

To the New Zealand Commerce Commission
Submission on the draft determination on the Fairfax-NZME merger

My name is Tracy Watkins. I am the Political Editor for Fairfax Media. I am making this submission in support of the proposed Fairfax-NZME merger.

We've all heard the story about the Vietnam war official who told a reporter "it became necessary to destroy the town to save it".

The draft decision on the Fairfax NZME merger felt to me like an echo of that quote.

I am making this submission as a journalist who has been reporting from the coal face for more than three decades, nearly 20 of those years from the parliamentary press gallery.

My tools used to be an old imperial typewriter and notepad; these days I wield an iPhone, a laptop and a selfie stick. I've written 1000 word columns on my cell phone while waiting in an airport; I've interviewed the Prime Minister live on Facebook and asked him questions as viewers posted them; I stood in the middle of a fight at a Hillary Clinton rally and had the video online within minutes of police separating the protagonists. More is possible now than ever before and we are all on a huge learning curve. We can and do try anything.

Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. But our willingness to adapt, to seek out new ways of telling stories, is the reason I have huge faith in our profession and also why I truly believe we are in a golden age of journalism.

I believe your ruling harks back to the days of the 1980s and 90s, when newspapers were rivers of gold and editors were God: they were the days when we reporters had our day dictated by "mahogany row", the daily meeting of senior editors and chief reporters, where story angles, leads and placement were decided before instructions were sent down the line to the reporter.

There are plenty of people in my profession who see us moving on from those days as the beginning of the end. They could not be more wrong.

In 2009 I was appointed to head a political bureau combining the offices of the Dominion Post, Sunday Star Times and Christchurch Press. For everyone concerned it was a painful time. But for what felt like the first time in my career, myself and my team were empowered as journalists. From day one, an enormous amount of trust was placed in our institutional knowledge and experience to get on with it and operate autonomously from the old newsroom structure and "mahogany row".

That model has now been replicated throughout much of Fairfax.

That's why I have such faith in the future of a merged Fairfax NZME entity. Yes, industry change, reflected in constant redundancies, is hard. It has personally affected my family and caused us financial hardship.

But I understand the why. We are in a fight for survival. And that has actually been good for us as an industry. I see more creativity, more passion, and a greater plurality of voices and issues than I ever saw back in the old days. Yes there are more Kim Kardashian headlines on Stuff than you are comfortable with. But if you look you will see some amazing journalism; grunty, confronting, challenging, riveting, entertaining and better than anything you would have read when I started my career in the 1980s..

We are also constantly adapting. My team publish direct to the web. They publish direct to the newspaper. The old back stops are gone. Today's journalist is the full package and they prove themselves daily as being up to that responsibility.

That's why I'm so passionate about the merger. We and NZME are among the few media outlets that invest in journalists. We are rivals but we have a shared belief in content as king. Both organisations are filled with journalists who are passionate and driven. But we must adapt or die. There is no comfortable status quo option. The media is in upheaval world wide. The only certainty about refusing to change is a slow decline to a weakened, fragmented version of ourselves.

Of course, there will be many in power - both in Government and outside of Government - who welcome that prospect.

You may even have heard from some of them, either formally or informally.

A strong media is not in the interests of those in power. The weaker we are the more freedom they have to go over the top of the traditional media and distribute their message unfiltered and unchallenged, through social media tools, like Facebook and twitter. Equally concerning is that the tools and the resources they have are so much more vast and more pervasive than anything we can access. These can and have been misused. When one of my reporters was leaked details of a GCSB report, Parliamentary bosses used intrusive powers to access her email and phone metadata and did not consider that wrong. Speaking truth to power takes deep resources to draw on, it takes credibility and it takes an investment in good journalism. The terror files stories published by The Dominion Post relied on a senior journalist, Phil Kitchin, with years of journalistic credibility and contacts behind him; it took months of research, hours of legal consultation and could only be published by an organisation with the money - and willingness - to accept the consequences of potential charges and a lengthy trial.

You see a merger as a threat to quality journalism, I see it is a shot at being able to continue to invest in such journalism.

I also see it as protecting something equally precious - credibility, and trust. Ours is a world where it is no longer simple for readers to know who or what is supplying them their news through their Facebook feed or a google search. I stood in a line for a Donald Trump rally and had people share Facebook pages and news links with me claiming that Hillary Clinton murdered a close aide, and other bald "facts".

You might dismiss these sources of "news" as irrelevant to the merger proposition put before you - I can't.

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