



Margie Comrie and Judy McGregor

McGregor, J., & Comrie, M. (Eds.) (2002). *What's news? Reclaiming journalism in New Zealand*. Palmerston North: Dunmore.

Reviewed by: [Catherine Strong](#), Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand.

It's difficult to be very critical of this book, since it holds a special place in the literature of modern journalism in New Zealand. The collection of 17 essays by the country's top media commentators take the opportunity to point out where the industry isn't measuring up to expected high standards. And this is the problem. When read as a whole, the book makes the New Zealand media appear weak and vulnerable, and journalists seem almost gormless.

The book is not a textbook for beginning journalism students. It doesn't ease the reader into a basic understanding of journalism. Instead, it is a sophisticated report card on the industry, directed at those actively working in it and who are able to make improvements. The commentators use spirited language, well-resourced case studies, and detailed statistics to make their points. Readers are told that it's easy for journalists to get manipulated, with 1,500 public relations professionals versus 2,500 working journalists; that the news media is steadfastly ethnocentric and monoculture; and its current practice is ignoring the Pacific.

We also learn that New Zealand is the only place in the world where every communications company in the private sector is under foreign ownership; that objective journalism has been replaced by "sympathy, prejudice and sheer drama"; and visualness has become the elite news value. A casual reader could come away with a jaded view, but in fact experienced journalists will see that these harsh assessments make them more vigilant in protecting the Fourth Estates principles.

Many of the 16 commentators have successfully made the leap from journalism practitioner to academia. They are all well respected in the field and have industry experience as well as critical observation skills on their side. Another potential problem in the book is that it is four years old and could be easily outdated because of the specific use of names, statistics, and examples. Most of the essays, however, stand up remarkably well to the passage of time. One example is the ethics chapter written by Jim Tucker, now of the NZ Journalism Training Organisation. A recent media controversy over chequebook journalism led me to scrutinise this section in particular. It was as stimulating and useful today as when it was written. The background and examples, in fact, put the current issue into perspective. Some websites throughout the book are out of date, a perpetual problem with textbooks. However, while following one of the invalid websites I was led to another one, which turned out to be a little jewel. It's a collection of links useful to working journalists in Australia: <http://www.journoz.com>. Any discussion on media ownership will outdate quickly, of course, but this one is kept topical by the identified trends and the rationale for alertness made by Paul Norris, head of the NZ Broadcasting School.

The book is divided into four themes: changing patterns, ethics and values, politics and media, and challenging stereotypes. The subject of public relations dominating newsgathering pops up throughout the book. This is, in fact, a crucial element facing working journalists and editors. Too often old-time journalists take a totally cynical view that all public relations is diabolical and underhanded. Dr. Margie Comrie, however, takes a reasoned approach to both the strengths and weaknesses of working with what are euphemistically called media managers. As a former journalist, now associate professor at Massey University, she uses excellent case studies. The only out-dated part is that PR salaries are now about 30 percent higher than when the chapter was written.

Professor Emeritus Ranginui Walker focused on the history of colonial injustice, and the ideological function of the press in supporting the hierarchy of Pakeha domination and Maori subordination. He backs up his theory with credible examples and damning newspaper headlines. The disappointment is that most errant articles (75 percent) were from only two newspapers, the *New Zealand Herald* and the now-defunct *Auckland Star*. It would have been stronger to show the shortcomings were more widespread. This chapter also gave only half a paragraph to the rapidly growing Maori media. The list of existing outlets notably omitted the long-running Maori language television news programme Te Karere and also the Radio New Zealand's long-term commitment to Maori news and current affairs programming.

Yes there are some shortcomings to the book, but they are very minor, and only beg for there to be another re-write. *What's News?* is in fact an update of McGregor and Comrie's previous analytical collection ten years earlier, called *Whose News?* Overall it is a collection of the country's best news media observers, using the best writing skills, to focus on the wider social impact of newspapers, radio and television. Its contribution to the industry is superb and it should be required reading for every New Zealand practicing journalist.

Purchase information: This book is ISBN 0864694164 and available through <http://www.bennets.co.nz> for \$38.69NZ

About the reviewer: Catherine Strong lectures in journalism at Massey University in New Zealand. She has had more than 30 years experience in broadcast and print journalism. This spans several countries in Australasia and North America. In addition to being a hands-on practitioner in many newsrooms, she was also an internal trainer for radio and television, before shifting to tertiary education. She was founder and managing director of Cabix Media in Wellington.