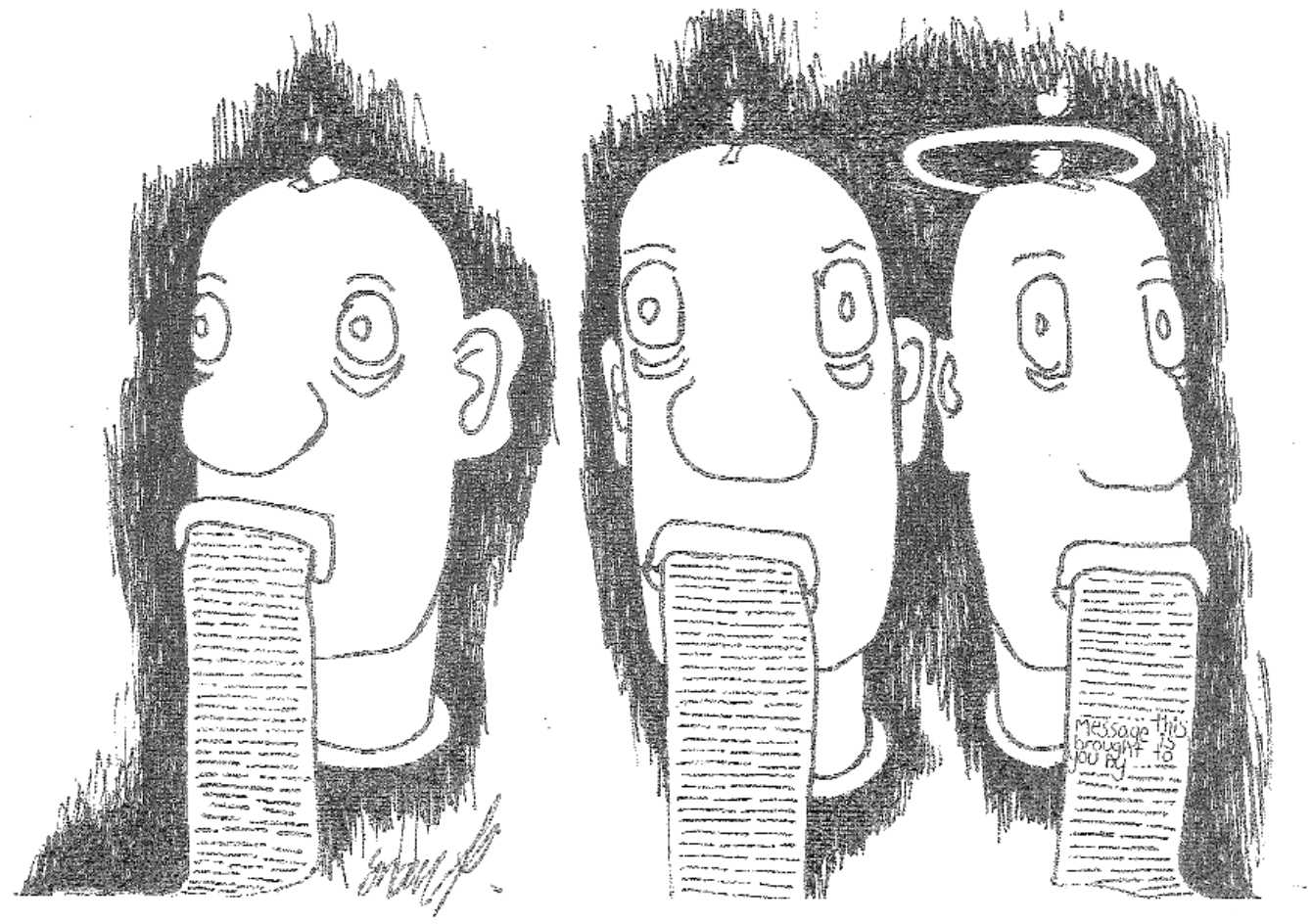
Media Opinion

# Cash-for-issue payouts pose headaches for journalists

**How does a journalist negotiate a relationship with a funding agency? SPIKE MOUNTJOY comments on media ethics and commercial interest.**




Prominent New Zealand journalists can receive cash payments for sympathetic coverage of particular issues.

Applications for the first New Zealand-based mental health media grant programme closed on May 31.

The successful journalists will be paid up to $12,000 each to work on projects that aim to "reduce the stigma of mental illness and the discrimination experienced by people with mental illness".

The grants are provided by the Mental Health Foundation, a charitable trust, in conjunction with the Ministry of Health's project "Like Minds, Like Mine", which was created to reduce stigma and discrimination around mental illness.

Media grants and fellowships offer a rare opportunity for journalists to sidestep the demands of the daily or weekly deadline and dedicate time to an area, covering it in more depth.

But how does the journalist negotiate a relationship with the money provider?

Applicants for the mental health grants submit a proposal to the grant provider. Recipients are selected by a panel of judges based on how well the project fulfils the provider's requirements.

The journalist's editorial relationship with the funder may be an important factor in determining whether the finished product is considered propaganda, public relations, advertising material – or serious journalism.

Application forms for the foundation grants say journalists "must be available for regular project reviews throughout the 12-month length of the grant".

This project is funded by an organisation with a clear agenda, paying for supportive stories and reviewing the work in progress. It is really journalism?

Say a journalist supported by a mental health grant, discovers wide-spread, unreported cases of violence committed by people with mental illnesses.

The purpose of the grant is to produce stories that challenge negative associations between mental illness and violence. Where does this leave the journalist and the story?

The New Zealand EPMU's code of ethics says journalists "shall not allow their professional duties to be influenced by any consideration, gift or advantage offered and, where appropriate, shall disclose any such offer."

This issue commonly arises when journalists are given free stuff, or "freebies". The *New York Times* has a blanket ban on their journalists accepting gifts, be it a ballpoint pen or an international plane ticket.

Such a clear stance is not as easy to maintain in resource-poor newsrooms, according to Canterbury University head of journalism Jim Tully, as he explained to Kim Griggs in Freelance Writer last year.

"Generally speaking, the rule in New Zealand is much more generous in terms of taking these things," says Tully.

Tully says that "Disclosure is the only way you can deal with freebies and junkets if you are going to accept them."

The journalist union's code asks that journalists not be influenced by any advantage offered them, and should disclose such offers. Should this rule of disclosure apply to media grants?

The foundation grants replace the Rosalynn Carter Fellowships, a similar programme offered to New Zealand journalists between 2001 and 2006 by the American Carter Centre.

Two New Zealand recipients of the Carter Fellowship, Noel O'Hare and Alex Spence, had their grant-funded work published in the *Listener* just a couple of weeks apart, in 2004.

O'Hare's article disclosed that he was a Rosalynn Carter mental health journalism fellow 2004. Spence's did not.

O'Hare published four other articles in the *Listener* between April and September 2004. All the stories were produced with the backing of the Carter Centre. None of them mentioned the relationship between O'Hare and the centre.

Denis Welch, deputy editor of the *Listener*, says the publication has no fixed guidelines, but decides whether to run a disclosure based on the merits of the article.

The *Listener* has never doubted the integrity of the work they receive from Carter fellows, says Welch.

The New Zealand-based grant system, which begins this year, does not require participants to declare their relationship with the Mental Health Foundation, says the foundation's communications and marketing manager Alex Stone.

The grant is funded by the Ministry of Health through their "Like Minds, Like Mine" project. The government is paying journalists to advance its policy and agenda.

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In this case, few committed humanists would criticise the stated aim of the grants they offer.

In 2005 it emerged that American syndicated columnist Armstrong Williams was paid $240,000 by the US Department of Education, via a public relations company, to promote the government's "no child left behind" policy.

The agreement required him to comment on the policy during his broadcasts and to interview the education secretary on his radio and television slots.

Melanie Sloan of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington described the work as propaganda. Williams' syndication agreement was cancelled.

When asked why he had accepted payment for promoting the policy he said, "it's something I believe in." This defence was not enough to stop a public outcry over the issue.

The information about Williams' "cash for comment" arrangement with the US government only became public after a request through the US Freedom of Information Act.

Carter Centre Fellowships are announced publicly, as the New Zealand media grants will be. The journalist–funder relationship is in the public domain, even if the journalist does not disclose the relationship in their article.

This mental health journalism could be described as an important public service, one not catered for in the budget conscious newsroom, running on short deadlines with ever decreasing staff numbers.

Phil Smith, one of the last New Zealand recipients of the Carter Centre Fellowship, says the programme, and media fellowships generally, can open up "neglected topics to journalistic enquiry and public knowledge".

"It points media in the right direction and says – see, there are interesting and worthy stories here."

Perhaps the reader should ask whose agenda is being advanced by this arrangement. In this case the stated aim of the grant is to challenge the stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness.

Stigma and discrimination is created and perpetuated with the help of the media, says Stone of the Mental Health Foundation

"There's a constant association in the minds of the media and the public between violence and mental illness."

Stone says this media focus on violence and the mentally ill is inaccurate and damaging.

Mentally ill people are proportionally less likely to commit violent acts than people without mental illness.

The foundation tracks media handling of mental health issues.

There has been a steady decline in "rampant discrimination", says Stone. Whether reportage paid for by the Carter Centre has helped to bring about this change is unknown.

Journalists play an active role in forming, as well as informin the thoughts of the public.

Whether they are open and transparent about their funding could mean the difference between the public's trust, and their suspicion.