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## Editorial Corporate media news

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ON 3 October 2004, APN News and Media, owners of the *New Zealand Herald* launched a Sunday paper. The *Herald on Sunday* arrived as a major competitor for the Fairfax-owned *Sunday Star-Times* and *Sunday News*. The first issue featured a group photo of eager-looking new staff. Missing from their news coverage, however, was a timely story about media ownership and democracy. Ten days earlier, journalists at the weekday *New Zealand Herald* had announced plans for court action against their employers. APN had refused to extend the *New Zealand Herald* collective agreement to workers on the Sunday edition. This story began on July 30 with APN's decision to launch the new paper. Subsequently, weekday journalists negotiated to establish a collective agreement for all future *New Zealand Herald* employees, along with those specifically employed by the *Herald on Sunday*. After several meetings, APN management abandoned negotiations. They sought a separate collective agreement for *Herald on Sunday* staff (who had already been employed on individual contracts).

In response, those *New Zealand Herald* staff with union coverage sent an email to prospective *Herald on Sunday* columnists recommending non-cooperation with their employers. A letter was sent to APN management and the *Herald on Sunday* editor expressing concern about the breakdown in negotiations. The letter stated that *New Zealand Herald* journalists would withdraw their services from the Sunday edition until negotiations resumed. The announcement of court action against the *New Zealand Herald* employers immediately followed. From here details get murky, but it is fair to say that APN management were less than pleased. Senior journalists involved in the dispute were reprimanded for unprofessional conduct and told not to use *New Zealand Herald* computers for union purposes.

As I write, events are still unfolding and the court case is some way off. Even at this stage, however, the story of this dispute illustrates the connection between media ownership and democracy. APN executives want to integrate



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the operations of their two major New Zealand papers. For major news events, one group of reporters will file copy for both publications. Already, the *Herald on Sunday* carries the *New Zealand Herald* masthead and both papers share the same website. Increasingly, stories and pictures will be shared among media outlets within the APN group. Press journalists will serve the parent corporation rather than a single newspaper. Not surprisingly, therefore, APN executives are dead against multi-site collective agreements. Their objective is to rationalise news resources and individualise staff contracts to protect the bottom line. The same is true for Fairfax, which owns all of New Zealand's major papers outside of Auckland. They will be watching the APN/*Herald* court case with interest. Within the Fairfax group's New Zealand holdings, union density is low; the prospect of collective agreements will not be welcomed. Within New Zealand, APN and Fairfax constitute a press duopoly. In the Sunday market, they compete for readership, celebrity columnists, billboard space and advertising contracts rather than journalistic excellence. The *Herald on Sunday* and the *Sunday Star-Times* have similar sections, carry similar news stories and cover the same events. The commercial battle of like versus like provides readers with a narrow range of viewpoints and stifles public debate. This reflects a wider process whereby competing media conglomerates hollow out national media systems. APN is 45 per cent owned by Tony O'Reilly's Independent News and Media. In April 1996, O'Reilly interests purchased the commercial stations of Radio New Zealand for \$NZ89 million. Within the nationwide radio market, O'Reilly's major competitor is CanWest, owner of TV3, New Zealand's major private television channel.

Global absorption of national media assets is less advanced in Australia. The ABC is clamped by a fiscal tourniquet, but nationwide public news networks have not expired. Audiences and readers are not entirely enveloped by the media products of Packer, Fairfax and NewsCorp. Nevertheless, the likely reincorporation of NewsCorp within the United States sends an unmistakable message; Australia, too, is a colonial outpost of global media empire. National opposition to the move comes from institutional investors and pension fund managers rather than elected government leaders.

In the South Pacific islands, polyglot traditions of culture and language are reflected in the diversity of radio and print media. However, concentrations of media ownership along with state control over much news journalism prevents open discussion about economic development. In this issue, **Philip**



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**Cass** observes that in Papua New Guinea, the two daily newspapers are owned by News Ltd and a Malaysian logging company (both in association with local shareholders). In these circumstances, press journalists are not likely to discuss the merits of a development strategy based upon deforestation and the offshore repatriation of profits. **Kalafi Moala's** account of his battle with the Tongan royal family reflects a fundamental debate about national self-determination. If the *Taimi 'o Tonga* newspaper is allowed to publish domestically, the royal family's business ventures and use of public resources will be open to scrutiny.

Concentrations of media ownership restrict the collective rights of journalists, mass media diversity and public debate about economic futures. Awareness of these matters has contributed to the growth of alternative communication networks. Journalists worldwide can draw from online publications, web forums, web bloggers and internet archives to challenge official views of reality. Information and communication technologies have revolutionised newsgathering; laptops, satellite phones and camcorders track unfolding events independently of corporate media. Correspondingly, the sites of news reception have multiplied; audiences do not totally depend upon print, radio and television outlets. Furthermore, major global themes concerning military imperialism, economic inequality, religious difference and environmental sustainability are being addressed outside of the major conglomerates. Amidst these developments, journalists and media educators can offer a distinct insight: corporate media itself undermines democratic principles of communication.

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