

Why papers merge makes good sense

You won't be surprised to know Lonely Planet isn't the first august journal to wax positive about Taranaki. That distinction possibly rests with the marginally less imposing Grey River Argus and Blackball News of Greymouth.

Here's what appeared in the main editorial of the newspaper's second page on January 19, 1914: "We have received from the New Plymouth Expansion and Tourist League a very well arranged pamphlet, profusely illustrated, setting forth the claims of Taranaki's capital as a holiday resort and place of residence."

Why would a small West Coast newspaper take interest in a North Island region that on a good day was at least day's steamship passage away?

Such a question is relevant to a curious debate about the future of the very organ in which you read this, unless you're seeing it on Stuff, of course.

That newspapers are in something of a fix is well known. They've been slowly declining since the mid-1970s, well before the advent of the internet, when evening dailies began to feel the pinch from TV news and other distractions.

The latest angst was self-consciously expressed in a full-page advertisement in last Saturday's paper, when most of the country's editors joined voices to remonstrate against a recent Commerce Commission opinion - that allowing the two main newspaper groups to merge would dilute editorial independence.

To explain why the editors are right when they support combining forces to preserve a service that's vitally important in places like Taranaki, let's go back to the Grey River Argus.

It achieved lasting global fame (prior to closing in 1920) when one of its grand cousins in Britain laughingly noted an editorial in the tiny South Island paper had "thundered" a warning to Germany's Kaiser in 1914. Or it might have been Russia's Tsar in 1880. Just what it said and when are the subject of online debate, although a time-consuming search of the Papers Past website would no doubt settle any confusion.

The point here is that for 132 years from 1879, little papers like the Argus – and there were dozens of them, sometimes two or more in towns like New Plymouth – could faithfully report the news from throughout New Zealand and the western world without having to employ their own reporters in every region.

Until 2011, all daily papers got much of their national and world coverage from the New Zealand Press Association (NZPA), which was part-owned by every newspaper that subscribed to it. And they almost all did.

On the day the Argus reported the charms of New Plymouth, stories received by "electric telegraph" recorded a drowning in Wellington, results from the New Zealand Professional Athletics Carnival in Auckland, the execution of 24,000 opium robbers a year in one province of China, the opening of the 44th annual session of the University of New Zealand senate in Otago, and the first flight in Epsom (in a considerable breeze) of a Bleriot monoplane presented to the New Zealand Defence Force.

NZPA disappeared in 2011, the eventual casualty of reorganisation of our newspaper industry from three big chains to two following the 1987 share-market crash, which panicked the

owners of the biggest, NZ News Limited, into bailing to the other two - the FairfaxNZ and MZME now wanting to merge.

Lost was an affordable way of ensuring newspaper readers in isolated places got news from all parts of the developed world. The two main newspaper-based news websites have maintained a good semblance of that, but each suffers a few gaps in its coverage from regions where it has no newspaper.

The big benefits of what the two companies are offering with their proposed union include a possible return to that complete national coverage, as well as restoring New Zealand ownership, and a shoring up of the heft our newspapers need to compete with offshore-based social media sites that cream off, tax-free, a considerable proportion of New Zealand's news media income.

When the editors say loss of independent voices is unlikely, they know what they're talking about. Journalists and editors are about as easy to marshal towards a single viewpoint as the proverbial herding of cats, which is what makes the unified voice in their advertisement so striking.

I know most of the people whose names are listed at the bottom of that impassioned plea. Getting them all to agree to anything is something of a miracle – which speaks volumes about the gravity of their cause. It's our cause, too.