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**Professionalism in the Media**

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## **PROFESSIONALISM IN THE MEDIA**

A recent book on the media, *Whose News?*, begins with the observation that the news media are dangerously under-debated in New Zealand society. Its editors, Margie Comrie and Judy McGregor, go on to say:

"While the news media need close examination and warrant the same type of scrutiny and analysis they impose on other institutions, there is not a strong tradition of media criticism in this country. Nor are the news media themselves properly self-critical."

Given the efforts that have had to be made in so many other areas of New Zealand life to wake up from the pre-1984 dreamtime and raise our national game, it is indeed reasonable to ask how the media are performing. Are they, like other businesses, striving to improve the quality of their product? What standards of professionalism can we expect of those who work in media organisations?

These are not easy questions to answer. In free societies the press has long been regarded as the free marketplace of thought. Protecting freedom of speech is rightly regarded as one of the foremost ends of democratic government. A society that cannot tolerate free and rational discussion - a free market in ideas - risks going down the road to serfdom.

Journalists understand this well. As John Fund, a leader writer for the Wall Street Journal, has put it:

"When it comes to the news business, no journalist needs to be told of the dangers of government control or of the social benefits of competition. We know that when governments meddle in the media business they always make things worse... . Every journalist knows that there is no such thing as 'reasonable' regulation of the press. The press is either free or it is not."

Fund therefore finds it paradoxical that the media are often shockingly indifferent or hostile to economic liberties, an attitude which, he argues, will ultimately lead to consequences that are against their own interests.

The high value that we place on freedom of expression is one reason why it is difficult to make 'ought' statements about the media. Another reason is that news media organisations are businesses whose job is to meet their consumers' needs. Being profitable is the usual test that they are doing so. It is hard to gainsay the final judgment of the market, but the challenge for the media, like any other business, is to maintain standards of excellence and offer the market a good product.

It follows that any observations about the media are inevitably subjective, at least in part. You should bear this in mind in considering the following reflections, which are an amalgam of my own perceptions and those of a number of editors, journalists and other observers who have recently shared their thoughts with me on the subject of media performance.

What I found interesting in talking to friends and acquaintances in the media is that there is no reluctance to engage in self-criticism, and that a number of themes crop up with surprising regularity. Some of the most frequent observations were as follows:

- There is a poor coverage of international news in New Zealand newspapers. This is noticeable even by comparison with Australia but is particularly striking in relation to newspapers in other small, trade-dependent economies like Singapore or Hongkong.
- Young journalists today usually have tertiary qualifications and are better informed about the world than their predecessors. On the other hand, journalism schools are more likely to turn out graduates with a political agenda.
- It is an interesting and healthy feature of the industry that, with one or two minor exceptions, politically affiliated newspapers, like many in the United Kingdom for example, are not to be found here.
- The good news in the print media in the last decade is the appearance of *Metro* and *North and South*. You have to go beyond Australia to find any equivalent high standards of in-depth reporting.
- Two Sunday papers have also appeared, and *The Evening Post* has vastly improved in that period.
- Television has gone backwards with its news and current affairs programmes. Richard Prebble recently expressed the view that "Television New Zealand's news, and its current affairs, have completely lost their way." Brian Edwards also has a useful chapter on this in *Whose News?*
- *Morning Report* has become a PSA digest.
- The demands on journalists have become higher. More output is expected, and resources of time and money are often scarce.

Some of the weaknesses identified are more serious than others. If, as TVNZ claims, more New Zealanders get their news from *One Network News* than any other source, that has to be a worry. TVNZ news and current affairs head Paul Norris recently argued that television violates its essential nature when it taxes the brain unduly. He added that the hard task of tracing the causes of policy will be left to newspapers. That is presumably the official policy that has given us 'infotainment' on the 6 o'clock news and the punch-up format on current affairs programmes.

In my view that is a cop-out. It is not an attitude that would be endorsed by CNN, arguably the world's premier news service at the present time. Nor do I believe the trend can be put down to deregulation, as Brian Edwards suggests. He makes the point himself that in the view of most commentators TV3 offers the better news service.

It seems doubtful that the solution to this problem lies with government ownership of media organisations. This should always be viewed with suspicion: the idea of the National Programme and the banning of private radio reflected an indirect desire by the government to control what people could hear. Even the notion of public funding of so-called 'public service' broadcasting seems dubious in practice. Exactly why licence fee revenue is being used to fund *Shortland Street* is a question that has been taxing some of New Zealand's best minds. As David Lange suggested, a more appropriate funding source might have been called 'New Zealand On Heat'.

An issue that always arises in discussions of the media is that of bias in reporting. I think it is possible to get unduly exercised over this problem. Media bias usually comes down to issues of ideological persuasion. It is a well-documented fact that graduates of journalist schools around the world have tended to be leftist in outlook. This is probably accounted for by the old proposition that if you were not a socialist at age 20 you had no heart and if you were still one at 40 you had no head. This tendency is likely to weaken with the demise of socialism around the world. Moreover, as Paddy McGuinness, the former editor of *The Australian Financial Review*, has written:

"It is inevitable that most people who find themselves actively involved in the media will have a large dose of the busybody and the do-gooder in their make-up. ... It only becomes a problem when it gets mixed up with a disrespect for evidence and plain facts, and a contempt for the ordinary processes of democracy; when journalists cease to be just reporters or commentators, and begin to try to become kingmakers and persuaders."

The grossest recent example in New Zealand of journalism which over-stepped this boundary was the notorious *Frontline* programme 'For the Public Good'. As an organisation we were outraged that in a country where corruption and influence-peddling has not been a feature of the relationship between business and government in the way it has in some other countries, such a programme was allowed to go to air.

It was to the credit of the news media in general and the Broadcasting Standards Authority that this breach of professional standards drew universal condemnation. Respected figures in the media such as Ian Templeton and Richard Long have shown similar integrity in their reaction to the baseless accusations of political bribery in the recent ABC programme *The New Zealand Experiment*, the work of the same producer. Sooner or later biased reporting or commentary draws reactions and, as elsewhere, good currency tends to drive out bad. But the correction can take time, and the doubts and suspicions that are raised in the meantime are damaging to confidence in our public institutions.

While the Business Roundtable has its share of critics, I have no complaints about the treatment we generally receive from the media. I find most journalists intelligent and straightforward, and they often do an excellent job of summarising complex material. The novelty of writing excitable stories about the organisation seems to have worn off. In an article in the latest *North and South*, David McLoughlin took the trouble to do his homework on claims and counter-claims and came up with a fair treatment. Commentary tends to balance out. For example, one capable and industrious *Herald* journalist in the Press Gallery usually manages to put a negative

slant on our material but the leaders and the business pages of the paper are often supportive.

What I find more irritating, and lacking in professionalism, are a number of journalistic practices which are by no means confined to our material.

One is the beat-up, or deliberate misrepresentation. A recent example is the prime minister's alleged call to "worship the rich", a total distortion of the relevant passage in his speech. Another is the view attributed to Roger Douglas that "exports don't matter", which is not substantiated by anything he said. All he argued was that there was no case for giving them preferential treatment over other activities.

Mischief shades into sloppiness. A Radio New Zealand news item stated that "Sir Robert Muldoon is backing claims by Winston Peters that the Business Roundtable have given money to MPs in a bid to influence economic policy." While Mr Peters' insinuations were deplorable, nowhere did he make that particular, and baseless, claim.

A second source of irritation is the use of language designed to show someone or something in a bad light in what purports to be a factual report. How often do you see terms like "admitted", "conceded" or "revealed" being used when the relevant word is "said"?

A similar example of "adjectivalism" takes the form of descriptions such as "the big business lobby group the Business Roundtable", or references to one of our members as a member of the "New Right" - a nonsense term if ever there was one. At least this practice would be more tolerable if it were matched, for example, by descriptions of the president of the CTU as a member of the SUP, but this seldom happens. The respected American reporter David Broder has made the point that:

"More sins are committed by journalists through their habit of labeling and categorizing people and situations than by any other means. Seeking to impose a simple-minded order on the confusing and ambiguous events and characters we deal with every day, we fall back on what we know are sloppy categories: hawks and doves, liberals and conservatives, hardliners and pragmatists... ."

A rather regular failure, referred to by Warwick Roger in the introduction to his book *Hearts and Minds*, is that journalists become propagandists by reporting quite outrageous claims by pressure groups and by people and politicians they themselves approve of. They fail to challenge them and ask whether they are based on fact. In a recent article on the welfare state, Rosemary McLeod catalogued a series of bogus welfare stories and outlined the questions that competent journalists should have asked about them before rushing into print.

A final frustrating practice, which *Morning Report* has converted into an art form, is to give publicity to critical reactions to statements or reports without bothering to report the original material. A recent example of this practice which we experienced was on the occasion of the release of a study on privatisation. The relevant *Morning Report* article comprised a one-sentence account of the report followed by two lengthy interviews with union officials, one of whom was not identified as such.

Once again the reverse treatment seldom occurs: we have never been asked to comment on, say, a union statement, and I cannot remember the last time my chairman was asked to appear on *Morning Report*. Probably he would decline, which may be the attitude of others if the latest practice of using Radio New Zealand staff to interview each other is any guide.

Many of these practices would be exposed and checked if we had a vigilant media watch organisation or if academics in journalism schools played a more active role in standard-setting. Perhaps the new series *Media Matters* will become an effective source of media scrutiny.

The most important reflection that I would offer on the media, however, I have left till last. This is the role that they have played - or rather not played - in interpreting to the community the radical changes which we have had to undergo as a country in recent years. Is there something about the media that makes them a lagging institution, or is there a failure of professionalism here? Consider the following accounts, the first from Andrew Knight, the New Zealand-born former editor of *The Economist*, in his valedictory leader in 1987:

"If we are truthful, we journalists have, as an estate, lagged behind the flow of opinion these past 12 years... . Certainly we were slow to see the significance of Mrs Thatcher, and it has been an enjoyable irony (doubtless for her too) that *The Economist* should be so frequently classed as Thatcherite for the clarity of its liberal, free-market reforming view, when its establishment has rarely been at ease with Britain's prime minister."

Next is Carl Bernstein, of Watergate fame, writing this year in the *Guardian Weekly*:

"For the eight years of the Reagan presidency, the press failed to comprehend that Reagan was a real leader... . No leader since FDR so changed the American landscape or saw his vision of the country and the world so thoroughly implanted. ... We have, in fact, missed most of the great stories of our generation, from Iran-Contra to the savings and loans debacle."

And finally this from a recent *Sixty Minutes* interview with Warwick Roger, a man who, more than any other according to Pat Booth, has changed the face of serious journalism in this country:

"If journalists are doing their job properly... interpreting what's going on in society, interpreting change, [then] when that change occurs nobody should be surprised... . So many people in New Zealand at the moment are surprised because of the changes that have taken place over the last 6 years. If the journalists had been doing their job properly, no one would be surprised."

As I said at the outset, it is hard to find an unchallengeable basis for statements about what the media "ought" to be doing, but I share Warwick Roger's regret that they have tended to be in the rearguard rather than the vanguard of change in New Zealand. We need all the help we can get to understand the significance of things like the end of the cold war, the collapse of socialism, the myths and realities of environmental scares, the trend away from 1960s social values, the phenomenon of political correctness, the lessons of the welfare state, the meaning of the Treaty of

Waitangi and a host of other enormously complex issues. These will have infinitely more important implications for our society in the years ahead than, say, the story of two National MPs breaking away to form the Liberal party or the latest non-disclosure from the member for Tauranga.

Regardless of the performance of the media, we must hope that we can somehow grope our way forward to understand and respond to such issues. Ordinary people sooner or later will acquire sufficient facts to make up their own minds and can be trusted to reach sensible conclusions. No one should fret unduly about Pam Corkery leading a crusade against privatisation; others will counter it and sooner or later, in the free market of ideas, truth will get its chance to win out over error. But because of the complex nature of our world today, we pay a price in human as well as economic terms for an ill-informed society. Delays and mistakes may be very costly, and ground may be lost that we can ill afford. To come to terms with what a small country needs to do to succeed, it would help immensely if the resources of talent and intelligence that exist within journalism shone a somewhat stronger light to illuminate the way ahead.