

J schools urged to take more risks in student selection

New Zealand journalism schools need to take some risks in selecting students so the news media is properly representing the communities it reports on.

That's the view of Tim Pankhurst¹, newly appointed general manager of the Communications and Media Industry Training Organisation.

"If I'm on a selection panel I would favour someone from the so-called wrong side of the tracks," he told 40 or so tutors gathered at Whitireia NZ Media Training Centre in Wellington last week for the annual conference of journalism educators.

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"Nobody down there had heard of Naenae, let alone knowing it was classic state house working class territory, and they would nod respectfully, imagining it was some sort of posh private school. And we would try to keep a straight face.

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Here is most of Mr Pankhurst's address:

As many of you know, the government has targeted getting better value for money from its industry training budget, which quadrupled from \$50 million to \$200 million in the decade to 2009.

The way Tertiary Education Minister Steven Joyce approached this was to base funding on completion of qualifications rather than on enrolments.

This is a not unreasonable approach, particularly when closer examination found 11 dead people were being funded and more than half of all trainees received no training credits at all in a year, that is, they were not actually in training.

Eighteen of the then 38 industry training organizations had to pay back \$4.3 million to the funder, the tertiary education commission.

Happily, the journalism house and its related printing apprenticeships were found to be in good order.

The communications and media industry training organisation, incorporating journalism and printing, is also responsible for sign writing apprenticeships and training.

The ITOs were established by their particular industries and are responsible for setting national skill standards, providing information and advice to trainees and employers, arranging on and off the job training, assessing trainees and monitoring training quality.

The CMITO is the smallest ITO and it was also judged among the best run by the tec. In fact, it was the only ITO that was fully compliant.

It has been very ably run by Joan Grace since its inception in 2009 with PrintNZ training and the NZJTO as sectors, but Joan has now moved to Melbourne and someone with a lot to learn, namely me, will be taking over as general manager from the beginning of next year.

Mike Fletcher has been closely involved with the JTO for a number of years now, he knows his stuff and I will be drawing on his knowledge and support.

¹ Tim Pankhurst is also the CEO of the Newspaper Publishers Association and is a former editor of the Dominion Post and other major dailies.

It is a part-time role and I will continue to take care of editorial advocacy for the Newspaper Publishers' Association, including its Media Freedom Committee, and also continue to run the Canon Media Awards, which I will come back to later.

One thing I have observed in my time on the CMITO board is that a lot of ITO time is spent trying to decipher smoke signals from the government and its agencies, the TEC and the NZ Qualifications Authority.

One of those signals is that there are too many ITOs and they should look to merge.

That has happened to some extent and there are now about 10 fewer at around 28.

The biggest is the Skills organisation, representing public service, electrical and telecoms, with more than 11,000 trainees, whereas our ITO has about 500.

Last year, we took on sign writers, who were looking for a home and that is related to printing, but we don't see a ready fit with other industries at this stage.

Given that we have reasonable reserves built up by prudent management and have a strong industry-based training track record, our board's attitude is that it is business as usual.

Mr Joyce has not specified an optimum number of ITOs, but he has talked about needing to have "a scale". That gives us some room to manoeuvre, we are not being directed, but we will need to be adaptable in the changing environment.

There is a wider industry training review under way, but that is an opaque process and it is not clear what stage that is at.

We do know a Cabinet paper is being prepared and this is likely to contain detail around funding, definitions and legislative requirements.

We will seek to have input to any consultation process that follows in 2013.

The CMITO has submitted the NZQA's process also needs to be streamlined so that industry can be responsive to changing needs. It currently takes more than a year for qualifications to be revised and registered with the NZQA.

We can't see the need for such bureaucracy and it certainly isn't efficient.

It's also important that the TEC, NZQA, Ministry of Education and the new super ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment adopt an all-of-government approach to industry training.

Again, it is frustrating and inefficient to be dealing with multiple agencies that don't properly talk to each other.

We have argued that as industry changes, the need for higher level skills also increases.

The level 6 Diploma in Applied Journalism is well-supported by industry and builds on skills developed in provider settings at level 5.

This has the potential to expand into related areas such as video and digital.

A level 5 diploma in print management has also been developed, allowing those who have completed apprenticeships to develop management skills as well as those coming in in other occupations such as sales and marketing.

The politics aside, our focus is on working with the journalism schools and the publishers to develop skilled graduates.

That is a mutual benefit and it is a public good.

I think it is generally agreed we have a pretty good structure around journalism training in this country and it is close to industry. That is certainly my view.

It was the general view, too, at a useful strategy planning workshop here in Wellington last month, examining the fit between training and industry requirements to 2015 in a rapidly evolving multi-platform media landscape.

There was also a positive outcome from this month's university and polytechnic external moderation report although it was noted style, spelling, punctuation and grammar were not of a high standard.

That points to problems in the education system before our students arrive but we do want to see all teaching staff ram the message home that poor spelling and grammar are not acceptable in assignments.

Most journalists of my age have experience of fearsome chief subs who would literally roar at you or maybe even throw something if you presented poor copy. Maybe we need a bit more of that.

While the digital development is undeniable, the basics of journalism remain constant – fast production of accurate, balanced and well-structured stories; ability to report courts and local bodies; shorthand; good spelling and grammar; some knowledge of media law and ethics.

Those apply across any platform.

I'd add curiosity and doggedness as essential ingredients too and a sense of humour doesn't go amiss either.

One of the questions asked at the industry workshop was: is there a gap between industry expectations and graduates' abilities?

The answer is "yes, there is" to some extent, but it's not a yawning one and the industry does need to be realistic.

At this stage I feel the need to make a confession.

I don't have a diploma of journalism. I have one in business but not in editorial, and the irony of being in a position of some influence while being one of the least formally qualified journalists in the country, has not escaped me.

So, if you don't agree with anything I say, it's fair enough to respond "well, what would he know?"

Earlier this year, I was privileged to speak to the Massey journalism students and I was struck by the energy in a room filled with bright young men and women who are the future of our industry.

It's a demanding course and if I was going around again I probably wouldn't make the cut.

There is increasing emphasis on actual reporting and a requirement to have a certain number of stories published.

That's as it should be, but I think we need to be careful not to keep loading on more and more layers.

We demand a lot of students in their 40-week course and we need to be realistic about what can be achieved and what to expect.

Abilities differ, just as they do in life generally, but most graduates are at least competent and some are exceptional.

The key to successful training to my mind is close association with industry, including placement in newsrooms.

In the two weeks that students spent with us when I was editing you could tell which ones had the edge.

It's hard to define a nose for news and to teach that but everyone involved is getting better at it.

I think, too, we need to take some risks in our selections of students so that we are properly representing the communities we report on.

If I'm on a selection panel I would favour someone from the so-called wrong side of the tracks.

That's not unconditional, though.

I recall being on an interview panel with Jim Tully for the Canterbury course – and as an aside I'm delighted to see that highly regarded course is up and running again for next year – and we were taken by a candidate who had a hands-on management position with TRANZ RAIL.

“Why does the Canterbury journalism course attract you?,” Jim asked.

And the candidate said: “Well, my brother lives in Christchurch and I'd like to be close to him.”

End of interview.

When I did work in Christchurch it's true that your status is dictated to a large extent by the school you went to.

My then-general manager, Don Churchill, used to announce in his Churchillian voice: “I went to Naenae College.”

Nobody down there had heard of Naenae, let alone knowing it was classic state house working class territory, and they would nod respectfully, imagining it was some sort of posh private school.

And we would try to keep a straight face.

I'd like to see more kids from Naenae and the like coming through.

We focus on what we expect from our trainees, but management needs to have a look at itself, too.

The news business is a tough game, particularly in the current climate of dramatic and painful change, and newsrooms can be unforgiving places.

It makes such a difference to a young graduate, struggling to come to terms with the craft, maybe wondering if they've made the right choice, to be told they've put a sharp intro on a story or that they have an eye for a good quote.

It doesn't matter what the activity is, you see it come through time and time again that you can never give enough feedback and we need to keep reminding ourselves of that.

Young journalists and news leaders alike also need to keep following through.

You will often see strong news stories, good issues raised and then they are dropped as the news agenda moves on.

We're told the Manawatu River is the country's most polluted, and judging by its colour the Waikato can't be far behind, but where are the regular updates?

This story is much bigger than dirty water. It concerns farming, our international image, exports, tourism, our economy and our way of life.

Every time there is a raw sewage discharge into our harbours and waterways in breach of consents – and it happens more often than you realise – we should know about it.

There should be a national outcry every time a child is killed by its so-called caregiver, driven by extensive news coverage.

In my view newspapers and their websites should be constantly campaigning, not just doing one-offs – and some don't even do that.

There needs to be a lot more scrutiny of business, particularly the finance and investment sector where crooks in suits continue to do inestimable harm.

And where was the rigour around kindly old Allan Hubbard, who wasn't driven by personal gain but who was certainly grossly if not criminally incompetent in handling large sums of others people's money.

How better for journalists, editors and their mastheads to demonstrate their value and worth than to expose wrongdoing?

No one else is going to do it. Not bloggers sitting in their bedrooms playing with their mouse, tapping out ignorant, borrowed or ill-founded opinion.

And certainly not commercial television with its emphasis on entertainment and autocue readers.

It comes back to being sceptical but not cynical, giving generous praise where its due and championing your community but never forgetting the army of PRs, I mean comms people, and consultants out there have huge vested interest in presenting their issue in the best possible light.

They may not be lying, but at times they are certainly concealing inconvenient truths.

I asked a very good reporter who had gone to work for a council how her local paper performed when looking at it from the other side of the fence.

They're hopeless, she said.

She gave an example of a cock-up by the council where they had wasted thousands sealing a main street that was in good condition that had the same name as a street in another suburb that really did need repair and was scheduled for the work.

No one asked why and the council certainly wasn't going to 'fess up.

A prominent business leader told me he has never been asked a question that put him on the spot, that tested him.

I don't believe he is that blameless and I doubt he believes it either.

My point in giving these examples is that while the media in this country does serve its readers and advertisers well, we don't have the competition that you see in other markets like Australia and the UK and that tends to blunt our edge. A lot of our reporting is unquestioning and passive and that's a challenge for all of us.

Another question that arises and one that is increasingly being asked is: will there be jobs for the graduates to go to?

The answer is unequivocally yes.

It is quite a skill to be able to filter the huge clutter of information out there, put it in context and present it in a coherent and credible way.

I don't see the demand for that changing, although the delivery mechanism will.

Publishers are under a lot of pressure. The business model that has sustained them in a very profitable way for a very long time is breaking down.

Print revenues are still substantial, more than half a billion dollars in this country, but they are in decline and those losses are not being met by online.

That means job cuts and greater work pressures.

But the oft heard claim that newspapers are dying is simply nonsense.

Circulations and readerships have held up remarkably well in our market and across our multiple platforms our readerships are bigger than they have ever been.

The two biggest NZ digital news sites by far are Stuff and nzherald.co.nz.

The internet is driving extraordinary change throughout our entire society.

If you think it's tough in print, who would want to be a main street retailer when so much buying is shifting to the internet.

Television is fracturing, TVNZ's returns to its taxpayer owners are pathetically small and platforms like My Sky which make it so easy to pre-record programmes and fast forward the ads are challenging the broadcasting financial model.

A recent Canstar Blue report found 77 percent of those surveyed avoided watching ads and 31 percent recorded shows on my sky and then fast forwarded the ads. I'm happy to say I am among that latter group.

And a separate Pricewaterhousecoopers report on the future of the entertainment industry found the digital platforms such as My Sky and Myfreeview were reducing the effectiveness of ads by enabling viewers to time shift and skip.

The volume of shouting ads is also being toned down, belated recognition, I guess, that they are an irritant more than an attractant.

In the 1930s, radio was going to kill newspapers, in the 40s it was cinema, in the 50s and 60s it was television and in the noughties it was the internet.

Warren Buffet, a savvy investor who recently spent \$US200 million buying newspapers, believes newspapers that intensively cover their communities will have a good future.

That is where our point of advantage is. Who else is going to do that in a credible way?

Earlier this year, the NZ Newspaper Publishers' Association brought out a digital analyst named Peter Thomson from the UK to present to advertising agencies in Auckland.

His message was that while the road ahead for newspapers is a bumpy one, they will survive and even flourish. They will evolve stronger, but they will be different.

Part of his reasoning is that newspapers will find new revenue streams based around online paywalls and games and events and quality journalism will become more valuable.

He says consumers are increasingly aware that the news in social media often lacks objectivity.

For serious news they go to news brands that they can trust and newspapers are some of the most trusted brands in the world. It is their most valuable asset.

It's important not to take that for granted.

In this country the Otago Daily Times and The Press both celebrated their 150th last year. In a young country newspaper mastheads are enduring and trusted like few other products.

Charles Darwin said: "It's not the strongest of species that survives, nor the most intelligent, it is the one most adaptable to change."

Newspapers and their digital platforms are constantly evolving and that is what will save them.