

ManawatuStandard

A division of Fairfax New Zealand Limited

1 December 2016

Registrar
Commerce Commission
PO Box 2351
Wellington
6140

Reference: Fairfax/NZME merger submission

To whom it may concern,

In my capacity as Fairfax's Regional Editor for Manawatu, I am writing to express my disappointment about the Commerce Commission's draft determination on the proposal to merge Fairfax NZ and NZME.

It is my submission that the Commission reverse its opposition to the merger for the good of not just the companies involved, but for the New Zealand public and the news media industry in general.

In the Manawatu newsroom, where I oversee a team of 20 reporters, news directors and visual journalists, we work tirelessly across seven days to provide readers in the wider region with the best possible editorial content.

A key focus for our team is generating content for the digital environment, which means we provide daily news, sport, feature and opinion articles for Stuff and the Manawatu section of the site.

We also produce three print publications - the Manawatu Standard daily newspaper and the Feilding-Rangitikei Herald and Tribune community titles.

One of the driving factors for the Manawatu news team is the passion we have for providing a voice for the people living in our region. We champion their successes and are unashamedly parochial in doing so. We are also staunch about holding people and organisations in our region to account.

But I feel it is imperative to confirm to you that decisions about what we cover and how we cover it are generated from within our own newsroom.

Editors within the group are entrusted to make editorial decisions on behalf of Fairfax, though with an eye to adhering to the legal and ethical frameworks laid down by the company and the industry. I firmly believe this approach would not change after a merger.

To see the Commission assume a merger could lead to the reduction of impartiality and objectivity in newsrooms is not only erroneous but also denigrating to the integrity of all editors.

Impartiality and objectivity are key journalistic tenets for both Fairfax and NZME. To assume this would change under a new regime is preposterous.

I agree with the Commission's point about plurality of voices being integral in our industry but, despite being part of a large multi-national company, editors at Fairfax have always had the freedom to express their own views. I have never received a directive from anyone in the Fairfax executive instructing me to take a particular stance on an issue.

I am perplexed by the Commission's assertion that the quality of content provided to readers would be diminished should a merger take place.

One of the points in the determination infers that a lack of competition could lead to complacency. This certainly doesn't ring true in Manawatu where the already minimal competition from other major media players has not led to a laissez-faire attitude from our news team.

We have always strived to achieve high quality journalism because we are a team of professional, dedicated journalists who take pride in the work we deliver and care about informing our communities.

There are also many examples of how taking a group approach to some news events can actually improve the quality of the coverage for local readers.

An example in Manawatu was seen during the lockdown of the Cloverlea suburb after an armed man holed up in a house. We were only able to provide 24-hour coverage to readers because we received assistance from colleagues in the metro newsrooms.

More recently we have seen Fairfax's high calibre, extensive coverage of the Kaikoura earthquake, which would not have been achieved without group collaboration.

We must all accept that journalism is in a time of change. Print revenue is declining so it has become necessary to evolve with the changing interests and behaviours of our readers.

This has meant some tough decisions have had to be made about how we operate our business but the one thing that has not changed is our devotion to quality journalism.

But the future of this journalism is dependant on having a commercially viable and sustainable model to work under. If we are unable to achieve this then the end result could be a severe reduction in the resources necessary to provide readers in Manawatu with strong local coverage.

I firmly believe a merger would be the best possible commercial option for both companies, while also retaining the editorial independence and diverse output our readers deserve.

The Commission raises concerns about the future of journalism in New Zealand should a merger take place but I would submit that its own draft determination proffers a far greater threat to the industry at large.

Kind regards



Jonathon Howe
Manawatu Regional Editor, Fairfax NZ