I ask the rest of NZers to follow. I am trying to keep my physical distance from others. I’m frequently hand-washing. I am reducing down my travel, as some of you will have already seen, and I’ve made the move to base myself here out of Wellington. Those are all measures I’m taking to make sure that I’m following the same guidelines that I’m expecting of everyone else. (Q + A, March 21, 2020)

Another interesting interaction pattern emerged from Ardern’s responses to media questions. At times she adopted what we refer to as a ‘three-step coaching pattern’, that served to advocate a particular course of practical action. Such responses: 1) show empathy, 2) provide a negative vision (e.g., a terrible consequence or high risk), and 3) explain collective actions and strategies that NZers should implement.

30. I know that this is a very, very difficult time for our small businesses, our butchers, our bakers, our grocers – you know, they are providing, generally, usually, food services for their community, but if every single one of them opened up across the country, it defeats the point. It opens up a huge chain of transmission. So I’m asking them to do right by their community and to close. (Q + A, March 27, 2020)

As illustrated in extract 30, Ardern first empathized with small businesses (‘I know’); then, she provided a negative vision of a ‘huge chain of transmission’ if businesses remained open; finally, she advocated that small businesses align with collective interests of the community and close. This three-step coaching pattern appeared salient in her interaction with the media, whereas in briefing speeches, the first step of showing empathy was less frequently seen. This seems to demonstrate that she listened attentively to what the media had to say and was able to think on her feet to justify government actions to align with the needs of her multiple audiences.

6. Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we have limited ourselves to the linguistic interactions between leaders and media in press briefings, rather than considering other contributing modes and other media, like social media (Charteris-Black, 2007). In spite of this limitation, the findings show how positioning, framing, and associated persuasive appeals played an important role in Ardern’s leadership discourse. In particular, some frames (for example, the ‘fight’ frame) were used as a basis to argue for potentially extreme measures (‘going hard and going early’). Such frames often drew on sporting metaphors to tap into the common cultural experience of many NZers. Promoting a collective approach appears to be particularly important and this was partly achieved by the range of self-positioning adopted by Ardern, who frequently positioned herself as ‘just another one of the team’. Taken together, the range of discursive actions described in the briefing speeches all contributed to the government’s goal of promoting a ‘strong’, ‘kind’, and collective leadership discourse. As is often the case (Baxter, 2010), leadership was discursively constructed by the combined efforts of leader, leadership team, and media, rather than by the efforts of a single individual. Goffman’s (1981) participation framework provides a useful way of understanding this co-construction. According to Goffman, ‘production’ involves three main roles: the animator, who gives voice to and conveys the communication; the author, who is responsible for the content; and the audience, who are the recipients of the message.
who has ‘scripted’ the communication; and the principal, the person or institution ultimately responsible for the communication, to whom it is attributed. In the simplest case, Ardern’s prepared statements, we see Ardern ‘animating’ the government position by delivering a speech that is likely ‘authored’ collectively by members of the government team, especially government public relations and communications experts (Bhatia, 2006). Moreover, the analysis highlighted the way that the government position could also be animated by other members of the government team as relevant metaphors were picked up by those individuals as well.

In terms of roles, the Q + A sessions are more complex because of their interactive nature, summarized in Fig. 1. The analysis points to two kinds of questions from the media: those that are ‘friendly’ and reinforce the government message; those that are critical and introduce competing positions, challenging government framings and persuasive appeals. Regarding the former, we suggest that the media can be seen to be animating the government position and providing a simple opportunity for the leader to clarify government goals. But in the latter, two distinct positions – one animated by the media and the other by Ardern – come into conflict. The data show that such conflicts are resolved in the leader’s response. In particular, a common pattern observed was: 1) empathy; 2) negative vision; 3) collective action. Here, the third step involved a return to the government’s preferred frames and positionings, reinforcing collective values and action important to the government’s goals. Ardern’s response, beginning with an expression of empathy, also addressed multiple audiences: the assembled media, the NZ public generally, and specific subgroups of that public.

The analysis therefore shows that the press briefings, as well as being co-constructed, were also at times, contested and negotiated. A particular contribution of this article has been to provide examples of this kind of contest unfolding ‘in real time’ in interaction with the media (in some ways similar to the genre of political interview, see Fetzer, 2000). This was evident when the media challenged Ardern’s positionings, framings, and persuasive appeals. In the face of such challenges, for example the suggestion that the key metaphorical frame ‘team of 5 million’ was inaccurate, Ardern argued forcefully to maintain the frame and close down competing frames. Such interactions further demonstrate how the leader must constantly renew and justify her metaphors and persuasive appeals for action because these can be questioned and contested at any point, especially where circumstances change.

Considering discursive differences between the first and second wave, the analysis illustrates that leadership was discursively constructed in a way that was responsive to changing circumstances. In particular, we noted more frequent ‘coaching’ activity in the first wave compared to the second wave, likely reflecting perceived needs at the time. During the first wave, the public had to learn what it was that they were up against and how to respond. Sensitive to this need, Ardern more frequently drew upon the coaching strategy. There was less of a need for this kind of discourse in the second wave. This notion that crisis communication adapts to changing circumstances is also seen in McGuire et al.’s (2020) analysis of the NZ government’s pandemic crisis communication response. While their study is limited to the first wave response, they identify three phases with different forms of crisis communication: 1) preparedness and decisive action; 2) education and social solidarity; 3) resilience and momentum.

In conclusion, the analysis has illuminated many of the discursive strategies used by Ardern to manage the crisis both in terms of transactional concerns and relational concerns. It has also revealed how these discursive strategies are co-constructed in the press briefing interactions, with contributions from a range of actors engaged in a joint construction that is sometimes contested and always negotiated. It is worth remembering that these press briefings are just one part of the response: future studies can include a wider range of data and multimodal analysis techniques to consider the role of social media in the construction of leadership as well as the role of modes other than speech. While firmly rooted in the context of political leadership in a crisis, we believe that many of the strategies adopted (positions, frames, and persuasive appeals) have potential for diverse contexts where leadership is done. Furthermore, the particular combination of transactional and relational talk observed here and in Ardern’s leadership discourse more generally, has led some, like the former Australian PM Julia Gillard, to suggest that Ardern’s leadership presents a novel approach. In particular, Gillard comments that Ardern is ‘leading in a different style’ and ‘leading with kindness and empathy at the foreground’ (Gillard, 2021). It is an approach that appears to have served well in fostering collective action during NZ’s Covid-19 crisis response. Time will tell whether such a different leadership style will prove to be unique to Ardern or whether it might be practiced more widely by other leaders and in other contexts beyond the political realm.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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