

# For the public good? Yeah right!

**JESSICA WAUCHOP** investigates the future of public service broadcasting in New Zealand.

Public service broadcasting in New Zealand is "hanging by a thread", says Radio New Zealand chief executive Peter Cavanagh.

Media owners are increasingly viewing journalism as a commodity rather than a service, he told the recent *Journalism Matters* conference in Wellington.

The traditional model is expected to serve the nation, rather than be commercially viable.

In New Zealand, public service broadcasting receives little support or attention from the public, he says.

Keynote speaker and Equal

Employment Opportunities Commissioner Dr Judy McGregor is a fierce supporter of the traditional model.

She says public debate and finding a champion for the public service cause is the only way forward.

"We need a strong, intelligent, organised voice who can co-ordinate with listeners who know what they want and can embed public service broadcasting into public imaginations."

Dr McGregor is disappointed political movements in New Zealand have dwindled to the point where Grey Power is one of

the few groups voicing public interest.

Margie Comrie, an associate professor from Massey University, agrees.

"In many parts of the world public service broadcasting is accepted and respected by the people. It is recognised as a source of public good . . . but not in New Zealand."

The blurred lines between journalism and commerce have had damaging effects on the industry which is increasingly thought of as a commodity, says Cavanagh.

He says the role of a public



broadcaster is to maintain diversity and to provide long term cultural dividends which is generally not occurring.

Rather, shared news information between media outlets is narrowing consumer choice.

Cavanagh believes it is the responsibility of the public broadcasters to promote their importance.

"Broadcasters have the responsibility themselves to promote their worth and explain what they do and the reason they exist."

Cavanagh also voiced concerns about public broadcasting in the

digital age.

"What poses a particular challenge is avoiding the risk of creating a digital ghetto.

"Digital technology comes as a cost to consumers and we will fail at our task as public service broadcasters if programming can only be accessed by a privileged few."

Comrie made a pointed remark at the end of her presentation: "What television service runs a garden show in three languages? And why is that innovative public service broadcaster, Maori Television, not represented here on the panel today."



PHOTO: JOSEPH BARRATT

EPMU: TVNZ's Sharon Fergusson speaks to the EPMU conference about the future of public service broadcasting.

## Voices of the future hold on to idealism

By Jessica Wauchop

The EPMU conference, *Journalism Matters*, was attended by journalists, academics and politicians, but also by the future of the industry – journalism students from AUT University and Massey University.

While much of the conference was dominated by "authorities", students who attended have varying views of the success of what could be described as a talk-fest.

Justin Henehan, a journalism student at AUT, says there are steps which need to be taken before anything is achieved.

"I feel EPMU needs to create more solidarity across all facets of news production because until they do there is little potential for significant industrial action.

"However I was impressed by the industry representation and the commitment shown by journalists and academics throughout the media spectrum," says Henehan.

Harriet Palmer, from Massey, agrees. "I think that it was especially good for student journalists

to meet those who have been in the industry for a long time.

"Sometimes, when you are studying, you feel isolated from the industry – it's nice to meet some bylines."

However, while meeting senior industry players was good for making contacts, the voices of the future believe their vote should count for more.

"I think more needs to be done to involve students. They need to take into account more of our concerns about the industry because we are going to be working in it," says Joanna Davies, of AUT.

At the end of the conference several resolutions were passed, including one to carry out a review of New Zealand journalism and media.

"I think the conference will be successful if the review happens. If not, then it was all just talking and nothing positive will be done," Davies says.

One delegate made the point that the industry needs to change to meet the expectations of students and young graduates – not change enthusiastic students to fit the conservative industry stereotypes.

## Clark and Key beware — bloggers are influencing the political landscape

By Spike Mountjoy

Battles in the blogosphere could decide the upcoming general election – but they could also lower the quality of political debate, says former newspaper editor Dr Judy McGregor.

Speaking in an interview with blogger *Idiot/Savant of No Right Turn*, she says web-blogs are in competition with traditional journalism for people's time.

"How are voters going to get their information? How much are policies going to be interwoven into that blog space, or is it going to just be, 'He's a flip-flop and her hair doesn't look good?'"

"Accessibility is the plus, quality of content is the challenge." David Farrar started

*Kiwiblog*, a forum sympathetic to the National Party, in 2003.

He says some bloggers do better research and analysis than traditional media.

"There's a lot of wild, partisan,

**"Every woman and her dog can say whatever they like."**

obnoxious stuff out there – but blogs like *No Right Turn* are excellent.

"The analysis of parliamentary select committees on that site is much better than you'd find in traditional media."

Alastair Thompson, co-editor of online news site *Scoop*, says issues are raised by bloggers

which are not usually in traditional news, and blogs have played a significant role in overseas elections.

Dr McGregor says all political parties are going to have to confront the notion that citizen journalism and blogs are going to be first with news.

This is not necessarily good news for healthy debate.

"Traditional journalism brings filters and checks and balances, it goes through sub-editors – there's challenge," she says.

"[In new media] every woman and her dog can say whatever they like without fear of repercussion and often with even less risk of adding to meaningful debate.

"It has taken the self reflection out of communication."

## Students want stronger voice

Journalists united are stronger than journalists alone, was a clear message at the recent EPMU conference.

Since then, wheels have been put into motion to establish either a student branch of the journalism union EPMU, or to create an independent student body with its own voice.

Robin Martin, an EPMU delegate who recently lost his job as a sub at the *New Zealand Herald*, says a student branch of the union would be productive.

"It could be a good way to combat declining union membership to get into the student level."

AUT journalism student Spike Mountjoy also says there needs to be an organisation that gives student journalists a voice and gets them involved.

"Some sort of body or organisation would be a good way to get people engaged in the debate about the commercial ownership of the media."

— Joseph Barratt.



PHOTO: JOSEPH BARRATT

INFORMATIVE: Deputy chief executive of APN New Zealand Rick Neville (front) at the conference.