

## Brent Edwards

(Brent Edwards, Director of News Gathering, Radio New Zealand, and Director of the EPMU Print and Media Council)

[Interviewer question to 00.13: What changes have you seen in journalism over your career?]

When I started working it was little Brother typewriters and you'd have three bits of paper in and three copies of the story. I worked in a newspaper office, initially; I worked in newspapers for almost 20 years. And when you went to work, you smelled the ink of the printer. It, it smelt like a newspaper; it was a newspaper. Of course *everyone* – well I didn't – but most people smoked, so it was full of smoke and I think actually it was after about a year or two I was there that we managed to make our newsroom smoke-free before the legislation came in. So, so it was a real newspaper, a local newspaper serving the province – this was in Nelson.

And of course the changes since then – light years' difference in terms of obviously the technology, computerisation. You don't have printing works with the newspapers anymore. They're, they're sited elsewhere. But since then I've moved into radio and more technology.

And the web. The web has just changed not so much the way journalism is done – or in some ways it has, although there's question-marks about whether some of those changes are for the better or not – but the different platforms now that you can use to get stories out. But also the pressure now, even greater pressure on journalists, that everything has to be instant at this moment, because the web can take it now. You're not waiting for a deadline for tomorrow's paper or for the afternoon edition. That's put a whole lot of pressures on journalism, and again sometimes not for the best, because people, they *rush* to get a story out and at times they're probably better to take a bit more time to get a bit more context, to make sure they've got it right. So yeah, a whole lot of changes and putting a lot more pressure, I think, actually on journalists to, to deal with a lot more different technologies and to deal with a lot more of that immediate pressure to get the story out.

[Interviewer question to 2.20 to 2.26: Has the media's role in society changed at all?]

Yeah, I think the media in general, but particularly newspapers, were – I'm not sure about the word 'powerful' – but *influential*. People read the newspapers, so they carried the news of the day, whether it was in the cities or provincial towns and so they were very important in people's lives. Nowadays, of course, people can get everything off their smartphone and they don't have to necessarily be following what we would call or what they call mainstream media or traditional news media: people are following friends on Facebook who might be telling them about what's going on; Twitter – people tweeting all sorts of things. Of course the thing about that is, there's no sense of whether it's right or wrong and I think that's why journalism is still so important in terms of being what it should be: a credible and *reliable* source of information which makes sense of this complete mess and mass of information that's thrown at people now. But there's no doubt there's huge challenges for news media organisations, for newspapers, radio, television stations and their websites to ensure that they remain relevant and credible to their listeners, their readers, their viewers.

[Interviewer question 3.45 to 3.51: How do you see technology developing in media?]

I think if I knew where they were going, I could probably make myself a pretty rich man. It's pretty hard to tell. I remember being at a conference probably eight years ago – international

conference in Spain about the future of journalism – and a speaker from the United States called John Nichols got up and told everyone then that look, don't worry about PCs and tablets, *everything* is gonna be on the smartphone and that media organisations have to be completely focussed on delivering news to smartphones. And there was quite a lot of debate at the time and a number of people: 'nah'. Well, of course, probably within a year or two he was *absolutely* right. What's gonna replace that? I don't know.

That's, I think, the biggest problem, in a way, or challenge, for journalism, is that you don't really know what's gonna be the next technological development and where it's gonna take us and the pressures it'll put on journalism in order to, to get its message across. The thing that most media organisations have to be is just nimble and flexible enough to respond as quickly as possible to *delivering* news on that platform where people want it. But equally though, I think we've gotta say, 'let's not just though suddenly dismiss and abandon *everything* we've done.' If you look at the newspaper industry, yes, struggling, but their profit still comes from newspapers. No-one has yet, really, produced a credible alternative in terms of a commercial model in the commercial media to make money yet out of what they do on the web. I think they're starting to move towards that way and, and again for, for radio, while they've all got websites, but still your radio listenership is, is ebbing away. But still a lot of people still listen to the radio, so you can't abandon those old forms of delivering news and journalism. You've gotta maintain them and maintain their quality *while* you're shifting and adapting to these new forms of technology.

[Interviewer question 6.07 to 6.12: Do you foresee any wildcards that could disrupt journalism?]

With all of the social media development there's this idea now that people talk about the "citizen journalist". That's a great title used and there's a degree of truth in that, but we've always had citizen journalists. There have always been people – the thing that I think journalists forget is we always rely on people telling us stuff. Now, actually, people can actually video it on their phone and all of that and actually send us that video rather than just give us an eye-witness account of something. I can't really help on... What, what would really surprise me, that would *really* disrupt journalism now – I can't imagine how it can be any more disrupted than it is at the moment, to be honest.

[Interviewer question 7.01 to 7.07: What kind of trends are you seeing for the future of journalism on a global scale?]

Well, I think internationally and, and the debate internationally around the future of journalism and, and how it responds to what we've been talking about – really the disruption that's caused by, by new technology – is, is *absolutely* around that: the, the fundamental importance of ethical, principled journalism to, to democracy. And, and that is what we in the international community of journalists believe is the saving grace for journalism, that without that level of journalism, that societies, democracies *really* can't be as *healthy* – in as healthy shape in as they should be. And so if people are interested in their communities and in their democracy, they would support quality journalism. That's the big thing though: it's around quality, ethical journalism. And certainly in a number of conferences that I've gone to where this matter's been discussed, the way has been that a number of media organisations are *responding* to the challenges by going to the lowest common denominator. I think the one thing that a number of us agree on is a) that's not good for journalism; it's not good for the democracies that we live in and for the emerging democracies, and eventually, ultimately, don't, we don't believe it's actually good for the companies themselves. That they won't survive that way.

The way that you'll survive and, and prosper and thrive in this environment is to provide that,

that, that quality, independent journalism that makes sense of what's happening in, in your community, in your, in your country and in the world in a way that most of the chatter on social media does not. And so that it, it, it is journalism: that it's, it's not just running your opinions as, as many of the social media sort of outlets do. And that people can, can *trust* what they read, that it is accurate and truthful and is fair and as balanced as it possibly could be.

[Interviewer question 9.23 to 9.28: Are people interested in where the media is going?]

They should be. They *absolutely* should be, because in all western democracies, democracy is, we understand it is *being* undermined. And it's being undermined because we probably don't have as an independent and as credible media as, as we should, and in the sense that most governments of the day have massive kind of spin machines behind them and now, of course, using social media, they are massaging the message even more. And so that makes it even more imperative that you *do* have an independent journalism going on which essentially looks to uncover stuff that a government of the day doesn't want the public to know that will *give voice* to those voices that might otherwise struggle to be heard. So incredibly important, and again that's where the media has to play its part by *ensuring* that it does provide that independent, credible quality journalism so that people absolutely then do see it as necessary.

Cos I think one of the problems, when you look at polls, is that there's quite a lot of public disquiet about the news media. A sense of, oh well, they don't tell us these things correctly or accurately; they're not independent. And to be honest, there's probably a degree of rationale. They've got, they've got reason to believe that, because too often the news media is perhaps being a bit sensationalist, they're trying to draw an audience and, and they're not, in my view – certainly here in New Zealand – covering issues in the way consistently that we should. Too often in politics, for instance, it's about the *game* of politics. It's not about the issues that affect people's lives. It's not about looking deeply enough at the legislation that's going to affect how you and I live our lives. And so I think that's what makes people both cynical about the media and cynical about politics. That's driven by both how the politicians operate and how the media report that.

[Interviewer question 11.48 to 11.53: What sort of leadership is required in the media to make sure it heads in the right direction?]

Well it needs strong leadership that puts, as I said, quality, ethical journalism first. That doesn't *just* basically cater for the sort of clickbait approach to media – 'oh, what's most interesting to people, what are people...' If you go back to the tabloid papers, that's why they had a page three girl, because they told them a lot of male readers love to see a page three girl. Well, that's not journalism, we know that, and, and now the danger is with social media, the whole clickbait thing of whichever celebrity is in the news at the time and people's interest in their personal life – that becomes the focus of journalism. Well, that's not really journalism. And I'm not saying there's not a place for human interest stories and for offbeat stories and, and for celebrity stories, but not as the core of what we do.

So I think it really, yeah, does take a real strength of character and a real commitment to that principled, public service journalism: journalism that's in the public interest - not necessarily so much always that the public's interested in, the sort of prurient stuff - and a real commitment to that. And a commitment to doing it well so that it is interesting and it is credible and it is relevant to people's lives. There's no point doing something that's nice and worthy but boring – I, I understand that.

But I think if most media organisations and, and newsroom leaders think about it, the stories we're talking about... And look, a story – climate change. I know, because I've seen it: a lot of people's eyes in newsrooms can glaze over about climate change, when you start talking about CO2 emissions and tonnes, etc. But that story is essentially quite a simple one and if people look at it in a simple way... scientists agree that the atmosphere is warming because of what we are doing as humans and that the consequences of that are gonna be pretty dire, not just actually for low-lying Pacific Island states, but for all of us.

And we should be telling that story, and we should be telling that story in a way that is relevant to people's lives so that they take interest. Because it *is* about their lives, their lives of their children and grandchildren. It does take a commitment, and I know that: I've been in debates in newsrooms about how we cover stories, and often newsroom leaders can go for the *easy* option and the lowest common denominator and I think that's gotta change. And internationally, we do have leadership from groups like the International Federation of Journalists and, and others. There's a Global Editors Network, as well, which is working to promote the whole thing about *ethical* journalism. Because I think a *lot* of people recognise that it's by maintaining high standards of journalism, that's how journalism will thrive and survive – not by lowering those standards.

[musical interlude 15.01 to END]

**Recording ENDS: 15.13**