

- EDITORIAL -

Special Issue: Agenda 2020 Imagining the Future of New Zealand Media

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This edition of *MEDIANZ* was generated from papers, presentations and discussions at the Agenda 2020: NZ Media Futures Symposium at AUT in April 2017. The Symposium was designed as a forum to encourage debate about the media and its audiences in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This was thematically connected to the electoral cycle and engineered to look beyond it. The 2017 General Election has allowed media academics, workers, owners and audiences an opportunity to re-engage with media policy in New Zealand – an area that has slipped from political debate in recent years. This is critical work, as the way New Zealanders understand the issues that shape our society are heavily influenced by the media that they engage with. In the lead-up to the 2017 general election, we have had an opportunity to scrutinise political parties' media policies and to see into the future of our critical media infrastructure in a time of change, disruption and challenge. The name *Agenda 2020* was adopted to reflect both media power in framing information and the intention of the project – to meet, debate, and develop solutions to the media issues facing Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The articles presented here are both shaped by current issues and debates around the New Zealand media and by thinking past the three-year election cycle and into the future. This challenges us to debate and shape – in a considered and deliberate manner – the ongoing development of the media in New Zealand. This reflects a growing interest in the role of the media in New Zealand's political, cultural, economic and social arenas, with groups such as the Coalition for Better Broadcasting and the campaign to Save Radio New Zealand coalescing around issues of deregulation, commercialisation, reduced funding and political apathy towards the media. The recent history of public engagement with critical media

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campaigns remind us of this. The media does matter to the 32,337 who signed the petition to increase funding to our last remaining commercial free public media outlet, Radio New Zealand. This campaign won an \$2.84 million-a-year boost to RNZ funding as a concession to their concerns (Scoop 2017). The media also matters to the 76,491 who signed a petition to remove a right-wing broadcaster from the role of chair of the public television network's election debate between the leaders of the two largest political parties.

That said, recent developments in the incumbent National-led Government point to growing apathy, and even disdain for engaging with the media as a part of our political, social and economic culture. During the development of the Agenda 2020 Symposium, I invited spokespeople for broadcasting and media issues from the four biggest Parliamentary parties to speak to the gathering about their media policies and how they envisage the future of the media in New Zealand. Labour, the Greens and New Zealand First agreed to present the same day and later sent Clare Curran, Gareth Hughes and Tracey Martin respectively to the Symposium to lay out, in some detail, their thoughts and policies around the media. The National Party, although initially seemingly interested, declined (citing a busy Minister). With the somewhat abrupt resignation of the popular three-term Prime Minister, John Key, and the subsequent elevation of Finance Minister Bill English to the job, a cabinet re-shuffle saw the end of the 80-year old Broadcasting portfolio. I then attempted to engage with the Minister for Culture and Heritage (who had assumed the bulk of the redundant Broadcasting portfolio's work) in attending and was flatly refused – with no explanation. The Symposium ran the session with an empty chair, pad, pen and water bottle for a Government Minister, any Government Minister, should they turn up. Our arrangements proved futile. This is, in my view, undemocratic, arrogant and the by-product of (what was then) a popular Government heading to almost certain victory in the polls in six months' time.

This is surprisingly short-sighted, as the grand narratives of the election process are played out in the media at election time and the media is important to the development of those narratives too. This can be seen across the spectrum of our political cultures, from the poignant and powerful – as seen in the notably stoic Auckland Chamber of Commerce chief executive Michael Barnett breaking down on *The AM Show* over mental health issues in New Zealand (August 29), and the farcical and fruity, with the Minister of Defence Gerry Brownlee in full 'infotainment' mode as a reluctant and unconvincing newsreader on *The Project* (September 5). Politicians of all stripes rely on the media getting and distributing their messages, whistles and promises as never before. The ever-growing multitudes of platforms, channels and commentators demand that political parties engage with the media thoughtfully, but also that they respond to changes in the media ecology with new policies. The National Party missed an opportunity to promote and defend their own work in these areas and to hear what their opponents were thinking. They also missed out on hearing what

some of the key media thinkers in New Zealand had been developing in their focused work in this area.

Naturally, not all that discussion can be encapsulated in this journal, but the articles here all engage deeply with the key themes of the Agenda 2020: NZ Media Futures Symposium. The research presented here traverses critical events of recent times and look beyond the horizon into possible pathways for the New Zealand media. The articles are arranged in a deliberate manner, beginning with Wayne Hope's detailed and nuanced exploration of the development of the New Zealand media and the structural and economic foundations for the media we have today – and importantly – how we understand that media in terms of temporality and epochal reality. Hope's deep and wide-ranging critique provides new ways of seeing the media we have in New Zealand today as the outcome of unique historical-political developments. These are both local and global in nature, and they deserve interrogation and forthright honesty about their utility as drivers of our understandings about the world around us as citizens of a sovereign nation influenced by the flows and truths of global capitalism.

Peter Thompson then takes us into contemporary media debates with his closely-observed and highly-detailed dissection of the failed SKY Television-Vodafone ('Skodafone') merger attempt that played out through 2016-17. Thompson demonstrates the complex conundrums facing agents of the state (in this case, the Commerce Commission of New Zealand) when they are called upon to adjudicate these large and complicated media mergers. The ongoing conglomeration of media companies across owners, borders, systems, platforms, production and distribution is writ large in these cases, with notable issues of law, competition, influence and culture being argued in order to produce acceptable outcomes for audiences as users and as citizens. This is increasingly difficult work in the face of contested media market economics and commercial pressures on global and local media systems.

Another large media merger is then scrutinised by Merja Myllylahti. The Commerce Commission was also recently asked to clear a merger that would significantly concentrate media platforms and content production with the conglomeration of NZME and Fairfax in New Zealand. This case provides pivotal insights into the border skirmishes between 'old' and 'new' media as the economics of both clash at the frontier of advertising drift, production economics and distracted and divergent audiences. There are big questions around the quality, plurality and economic structures of converging media played out in this case. Myllylahti's background in international financial journalism and critical scholarly research allows for a penetrating and deeply analytical discussion of these elements of media change, that provides insights into wider issues of convergence of the media.

Another take on convergence follows from Rufus McEwan. Here we see the regulatory role of the state and the disruptive and often ethereal nature of digital change played out in attempts to quantify and direct emerging possibilities bought about by media convergence. McEwan argues that convergence ‘remains a highly contentious subject’ and this examination of how the New Zealand Government attempted to engage with stakeholders, interest groups, industry and the community on the subject shows that the rhetoric and the reality of convergence as a basis for policy development are often mismatched.

This raises the issue of who policy is made for and how the media is developing in relation to audiences. Vijay Devadas and Brett Nicholls challenge perceptions of ‘publics’ and their rights in participating in the cultural, political and social life of New Zealand. This article seeks to re-centre the notion of ‘citizens’ in the cultural-political ecology of the nation, in contradiction to the neoliberal construction of the rampant individual consumer operating according to market logics. This critique traverses the functions of the state, the market and civil society as well as the influence of the normative values created and adopted by 30-plus years of neoliberal culture that the New Zealand media (and its audiences) have developed in. This article provides a timely and critical discussion of citizen’s right to an unfettered media system that is inclusive and meaningful, to counteract the waning ability of traditional balances to commercialised culture to provide for human rights in media access.

The political state and the media are the focus of the next piece from Sarah Baker, Thomas Owen, Verica Rupal, Merja Myllylahti, Vijay Devadas, Geoffrey Craig and Carlo Berti from the AUT Media Observatory. Their analysis of recent New Zealand local body elections provides a detailed critique of the mechanics of reporting elections and issues of balance, access, diversity and representation of politics and politicians. This is framed in terms of the ‘quality’ of media activity around democratic moments and the ‘marketplace of ideas’, as well as the contentious issues that surround the sources of information used to create stories. The discussion relies on sampling actual media outputs and contrasting and comparing different approaches to reporting the political process during the 2016 Auckland local body elections. This is a rich insight into the nature of modern political reporting and the vagaries of complex political information being transmuted by the media.

The final article comes from Gavin Ellis, a notable and long-standing editor-in-chief of the *New Zealand Herald* (now retired) and more recently a critical voice in media thinking in New Zealand as a lecturer at the University of Auckland, an author of two books focused on the media and as a media commentator for Radio New Zealand. Ellis was asked to provide the closing address for Agenda 2020: NZ Media Futures, and this article is developed from that intuitive but thoroughly realistic and scholarly discussion of possible paths for a media that fulfils its role in our democracy – and as part of our collective future wellbeing. The approach is both practical and critical, with nuances that only a lifetime spent dealing with the real issues of media development and an intellectual respect for the broader societal

issues that the media is enveloped in can produce. Ellis emphatically rounds off this edition and its discussions with cautions, but also positive and practical interventions we can make that will help us create and protect the media we want – and the media that we need.

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