



Quality mark missing from early editions of *Herald on Sunday*

by Ben Christie and Mike Barrett

Auckland's new Sunday newspaper may be pulling in the advertisers, but so far the quality of its content is disappointing, say media commentators.

The *Herald on Sunday* promised to shake up the Sunday newspaper scene and fill a gap left by the *Sunday News* and the *Sunday StarTimes*.

But after its first two issues, the new *Herald* has come in for some heavy criticism.

Journalists and media commentators were initially excited by the prospect of more jobs, better reporting standards and a challenge to the existing Sundays in a more competitive market.

But the similarity between the *Sunday StarTimes* and the *Herald on Sunday* is a concern, says media commentator Dr Wayne Hope.

"The *Sunday StarTimes* and the *Herald on Sunday* have similar sections, carry similar news stories and cover the same events. The commercial battle of like versus like provides readers with a narrow range of viewpoints and stifles public debate."

Hope, who lectures in communication studies at the Auckland University of Technology, says the competition is a press duopoly between Fairfax and APN/Herald, rather than healthy competition for news.

"In the Sunday market they compete for readership, celebrity columnists, billboard space and advertising contracts rather than journalistic excellence."

Deborah Hill Cone, assistant editor of the *National Business Review*, says it is excellent to see APN choosing to invest millions of dollars in a new publication.

"It's more competition and adds more vitality to the journalism scene. So overall, I think it's a really good thing."

"It's great in the sense that you couldn't escape the feeling there's been a cosy duopoly between the two major publishers. They don't really engage in any major competition because they've both got their own separate territories."

Hill Cone says the new paper offers little new content and should have had some breaking news by now.

"There was one big story about Clint Rickard studying in Australia. They had to back down on that, and ran a big apology on it. But my overall view so far is that I would have liked more hard news."

Hill Cone says the *Herald on Sunday's* lifestyle content is too feminised and too similar.

"You just get so much of the same kind of material, and that's one of things where you would think: This is an opportunity for those features editors and section editors in the *Herald on Sunday* to go and look for stories that are not being promoted by PR people."

Commentator Dr Brian Edwards is disappointed with the *Herald on Sunday*, but says it may need time to bed down.

"People like me thought that because the *Herald* is quite a quality paper, we might be get-

ting a quality paper on Sunday, perhaps not entirely along the lines of British Sundays, but somewhere approaching that. It just seems to me that we have ended up with more of the same."

One positive spin-off is that the other papers have upped their games, says Edwards.

"The *Sunday News* has got more pages, and the *Sunday StarTimes* is looking more like the quality paper that some of us hoped for on Sunday."

Allan Lee, an AUT journalism lecturer who teaches newspaper editing, says a highbrow newspaper would struggle to survive in New Zealand, given our small population.

"No paper can move too far from the middle market," he says.

Dr Barry King, head of communication studies at AUT, says the new *Herald* has pitched itself in between the two existing Sunday papers and is tabloid in content as well as size.

"I think it's trying to move down-market, and that may mean, of course, a bigger readership. The only other paper out there is the *Sunday News*," says King.

"I think it's an attempt to combine all those people who are interested in celebrities, reality TV, movies. The *Herald* is, in any case, moving into the community newspaper area."

"It's obviously finding a gap in the Sunday market which is more arts and entertainment."

King says the story on film director Peter Jackson in the first edition made him think he

was reading the *Sunday News*.

He speculates that the *Weekend Herald* may become the serious business, political, current affairs newspaper, while infotainment will filter through to the *Herald on Sunday*.

Edwards says his impression from reading the second edition was that the *Herald on Sunday* was stung by some criticism.

"I think there was a reference in Sue Chetwin's editorial which conveyed that these were snobby intellectuals or ivory tower intellectuals who were criticising the paper, but I don't think that was entirely the case."

"I personally think Sunday is the day when you can lie in bed and really enjoy a quality newspaper, rather than something which is in every sense just another tabloid."

Commentators say the fundamental fight between the Sundays is for the advertising dollar, rather than for quality content.

The *Herald on Sunday* has offered discounted advertising and free subscriptions over the past few weeks, but this may not be sustainable. The considerable corporate weight of APN, the large number of subscribers receiving the paper for free until subscription renewal and discounted advertising should spell success for the *Herald on Sunday*.

"There is a market there on Sunday," says Hill Cone. "But, whether they have deep enough pockets to really spend a long time waiting to see their investment pay off, remains to be seen."

Lee says it is a good time to be launching a new paper with advertising spending still running strong.

"It's all downhill from here in terms of the business cycle. The new format presents a new set of challenges for advertisers."

Lee, who likes the tabloid format, predicts that broadsheets will eventually downsize.

He cites examples of *The Times* and *The Independent* in the UK which last year introduced tabloid versions.

The Independent, voted Britain's newspaper of the year in 2003, has recently phased out its broadsheet and *The Times* plans a similar move.

The Independent and *The Times* were the only two British national newspapers to increase sales last year.

"In Europe they have no problem with serious papers being in a tabloid format."

Hill Cone and Edwards both dislike the tabloid format.

Hill Cone says good paper stock is also important for the magazine sections of Sunday papers.

"From a purely commercial perspective, the pullouts in the *Herald on Sunday* are not on good stock, they are basically on newsprint."

"This sets them back compared to the *Sunday StarTimes* which has launched a proper magazine."

Hill Cone predicts that, given its limited reporting resources, the *Herald on Sunday* will be unable to keep churning out the amount of copy it has produced for the first two editions.

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