

Conference 2004: Professionalism in the media

The 'Jekyll-Hyde journalist': New Zealand Journalists and the Pursuit of Professionalism.

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1. Introduction: The 'Jekyll-Hyde Journalist'

Over the century from when it was first published, Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* has become a symbol for identity conflict in Western culture. While the inner conflict between humanity's sense of 'good' and 'evil' was the central theme of Stevenson's original novel, this paper employs the term 'Jekyll-Hyde Journalist' more broadly as a metaphor for occupational identity conflict. The 'Jekyll-Hyde Journalist' is a metaphor that captures the occupational identity conflict within the journalistic occupation since its inception in New Zealand. At the heart of New Zealand journalists' 'Jekyll-Hyde syndrome' was the dual identity of their occupation as a 'profession' on the one hand, and a 'trade/craft' on the other. This ambiguity surrounding the nature of journalistic work (was it professional work?) and the status of journalists (was theirs a profession?) is explored in this paper through an overview of some of the key professionalising efforts of New Zealand journalists during the twentieth century. It is argued that the identity conflict within journalism was a significant impediment to the realisation of professional status for journalists.

The theme of this paper is that 'professional trappings do not a profession make'. Indeed, New Zealand journalists' interest in, and indeed, the adoption of many trappings of the 'true professions' failed to resolve the ambiguity surrounding their occupational status. By illustrating that professionalism is less an issue of professional traits and more a question of occupational identity, this paper thus challenges traditional understandings of journalistic professionalism that centre upon the presence or absence of 'professional traits' (such as ethical codes, professional associations, self-regulative autonomy, and government licensing). Thus, future reform initiatives need to acknowledge the 'Jekyll-Hyde syndrome' of New Zealand journalists.

2. Organising journalists

The question of whether journalists comprise a 'true profession' has not been confined to academic debate within the sociology of professions; New Zealand journalists began debating this issue themselves as far back as the nineteenth century. Since this time, New Zealand journalists' various modes of social and industrial organisation highlight the intensity of their 'Jekyll-Hyde syndrome', that is, the conflict over their occupational identity that has characterised the development of journalism as an occupation. The first journalists' organisation in NZ was the New Zealand Institute of Journalists (NZIJ). It was established in 1892 with the British Institute of Journalists as its model and was very much concerned with the question of journalism's professional status. It is important to note that the NZIJ prioritised the professional status of *journalism* rather than that of *journalists* largely because its membership was not confined to working journalists. It was also made up of editors and newspaper owners and therefore its interests in professionalism centred upon the status of journalism as a whole. The institute's status ambitions were to do with journalism as a social institution rather than on journalists as an occupational group. Based on the professional models provided by medicine and law, the institute's main objective was to raise the status of journalism to a 'clearly recognised status' as a profession. The institute's leaders went about doing this by lobbying for recognition of journalists' privilege to retain confidential sources – a privilege long accorded to the recognised professions. The institute also deliberated the question of entrance examinations to the occupation, another feature of the recognised professions. So the institute's approach to promoting the professional status of journalism was to model journalism's 'professional infrastructure' on the recognised professions of medicine and law.

However, by the turn of the twentieth century, problems with this approach became evident. Because of the wide membership of the institute, working journalists believed that the professional interests of media owners were being promoted at the expense of working journalists' interests as employees. The institute's promotion of 'professionalism' was not necessarily in the interests of working journalists. The status of journalism as a public institution may have been high, but journalists' wages and working conditions were poor. If professionalism did not promote journalists' economic concerns, then they didn't want a bar of it. This led to the creation of a journalists-only body to deal with their industrial concerns.

This was called the Canterbury Journalists' Union (CJU) and was established in 1901 as a registered trade union. The difficulty was that at the time, many journalists outside of Christchurch believed that forming a union was extremely undignified. Hence, its membership ended up being confined to the Canterbury region.

The other major difficulty was the widespread perception that by aligning themselves with the labour movement, journalists were undermining their ideals of objectivity and impartiality. Employers were quick to pick up on this point and were very much opposed to journalists forming a union. In fact, the Christchurch *Press* management threatened to sack journalists who joined the Canterbury Journalists Union. So the Canterbury Union ended up being quite short-lived and wound up in 1908. Although it had little success as an industrial body, it had served to open up the possibility for a trade union movement among journalists in New Zealand. This was the origin of the New Zealand Journalists' Association (NZJA) formed in 1912. What was especially significant about the NZJA was that although it was a registered trade union, it took a 'professional approach' to achieving its central objectives.

3. The NZJA and the pursuit of professionalism

From the outset, the NZJA's interests in professionalism stemmed from some central concerns facing working journalists. NZJA leaders believed that the importance of journalistic work was not reflected in journalists' status and economic rewards. They saw their work as just as, if not more important to society as that of the recognised professions of medicine and law and felt that, as such, journalists should receive the same social and economic benefits. Their arguments were informed by the view that journalistic work was professional work and that journalists did in fact comprise a 'true profession'. It would be the goal of the NZJA to ensure that these views were recognised by society. To achieve these objectives, the NZJA believed that journalists needed to emulate the professional infrastructure or organisation of the recognised professions like medicine and law. 'Professionalism' was deemed a preferable strategy to achieving these ends because it was more consistent with the 'white-collar' image journalists wished to attain.

4. The NZJA's professionalising efforts

From the 1930s, the NZJA launched a variety of projects designed to build up the professional infrastructure and the status of journalists as professionals. Some of the professionalising efforts enacted by the NZJA were met with some measure of success; others were ultimately unsuccessful. Examples of the professionalising efforts initiated by the NZJA included firstly, the NZJA's push for registration for journalists in the 1930s. This was unsuccessful ultimately because of the idea that by restricting who could practice as a journalist, the interests of freedom of expression and press freedom would be undermined. In addition, the 1940s marked the beginning of the NZJA's campaign for university-based education and qualifications for journalists. The aim was to establish a system of university-based education for journalists modelled on that of doctors and lawyers, which would give priority not to the more 'mechanical' aspects of journalistic work, but rather to the intellectual and academic requirements of their work. The 1940s was also a period of interest within the NZJA in adopting a code of ethics, something which it never managed to do until the 1960s, due to the conflict within the occupation as to the status of journalists. Nonetheless, it is the NZJA's unsuccessful professionalising initiatives that tell us most about the 'Jekyll-Hyde syndrome' within journalism. Of particular interest, here, is NZJA's effort to create a professional institute in the 1950.

5. Journalists' identity conflict explored: The Professional Institute plan

The 'institute plan' was a policy initiative of the NZJA between 1950 and 1954. The main object was to create a separate body from the NZJA that included not only working journalists, but also editors and publishers. The explicit idea behind it was to "raise journalism to a clearly recognised status as a profession". By 1953, a draft constitution had been drawn up with four central objectives:

1. The institute was to serve as the guardian of ethical standards of journalism
2. It would help to preserve press freedom and protect the professional interests of journalists
3. It would administer entry examinations for prospective journalists
4. Finally, the institute would oversee the training of cadets, and provide refresher courses for senior journalists.

The pros and cons of the institute were debated until finally, NZJA leaders were forced to concede failure. Why? The reasons have very much to do with the tension over the NZJA's professional vision' among journalists and the wider industry.

Problem One

The first problem was the pervasive tension among NZJA members as to their actual and desired status. From the 1940s onwards, there were two factions within the NZJA on the question of journalistic professionalism, hence the notion of the 'Jekyll-Hyde journalist'. The first faction was made up of advocates of professionalism (mostly NZJA leaders and younger journalists) who believed that by emulating the professional infrastructure of the 'recognised' professions, journalists could attain the status they believed they deserved. However, this view was met by significant opposition from a second faction of journalists within the NZJA. This second group was comprised mainly of the 'old hands' who believed that journalism was not in fact a profession, nor should it aspire to be one. Seeking professionalism for journalists was – to use language of the era – a rather 'toffee-nosed' (not to mention unrealistic) endeavour. According to this school of thought, the best method for advancing the interests of journalists was through traditional trade union activity. So without the mandate from the wider membership, many of the NZJA's professionalising efforts were hampered, including the professional institute plan of the 1950s.

Problem Two

The second major impediment to the realisation of the NZJA's professional institute plan was that employers support for journalists' professionalising ambitions was not always forthcoming. Because journalists' quest for professional status was seen as little more than 'a lever to jack up journalists' wages', it was obviously not in employers' interests – as the payers of those wages- to support journalists' efforts to become recognised as true professionals.

7. Conclusion

The outcome of the institute plan illustrates how the 'Jekyll-Hyde syndrome' within New Zealand journalism undermined the NZJA's ambitions for professionalism. This conflict as to the actual and desired status of journalists featured in both earlier and later attempts to professionalise journalism. The NZJA's professional vision – to emulate the infrastructure of the recognised profession to advance their status – was tempered by opposition among journalists and employers. Moreover, there are indications that this ambiguity has not been resolved in spite of the 'trappings of professionalism' that exists in such structures as ethics codes, self-regulation, tertiary education for journalists today – all of which featured as part of the NZJA's original plan for prompting the professional status of journalists.

However, the forms these structures eventually took reflected the compromises made due to the tension surrounding the status of journalists. Indeed, this ambiguity as to the status of journalists continues to be reflected in the contemporary infrastructure of journalists, which represents a curious mix of both 'blue collar' and 'white collar' models and ideals. Notably, journalists are currently organised along trade union lines rather than as a unified 'professional body'. Journalists have various ethical codes and self-regulatory structures (like the 'recognised professions') but no real penalties for breaches (unlike the 'recognised professions'). While the locus of journalism education increasingly has been tertiary institution (rather than the newsroom), the JTO was of course a product of the Industrial Training Act 1992 which assumed journalism to be an industry – rather than a 'profession', aligning journalists with 'blue collar' workers – a far cry from the NZJA's original professional vision. Ultimately, what these contemporary patterns suggest is that the question of journalists' status remains ambiguous and that the 'Jekyll-Hyde Journalist' still lives into the twenty-first century.