

Submission to the Commerce Commission on the proposed merger of Fairfax Media and NZME

November 22, 2016.

Many moons ago I did post grad media studies at Massey University. It was more arcane than it was interesting but I suffered through it. We deconstructed media using various tools including semiotics and Marxist models. So what, then, did we do?

The good part. We watched movies such as Martin Scorsese's Raging Bull and John Ford's The Searchers. The bad part. We molested these great works of cinema at every opportunity by the application of academic modelling techniques - either the language of signs or maybe a Marxist approach - to get a deeper understanding of their meaning. We needed to penetrate their core, apparently. At best, the approach was an unnecessary extravagance, at worst a nonsense.

The implication was that the writers, directors and actors could not be trusted to impart the meaning of the movie to an audience. That task required an academic in an ivory tower.

With the greatest respect, I see an uncanny parallel with the Commerce Commission and how you believe media will behave if the proposed merger was to proceed.

And it seems to me you think it's much like a school of fish. As if we will suddenly change direction and blithely tow some imaginary line. That is not who we are as editors and journalists.

Pluralism is rife in newsrooms. Everyone has an opinion on stories and by God they will get it heard. There is no such thing as an editor with absolute power, the one arbiter of good taste and news sense. It's simply not true. Journalism is a team sport and a good editor requires many attributes but chiefly it's a good set of ears. The job is about listening to what your senior team, your reporters and your readers are saying.

The notion that post merger we would become - cue heavenly choir "one voice" - is absurd. There are many song sheets. In my ten years as an editor I have not once been told what we should cover nor have I been steered in any direction by advertisers or my superiors. Newsrooms are individual sovereign states where a benign anarchy rules.

My staff are constantly writing stories about many things that don't gel with my own personal or political beliefs. There is no stopping them and that is the beauty of without fear or favour journalism. We live and breath plurality. In terms of viewpoints, my newsroom is frequently split asunder. Tribal Huk gang leader Jamie Pink is a recent example. We ran a series of stories and videos about his antics running P dealers out of Ngaruawahia. Many reporters thought we shouldn't be doing those stories. We ran them. And sometimes it's not only the newsroom that's divided, it's the whole building or even the town. I've been in the editor's chair when a town or city is divided on an issue. In Taranaki I walked into my own newsroom and felt arrows of reproach from my staff because we exposed a bullying culture at a local school. The old boys were not impressed. I could go on. The point is we rarely agree on anything. News meetings are debates where arguments for and against stories are advanced. To suggest that all this would stop if a merger was allowed is ill informed and

tarnishes the reputation of any journalist worth their salt. A merger is the only way local journalism can continue to thrive for Fairfax and NZME. Please don't take the sunshine away.

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