

Survey of New Zealand journalists: They enjoy the job, despite everything

Abstract

This article reports the results of a survey of New Zealand full-time journalists. The workforce is relatively young, primarily of European ethnicity, and receives average pay. Although the workforce is predominately female, men outnumber women in senior management.

New media is increasing in importance, but conventional media still employs three-quarters of journalists. Although respondents believed ethics was an important element of the job, they acknowledged there were times when controversial methods were justified. Respondents had a positive view of their industry - despite frustrations over lack of resources, they enjoy the variety and importance of the job. Most respondents said they became journalists because they enjoyed writing, meeting people and making a difference.

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Introduction

This article presents the results of the first survey of New Zealand journalists published in seven years (the last being Hollings, Lealand, Samson & Tilley, 2007). Over that time, major changes have swept the industry, including the continued rise of new media and the phone-hacking scandal at The News of the World. The results reported here therefore represent a long overdue updating of the demographics, views and attitudes of New Zealand journalists.

A notable aspect of this survey is that it asked journalists several questions they had previously said they wished to be asked. In the 2007 survey, journalists were asked what additional questions should be included in a future survey. Respondents commonly said they wanted to be asked why they had become journalists, what they thought about the job and how they rated the quality of the New Zealand news media. We posed such questions in this survey and report the answers here.

The article begins by outlining the research method used to collect the data. We then report on the demographics of New Zealand journalists, along with their assessment and views on such topics as journalism ethics, the role of the journalist and the state of the industry. Our concluding comments then appear. All dollars quoted in this article are New Zealand dollars.

Research method

The survey was conducted between January and October 2013. The questionnaire was created and made available online in SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com). We advertised the survey to New Zealand journalists via social media sites. We also approached key staff members at the main journalism organisations in the country, including print, internet, radio and television news outlets. They agreed to distribute the survey via their organisations' internal networks to their journalism staff. Journalists were invited to complete the survey. Reminders were posted online and went to the journalism organisations. We augmented the online survey by telephoning randomly selected journalists, inviting them to take part in the online survey. For groups that had particularly low response rates, such as Pasifika journalists, we contacted sector leaders who assisted us with recruiting respondents.

The results reported here were for those respondents who identified themselves as journalists employed full-time. A total of 320 usable responses

were obtained, representing 8 per cent of the estimated 3800 full-time journalists in New Zealand (Careers New Zealand, 2014).

Not all respondents chose to answer all questions, so the totals in the tables below are all slightly below 320.

As relevant and where possible, we compare the results obtained in our survey with those of the last 2007 survey of journalists and the New Zealand full-time workforce and population generally.

Age

The frequency of journalists' ages by age band is reported in Table 1. It is relatively young workforce, with just over a third of journalists aged 30 years or younger, and almost 60 per cent aged 40 years or younger. By contrast, in 2013, in the New Zealand full-time workforce generally about 25 per cent of employees were aged 30 years or younger, and about 45 per cent aged 40 years or younger (Statistics New Zealand, 2013).

The survey questionnaire's use of age bands means we cannot precisely report the mean or median ages of the journalism workforce. However, we can estimate those figures following Jeffcoat and Belgrave (2004). The estimated median age of the New Zealand journalist is 38 years, with an estimated mean age of 40. These results mirror those in 2007, where the estimated median age of the journalism workforce was calculated as 39 (no mean was reported in that survey).

	Frequency	Per cent
20 years or less	3	1.0
21 - 30 years	105	34.1
31 - 40 years	69	22.4
41 - 50 years	53	17.2
51 - 60 years	61	19.8
More than 60 years	17	5.5
Total	308	100.0

Ethnicity

New Zealand journalists are overwhelmingly European in ethnicity (Table 2). Eighty-three per cent of respondents identified themselves as being of European ethnicity, Māori comprised 5 per cent of the respondents, Pasifika 2 per cent and Asian 1 per cent. By contrast, in the New Zealand population generally in 2013, Europeans comprised 74 per cent of the population, Māori 15 per cent, Asians 12 per cent and Pasifika 7 per cent (Statistics New Zealand, 2014a, respondents could select more than one ethnicity).

As such, compared to the population generally, the percentage of New Zealand journalists of European ethnicity is disproportionately high and of other ethnicities disproportionately low.

Our survey results mirror those for 2007, where 86 per cent of respondents were of European ethnicity, 4 per cent Māori, 1 per cent Pasifika and 1 per cent Asian.

The current survey also found that few New Zealand journalists are multi-lingual. Sixteen per cent of respondents said they had at least some proficiency in the Māori language, with only 3 per cent saying they were competent in or native speakers of Māori. Two per cent said they had at least some proficiency in Samoan, one per cent said they had at least some proficiency in Tongan, and the same percentage said they had at least some proficiency in Mandarin.

	Frequency	Per cent
European	256	83.1
Māori	15	4.9
Pasifika	7	2.3
Asian	3	1.0
Other	27	8.8
Total	308	100.0

Income

Journalists' annual before-tax income, by income band, is given in Table 3. Again following Jeffcoat and Belgrave (2004), we can estimate the mean income for journalists as being \$60,000. This is effectively the same as the mean income of \$59,000 for the New Zealand full-time workforce generally (Statistics New Zealand, 2013).

Mean and median income data were not estimated in the 2007 survey. However, it would appear that incomes have risen somewhat since 2007, when 66 per cent of journalists earned less than \$60,000. In this survey 58 per cent earned \$60,000 or less. This presumably reflects cost of living increases in income over time.

	Frequency	Per cent
\$20,000 or less	1	0.3
\$20,001 - \$30,000	14	4.6
\$30,001 - \$40,000	60	19.7
\$40,001 - \$50,000	66	21.6
\$50,001 - \$60,000	37	12.1
\$60,001 - \$70,000	39	12.8
\$70,001 - \$80,000	34	11.1
\$80,001 - \$90,000	17	5.6
\$90,001 - \$100,000	13	4.3
\$100,001 - \$120,000	11	3.6
More than \$120,000	13	4.3
Total	305	100.0

Job position

Most respondents were rank-and-file journalists - that is to say, they gather and produce news but have little editorial responsibility (Table 4). Three-quarters of the respondents were rank-and-file journalists, 12 per cent middle management and 14 per cent senior management.

Comparative figures from the 2007 survey are not available.

	Frequency	Per cent
Senior management	44	13.8
Middle management	37	11.6
Rank and file	237	74.5
Total	318	100.0

Experience

The journalism workforce is relatively experienced (Table 5). Fully 50 per cent of the respondents have 10 years' or more experience as journalists and nearly 70 per cent (68.6 per cent) have worked in the industry for five years or more.

Although the time bands were slightly different, essentially the same was true in the 2007 survey. That survey found that 50 per cent of journalists had more than 10 years' experience and 66 per cent had six years' or more experience.

	Frequency	Per cent
1 year or less	25	7.8
More than 1 but less than 2	31	9.7
2 or more, but less than 5	44	13.8
5 or more, but less than 10	61	19.1
10 years or more	158	49.5
Total	319	100.0

Gender

The journalism workforce is relatively feminised. Journalists are more likely to be female than male, with 57 per cent female (Table 6). (The only respondent who identified as transgender was not a full-time journalist, and

thus was not included in these results.) These figures are in contrast to the New Zealand full-time workforce in 2013 generally, where 41 per cent of full-time employees were female (Statistics New Zealand, 2013).

Our survey result directly mirrors the 2007 figures where, again, females represented 57 per cent of the workforce.

Female journalists outnumber their male counterparts in all age bands other than those aged 51-60. The imbalance is particularly pronounced for those aged 30 years or younger, where women comprise two-thirds of the workforce. To some extent, this contrasts with the 2007 survey. That survey also found women outnumbering men for the younger age bands, but found that for those aged 35 and above men outnumbered women.

		Gender	
		Female	Male
20 years or less	Frequency	2	1
	% of age band	66.7%	33.3%
21 - 30 years	Frequency	70	35
	% of age band	66.7%	33.3%
31 - 40 years	Frequency	35	33
	% of age band	51.5%	48.5%
41 - 50 years	Frequency	30	23
	% of age band	56.6%	43.4%
51 - 60 years	Frequency	29	32
	% of age band	47.5%	52.5%
More than 60 years	Frequency	9	8
	% of age band	52.9%	47.1%
All ages	Total	175	132
	% of total	57.0%	43.0%

Although women are somewhat more prevalent than men in journalism, the data suggests men continue to dominate in terms of power and position. Only 8.7 per cent of female respondents were in senior management, whereas 20.3

per cent of males were. At the middle management level, however, 12.7 per cent of females were represented, against 9.8 per cent of males. And a large majority of women, 78.6 per cent were in the rank-and-file category, against 69.9 per cent of men. Gender differences in terms of editorial seniority were significant: $\chi^2 = 8.74$, (df=2), $p < 0.05$, Cramer's $V = 0.17$.

Employment

In looking at where journalists work, we have separated the data into two main groups (Table 7). The first is conventional media, comprising print (newspaper and magazine) and broadcasting (radio and television). The second is new media, comprising multi-platform journalism and solely online journalism.

Conventional media remains the backbone of the industry, employing three-quarters of all the respondents in our survey. Within this, print is the larger category, employing 51 per cent of respondents, with broadcasting employing 24 per cent of respondents. Newspapers remain the largest single category, employing 45 per cent of respondents.

But new media is a significant player, employing 22 per cent of respondents. Multi-platform is the larger category here, employing 16 per cent of respondents.

Comparative data from the 2007 survey are not available.

	Frequency	Per cent	Subtotal per cent
Conventional media			
Newspaper	139	45.3	51.1
Magazine	18	5.9	
Radio	46	15.0	
Television	28	9.1	
Subtotal			75.2
New media			
Multi-platform	48	15.6	21.5
Online only	18	5.9	
Subtotal			
Other (eg, news agency)	10	3.3	
Total	307	100.0	

Qualifications

New Zealand journalists are generally highly qualified (Table 8), with nearly half (48.5 per cent) having a degree as their highest qualification. In the New Zealand adult population (those aged 15 years or over), only 20 per cent had a degree (or equivalent) (Statistics New Zealand, 2014b).

Journalism was the primary discipline studied by many journalists. Looking at all those in our survey with tertiary qualifications, 62 per cent specialised in journalism, 16 per cent in journalism and another communication field, and 4 per cent specialised in communication. Eighteen per cent specialised in other fields.

The journalism workforce is apparently more highly educated today. Whereas 31 per cent of respondents in 2007 had no tertiary qualification, here the figure was 8 per cent.

	Frequency	Per cent
Master's degree	31	10.0
Bachelor's degree	119	38.5
University diploma	78	25.2
Polytechnic diploma	54	17.5
Undertook some university studies, but no qualification	13	4.2
Completed High School	11	3.6
Did not complete High School	2	0.6
Don't know	1	0.3
Total	309	100.0

Political views

We asked respondents to rate their political stance on an 11-point scale, with 1 being strongly left-wing, 6 being the centre and 11 being strongly right-wing. Journalists generally regarded themselves as moderately left-wing. Sixty-two per cent of respondents rated themselves as somewhere on the left of the political spectrum, 22 per cent placed themselves in the centre and 16 per cent rated themselves somewhere on the right. The mean rating was 5.0, with a standard deviation of 2.0.

Statistical tests revealed no significant relationship between political views and job position.

By contrast, the New Zealand voting population is generally right of centre. In the 2014 general election, a total of 52 per cent of voters voted for one of the three unambiguously right-of-centre parties: National, Act or Conservative (New Zealand Electoral Commission, 2014).

Job satisfaction

Journalists are generally happy in their work (Table 9). A large majority (82 per cent) rated themselves as very or moderately happy (a third saying they were very happy). Only 10 per cent expressed any level of unhappiness (2 per cent saying they were very unhappy).

	Frequency	Per cent
Very happy	101	33.4
Moderately happy	147	48.7
Neither happy nor unhappy	23	7.6
Moderately unhappy	24	7.9
Very unhappy	7	2.3
Total	302	100.0

We asked respondents to give their reasons for their level of satisfaction. The overwhelming theme in the responses was that, despite resource constraints, they enjoy the variety and challenge of the work. The next biggest reason was because they see journalism as a worthwhile contribution to society. A smaller number listed a positive work environment as a reason. Among the comments:

- "It's so interesting! A strange theft one day, a giant slug the next, an election the day after."
- "Meeting everyone from miners to the Prime Minister, cats to commissions of inquiry. No day is the same."
- "Love the work but getting sick of the long hours."
- "Generally enjoy my role interacting with the community, retelling their stories and being able to inform people about what is going on in the world. The difficulties are working to a tight deadline, being under-resourced, under-staffed, and therefore a lack of well-researched and investigative stories."

- "Still enjoy uncovering hard news items that interviewees would rather not have made public."
- "I work for a newspaper that supports the ambitions of its staff, provides the latest technology to assist newsgathering, and pushes reporters to embrace the growing online market."

The negative comments centred on pay and lack of resources. Among the comments:

- "Too much work, not enough money."
- "Changing technologies have increased the pressure of the job. We're now expected to do things like blog, tweet, and edit our own footage, and I fear this compromises our focus on researching/writing the story itself."

Freedom in the job

Nearly three-quarters of respondents (71 per cent) said they had either complete freedom or a great deal of freedom when it came to personally selecting stories. Only 5 per cent of journalists said they had either no freedom or little freedom.

A similar pattern of results was observed when journalists were asked about their personal freedom in the newsroom to determine what aspects of a story should be emphasised. Again, 71 per cent said they had either complete freedom or a great deal of freedom in deciding what aspects of a story should be emphasised. Seven per cent said they had either no or little freedom.

In fact, many respondents said they participated in editorial and newsroom co-ordination, such as attending editorial meetings or assigning reporters. Sixty per cent said they participated very often or all the time in such activities. However, almost a quarter (22 per cent) said they rarely or almost never took part.

The role of the journalist

We listed 23 roles journalists might undertake in their jobs. Using a four-point scale, where 1 was unimportant and 4 was very important, we asked respondents to rate the importance of each role in their work.

The most important role was “Report things as they are” (a mean rating of 3.9). Other highly important roles were “Be a detached observer” (3.6), “Educate the audience” (3.6), “Let people express their views” (3.4), “Provide information people need to make political decisions” (3.3) and “Monitor and scrutinise political leaders” (3.3). The journalists therefore apparently regarded their primary roles as being objective, independent reporters and to provide information to create an informed citizenry, especially regarding political issues. Clearly, the respondents take their fourth estate role very seriously.

The least important roles were “Support government policy” (1.3), “Convey a positive image of political leadership” (1.4), “Proficiency in another language” (1.7) and “Be an adversary of the government” (1.8). Respondents thus did not see themselves as being necessarily a supporter or opponent of the government, nor to promote multilingualism.

Journalism ethics

We asked the respondents a range of questions on journalism ethics. Virtually all respondents (97 per cent) agreed with the statement, “Journalists should always adhere to codes of professional ethics, regardless of situation and context.”

However, when pressed on the issue, two-thirds of respondents agreed with the statement, “What is ethical in journalism depends on the specific situation.” Forty per cent agreed with the statement, “What is ethical in journalism is a matter of personal judgment”, and almost the same proportion (38 per cent) agreed that, “It is acceptable to set aside moral standards if extraordinary circumstances require it.”

We also listed 13 controversial journalistic practices and asked respondents whether they could be justified in obtaining an important story, with 1 being always justified and 4 being never justified.

The practices journalists identified as the most unjustifiable were “Accepting money from sources” (mean rating of 4), “Altering or fabricating quotes from sources” (3.9), “Unauthorised use of cellphone data or hacking cellphone messages” (3.9) and “Altering photographs” (3.8). Again, we can detect the high value journalists place on objectivity and independence. They were also possibly affected by the phone-hacking scandal in the United Kingdom.

The most acceptable practices were “Using confidential business or government documents without authorisation” (mean rating 2.4), “Using hidden microphones or cameras” (2.8), “Using re-creations or dramatisations of news by actors” (3.0). This suggests undercover operations are regarded as acceptable should the information obtained warrant such action. Likewise, dramatisations of news events (presumably identified as such) were seen as acceptable, presumably when actual footage was not available.

News media regulation

At the time of the survey the Law Commission, an independent government-funded agency in New Zealand, was proposing that one complaints body be established to cover all news media, especially given the rise of new online media (Law Commission, 2013). There was also the ongoing fallout from the Leveson Inquiry (Leveson Inquiry, 2012).

We asked respondents a simple yes or no question: “In the light of the recommendations from the Leveson Inquiry into the news media in the UK, and [at the time] draft recommendations from the New Zealand Law Commission regarding regulation of the news media in New Zealand, do you think there needs to be changes to regulation of the news media in New Zealand?” Virtually three-quarters of respondents (74 per cent) replied, “No.”

We invited respondents to explain their response. Among the comments in favour of retaining the status quo:

- “Press independence is the cornerstone of democracy.”
- “For the most part the industry operates in an ethically acceptable manner and has appropriate bodies in place to deal with public complaints.”

- “I think the NZ media is very ethical already - we are nothing like the British press, so should not become overly regulated due to mistakes they have made.”

But about a quarter of respondents said changes were required to the regulation of the industry. The main reason for this seems to be the rise of new media. Among the comments:

- “There is so much on the net now. Rules - and the law - are being broken. Untrained people are too prominent.”
- “A single body to judge all media is a fair idea.”

Influences on the job

We gave respondents a list of 27 influences and asked them to rate how much each affected their work as a journalist, with 1 being not influential and 4 being very influential.

The strongest influence was “Journalism ethics” (with a mean rating of 3.6). This was followed by “Information access” (3.5), “Media laws and regulation” (3.4), “Time limits” (also 3.4) and “Availability of newsgathering resources” (3.3). We see here a mix of ethical/legal demands with the logistical realities of access to information and resources.

The weakest influences were “Religious considerations” (1.4), “Pressure groups” (1.6), “Advertising considerations” (1.6), “Profit expectations” (1.7), “The military, police and state security” (also 1.7) and “Businesspeople” (also 1.7). Clearly, journalists regard such external forces as having little influence on their work.

We also gave respondents a list of 23 elements that may have altered over the past five years in New Zealand. We asked respondents to rate each, with 1 being weakened a lot and 5 being strengthened a lot.

The elements identified by respondents that have strengthened the most were “Social media, such as Facebook or Twitter” (mean rating of 4.6), “The use of search engines” (4.5), “User-generated content, such as blogs” (4.4), “Profit-making pressures” (4.1), “The importance of technical skills” (4.0) and “Audience feedback” (also 4.0). Clearly, then, journalists are feeling the impact of new media on their work practices. Intriguingly, although

respondents had said profit was a weak influence on their work (see above), they also identified it as increasing in significance.

As for the elements identified by respondents as having weakened the most, these were “Time available for researching stories” (1.9), “The credibility of journalism” (2.4), “Ethical standards” (also 2.4), “Journalism education” (2.6) and “Journalists’ freedom to make editorial decisions” (2.8). These results likely reflect the tightening resources of the newsroom and, possibly, the impact of the News of the World phone-hacking scandal. Journalists, it seems, have less time to research stories and mentor new recruits, and feel the standing of journalism has been undermined.

Quality of the news media

Respondents generally had a fairly positive view of the quality of the news media in New Zealand. Forty-four per cent rated the quality of the news media as either excellent or above average. A further 41 per cent rated it average. Only 15 per cent rated it poor or below average.

Respondent were invited to add their own comments to this question. The main themes in the positive comments were that New Zealand enjoys a free press, some news outlets (especially state-owned radio station Radio New Zealand) are excellent, and journalists are doing a good job in trying circumstances. Among the positive comments:

- “We have an impartial and well-trained media and it is relatively transparent and free of political bias.”
- “Our media enjoy great freedom, and in a small country like this where everyone is somehow connected, the truth always comes out either rather quickly or eventually. This helps keep the nation both honest and well-informed.”
- “Radio New Zealand is the best national news source in the country and I wish there were online, print and television equivalents.”
- “If you listen to Radio New Zealand, watch the main TV news bulletins, read at least one daily newspaper and keep an eye on the websites, you’re not doing too badly for a country with the population of Melbourne.”

- “The work of the journalists etc. is generally outstanding. But there is a lot of under-resourcing, lack of money and commercial influences that surely are having some effect on the output.”
- “Ownership issues and resources available make it quite difficult for journalists, but I believe most organisations do a very good job, and most of the people I've met are highly committed and ethical.”

The main themes in the negative comments centred on cost-cutting undermining the quality of journalism, a focus on trivial stories and reproducing public relations hand-outs, a reliance on young inexperienced journalists, and that there are better news organisations overseas. Among the comments:

- “Newspapers compromised by lack of staff and resources, plus increased focus on popular, quick turnaround stories.”
- “It is too productivity-driven. Journalists are drilled that they should produce a certain number of stories in a day and are judged on this more than on the quality of those stories.”
- “I think journalism in New Zealand has been captured by trivia in recent years. This is partly due to the fact newsrooms are employing fewer journalists and there is ridiculous pressure for everyone to be first with something on websites.”
- “Today there is too much reliance on simply picking up and running press releases, with little or no background checks on the validity of the (often political) information presented.”
- “There are far too many young journalists lacking political experience and a knowledge of history to provide the depth that is needed in journalism.”
- “Our newsroom basically looks like this: many young female reporters at the bottom and then middle-aged men in middle management and above. I wish we had more experienced reporters in our newsroom, who could mentor us. And I wish there were more females to look up to.”
- “While there are great journalists in New Zealand, there is a lack of funding for the national broadcaster. This means a lot of talent is

shed to the private sector and the service provided cannot compare to institutions such as the ABC and BBC.”

- “Not as competitive and investigative as British media. Media agenda is increasingly set by public relations and politics.”

Career choice

We asked respondents to tell us why they became journalists. Several major themes emerged, including a love of writing, an interest in people, the unpredictability and variety of the work, and a desire to make a difference. Among the comments:

- “I'm curious by nature, and I'm passionate about writing/storytelling. But I've stayed a journalist for other reasons - the satisfaction that comes from telling people about things that matter.”
- “I like to write and I like variety.”
- “Because I wanted to find out more about what makes other people tick and hold people in power accountable for their actions.”
- “Because I wanted to tell stories and break news. I love revealing stuff others want to keep hidden.”
- “To change the world for the better and to tell stories.”
- “Love of writing and love of news and current affairs. I think good journalism is really important to a democratic society - that's something I really believe in and therefore wanted to pursue.”
- “To tell people's stories, inform the public, and give a voice to underprivileged or voiceless people who would otherwise be ignored by the mainstream or political institutions.”

Conclusions

This article reported the results of a survey of full-time New Zealand journalists conducted in 2013. The journalism workforce is relatively young, with almost 60 per cent of respondents aged 40 or younger. But it would be wrong to equate this youthfulness with inexperience, as half the respondents had at least 10 years' journalism experience.

The workforce is primarily of European ethnicity, disproportionately so given the ethnic composition of the population generally. Journalists are paid the same average income from their work as the New Zealand full-time workforce.

The industry is increasingly feminised, with women outnumbering men in virtually all age bands, and among rank-and-file journalists and in middle management. However, men outnumber women in senior management roles.

Conventional media still employs most journalists, with half employed at newspapers and about a quarter in broadcasting. But new media is a major employer too, accounting for 22 per cent of respondents.

The industry appears to be increasingly highly educated, with about half having a university degree. Journalists are generally slightly left of centre politically.

Journalists are happy in their work generally. Despite concerns over low pay and lack of resources, they enjoy the variety and importance of the job. They saw themselves as independent, objective reporters giving the public important information. Respondents generally felt they had a great deal of freedom in the job.

The respondents believed ethical behaviour is a crucial aspect of the job. But many respondents did accept that sometimes controversial strategies may be justifiable to break important stories. Most respondents felt the news media in New Zealand did not need further regulation.

Overall, respondents had a positive view of the quality of the news media in New Zealand. They felt new media is having an increasing effect on their work, including the demands of blogging and tapping into resources such as Facebook. However, tightened resources and, possibly, the ongoing fallout of the phone-hacking scandal are making life more difficult.

Finally, respondents often told us they became journalists because they enjoyed writing, meeting people, telling stories and making a difference. As one respondent said: "Best job in the world."

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