Still European and female, but older: Profiling the New Zealand journalist

ABSTRACT

Four voluntary surveys in the past 20 years have profiled the age, income and other descriptors of New Zealand journalists. However, the response rates have raised questions about the representativeness of the data. This article draws data from the non-voluntary 2006 Census, supplied by Statistics New Zealand, to give a profile of the age, sex and ethnic distribution of a large subgroup of journalists—those described as reporter, subeditor or editor. It shows the approximate median of these New Zealand journalists is 41 years old, female, European, and earning $44,751 a year. This is slightly older than indicated by voluntary surveys. Other findings are that reporters have a higher approximate median income than either editors or subeditors. Women, Maori and Pasifika peoples are more likely to be in lower paid occupational subgroups. A comparison of survey and Census data suggests that they get comparable results for gender ratios, but approximate median incomes vary considerably and age distribution to a lesser degree. Voluntary surveys may be missing a group of editors and older journalists.

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Introduction

For people that devote a lot of time to describing the society they live in, surprisingly little is certain about the demographic characteristics of New Zealand journalists themselves. In the past 20 years there have been at least four surveys of journalists. The two most recent have characterised the typical New Zealand journalist as youngish, European, and female.
For example, Lealand’s 2003 survey was headlined ‘Still young and female: A (modest) survey of New Zealand journalists (Lealand, 2004). It found the median journalist was 38 years old and earning around $51,000. Likewise, a survey last year by the NZ Journalists Training Organisation (2006) found that the basic profile was also young, female and European— but earning less— $40,000 a year. This was a significant change from 1994 when the median journalist was a 35-year-old male (Lealand, 1994). Both the more recent surveys have their problems, however. Lealand’s has been criticised for a low return rate (297 responses). Rupar (2006) suggests this ‘casts a shadow over the findings and prevents it being seen as a national survey’. The JTO survey has a much bigger sample size (1216), but is difficult to make comparisons with because of the way some data is reported. This article is an attempt to provide some consistent, mutually agreed data on New Zealand journalists—including approximate median age, income, gender division and ethnic spread. It also attempts to compare data from voluntary surveys with data from the New Zealand Census to determine how representative voluntary surveys are of journalists. It draws on data from the Census, compiled by Statistics New Zealand, and the three surveys mentioned above. As it is mandatory in New Zealand to fill in the Census, it is probably the most complete and reliable dataset available for those categories it measures. As well as providing a profile of New Zealand journalists, it is hoped this study will be useful in planning and assessing future surveys.

**Methodology**

Data were sourced from the 2006 Census of Population and Dwellings (Statistics New Zealand, 2007a). To keep the data as consistent as possible, only those categories which clearly described journalists were considered— these were reporters, editors, and subeditors². For further precision, only those in paid employment were included. Other categories that may have included some journalists— such as photographers and camera operators— were excluded because it seemed likely that these would include a much greater proportion of non-journalists and thus skew the figures. For example, while there were 2277 employed reporters in the 2006 census— all of whom were likely to be involved in journalism, according to the census definitions³, there were also 1749 photographers, many of whom were unlikely to be working in the news media. Statistics New Zealand supplied on request a further breakdown of the categories of reporter, editor and
subeditor, by age, income, sex and ethnicity. Figures for gender were broken down to show basic comparison by occupation. Using these data, the approximate median age and income were derived using the formula below. As the data were only available in bands, only approximate median age and income could be calculated. The approximate median was preferred to calculations of approximate average as median is considered a more reliable indicator of the central tendency for data such as salary bands and age, which can be skewed by significant outliers (Meyer, 2002). This tendency was confirmed by the fact that an initial calculation of approximate average income was tested and found to produce a result significantly at variance to the median. For the calculations of approximate median, those who did not state income were omitted, as were those who did not state ethnicity. Likewise, those who specified more than one ethnic group were omitted from the charts shown, although the complete dataset is included at the end of this article.

To calculate the approximate median age and income, the following formula was used (Jeffcoat, 1998):

\[
m = aM + \frac{n}{2} - gM \times wM \\
\frac{\text{fM}}{aM}
\]

where \(aM\) = lower limit of median class
\(gM\) = number of values below median class
\(fM\) = frequency of median class
\(wM\) = width of median class

The results were then compared to calculations of approximate median income and age from Lealand’s and the JTO surveys and the 1996 Census (Statistics New Zealand, 1996).

**Census results**

**Age**

The approximate median age for all journalists was 40.9 years (see Graph 1). For reporters it was slightly older: 41.2 years. Subeditors were slightly younger, at 41.15 years, and editors younger still at 40.5 years.
Income
The approximate median income for all journalists is $44,751—well above the national median of $34,568. As the chart below (Graph 2) shows, reporters have the highest approximate median income, ahead of editors, with subeditors lowest. Approximate median income for reporters was $46,666, editors $43,977 and subeditors $41,458.

As Graph 3 shows, a greater proportion of reporters (4.8 percent) tends to be in the top income bracket (more than $100,000), than editors (of whom only 4 percent were earning more than $100,000). The most common salary band for reporters and editors is the $50,000-$70,000 range, while for subeditors it is under $30,000.
Gender
The profession is predominantly female (see Graph 4 below). Of the 4284 journalists, 46 percent are male and 54 percent female (this is almost exactly the reverse of the national figure of 47 percent of those employed being female and 53 percent male). Although the numbers of male and female reporters are almost equal (1131 male and 1146 female), the discrepancy grows in other job categories. Of editors, 57 percent are female, and of subeditors, nearly two thirds (63 percent).

Ethnicity
The overwhelming majority of the 4284 journalists are European (81 percent) (Graph 5). The next biggest ethnic groups are other (12 percent), Maori (6) Asian (4.8) and then Pasifika (1.8). These group proportions remain roughly
the same across all job categories. Of reporters, 82 percent are European, 12 percent other, 5.8 percent Maori, 3.4 percent Asian and 1.8 percent Pasifika. There is a slightly higher representation of Maori and Asians as editors and a slightly higher proportion of Pasifika as subeditors. For editors, the figures are European (79 percent), other (12), Maori (6), Asian (6.8) and Pasifika (1.6). For subeditors, the figures are European (81), other (11), Maori (6.3), Asian (3.6) and Pasifika (2.7).

**Discussion**

All survey methods have their pitfalls. As will become clear, those mentioned here are no exception. But first, a look at what the latest Census data indicates about these groups of journalists. Then a discussion of what the Census and surveys agree and disagree about, and the reasons for this and the implications.

Firstly, what does the 2006 Census tell us about journalists? One point to emerge is that reporters are apparently the best paid of all journalists, ahead of editors, with sub-editors significantly further behind. While there are a significant number of editors in the highest income bracket, it is clear that being a reporter is not a barrier to reaching the higher salary bands of the profession. Being a woman may be, however. While numbers of male and female reporters are about equal, the lower-paid categories of editor and subeditor are much more likely to be occupied by women. However, journalists overall are still well ahead of the approximate national median income of $33,000.

It is also clear that journalists are still relatively young overall. While the median age is 40.9 years, one fifth is under 30 years of age, and nearly two thirds are under 45. Almost three quarters are under 50, and 90 percent are under 60 years of age.
When it comes to diversity, the profession still does not reflect the rainbow of New Zealand’s ethnic mix, though possibly more so than a decade ago. The overwhelming majority of journalists are still European, with Maori, Asians and Pasifika under-represented, particularly as reporters. Maori and Pasifika are slightly more likely to be subeditors—a lower paid group.

Of course, the problem with the Census data is that it does not allow a breakdown by medium, as there is likely to be considerable variation within these trends. For example, newspaper editors are generally paid much more than reporters and editors of smaller publications. And the distribution of men, women and ethnicity is likely to vary considerably by medium or publication.

It is apparent from the data that the survey picture of the median New Zealand journalist as increasingly female is upheld by the Census data. Likewise, while the median journalist is still youngish, a comparison with survey data does appear to show a gradual aging. The graph below shows that the profession appears to be losing twenty-somethings and gaining fifty-somethings. Further work would be needed to confirm this.

Beyond that, significant differences emerge. Take income; Lealand’s surveys suggest median income is increasing, albeit slowly. Using the above formula for calculating approximate median income and age, Lealand’s 2003 data...
produces an approximate median age of 38 years, and income of $52,354. This compares with 35 years and $50,632 in 1994—a modest increase in real terms. But the Census and 2006 JTO survey suggest much lower figures. The JTO survey typified the median journalist as female, European, ‘thirty-something’, and earning $40,000 a year. The 2006 Census is somewhere in the middle of Lealand and JTO, with 40.9 years and $45,087. This is shown by Graph 7 below.

However, this article does not attempt to give a definitive comparison of the Census data to previous surveys of journalists. It is difficult to compare them accurately, because a) the surveys mentioned include other suboccupations (e.g. photographer, researcher, cartoonist) in their age and income populations and (b) do not sample the whole population of reporters, subeditors and editors captured by the Census. For example, we do not know if the surveys are capturing proportionally more younger journalists than the Census. It is the potential for these ‘missing journalists’ to skew results that bedevils voluntary surveys. Likewise, we do not know if the Census categories are picking up non-journalists as well. For example, the ‘editor’ category may be capturing non-journalists such as book editors—although the definition given below suggests it should not be.

One way of approaching this problem could be to compare surveys
and Census returns for the relative proportions of reporters, subeditors and editors, using fairly similar definitions of these categories, and excluding photographers etc. If we do this, we see a clear difference between surveys and Censuses (Graph 8):

This table shows that the surveys capture fewer editors and more subeditors than Censuses taken at around the same time. (This is particularly marked for the 2006 Census—but this may be because the overall pool has expanded—from 3561 to 4278). This may be because the Census is also picking up non-journalist editors, as mentioned above. Or it may mean that a large group of subeditors or editors are consistently choosing another category on Census forms. Or it could be that this extra pool of editors captured by the Census is the group of ‘missing’ journalists who do not reply to voluntary surveys. We know that the 2006 Census has an older demographic than the contemporaneous surveys—is this because surveys tend to be filled in by younger journalists, while Censuses also capture a group of older journalists—including more editors—who avoid surveys?

If we accept that the Census data are more representative of these three categories of New Zealand journalists—and it seems reasonable to assume that they are—then clearly survey data need to be interpreted with the absence of this group of older journalists in mind. Future researchers may also
wish to consider ways of capturing this elusive pool of non-responders when designing and targeting surveys. Because of time and resource constraints, it was not possible to compare earlier Census data by age and income with earlier surveys. This would be useful to help establish whether the variations between censuses and surveys noted here are consistent.

Notes
1. This figure was calculated by the author using data in Lealand’s survey and the same formula for approximate median applied to Census data in this article. All figures are have been adjusted for inflation to 2006 dollars, using the Reserve Bank’s CPI calculator (Reserve Bank of New Zealand, 2007).

2. The published 2006 counts of occupations feature two versions—NZSCO99, which permits comparison to 2001 Census, and ANZSCO06, which has different categories and cannot be concorded with NZSCO99 (Statistics New Zealand, 2007b).

3. A reporter is defined under Census category 33612 as someone who:

Collects, reports and comments on news and current affairs for newspapers, magazines, radio or television. Collects information and opinion by observation, interview, investigation from a variety of sources. Produces reports and commentaries. Training and/or experience required: 3-4 year university degree or 6 month polytech course. Communication, writing, research and organisational skills.

An editor is defined under Census category 33613 as someone who:

Directs the preparation of a newspaper, magazine or other publication, controlling the collection of news and selection, revision and arrangement of material for publication. Manages the editorial department. Allots assignments and appraises work submitted for publication. Assigns articles to specialist writers. Edits copy and verifies content of articles, revising where necessary for clarification or adherence to space limitations. Decides spacing and positioning of items. Writes articles or reviews. Training and/or experience required: Pre-entry diploma or journalistic skills. Organisational, decision-making, problem-solving and communication skills.

A subeditor is defined under Census category 33614 as someone who:

Assists with editing of a newspaper, magazine or other publication. Examines materials for suitability for publication with regard to style and conformance to editorial policy. Edits copy to remove errors in spelling, construction, continuity, punctuation and content, or misleading or libellous material. Ensures stories conform with style. Decides layout and writes headlines. Training and/or experience required: Reporting experience and/or pre-entry diploma. Organisational, decision-making, problem-solving and communication skills.

4. Lealand’s total population includes 58 who did not match the Census definitions of reporter, editor or subeditor—20 percent of the total. For the JTO survey, the percentages are probably similar, though it is difficult to be certain, as the total
for occupations adds to more than the 1214 shown. For simplicity, this researcher accepted JTO’s reported percentages of reporters (63 percent), subeditors (16 percent) and editors (24 percent).

5. For this table, the Lealand reporter category includes reporters, chief/senior reporters and freelance journalists; the subeditor category includes chief subs and associate subs; the editor/senior editor category remains alone. The JTO categories have been left as reported.

References


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