

Why freedom of speech survives

Actually, most people don't give a bugger about freedom of expression.

That's because they have it readily at hand via social media, and because it's been around for centuries, having been wrested from English monarchs who cut out the tongues of those who said the "wrong" thing.

I found a public survey once that asked people to rank 10 modern freedoms, and freedom of expression came last, well below things like the right to drive a car.

Don Brash has whipped up new debate about it, a brouhaha that overshadowed the recent death of one of the country's greatest freedom of expression advocates, a man who changed modern journalism in New Zealand nearly 40 years ago with his courageous exposure of the brittleness of mainstream thinking.

Warwick Roger, who died last week after a long battle with Parkinson's Disease, started our first "new journalism" vehicle in 1981, a glossy Auckland magazine called *Metro* with content modelled on in-depth reporting of the kind emerging in the US.

Its long stories – some up to 15,000 words – resembled those written by American journalists like Tom Wolfe. They used literary devices usually found in fiction, and didn't necessarily conform to the tenets of standard "balanced" journalism.

Although investigative journalism dates back in New Zealand to the 1860s and often appeared in the 20th in what seems an unlikely forum, *Truth* newspaper, Roger was the first to acquaint us with Wolfeian writing presented in a magazine with high production standards and leading-edge design.

For the first time, the art director was as important as the chief subeditor, but although the look was as important as the content, the latter was game-changing because it regularly examined issues in meticulous detail and drew conclusions that influenced politics, the economy, the law, medicine and social trends.

Not all its words were lofty, mind you. One of Roger's most powerful was the magazine's gossip column, a vicious outlet for the lampooning of the self-important. Roger penned it most of the time under cover of the pseudonym Felicity Ferret.

Auckland's glitterati loved it during most of the 80s but lost their senses of humour after the 1987 crash. They started to demand retractions. One case in 1994 led to a two-week defamation trial in which a rival gossip columnist successfully sued *Metro*; Roger was finally outed as the person with acid in his pen.

Such diversions were unimportant in the long run. In 1987, Roger published a landmark expose of what his headline dubbed the "unfortunate experiment". The story, by Sandra Coney and Phillida Bunkle, revealed a project at National Women's Hospital in Auckland deliberately left 127 women suspected of having cervical cancer untreated so researchers could compare outcomes. Eight died.

The story has been acclaimed one of the top two or three investigative stories published in New Zealand, because it led to a commission of inquiry and fundamental changes in the way doctors must relate to their patients. It was typical of Roger's fierce need to seek all angles that he later published an article defending of one of the hospital's leading researchers.

For those who follow the paths journalism takes, one of Roger's unique strategies was to hire mainly writers with no journalistic background. He had a jaundiced view of mainstream media and wanted to shape the work of those with fresh insights. Some of the country's greatest media writers – for example, Steve Braunias and Tim Wilson (today on TV's *Seven Sharp*) – emerged from that process.

Roger first achieved prominence as a feature writer for the *Dominion* and the *Auckland Star*, but although the latter had given much space to the pioneering work of Pat Booth on the Arthur Thomas murder case, it insisted Roger had to meet standard length limits for stories (about 2000 words).

He wrote long, and his stories were stitched together, making it impossible for subeditors to cut him. Already a devotee of American non-fiction outlets like *The New Yorker*, he felt it was time New Zealand had its own repository of the “journalism of outrage”.

He left the *Star* and started *Metro* in a small operation that would grow under his genius to include *North & South* (edited by his wife, Robyn Langwell) and a stable of other successful magazines.

I'll always remember Warwick for his sense of humour. One day after *Metro* had yet again scooped the *Star*, I arrived at work to find a packet of bitter pills on my desk. He'd sneaked in and left them there.