

Research report

Still young and female: A (modest) survey of New Zealand journalists

ABSTRACT

Modelled on earlier national surveys of 1987 and 1994, this 2003 survey polled New Zealand journalists on their educational background, formal training, experiences on the job and professional development. Even though the returns (297) were fewer than expected, those participating provided useful insights into the profession. Participants responded to questions about changing aspects of journalism (such as the impact of the internet, and the consequences of commercial pressures on newsgathering), which are compared with American journalists responding to the same questions. They also responded to questions about use of te reo language and coverage of Maori news and issues. Despite the constraints of the sample size, there is ample evidence in this survey to show young New Zealand journalists take their profession seriously, and demonstrate a willingness to address the imperfections and shortcomings of the Fourth Estate.

GEOFF LEALAND

Screen and Media Studies, University of Waikato

THIS SURVEY of New Zealand journalists adds to similar surveys done in 1987 and 1994 – creating, in effect, a sort of research tradition and historical base describing the characteristics of journalists in New Zealand. Unlike the earlier *A National Survey of New Zealand Journalists, 1987* and *A National Survey of New Zealand Journalists, 1994*, this does not claim to be a national survey. As in 1987 and 1994, the distribution of

questionnaires for the 2003 survey was national but the return (297 questionnaires) from this latest survey cannot justify similar status as it does not represent all – or even a good percentage – of journalists currently working in New Zealand. The numbers participating in the 1987 survey (n=1249) and the 1994 survey (n=1214) better represented the profession; at best, this 2003 survey represents an incomplete or partial survey.

The reasons for the poor response to the 2003 survey are set out below. Despite the reservations expressed about the sample size and the data it provides, there is valuable information in an earlier report supplied to the New Zealand Journalists Training Organisation (NZJTO), and in this article. Details about the personal and educational backgrounds of these journalists can provide opportunities for cautious speculations about the profession in New Zealand at the beginning of the new millennium.

The research project

Research design

The objectives of this study, as set out in a proposal submitted to the New Zealand Journalists Training Organisation in October 2002, were:

- To compare the situation and training of New Zealand journalists, as described in the 1994 survey report, with the situation of New Zealand journalists in 2003.
- To investigate and describe significant changes which have occurred in the ensuing eight years. These would include: shifts in employment responsibilities and focus; the impact of technological change; the impact of structural changes in the New Zealand media; aspects of age, gender, ethnicity and training.
- Investigate the current status of journalism training in New Zealand, and provide guidelines for future directions in journalism training.

To achieve these important aims, the strategy was to conduct a *whole population survey* of journalists working in all areas of the New Zealand media, and associated fields. The survey would include daily and weekly newspapers, community newspapers, magazines, radio, television, public relations, press secretaries, freelance journalists, and those working in newer areas of news gathering and dissemination, such as web journalism

To reduce the cost of the research exercise, questionnaires were distributed and returned electronically, using the *MediaPeople* electronic list as the source of contacts. It was believed that this would be a more efficient method of distribution and retrieval than the paper ('hard copy') questionnaires used previously (more on this below).

Due to a lack of available funding from the NZJTO, it was agreed that a funding proposal should be presented to the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Research Committee, University of Waikato. Following formal approval from its Human Research Ethics Committee, the faculty approved funding of \$6213 in late 2002, with fieldwork to begin in 2003. As this research project was funded by the university, it was felt it was appropriate to broaden the range of the previous surveys, by adding questions which addressed broader professional and cultural aspects of contemporary journalism in New Zealand. To this end, the survey replicated some of the questions used in the 1999 *National Survey of Journalists*, conducted by the highly-regarded Pew Research Center For The People and The Press in the United States.

The final approval for this research exercise (questions, explanatory cover sheet, distribution methods) was given by the NZJTO Board meeting in Auckland on February 20, 2003, and questionnaire distribution began in April 2003..

Questionnaire distribution

An 11-page (including cover sheet) questionnaire was sent as an attachment to a widely distributed email message. Electronic distribution began in April/May 2003, with assistance provided by three graduate students in the Department of Screen and Media Studies, with continuing assistance provided by Brett Horgan. Problems with some early deliveries were identified (possibly due to several design flaws, and interface problems) and these were remedied through modification of the questionnaire, and the setting-up of a dedicated electronic mail-box for returns. In addition, respondents were directed to a web-based questionnaire. Respondents were able to print off and mail back the electronic questionnaire, or request a hard-copy version if this was preferred.

In those instances where returns from large organisations did not match expectations, approaches were made to targeted senior executives by Geoff Lealand and Bill Southworth (on behalf of the NZJTO), to encourage their staff to respond. After the field research had run for two months, a decision was

made to bulk distribute hard copies of the questionnaire to six major news organisations: Wilson and Horton; INL, Radio New Zealand; The Radio Network; TV3; Television New Zealand. Even though more than 900 hard-copy questionnaires were couriered to these organisations, returns remained disappointing.

Questionnaire returns

A total of 297¹ useable questionnaires were returned in the 2003 survey. As noted above, this is far fewer than the numbers returned in the two previous surveys. There are a number of possible explanations for this poor response:

■ The electronic distribution system was not as efficient or effective as hoped. The daily traffic of email messages to journalists is now at a level that it is routine – and tempting – to delete any unsolicited messages – especially those which require a careful and time-consuming response.

■ There were initial processing problems, and possibly some blocking of email attachments by some large news organisations, which prevented questionnaires reaching some journalists.

■ The research project coincided with a busy teaching schedule for the chief researcher and there were few opportunities for sustained follow-ups and reminders to the journalist community.

■ Even though the JTO publicised and promoted this research project, and the deadline for returns was extended several times, it seems to have encountered considerable inertia or disinterest on the part of news organisations and journalists.

■ There was no direct incentive for journalists to participate (the 1994 Survey offered a prize of a lap-top computer for a lucky respondent).

The 2001 *New Zealand Census* did not include ‘journalist’ as an occupational category but did report the following numbers for associated categories, namely;

Category 33612	Reporter	2277
Category 33613	Editor	1251
Category 33614	Sub-editor	246

Source: Statistics New Zealand, ‘Occupation, Aged 15 Years or Over, 2001’

Given the inability of this survey to reach a significant number of these

occupations, and the explanations offered above, the results below should be used with caution. It is appropriate that the constraints of the sample size and the absence of statistical verification be kept in mind, particularly in respect of making direct comparisons with the earlier surveys, extrapolation to a wider population, or if the data is being used to make broad statements about the current state of New Zealand journalism.

Nevertheless, this survey does present the experiences and opinions of a sizeable group of New Zealand journalists who responded to the questionnaire. Other recent surveys of journalists elsewhere have used smaller or similar-sized samples, such as in David Croteau's (1998) study of bias in the American media (only a third of 444 Washington journalists responded), the 2003 Foundation for American Communications national study of media professionals (n=401), and the Pew Research Center 1999 national survey of the US news media (n=552). The 2003 research study *The American Journalist in the 21st Century*, conducted by Indiana University, surveyed 1149 randomly selected journalists, who represent 116,000 American journalists working full-time in the mainstream news media.

Results

SECTION A. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESPONDENTS

1.1 Position, age, income and gender

Those journalists who participated in the 2003 Survey occupied the following *positions*:

Position:	<u>n</u>
Director/Producer	19
Editor/Senior Editor	60
Chief Sub/Associate Sub	7
Subeditor	26
Chief/Senior Reporter	24
Journalist/Reporter	111
Freelance journalist	7
Communications/Public Relations	6
Cartoonist/Photographer	9
Researcher	1
Other	7
Not given	<u>16</u>
Total	297

Those participating in the survey were fairly equally divided between those occupying senior positions of Chief/Senior Reporter or above, and those occupying journalist/reporter positions.

Most (264) of these journalists were in *full-time employment*, with 32 working in journalism on a part-time basis. The greatest proportion (59 per cent) were new to the profession of journalism (working for two years or less), with 48 working three to five years, 38 working six to ten years, and 22 working eleven or more years. There were 141 *males* (47 per cent) and 156 *females* (53 per cent). A majority of 267 (93 per cent) reported their *ethnic background* as Pakeha, with 13 Maori journalists (several of whom indicated dual ethnicity), two Tongan, one Samoan, three Chinese, and two other nationalities.

The *age* range of the respondents, at the time of the survey, were:

Age:	<u>n</u>
20 –29 years	72 (24%)
30-39 years	94 (32%)
40-49 years	74 (25%)
50-59 years	48 (16%)
60 years or older	<u>8 (3%)</u>
Total	296

The table above shows that a slight bias towards younger journalists in those responding to the this survey, with over half (56 per cent) aged 39 years or younger. Another quarter were in the age band 40 to 49 years, when they might be expected to be occupying senior positions in news organisations.

Income was spread across the following bands:

\$20,000-\$29,000	38 (14%)
\$30,000-\$39,000	58 (21%)
\$40,000-\$49,000	58 (21%)
\$50,000-\$59,000	52 (19%)
\$60,000-\$69,000	23 (8%)
\$70,000-\$79,000	22 (8%)
\$80,000-\$89,000	10 (4%)
More than \$89,000	<u>18 (6%)</u>
Total	279

The journalists in the this survey worked in the following areas of the media:

Media sector:	<u>n</u>
Metropolitan/daily newspaper	44
Community newspaper	22
Newspaper (unspecified)	64
Television	31
Magazine	25
Print journalism (unspecified)	47
Radio	35
Government/press secretary	3
Freelance journalism	2
Public relations	3
Other (institutions; education; private company)	<u>9</u>
Total	285

Print journalists dominated this survey, with over two-thirds (71 per cent) working for newspapers or magazines, or in unspecified sectors of print journalism.

1.2 Education and language skills

Respondents were asked what level of *formal education* they had experienced:

Level of formal education	<u>n</u>
Technical institute/polytechnic training	50
Cadetship/apprenticeship	26
Some university study	63
Completed undergraduate degree	149
Completed masters degree	21
other qualification	35

This survey of New Zealand journalists is dominated by tertiary educated journalists, with a significant number (149) having completed an undergraduate university degree, and a further 21 progressing to a postgraduate degree. Speculation about motivation is a recurrent theme in this article but it may be that these tertiary educated journalists may have been more favourably inclined to respond to a university based survey. *The value of tertiary studies*

in respect of subsequent entry into journalism was regarded as:

essential	helpful	neither helpful/ unhelpful	of little use	no use
58 (25%)	130 (55%)	28 (12%)	16 (7%)	2 (1%)

Tertiary study was highly valued by those responding to this question, with a great majority (80 per cent) judging it as *essential* or *helpful*. Tertiary education was *most valued* for the wide knowledge base it provided (176 responses); the opportunities to acquire research skills (86 responses) and analytical skills (84 responses); and for encouraging good writing skills (57 responses).

A minority of 57 (19 per cent) indicated they could *speak Maori* and for most, their level of fluency was modest or minimal. For example, 39 indicated their linguistic ability extended only to common words or greetings.

One Pakeha print journalist expressed the view that little was being done to improve competence in this area,

Nobody in the industry takes this seriously; very few have any perception of how riddled with bias mainstream media is/are.

This perception was echoed by several other respondents, including another senior Pakeha editor,

There is a lamentable, on-going ignorance among Pakeha journalists about (a) things Maori, (b) our colonial history. Therefore, prejudices are repeated and Maori development is frustrated.

Only a small number (13) regarded their journalistic work being produced mainly for a *Maori audience*, but one radio journalist made the following comment:

It has to be kept in mind all the time as an integral part of the Radio New Zealand Charter.

There was also some opposition to any special attention to Maori language requirements, or attention to Maori issues or interests, as in the following comment:

Maori represent a small proportion of the total population in NZ; our

publication is a mass-media one and the background of all ethnicities needs to be balanced to reflect society generally. (metropolitan newspaper reporter)

In respect of their *level of preparation* or ability (formal and/or informal training) *to cover Maori news and issues*, there was a fairly even split between those who regarded themselves as prepared, or ill-prepared, as in the following table:

thorough	Preparation for covering Maori news			
	adequate	neither	inadequate	poor
9	91	88	55	43

Those journalists who were not producing primarily for Maori listeners, readers or viewers described their primary audience as being defined by locality (local or national audiences), socio-economic status, or other criteria

A number of respondents were familiar with *other languages*, with French (33) and German (7) most common,

SECTION B: JOURNALISM TRAINING

1.1 *Pre-entry journalism training*

More than half (163) of journalists in this survey reported that they had done formal pre-entry training, at the following educational institutions:

Training institution:	n
Wellington Polytechnic/Massey Wellington	48
AUT (also AIT)	35
University of Canterbury (post graduate)	27
Aoraki Polytechnic	13
NZ Broadcasting School, CPIT	5
Open Polytechnic	4
Unitech	1
Other	30
Total	163

Note: There are no apparent graduates from Waiariki Polytechnic, Northland Polytechnic, WINTEC (Waikato) and Manukau Polytechnic training courses included here .

Graduates from journalism schools in Wellington and Auckland comprised

the largest group of pre-entry trained journalists in this survey, followed by those educated in Christchurch or Timaru-based schools.

The considerable number of these journalists had *graduated within the past decade*; 48 had done their training between 2000-2003 and 39 between 1995-1999. Twelve had done a course between 1990-1994 and 33 between 1980-1989. A further 25 had done such training before 1980.

2.2 Value of pre-entry journalism training

Evaluations of the value of pre-entry journalism training were generally positive, as in the following table:

excellent	good	neither	unsatisfactory	highlyunsatisfactory
16	72	15	5	2

Elaborations of these responses included both positive comments (28) and negative comments (8) on the abilities of tutors, and positive (81) and negative (21) comments on the skills and expertise provided by the courses. In a generally positive assessment of pre-entry journalism training, there was also significant appreciation (45 responses) of the practical emphasis of such training.

SECTION C: WORK EXPERIENCE AND JOB MOBILITY

3.1 Work experience

Those journalists participating in this survey had worked for the following periods in journalism:

Work experience:	<u>n</u>
Less than one year	20
One to two years	41
Three to four years	38
Five to nine years	53
Ten to 14 years	24
15 to 19 years	43
20 to 29 years	37
30 years or more	<u>27</u>
Total	283

The above table indicates a spread of journalism experience, but with a

tendency towards those who had entered the profession in recent years, with 99 (35 per cent) having worked four years or less. The great majority (267) were in permanent employment, with 16 employed on a casual basis.

3.2 *Involvement in journalism*

Although a considerable number of respondents (58) were still with the news organisation which first employed them, others reported frequent job changes or employment mobility, as in the following table:

No. of media organisations	<u>n</u>
one	58
two	49
three	55
four	43
five	30
six	23
seven	7
eight or more	<u>16</u>
Total	288

Some 82 respondents (28 per cent) had left journalism at some time, to take up other employment or other options. These included; moving into public relations/communications (21); overseas travel (17); employment with better pay (13); departure due work conditions in journalism (10); and family or parenting demands (9). Other reasons cited were: *lifestyle changes, redundancy and unable to find suitable employment in journalism.*

SECTION D: OFF-THE-JOB TRAINING

Of the 289 respondents who responded to the question *Have you been involved in any off-the-job journalism training courses since 1994*, 101 (35 per cent) indicated they had received such training. Of these, 95 assessed such training as either *thorough* or *adequate*.

SECTION E: ON-JOB TRAINING

Of the 293 respondents who responded to the question *Have you attended any formal on-job training on specific topics/skills since 1994?*, 137 (47 per cent) indicated they had received such training. A lesser number (92) reported that on-job training sessions occurred *regularly*, and when they did they tended to

be scheduled *occasionally*. rather than *every week* or *monthly*. Most of these journalists (85 per cent) reported that such training had been *very helpful* or *helpful*.

A considerable number (37) of respondents sought *more on-job training*, with others seeking specific areas of advanced training – such as professional refresher courses and new skills acquisition. Less than half (41 per cent) received *day-to-day coaching and feedback*.

Most of this feed-back was informal and occasional, as in the following explanations,

My employer is pleased to help if it means ironing out any mistakes. We discuss editorial content and talk over ideas before deadline each week.
(freelance print journalist)

I wouldn't say [it was] day to day – chief reporters and other journalists tell you if you've filed a particularly good piece of work and the exec producer ... will mention in his feedback note if he enjoyed your work. Coaching and constructive criticism is ad hoc – given when required but there's nothing structured.
(radio newsreporter)

SECTION F: THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF JOURNALISTS

The journalists in this survey were asked to rank a range of factors which have been influential in their development as a journalist. The cumulative results from this question were as follows:

Rank		essential	valuable	helpful	fairly unimportant	irrelevant
1	Encouragement from colleagues	62	131	75	16	2
2	Encouragement from superiors	101	113	49	14	4
3	Worked in more than one job	49	107	55	22	28
4	Overseas experience	28	82	76	25	37
5	University education	29	77	64	35	53
6	Ongoing training	39	69	71	35	33
7	Pre-entry training	89	47	32	20	54
8	Response from public	27	15	8	1	4

The rankings above reflect the cumulative responses to all the positive assessments (*essential, valuable, helpful*). When ranked by the positive measurement of *essential*, the areas were ordered as below:

Rank

- 1 Encouragement from superiors
- 2 Pre-entry training
- 3 Encouragement from colleagues
- 4 Worked in more than one job
- 5 Ongoing training
- 6 University education
- 7 Overseas experience
- 8 Response from public

Encouragement from superiors was also regarded as the most important influence on the professional development of journalists in the 1994 survey.

A majority (57 per cent) reported that their work performance was subject to a *regular formal assessment*, with opinion divided over the *value of such assessments*: nearly half (47 per cent) regarded them as *excellent* or *good*, while slightly more (53 per cent) regarded them *unsatisfactory* or *highly unsatisfactory*, or adopted a neutral position.

Nearly equal numbers of respondents reported that *journalist colleagues* (94 responses) or *superiors* (100 responses) were the *main source of encouragement or helpful criticism* in respect of their own work, or the work of others. *Friends or family* (18), *reader or viewer response* (19), *social contacts* (5) or *ratings/market research* (5) were less significant.

Of 284 who responded to the question *Do you believe you have encountered any significant barriers in advancement in your journalism career?*, 81 (29 per cent) journalists reported that this had occurred. Age and gender discrimination (26 responses each) were the most frequent complaints, with perceived discrimination also being attributed to race, lack of qualifications, and general employment practices. Explanations included,

Early on, being a woman [was] a problem. Not now.
(section editor, metropolitan daily)

[I] was seen as too old...and sex, because I was a sports reporter
(female Business Editor, metropolitan daily)

[There is an] old school mentality. Young people's ideas are thought of
as radical.
(editor, print weekly)

Being active in the union certainly didn't help
(communications manager)

Nevertheless, the great majority (87 per cent) of journalists in this survey were *satisfied with their career choice*, and only a minority (23 per cent) were seriously considering *leaving journalism*. Sources of *dissatisfaction*, for a minority, included *pay rates, stress and work conditions, or general disenchantment* with their job.

SECTION G: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS FOR THE FUTURE

The journalists in this survey were asked *Which ... groups of people in your office most need further skills and development?*. Of the nominated groups, working journalists (88 responses) were regarded in most need of professional development, followed by *managers* (81 responses) and *supervisors* (21 responses). The most pressing needs appeared to be: *interpersonal or communication skills; improvement in basic language structures and/or writing styles; business/management skills; approaches to investigative journalism; and better understandings of the demands of journalism* .

A majority (56 per cent) were aware of the JTO's *Graduate Journalist Diploma* (offered since 1994), and 27 had taken some papers towards it. A further 13 indicated they planned to take up such *studies in the future* but more thought that incentives to study needed to be offered. There were calls for more material or positive support from employers, in the shape of financial and/or time allowances.

The journalists in this survey were able to nominate up to *five areas of training needs*, and rank these in order of priority. The lengthy list of perceived needs, in order of need, is as follows:

Rank order ²	Area of training need
1	media law/media ethics
2	general writings skills

3	Maori language and/or culture
4	business and financial reporting
5	interviewing skills
6	layout and design
7	management/human resources training
8	general research skills
9	feature writing
10	investigative journalism

The placement of media law/ethics at the top of the list replicates its placing in the 1994 Survey. There are also repeats of calls for specific areas of training (such as Maori language) which appeared in the two earlier surveys. Areas of training long central to journalism (general writing skills, interviewing) dominate; not yet supplanted by a desire to be better acquainted with changing technology or new styles of journalism.

SECTION H: SOME NEW QUESTIONS

As indicated in the opening remarks in this report, there were opportunities to add questions which had not appeared in the 1987 and 1994 surveys. The purpose of these new questions was to explore shifts and changes which had occurred in New Zealand journalism since 1994 (especially in respect of technological change), and to replicate some of the questions from the important 1999 study of American journalists, conducted by the Pew Research Centre.

4.1 Use of the internet and new technology

Journalists were asked how frequently they used the *internet/www* in their work. A significant majority (75 per cent) used it *every work day*, while 20 per cent used it *some days*. Only a small number (4 per cent) used it *infrequently*, or *never* used it (1 per cent). A significant majority (78 per cent) considered that the emergence of the internet had made journalism *better*, while minimal numbers of respondents considered it had made it *worse* (3 per cent) or that no *change* had ensued (7 per cent) whilst 12 per cent recorded a *don't know* response.

In the Pew Center study, a significantly lower percentage of American journalists (54 per cent) considered that the emergence of the internet had made journalism *better* and 26 per cent considered it had made *not much*

difference. Nearly all (98 per cent) had direct access to the internet at their job.

They were also asked what other *technological changes or innovations* had made a significant impact on their work practice. These new technological tools and aids included:

- 1 Email (123 mentions)
- 2 Digital input/editing (113)
- 3 Digital cameras (58)
- 4 Computers generally (55)
- 5 Cellphones (33)
- 6 Laptops and other portable tools (13)
- 7 Electronic databases (16)

One newspaper editor commented that new technological tools had greatly benefited journalism but has also changed work practices through shifts in the production process,

Changes such as direct inputting and computer design have saved time but also left journalists with more of the production work than formerly, so workloads have increased

4.2 Journalism today

Journalists in this survey were asked if there are *important problems facing journalism* today. A large majority (87 per cent) agreed with this statement, whilst 35 (13 per cent) disagreed. Many journalists in the survey agreed that significant problems or dilemmas faced contemporary journalism in New Zealand, challenging the often-expressed assertion that journalists are complacent or lack curiosity about the state of their craft. Perceived problems or issues included:

- 1 Problems in resourcing and staffing (72 mentions)
- 2 'Dumbing down' of the profession and/or its output (60)
- 3 Convergence of ownership/commercial influences (43)
- 4 The public opinion of journalists and journalism (27)
- 5 The skill or expertise of journalists (26)
- 6 'Spin' or media manipulation tendencies (24)
- 7 Media ethics/media law issues (14)

In the Pew Center study, *credibility problems* associated with *reporting*

objectively/fairly or reporting accurately/fairly headed the list of perceived problems facing American journalists. Other perceived problems included; *declines in circulation/readership, making sure coverage is relevant, lack of ethics/moral codes/principles, competing with other forms of media and sensationalised coverage.*

On numerous occasions, the question about perceived problems in contemporary journalists elicited lengthy explanations from respondents. These included specific complaints about skills and journalist standards—echoing perennial complaints which also appeared in the 1987 and 1994 surveys,

Journalists are not being taught to ask the hard questions and far too many are appalling writers
(chief reporter, provincial daily)

The low pay is forcing good journos and students to switch to public relations.
(production manager, television)

English grammar and spelling poor. Low wages.
(business editor, metropolitan daily)

Workplaces have high stress, shift work and average pay. As a result too many people [are] leaving.
(radio reporter)

In marked contrast to the earlier surveys, there were many more instances of a direct engagement with bigger problems facing contemporary journalism in New Zealand. These were in response to significant structural shifts in the New Zealand news media over the past 10 to 15 years; a consequence of increasing competition and commercial pressures, a perceived blurring of distinctions between ‘news’ and ‘entertainment’, and significant changes in media ownership.

Extended comments included:

Lack of resources to encourage in-depth investigation of topics; loss of institutional memory and life experience, esp. subeditors
(freelance editor)

The lack of real competition in NZ has driven everything towards once-

over-lightly, mass-market products. It's extremely demoralising!
(section editor, newspaper)

I feel it's dangerous having only two major [*print media*] chains – both for editorial independence and job opportunities.
(feature writer, weekly)

Overseas ownership of the two main newspaper groups has resulted in cost-driven practices, compromising good journalism.
(deputy chief reporter, provincial daily)

The entire NZ news media is going backwards, I think, because of the lack of investment and understaffing. The closure of the *Evening Post* in Wellington has done serious damage to the local media. They now do not have the ability or the willingness to do the most basic digging for stories/scandals that are literally sitting right in front of them.
(communications manager)

Competition from new media sources, especially alternative media (eg internet). Trend towards more subjective journalism, where facts get ignored.
(newspaper editor)

Too MOR, too mediocre and too many journos wanting to be minor celebrities.
(communications adviser)

American journalists in the Pew Center study, and New Zealand journalists in turn, were also asked to nominate those characteristics which distinguished journalism from other professions or pursuits – in essence, to *indicate what makes journalism, journalism?* These New Zealand journalists most highly valued journalism for its ability to:

- 1 Provide objective reportage (53 mentions)
- 2 Its ability to influence public debate and discussion (45)
- 3 Its ability to communicate between the various sectors of society (41)
- 4 Its role as a public watchdog (29)
- 5 Its ability to investigate and interrogate (24)
- 6 The variety of work it offers (19)
- 7 The excitement it generates (13)

8 Its ability to interpret events (12)

9 Its elements of curiosity and enquiry (11)

Recurrent refrains were *telling the truth, acting as a watchdog* and *writing the first draft of history*. Extended explanations of what journalism meant for those working in the profession included,

Knowing that what you write may well influence your reader to: change something for the good in your town; put right an injustice; write letters to encourage debate ...

(freelance reporter)

Sometimes it's simply keeping people informed; it's warning them of consequences, informing them of the world around them, broadening their minds ... But mostly it's part of the information flow that filters and disseminates all the stuff we're bombarded with and presents the bits to people that we think merits their attention.

(radio reporter)

The combination of immediacy and context. Immediacy for its own sake is worthless but endless delays while considering all the implications cut the life from material. It's the mix that makes journalism what it is, and why good journalism is so difficult.

(section editor, newspaper)

Journalism is unquestionably linked to business imperatives – the bottom line – but it is much more than that. It is creative, like an art or a craft, and it is essential – some would argue *the* essential element of democracy.

(deputy editor, newspaper)

There was an occasional rather jaundiced judgement passed on peers, as in *Journalists, on the whole, are not very nice people – very insecure and selfish* (communications adviser). Nevertheless, while acknowledging the shortcomings of some of their colleagues, most of the journalists in this survey retained faith in their craft, and in other journalists – as in the affectionate judgment, *Fantastic, rebellious, questioning, eccentric, sceptical, social, creative people*. (communications manager)

The Pew Center study reported the most-valued characteristics of journal-

ism, as judged by American journalists, as:

- 1 Valuing truth/honesty
- 2 Providing information/informing the public
- 3 The opportunity to record/witness history
- 4 Diverse/unpredictable/new everyday
- 5 Making a difference/be of service

Journalists judge their profession

Journalists in the New Zealand survey were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with a series of statements about journalism in New Zealand. Responses³ to these statements were as follows. Where appropriate, findings from the Pew Center report provide contrast and comparison with these New Zealand findings.

There are a number of interesting variations between the responses of the American journalists in the Pew Center study, and New Zealand journalists. More American than New Zealand journalists agreed with the assertion that the differences between *reporting* and *commentary* had become blurred in recent years, that the news media had become *too cynical*, and journalists had become *out-of-touch with their audiences*.

In a number of cases, there was remarkable agreement. A similar proportion of American and New Zealand journalists agreed *that too little attention is paid to complex issues in journalism today* and *the news media is more adversarial than is necessary*.

1 The distinction between reporting and commentary has seriously eroded.

NZ journalists	agree 49%	disagree 43%	don't know 8%
American journalists	69%	30%	1%

2 News reports are increasingly full of factual errors and sloppy reporting.

NZ journalists	agree 47%	disagree 47%	don't know 6%
American journalists	40%	58%	2%

3 Journalism is more professional and skilled than in the past.

NZ journalists	agree 38%	disagree 47%	don't know 15%
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4 Too little attention is paid to complex issues in journalism today.

NZ journalists	agree 72%	disagree 24%	don't know 4%
American journalists	71%	27%	2%

5 *Journalists provide a critical role in opposing abuses of political and financial power.*

NZ journalists	agree 92%	disagree 6%	don't know 2%
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6 *Too little attention is paid to ethical issues in journalism today.*

NZ journalists	agree 49%	disagree 43%	don't know 8%
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In an associated question, 81% of American journalists reported that there were on-going efforts to address ethical issues in their workplace.

7 *Journalists should be politically neutral.*

NZ journalists	agree 66%	disagree 29%	don't know 5%
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A majority (74%) of American journalists regarded 'Always remaining neutral' as a core principle.

8 *The news media is too cynical.*

NZ journalists	agree 25%	disagree 70%	don't know 5%
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American journalists	53%	45%	2%
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9 *The news media is more adversarial than is necessary.*

NZ journalists	agree 29%	disagree 61%	don't agree 10%
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American journalists	34%	65%	1%
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10 *Journalists have become out-of-touch with their audiences.*

NZ journalists	agree 24%	disagree 66%	don't know 10%
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American journalists	57%	41%	2%
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11 *Corporate ownership can unduly influence news organisations.*

NZ journalists	agree 67%	disagree 24%	don't know 9%
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In an associated question *To what extent do corporate owners influence news organisations?*, 26% of American journalists replied *A great deal* (5%) or *A fair amount* (21%)

12 *The needs of advertisers can unduly influence news organisations.*

NZ journalists	agree 68%	disagree 25%	don't know 9%
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In an associated question *To what extent do advertising concerns influence news organisations?*, 21% of American journalists replied *A great deal* (2%) or *A fair amount* (19%)

13 *Journalists tend to be more liberal in their politics and/or attitudes than the general public.*

NZ journalists agree 53% disagree 33% don't know 14%
A 1998 report *Maybe the public – not the press – has an leftist bias* (Cohen, 1998) suggests that Washington journalists were more divided and conservative on the question *Do a few large companies have too much power?* than the American public.

14 *It is as easy for females to become journalists as it is for males.*

NZ journalists agree 85% disagree 10% don't know 5%

15 *With the proliferation of the internet, old ideas of what is journalism are changing.*

NZ journalists agree 58% disagree 34% don't know 8%

16 *Journalists should be proud of their profession.*

NZ journalists agree 95% disagree 2% don't know 3%
To the question *When you meet someone for the first time and tell them where you work, do you feel proud, or do you feel somewhat apologetic?*, 93% indicated they felt *proud*.

The final question in the 2003 survey of New Zealand journalists focused on the use of *ethical guidelines* in the workplace. Nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) of those surveyed reported that they, or their organisation, used formal ethical guidelines or codes of practice. These tended to be used *infrequently* (12 per cent) or *when required* (41 per cent), rather than *frequently* (11 per cent). Nearly one-quarter (22 per cent) *never* used such guidelines or codes.

Some tentative conclusions

The response to a broad distribution of questionnaires (electronic and hard-copy) to journalists in all significant employment sites in New Zealand was disappointing. This experience should lead to some pondering about research strategies, if the research exercise is to be repeated in the future. The attractions of computer/internet-based questionnaires are numerous (low unit cost, time savings, targeted research subjects); less obvious are the possible barriers and limitations inhibiting a good return rate.

Numerous commentators have noted that journalists have long been accustomed to interrogating all kinds of people in all kinds of professions, but

become unwilling subjects when the scrutiny is returned. To counter this resistance, and create a more satisfactory two-way communication, it would be sensible to employ the information-seeking strategies journalists are familiar with, when attempting to research the profession. This would entail face-to-face or telephone interviewing, rather than the conventional questionnaire methods used in this study.

In his review of the 1994 NZJTO report, Australian journalism educator Professor John Henningham argued that a combination of targeted sampling and telephone interviewing should replace postal surveys in investigations of the profession, as ‘journalists will not reply to postal surveys’. Even though computer technology has made questionnaire distribution and processing easier, the experience of this research exercise suggests that it would be wise to follow Henningham’s advice in any subsequent research.

Despite the constraints of sample size – and the lingering silence from those journalists who did not participate – the views and experiences of these 297 New Zealand journalists provide interesting and useful information. This cohort of well-educated, younger journalists tend to be new to the profession, and not yet in the higher salary bands nor in the ranks of senior news executives. Nevertheless, they represent the future of New Zealand journalism and there is ample evidence here to show they take their profession seriously, and demonstrate a willingness to address the imperfections and shortcomings of the Fourth Estate.

Notes

¹ Another 39 questionnaires were received in the latter months of 2003– too late to be included in the initial analysis. There were also problems in the transmission of data across distances, as the NZJTO report was written while Geoff Lealand was on sabbatical at Cardiff University (Wales), January-May 2004.

² Rank order was generated by combining the first + second placements for each category. These closely reflected the placement for first choice.

³ Responses to these questions ranged from 255 to 267. Not all the questions provided opportunities for direct comparisons with the Pew Center study; a number were added to provide further information on aspects of gender and change in New Zealand journalism. Several questions added more positively-oriented options to the largely negative emphases of the Pew Center study.

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Associate Professor Geoff Lealand teaches in the Department of Screen and Media Studies, University of Waikato. He is the NZ commissioning editor for Metro [Australia] and is on the editorial board of Media International Australia. His book, It's All Done with Mirrors: About Television (Dunmore Press), co-authored with Helen Martin, was published in 2001. More recently, he has been writing on The Lord of the Rings, media literacy, children's television, and quality American television.

lealand@waikato.ac.nz