

Column 50 - time to reflect on getting this far

This is my 50th column in the Daily News, and I'm surprised it got this far. I'm not short of opinions, but I spent a lifetime as a news reporter and from day one it was hammered into me that including my own views in newspaper writing is a mortal sin.

It's called "being objective" and it has ruled news journalism the world over from the first quarter of the 20th century. It was an adjustment made after the so-called "muckraker" era, when reporters embedded in exploitative enterprises like the slaughter yards of Chicago and revealed appalling work conditions.

The mighty dollar pushed back, so newspapers adopted objectivity as a strategy to counter criticism. That it was a failure became obvious during US Senator Joe McCarthy's 1950s communism witch-hunts, when the ethic of faithfully reporting what politicians and others said allowed him to terrorise society.

Even though McCarthy was finally countered by CBS newscaster Ed Murrow, whose courageous – and opinionated – journalism brought an end to the persecution, the idea reporters should never state anything as fact without attributing it to someone - or several people, in the interests of supposed balance – was entrenched.

It certainly held sway when I began on the Taranaki Herald in 1965. Opinion was reserved for what we called the "instant wisdom" column, otherwise known as the editorial, a place where newspapers expressed a corporate view derived from discussions each day between the editor and his leader writer (they were always males in those days).

Columnists like today's were rare. The Herald had an excellent one in Stu Tullett, a writer, historian and subeditor who wrote his incisive take on Taranaki life around a fictional character called Dudley (after British TV comedian Dudley Moore, I suspect).

The Auckland Star had Noel Holmes, Michael Brett, Bob Gilmore and Jack Leigh, all of them noted journalists, Gilmore notorious for seeing how far he could go with scatological references. After a quip that "cunnilingus is not the Irish airline" his columns had to be run past the editor for a prepublication check.

As the Star's editorial manager, a sort of editor-in-training job, I was instructed by editor Keith Aitken to try my hand at leader writing, but my first attempt so closely resembled a news report he never asked again.

Later, when I found myself in his chair, I attempted only one editorial (we had several editorial writers, including one of the first females, Taranaki's Helen Brown). My sole slightly hysterical effort pleaded with Aucklanders to get on with building the Aotea Centre, a proposal mired in the kind of controversy that years later would surround our Len Lye Centre.

I was more courageous about columns. With the Star's stars all retiring about that time (the early 1980s), I tried something new – commissioning non-journalists to have a go at expressing their opinions. People like cot-death campaigner Dr Jim Sprott was one, former PM Sir Rob Muldoon another (he dictated his columns to his secretary).

About half a dozen of them populated the page each week. Former All Black and Taranaki rugby coach J J Stewart would join them, after I noticed the Daily News successfully launch him as a bucolic writer on country life.

A pattern emerged. Most untrained media writers could sustain a few columns on their known hobbyhorse, but then struggled. When they started writing about what was on television we fired them. Turnover was high. Many people think they can write, but keeping it up week after week is hard work and often needs a lot of unseen input from subeditors.

So, you might say I'm a bit of an expert on how columns should be written. But as rugby coaches will testify, being an All Black doesn't necessarily mean you can coach, so I was nervous about whether I

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could put theory into practice when this column began last year. Could I shed the tendency to write news?

Having grammar and spelling dexterity helps, as do research skills; most columns sit atop an iceberg of background checking. Being observant is useful. I try to mix it up: reminiscences here, observations there, some rarking up, occasional doses of self-deprecation, and a view about most things. As to the actual writing – all you need is a desk, a chair and a pound of beeswax to stick your bum to the seat.

You'll have your own opinion on whether the transition has been made.