Theme : The future of mainstream media

1. The news media – the Prime Minister's view

ABSTRACT

New Zealand has not always been the robust little democracy with the freedom of speech enjoyed today. The election of the first Labour government, the 1951 Waterfront Lockout emergency regulations and the Muldoon era were all testing times for the news media. In the first of the three commentaries, Prime Minister Helen Clark examines a politician's view of media rights, responsibilities and ethics. *Fortune* magazine Bethany McLean profiles her expose on the 2001 Enron financial scandal, and *The Dominion Post* editor Tim Pankhurst, whose newspaper celebrated its centenary in 2007, outlines the innovations undertaken by his newspaper in meeting the technological challenges of the mainstream media.

HELEN CLARK
Prime Minister of New Zealand

Historical observations

ONE of the many quotes of Edmund Burke was the term 'The Fourth Estate'. Where did it come from? From Burke, who, according to some, during a discussion about the three estates of the nobility, clergy and commoners, looked up into the press gallery and said, 'Yonder sits the Fourth Estate and they are more important than them all.' The context of the Fourth Estate is a very apt one. Alongside other key guarantors of good government—openness, transparency, democracy, robust debate—the media must be in there alongside Parliament and the judiciary. The media's role of informing citizens is clearly a very critical one.

I like to think of journalism as a profession and I attribute to a profession certain characteristics, like a duty to act professionally and to adhere to an ethical code.

New Zealand has not always been the robust little democracy with the freedom of speech we have today. A couple of months ago I spoke at the centennial event for *The Dominion* newspaper. I read bits and pieces of the specially produced centenary book about the history of *The Dominion*, which was an unashamedly conservative paper. It never really got used to the election of the first Labour government in 1935, but there was one stage when it fell out with an even earlier generation of politicians. Politicians withheld the political news file—meaning the newspaper did not get advice about government business. That was obviously quite tough for *The Dominion*.

I think back to the 1951 Waterfront Lockout a major industrial dispute in New Zealand when Prime Minister Sid Holland's government brought in emergency regulations that stopped the locked-out workers having their point of view publicised. I wonder how those great beacons of freedom of speech, like the *Herald* or *The Dominion*, dealt with that, as you could not lawfully have your point of view published as a locked-out worker in 1951.

I think through to the more recent Prime Minister Robert Muldoon era, within the memory of most of us here. The most striking example was the press conference from which journalist Tom Scott was ejected by Muldoon. In the middle of his peroration, it is said that Muldoon stopped and refused to continue while Tom Scott sat in the room. The rest of those at the press conference sat there as Scott left. I can't imagine that happening today. This reminds us that the level of freedom of speech and access has not always been as it is today.

Freedom on speech today

New Zealand is perceived as a country with great press freedom. In an international survey that New Zealand is part of every year we are always well into the top 20. This year we were 15th out of 169 countries, which reflects the very high degree of freedom that journalists and news media organisations enjoy in New Zealand.

That is not so in many places. As we know, the lives of journalists in other countries can be very fraught and people show tremendous bravery bringing the stories to print. Many of you will be aware of the run of killings and assassinations of journalists in some countries, including Russia and the Philippines. Speaking out can be a very big risk for free media, and journalists can pay a very high price for that. In the case of Russia it is very disturbing

to see the range of killings there, let alone in a conflict like in Chechnya, which journalists report. We must never underestimate the heroism of the war correspondents, who go in and put their lives on the line so that others can find out what is going on.

There has also been a new phenomenon war correspondence: the embedded correspondent. I think that raises some ethical issues. An embedded journalist is situated alongside personnel on one side of a conflict. As a close observer of international news channels, I did feel that the BBC's objectivity slipped from time to time during coverage of the invasion of Iraq.

Truth, fairness and balance

Rights go with responsibilities, and that is where ethics come in. In the media sense, the key elements are truth, fairness and balance. Some would say fairness and balance are in the eye of the beholder, and in my experience it doesn't pay to be too thin-skinned about this. Actually, politicians put up with quite a lot, especially when newspapers are in full campaign mode, like the *Herald* has been regarding the *Electoral Finance Bill*. That can run for weeks—if not months—with full-blooded attacks: front-page headlines, op-eds, editorials, attack stories, cartoons. In my experience there is not a lot of point in complaining to the in-house regulatory organisation of the Press Council. It can be a lengthy process that just doesn't get you anywhere.

A thirst for knowledge

In the invitation to speak today I was asked: what can journalism educators do better? It is not really for me to judge, but perhaps I could comment on what I think is helpful to New Zealanders. We want to be informed, to be able to participate in debate, and we want to have properly informed opinions about what is happening at home and abroad. So the first point to make is: encourage a thirst for knowledge, and a search for context and background.

Most journalists are relatively youthful and that brings energy, enthusiasm and fresh perspectives. But I suspect most also probably come with only a rather cursory study of social studies—very few have studied across history, geography, sociology, economics—and that leaves large gaps in the general knowledge.

One can reflect on the fact that today's political editors on the two main television channels were barely in their infancy, if born, when Prime Minister

Norman Kirk brought the troops back from Vietnam, cancelled the Springbok Tour, and sent the frigate to protest French nuclear testing on the Pacific atoll of Moruroa—events which in our age group were seminal. Muldoon and Prime Minister David Lange are considered ancient history. World Wars One and Two are antediluvian.

One of the most staggering things I have seen of a lack of perspective was a survey that was done at the turn of the new millennium about what New Zealanders thought was the most tragic event of the 20th century. For me, without question, the Great War, the Holocaust, and Second World War were the most tragic events. But many people in the survey identified the death of Princess Diana as the most tragic event. Although her death was a great tragedy, in terms of perspective, how does it count alongside the millions of dead in those conflicts? It would be great if you as educators can encourage a search for context, background and understanding.

Providing context

I have a strong view that to understand the way we are today, we have to understand the way we were and what shaped us to be the people we are today. This also applies on the global level. Why is the world the way it is? Why do people behave the way they do? How has our history shaped us?

New Zealand is active in the world community. What matters out there matters to us. Yet I think very few journalists have much comprehension of the range of relationships New Zealand has and the range of issues we are involved in. It is important to search for context and to go beyond the context of our own community. It does seem that proprietors do not seem to think these things are particularly important either, so they do not encourage depth of coverage.

I have recently returned after 11 days away across to the East Asia Summit, the Commonwealth Summit, addressing a major government-sponsored sustainable-development conference in Berlin, and opening the first ever New Zealand embassy in Egypt. For the latter three stops there were no New Zealand journalists present. For the first one in Singapore, one Radio New Zealand journalist stayed on from a Foreign Affairs Minister Winston Peters' trip to North Korea and a New Zealand Press Association journalist was paid to go up by the Asia:New Zealand Foundation. NZPA has been quite successful in getting such funding before and the journalist concerned

has built up some specialisation in covering the East Asia Summit. But the reason you do not often read about these important meetings is because the New Zealand media do not think they are important enough to cover. What coverage we do manage to get is usually because we are on the phone in the middle of the night from Kampala or Cairo or somewhere trying to interest people in a story that is important to New Zealand.

Understanding diversity

The third point I want to make about the role of the media in the 21st century is in understanding diversity, and being a force for good, not a force for intolerance and misunderstandings. This subject is coming up quite a lot now in international forums around interfaith dialogue and also the United Nations initiative on the Alliance of Civilisations.

A lot of the debate comes back to the question: what is the role of the media? Is it to perpetuate hate, misconceptions and stereotypes, or could the media be a positive force for building understanding? Obviously, one would like to see it as the latter. The cartoon issue brought that debate to our shores early last year when some New Zealand newspapers reprinted the Danish Mohammed cartoons, and I was quite critical of the decision to publish by the *Dominion* and others. I never saw it as a freedom of speech issue, but more a question of editorial judgement and taste. What purpose was served by publication? I think that is the nature of the debate. The selection of news is an editorial judgement made day in and day out, and judgements are also made about what kind of role a news media organisation should play.

Mistaking scrutiny with cynicism

The fourth point is the importance of not confusing scrutiny with cynicism. Cynicism attributes the worst motives to everybody. The background material I was given for today included reports of a seminar, which included people from the media world commenting about the role of the media and how to do the job. Political editor Duncan Garner of TV3 basically told people: 'politicians always lie'. Actually, politicians do not always lie. I was appalled by this statement because if that is the mindset with which we are reported it is no wonder politicians are ranked about the same as car salesmen.

It is important that scrutiny not be confused with cynicism because in the end that undermines the political process. If the public is encouraged to believe

that everyone who steps forward for public life is a dishonest person, where does that leave us? So I thought that was a most unfortunate comment.

The journalist is the story

A couple of other trends to comment on. I think in this age of personality-driven media, there is a tendency for the journalist to make themselves the centre of the story. How often do we see the story which is about them? Well, actually, it is not about them, the story is about something else. If the journalist somehow feels they have been slighted, the story becomes one about them, and it can go on for weeks and weeks. I can think of countless incidents where the journalist or the news organisation has become the centre of the news story, rather than being a conveyor of news. I think that trend is quite interesting.

Blogs

The second trend I've noticed is the blog. Now we have senior political journalists with their blog. Blogs can be quite entertaining. I have discovered on the odd occasion when journalists do accompany me on an international visit, and it is a problem meeting deadlines in different time zones, they rush back to their hotel rooms and blog. In doing this, they commit to instant opinion, and then when it is time to write a considered piece they may realise that they have rushed their judgement on that issue. So the role of blogs should provoke debate among journalists.

Competition

The third trend is the very competitive news environment. Journalists and news organisations are constantly striving to write up a news report before it happens. This leads to a tendency not to let the facts get in the way of a good story. There would not be a day when one does not see something that is just plain wrong and often when a phone call is made to point out that, there is a bad reaction at the other end. This takes me back to reinforcing the earlier point to seek the truth. Fairness and balance are important.

Working together

Of course politicians and journalists need each other—it is a symbiotic relationship. But I think having clear boundaries is important because you

cannot act professionally if there are not clear boundaries. I think in this small political bubble of Wellington, and particularly Parliament, people work far too close to each other, with long-established habits of socialising closely together. I myself always like to keep professional boundaries.

I have a style of being very open with journalists, but not to the point where familiarity breeds contempt. I reinstituted the weekly press conference, which had not been held for about six years before I became Prime Minister, and was intermittently held before that. I do regular stand-ups, scheduled interviews, one-off interviews, and phone calls from offshore. Generally, we try to co-operate with media because we both have jobs to do. It is important to ensure that we have a relationship that is a good, professional working relationship. As a politician, I like to be able to respect the job that journalists do, but that needs to go two ways.

I hope all that is semi-helpful as you start your deliberations on journalism education. You are the experts, and I hope I have been able to convey to you some of the things I think will give us a lively news media that contributes to the democratic life of our country.

Helen Clark is Prime Minister of New Zealand and leader of the NZ Labour Party.

Later in the conference, two delegates responded to some of Helen Clark's criticisms:
Barry Paterson, chairperson of the New Zealand Press Council, said: 'I noticed the Prime Minister wasn't very complimentary to the Press Council. She has never made a complaint to us, actually.' Barry Paterson has since advised that he subsequently discovered that a complaint was made on behalf of Helen Clark many years ago, before she was Prime Minister. The complaint was upheld.
Duncan Garner, political editor at TV3, disputed her reporting of his comments: 'What I said was I believe it is politicians' default position to lie, not that all politicians are liars.' Duncan Garner has since advised that his initial position was taken in response to a question about Labour Minister David Benson-Pope and he made the statement in the context of when politicians find themselves under pressure.
- Guest Editor