

Proposed NZME/Fairfax merger.

While the Westport News is not opposed to this merger it is concerned about the possible loss of the news sharing service with NZME newspapers and other independents.

The Commission may recall that Fairfax caused the demise of the national news service provided by NZPA and supported by every daily newspaper in New Zealand when it pulled out in 2011. This left the NZ Herald and its sister publications and the independents to form a news sharing service which was originally called APNZ and more recently renamed NZME. Fairfax wanted to go it alone.

If the merger results in the loss of the NZME news service, or another affordable option is not put in place, the Westport News would have to cease daily publication after almost 150 years serving the Buller region. Other independents could also be affected, as would some of the regionals owned by Fairfax and NZME which may be spun off as a result of the merger.

Regional newspapers help provide full national cover of daily events not matched by the Mets. For instance, the Fairfax owned Christchurch Press has one reporter based on the West Coast, whereas the Westport News, Greymouth Star and the Hokitika Guardian employ 10.

It is hard to see how a merged media group could offer full daily cover of regional affairs, and have reporters covering district council meetings let alone district court proceedings and on the ground day to day minor/major stories which are now freely fed into the service via NZME.

It is worth noting that when Fairfax caused the demise of NZPA it promised, spurred by critics, that it did not want to see small newspapers like the Westport News disadvantaged, but in the event it offered nothing!

We believe the merger should only be approved if NZME is prepared to retain and expand its current news sharing service to include Fairfax dailies.

Otherwise, in my opinion, regional New Zealand and the nation as a whole will be the losers.

I have had over 50 years of service in this industry and can assure the commission that letting the big Mets merge and go it alone will inhibit the free flow of news throughout New Zealand.

I believe the commission has an opportunity here to, once again, foster the creation of a truly national news sharing service. And the commission should not be concerned about the loss of competition in the industry because essentially there is none now. The print versions of daily newspapers mainly circulate in defined and historical geographic regions running stories that appeal to readers.

Regards

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