

Submission on the Fairfax Media/NZME merger

November 24, 2016

From: Victoria Guild

Title: Nelson Regional Editor

Company: Fairfax Media

As an editor of a regional daily newspaper, I'm mystified by some of the claims made by the Commission in it's draft decision.

I'd particularly like to address the plurality of voices. In my region, the Nelson Mail, and more latterly nelsonmail.co.nz (through stuff.co.nz), has been the dominant media voice for 150 years. There are other voices in the community not owned by either Fairfax or NZME - Nelson Live, the Nelson Weekly, Waimea Weekly, Motueka Guardian, the Golden Bay News, RNZ and Mediaworks - but as the daily paper the vast majority of the population has traditionally got their news from us and relied on us as the trusted source.

Never in those 150 years has there been a suggestion that the editor has bowed to political or commercial pressure to withhold or indeed publish a story. In fact, even in my 18 months as editor I have published stories which have been unpopular with some of our largest local commercial clients, leading to some withdrawing advertising from us. Our integrity is intact, and I am grossly offended by the idea that we would let commercial factors influence our editorial decisions.

I would also like to address the issue of quality. No journalist worth their salt wants to publish substandard stories. We work extremely hard in our newsroom to lift the quality of the work of our reporters every single day. We are acutely aware that if balance and fairness are missing, we will be punished by our readers. That is what drives us - both our own pride in our work, and the fact readers will turn off and go elsewhere if they don't find us credible. It doesn't matter who our owners are.

I find it amusing that the Commission acknowledged that TV and radio follow the newspapers (or newspaper websites) to get their stories. We've known that for years, but to suggest a merger would impact by a trickle-down effect on the quality of other media's work? No matter where other media get their stories from, it is up to them to uphold their own standards - not us!

It appears that the Commission believes if the merger doesn't go ahead, we will continue on as we are. This is simply not the case. The retraction in advertising due to Facebook and Google has influenced our business enormously and it will be impossible to retain the numbers of staff we now have in the regions without a strong business behind us.

As a regional editor I am fearful that continued cuts will affect our ability to cover essential public interest stories from the likes of courts, council and health boards. We are a commercial business but we take our public responsibility extremely seriously. Continued cuts to newsroom staff will force us to only react to big news and we won't have the resources to be the public watchdog we are upheld as being. We will become a once-over-lightly media without the ability to do follow-ups, investigations, backgrounders and explainers because those stories take time (and money) to develop. We certainly wouldn't be able to sustain a daily print product with fewer staff. Fairfax has 'trimmed the fat' as far as it can.

Strong regional newsrooms are essential in this country to maintain democracy. It is essential this merger goes ahead to enable New Zealand to have a strong, sustainable media business out there walking the beat and 'keeping the bastards honest'.

Thank you.