

Outsourcing a threat to news quality

APN's cost cutting experiment means many New Zealand subs may lose their jobs. JUSTIN HENEHAN reflects on the effect this has on media content.

Australian media giant APN Media is planning to outsource sub-editing and design of its New Zealand publications.

The move, which has been described as an experiment, will result in the loss of jobs and future employment opportunities in New Zealand media.

It will have far reaching consequences for the integrity and quality of journalism in New Zealand, and possibly further afield.

By early July 2007, Pagemasters, a Melbourne-based subsidiary of the Australian Associated Press, will begin sub-editing APN publications. The affected publications include the *New Zealand Herald*, the *Herald On Sunday*, the *Auckland*, the *Listener*, and regional newspapers from Whangarei to Hastings.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union estimates the change will mean the loss of around 70 jobs.

Tony O'Reilly's Independent News & Media (IN&M), which owns 40 per cent of APN media, plans to outsource much of its sub-editing and design work on its Irish papers.

Simon Collins, delegate for the New Zealand Herald Journalists Collective, says IN&M and APN are using Ireland and New Zealand as test cases.

If this strategy works, he says "competitors will have to follow suit, and it will be used on a global scale".

UK *Guardian* Journalist Roy Greenslade says if these two experiments at each end of the globe

come off ... then other publishers across the world – who are always seeking successful cost-cutting initiatives – will surely follow O'Reilly's lead.

Academic Bill Rosenberg, author of *News Media Ownership: How New Zealand is foreign dominated*, says this type of strategy is to be expected under the current neo-liberal economic order.

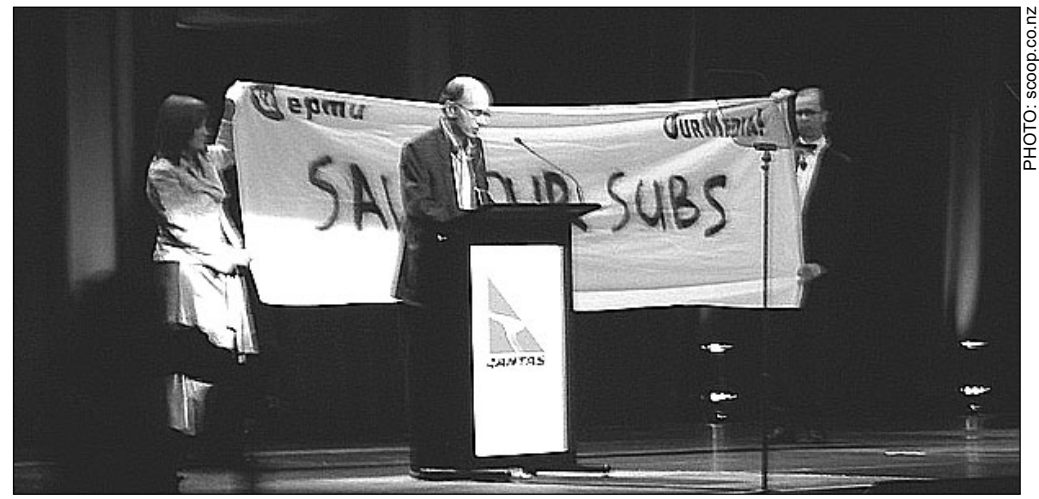
The prospect of this experimental outsourcing becoming a global model is a symptom of a more centralised and commercialized media, and a sign of things to come, he says.

In a recent press release, EPMU national secretary Andrew Little writes, "We need good quality, accurate news for our democracy to function, but APN seems more interested in increasing its profit margins."

Journalist Gareth Vaughan wrote in *The Dominion Post* on March 23, "APN's New Zealand national publishing division was the trans-Tasman media group's weakest performer in the 2006 financial year, earning A\$96.5 million (NZ\$110 million) before interest and tax, down seven per cent from the previous year."

Outsourcing is a global trend. Last year UK media company Northern & Shell announced it was completely outsourcing the business section of its *Daily Express* newspaper to Press Association, costing 35 journalists' jobs.

Reuters, Ohio's *Columbus Dispatch* and California's *Contra Costa Times* have also out-



CONFLICT: Sub-editors protest against outsourcing at the Qantas Media Awards 2007.

PHOTO: scoop.co.nz

sourced parts of their operations, not only to foreign companies, but to foreign countries such as India and Singapore.

In a report released last year, the World Association of Newspapers identified several media companies which outsource, such as the BBC, IN&M, The New York Times, Viennese newspaper *Vorarlberg Nachrichten*, and some Swiss newspapers.

"Whatever the risks and potential pitfalls, outsourcing is here to stay. The newspaper industry has only recently begun taking tentative steps into outsourcing what were once considered core competencies such as editorial, advertising and circulation."

Little describes sub-editors as "the people who make sure our papers get their facts right".

A lot rests on this seemingly simple job – when a fact is wrongly reported the publication or the journalist may be sued for defamation, the reputation of the publication is damaged, and the public's trust in the integrity of journalism may be lowered.

The EPMU's Journalist Code of Ethics applies directly to the conduct of the reporting journalist, but the sub-editor is indisputably implied in its invocations.

Collins describes sub-editors as the second line of defence for the Journalist Code of Ethics.

Subeditors often make ethical judgements. They must know the code intimately, and also have knowledge of the context of any judgement made by the reporter.

Collins fears this new "factory environment" will compromise the quality, accuracy and integrity of New Zealand journalism.

"It's going to be much harder under Pagemasters. Sub-editors won't be able to ring journalists. There will be more mistakes and a loss of quality," he says.

Distance between the event, journalist, and sub-editor makes it increasingly difficult to pick up errors of fact, cases of fabrication, and defamation issues.

Pagemasters' sub-editors' lack of local knowledge and relative inability to check facts could result in the adoption of more rigid, standardised editorial policies and procedures.

Bill Rosenberg says the outsourcing and centralisation of sub-editing could create a risk-averse media environment, where contentious issues are avoided.

In such an environment the preference will be for easily-verifiable and non-contentious stories.

Newspapers' editing policies are thus likely to be highly conservative.

The centralization of sub-editing will "move ownership of the news stories further from the journalists who write them and further from the people in the news", he says.

Rosenberg presents evidence in *News Media Ownership* that direction by owners occurs in the media, and foreign ownership can influence content and emphasis in the media to some extent.

How language can shape public opinion

In the battle for hearts and minds, war reporters need to choose their words carefully.

By DYLAN QUINNELL

Words can destroy lives, distort the truth and even worse, kill. The undeniably effective Nazi propaganda, produced under Hitler's propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, is the most obvious example of this.

A more recent example can be seen in the modern use of the word 'terrorist'. Anyone called a terrorist instantly becomes a heartless, unthinking, enemy of the West, rightly or wrongly.

The media enhance the power of words, as millions of people get their information on the world through the media. Journalists work with words every day and an area where these words have special consequence is when they are reporting conflict, specifically war.

In his book *Dining with Terrorists*, BBC journalist Phil Rees searches for a working definition of the word terrorist. In doing so he sees some of the power of words, especially the way they are used by the United States Government.

He talks of the US "war on terror" and the "war on drugs" – in South America and partially in Afghanistan – as wars on metaphors.

"The problem with a 'war on a metaphor' is that it allows the Government to begin military action on almost anyone it chooses," says Rees.

At the same time they have managed, up until recently, to change people's opinions of war through the words used.

"War has been transformed into a patriotic endeavour, a word with positive healthy connotations...associated with a crusade to clean up a dirty world," Rees argues.

One of the conflicts Rees has covered is between Israel and Palestine. "Israel has carefully used language that encourages a perception of legitimacy in the Western media," he says.

He interviewed one of the leaders of Hamas, a Palestinian militant organisation, who says "even sympathetic writers see the Palestinian conflict in terms of the war on terror rather than the struggle of an occupied people to achieve freedom".

In the Western media, Hamas are 'terrorists', no questions asked.

Because of this, they are reluctant to speak to the media, meaning their story is not heard in the West.

It also stops the media from helping find a path

to peace, through fostering understanding.

When British war correspondent Robert Fisk spoke at AUT last year he explained how the words used to describe a conflict can have a profound effect on the way the reader understands it.

He gave an example of an attack by Palestinian fighters on an Israeli outpost in the West Bank.

The event can be reported in one of two ways, "Palestinian militants today attacked an Israeli settlement in the disputed West Bank." Or "Palestinian freedom fighters today attacked an Israeli outpost in the occupied West Bank."

In the first piece the Palestinians are made out to be the aggressors who are targeting a civilian area in a historically disputed area.

In the second piece you get the idea that the Palestinians are in fact fighting to regain their land by attacking a military position.

By simply changing a few simple words the whole meaning of the passage is changed.

What unprejudiced word could be used to describe the target of the attack? It is a community, which under international law is illegally built; an Israeli outpost and a civilian settlement all at the same time.

Journalists are supposed to be impartial, but when defining his job Fisk says "I'm a reporter who's allowed to say what I think."

He says there is an idea today that "everything has to be told in such a way that you detach yourself from the tragic events going on. I think this is a totally useless form of journalism."

Contrary to Fisk's view, there is a theory called "Conflict-Reducing Reporting" that has come out of a group called International Media Support, based in Denmark.

Ross Howard, author of a handbook on the theory, believes that "journalism is difficult in the best of times

...However, when a society is threatened by a violent conflict, journalism faces even greater difficulties."

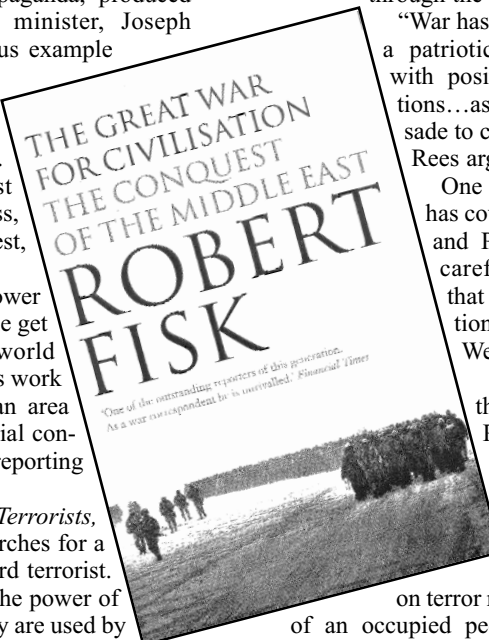
He argues that opposing sides try to control the media and reliable and true information can be hard to come by.

Howard argues that the media has an important role in times of conflict; it can provide several elements that experts have identified can help reduce conflict.

"For two sides to move towards a non-violent resolution, they must first talk.

"This is where good journalism comes in." It can create a channel of communication between the two sides, but to do this the media needs to be seen as neutral by both sides, he says.

Through writing unbiased articles, journalists can help to educate both sides on solutions that have worked around the world and correct misconceptions they may have of each other.



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