

Workshop 1



Collecting data

*What is happening with civics and the news media in New Zealand?
Wednesday, 2 September 2015*

The first workshop of *The Civics and Media Project* saw 40 people come together to survey the current civics and media landscape in New Zealand. As the day progressed, speakers representing different stakeholders in this area unearthed many questions concerning New Zealand's current direction and pointed to issues requiring further investigation. The intention of the day-long workshop was to establish a shared evidence base and to identify key themes for continued discussion, in order to ensure that New Zealand is heading in the direction of a well-informed, civically engaged society in 2030.

The following is a digested account of the speakers' presentations with supporting resources.

Firstly, **Brad Jackson** from the VUW School of Government introduced the workshop and explained that the structure of the discussion in this first workshop (and the second and third workshops in turn) would be flexible – able to be fuelled by questions arising over the course of the day.

As the first formal speaker of the day, **Prof. John Burrows QC** began by discussing what would become a strong thread over the course of the workshop – the concept of nationhood. Burrows noted that New Zealand is a super-diverse nation, which presents unique challenges in establishing a coherent national identity. In order to do this, Burrows believes citizens need to have a shared idea of how our nation is governed, and of the constitutional principles that make up our distinctive constitutional relationships.

He provided a definition of civics, which was used as a working definition throughout the remainder of the workshop: 'the study of how government works and the rights and duties of citizenship.'

Burrows stated that New Zealand's unique position as a country without a formal constitution recorded in one cohesive document – in conjunction with the distinctive constitutional relationship created by the Treaty of Waitangi – means it is essential that citizens understand the legal and political principles which govern the nation. Burrows lamented the lack of understanding of New Zealand's constitution in certain demographics – older generations as well as younger, disconnected kiwis.

To these ends, Burrows highlighted the main features of governance that he thinks ordinary citizens should have knowledge of: 'How government and Parliament work, and what they do; how the courts work and control government; the functions of the New Zealand Human Rights Commission; the continuing significance of the Treaty of Waitangi; the principles behind the rule of law.'

Burrows explained that the media's principal functions arise from the classic concept of the media as a trusted and reliable source of news and information. The functions of the media are to get messages out and to provide a forum for comment. Digital media and changes in funding structures are simultaneously enabling the enhanced performance of these functions and challenging the nature and quality of news, information and civic participation.

Burrows's PowerPoint presentation is available [here](#).

Paul Satherley from the Ministry of Education introduced the group to the state of formal civics education in New Zealand. He explained that schools are able to design, deliver and review their own curriculums and that civics in this process is considered part of social studies. Government, the Treaty of Waitangi and human rights are all aspects of these lessons. Later in the afternoon, further clarification was sought as to how civics fits into the curriculum.

Satherley presented data from the ICCS 2008 survey, which shows a wide distribution between the highest and the lowest civic knowledge scores amongst Year 9 students. This reflects the diversity and inequalities in New Zealand's society.

Satherley's PowerPoint presentation is available [here](#).

Scott Ussher from Statistics New Zealand built on the themes initially brought to light by John Burrows. He provided the group with evidence of New Zealand's increasingly diverse population and of the population's declining civic engagement over the past few years. Ussher demonstrated New Zealand's diversity with numbers. In 2013, nearly 20% of people could speak two or more languages. Roughly 90% of the total population felt a sense of belonging to New Zealand, with 48% describing themselves as strongly belonging. In Māori groups, 71% felt a strong sense of belonging, whereas in Asian groups only 20% said they felt a sense of belonging to New Zealand. These statistics raised the question of the relationship between social inclusion and civic participation.

When it comes to particular relationships with institutions of the state, Māori adults have high trust in police and courts but low trust in the media. There is more work being done by Statistics New Zealand to determine whether or not this aligns with similar trends in other demographic groups. The survey does not ask about what causes low trust in institutions and the media – a question which may be necessary in order to begin improving engagement between citizens and the state.

More work is being done in this area with the [New Zealand General Social Survey 2016: Objectives of the Civic and Cultural Participation supplement](#).

Ussher's PowerPoint presentation is available [here](#).

Karl Lofgren of Victoria University's School of Government spoke of the possibility for digital media to act as a vehicle for improving citizens' civic connectivity and knowledge of the machinery of government. However, he cautioned against seeing 'new media' as a silver bullet, encouraging the group to think instead of the kinds of engagement currently lacking from public and private debate. Lofgren asked about the ways that online participation might be able to act as a means for improving accountability of elected officials to citizens. He noted that there is a risk in relying on digital participation as the sole means of increasing civic activity and engagement, and noted that often 'direct democracy' merely reinforces existing patterns of 'engagement inequality', being less accessible to those who do not have the time or resources.

Dr Gavin Ellis of Auckland University and former editor-in-chief at the New Zealand Herald gave an overview of the current state of news media in New Zealand. Ellis noted that newspaper circulation has declined by 36% since 2000. He emphasised that it is not just the content of the news that needs to be re-assessed in the current climate, but its structure too.

He discussed issues facing these publications such as ownership by Australian companies, large shareholding presence of financial institutions and profit-first strategies. Efforts to increase civic engagement may be hampered by the dominance of infotainment, reader-friendly stories and trends towards sensationalism in news media, he said. Ellis noted that the move to mobile presents its own issues, and warned against a society where 'bread and circuses' are the main drivers of the citizenry.

Ellis's PowerPoint presentation is available [here](#).

Dr Peter Thompson, senior lecturer of media studies at Victoria University of Wellington, discussed the relationship between polity, economy, civil society and the media. He noted that the media plays a crucial role in shaping the structures and links between state, market, and civil society.

His discussion revolved around the central question of how we can ensure that the interests of civil society are not outweighed by polity and economy. He prompted the group to think about the 'genuine crisis' we are currently experiencing wherein the traditional news system is struggling to maintain itself.

Thompson gave an overview of the New Zealand media ecology, explaining that New Zealand as a nation has a laissez-faire approach to regulation of the media market, meaning there is little control over media ownership and cross-media holdings or competition. He noted that New Zealand has low economies of scale and high opportunity costs for local content forms, and therefore viewers are consuming high levels of imported content. Picking up the threads from earlier speakers, Thompson noted that digital convergence should be seen neither as the cause of, nor as a panacea for, the current issues with the media sector and the decline in the general public's civics knowledge. He then discussed further changes occurring in the media sector, noting that

- News media is under increasing shareholder pressure to defend narrow profit margins – pressure which comes in the form of redundancies, populist formats and clickbait, opportunity costs for investigative journalism, and cuts to newsroom budgets.
- There has been a government policy shift away from public service principles, for example the end of the TVNZ Charter, the closure of TVNZ 7 and the freeze on funding for Radio New Zealand.
- Serious TV current affairs programmes are being pushed into peripheral slots.
- Fairfax and NZME are uncertain about the use of paywalls; NZPA has collapsed.
- There has been an increase in the use of blogs and social media as news sources, but these are often partisan (without declaring so) or are derived from mainstream news media.
- Funding models for 'indie' news media are difficult to create & sustain.

These changes destabilise New Zealand's desire for, and access to, reliable news and information. The media must provide this as part of their role as the fourth estate.

Thompson ended his speech by emphasising the continuing importance of the public sphere – we must discuss this issue in ways that are accessible to all, in order to generate and sustain civic dialogue. Thompson explained that in the digital convergence era, this cannot just be left to the internet – it needs cooperation from state, capital and civil society.

Paul Thompson, CEO of Radio New Zealand, gave the group an overview of the national broadcasting company's experience of charting new territory. He explained that RNZ's choice has been to provide quality content in whatever form it takes, in order to fulfil its purpose of serving the public interest. In addition to traditional radio, RNZ's online audience is growing on platforms such as its website, and website offshoot The Wireless, providing additional written, cartoon, and video content.

Thompson noted that although citizens today are given a greater degree of choice in what they consume (with the case of time-shifted television viewing as an example) there is still value in institutions which build and retain trust as content providers and accountability mechanisms for politicians. Thompson highlighted the notion that the contemporary abundance of information is both a positive and a risk. Throughout the discussion he was careful to assert that RNZ is a 'special case' as it is publicly funded, and therefore is somewhat immune to some of the drivers impacting other MSM outlets.

Marcus Stickley from The Wireless, the 'public service media platform for millennials', explained that many young people do not understand the power they have as citizens. He explained that civic engagement manifests differently today and should not simply be dismissed as 'slacktivism'. Stickley explained that the millennial audience (or at least, the target audience of the Wireless) requires information that is presented in a relatable way – with room left for debate. Information and media must cater to the context of the individual. Stickley provided the following examples of how The Wireless is responding to contemporary media tastes and making content accessible:

- [The Pencilword: On A Plate](#)
- [The Pencilword: The most valuable vote in New Zealand](#)
- [White Man Behind A Desk: Money and the Media](#)
- [White Man Behind A Desk: Defamation and Infotainment](#)
- [White Man Behind A Desk: Social Bonds](#)
- [The state of civics education](#)
- [Another white election campaign](#)
- [Out of the echo chamber, onto the streets](#)
- [Rocking the vote](#)
- [Beyond the ballot box](#)
- [Ask Away](#)

Peter Griffin, Manager at the Royal Society of New Zealand's Science Media Centre, picked up on points made by earlier speakers such as Thompson, noting that we are currently experiencing digital vertigo. It is difficult to determine what is credible when there is such a wealth of information readily available. As part of a civic education people also need to be equipped with the tools to analyse the veracity of information, he said. He noted that digital literacy is about more than merely using computers; there needs to be a critical-thinking component to this education. We need to ensure that digital citizens are also engaged citizens.