



At the 2019 launch of the NZKGI-commissioned book *Seeds of Success* with former Agriculture Minister Damien O'Connor and former NZKGI chairman Doug Brown and author Elaine Fisher. Photo - Jamie Troughton/Dscribe Media

## COVERING HORTICULTURE A JOURNALIST'S PERSPECTIVE

*Contributing writer ELAINE FISHER is retiring after decades of service to horticulture, including stints as editor of the New Zealand Kiwifruit Journal and president of the New Zealand Guild of Agricultural Journalists and Communicators. In her final article for Horticulture New Zealand's magazines, she reflects on a changing media landscape and half a century of journalism.*

**Newspapers were arm-stretching broadsheets, and the Saturday New Zealand Herald was door-stop heavy. A plethora of weeklies and magazines served rural communities. Deadlines were daily and radio and television provided the 'breaking news'.**

That was the media landscape when I became a journalist. No computers, internet, cell phones or digital cameras - I remember the nose-stinging smell of darkroom chemicals and the noise and heat of Linotype machines with their crucibles of melting lead.

Unsurprisingly, 50 years on the media has changed significantly. Newspapers have shrunk to tabloid size; many weeklies and magazines have disappeared, and news is 'instant' whenever and wherever you want it.

Throughout my career, the basic principles I learnt from tough sub-editors in the *Waikato Times* newsroom, served

me well. Research, talk to both sides and ask who, what, where, when, how and why, then check your facts. Keep your opinions out of the story, unless it is an editorial. Let readers form their own views.

Failure to do so resulted in a very public summons across the newsroom floor to the sub's desk for a 'please explain'. No better way to learn.

Now more than ever, those skills are needed to not only serve the public, but also to protect the craft and integrity of journalism and even democracy.

What is now called The Legacy media - print, radio and television - has suffered and, in some cases, collapsed from the emergence of 'new media' - social media, email, search engines and most recently generative AI (artificial intelligence).



Elaine Fisher covered horticulture for decades, and broke the story on Psa's discovery in Te Puke in 2010. Photo - Merle Cave/Coast & Country News

The changes began 20 years ago when Facebook launched. People no longer had to rely on the news and views provided by big (or even small) formal media organisations - they had their own voice and the voices of others around the world.

Anyone could be a reporter, quickly uploading information and images based on their own opinions and observations with no critical oversight. It was exciting and liberating but also dangerous on a personal and political level.

The popularity of social media pulled in the advertising dollars of companies keen to tap into new audiences. This hit print media hard, as did significant increases in printing and postal charges.

Rising costs have led to staff cuts, so increasingly generative AI is used to help create news content, including by the NZ Herald which, in July this year, used an AI tool to produce a *Weekend Herald* editorial about the All Blacks.

According to a 31 July item by Hayden Donnell of RNZ Midweek Mediawatch, New Zealand Herald's publisher NZME said it should have employed more "journalistic rigour" before publishing the editorial.

Artificial intelligence may be a useful tool to quickly research and assemble information in an overstretched, under resourced newsroom, but not to write an editorial which should showcase the best of human generated writing, style and content.

Following the fallout from the admission by NZME, it's likely it and other media will disclose the use of generative

AI in future articles. That could be both reassuring and worrying for readers, many of whom already distrust mainstream media and are even more nervous about AI.

And with justification. It's hard to know exactly who is controlling the AI tools, but one thing is certain - every time we use them, artificial intelligence is learning from us and getting smarter.

“

**Print, radio and television has suffered and, in some cases, collapsed from the emergence of 'new media'**

I believe it is time to return to the best principles of journalism: truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, fairness and public accountability. Doing so will help regain public trust and ensure the survival of journalism as a critical part of democracy, to hold power to account and to accurately inform and entertain readers.

One organisation which seeks to help rural journalists do that is the New Zealand Guild of Agricultural Journalists and Communicators. Among its aims are to: "Maintain a high standard of agricultural journalism", and "Promote better understanding of agriculture, and its place in New Zealand's economic and social life".

For decades I have been a guild member and served on its executive and a term as president. The guild has a code of ethics, offers personal development opportunities, seminars and rewards excellence through its annual journalism and communicator of the year awards. Long may it continue to do so.



Seeds of Success - The stories of New Zealand's Kiwifruit Pioneers by Elaine Fisher was commissioned by NZKGI to mark its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2019. In 2021 Kiwifruit Vine Health published the book Psa, The New Zealand Story written by journalists Sue Hoffart and Elaine Fisher

## Elaine is your contact



Elaine's a Times girl, as we told you yesterday. She's a reporter who is well known to many people associated with many Waikato organisations.

The Times is a community newspaper—your newspaper—and Elaine will be heading a new Times service which, we trust, will encourage more organisations, clubs and readers to help The Times keep the Waikato informed.

Elaine, who is used to getting out of the office and meeting people, has volunteered for a desk job.

If your cat has learned to knit, if you have just seen a flying saucer, if your favourite organisation has done something important, don't just tell the neighbours.

Dial 80129 and ask for Elaine. She will discuss your news with you.

And don't be shy about it. If you even think your big news may interest your fellow Times readers, Elaine will advise you. She's your contact girl!

This 1970 Waikato Times promotion to encourage more local news input from readers featured cadet reporter Elaine Smith

Technology is of course not all bad. Computers, digital cameras, cell phones and the internet enable me to work from home now, and did so while our children were young, long before Covid-19 made it necessary.

Technology has brought changes unimaginable when I began writing for the *Lower North Weekly News* in Wellsford in my last year at high school. That opportunity came on the recommendation of the best careers adviser I could have – retired journalist and my school bus driver Gus Dallas.

My first job, straight from school, was with the *Plateau Gazette* in Taumarunui in 1969. In the years that followed I worked for daily and community papers in Taupo, Hamilton, Whakatane and Tauranga.

It wasn't until the 1990s that I specialised in horticultural reporting as editor of the *New Zealand Kiwifruit Journal*. Growers, post-harvest operators, scientists and industry leaders patiently taught me about growing, packing and marketing kiwifruit.

I wrote about the launch of Hort16A, the first commercial gold kiwifruit with its distinctive 'beak' which taught the industry to handle fruit gently. I also reported on the structural changes within the industry and the branding process which resulted in the Zespri name. It's amusing now to remember the public uproar 'renaming kiwifruit' caused.

I left the *NZ Kiwifruit Journal* in 1998 to join the *Katikati Advertiser*, and in 2008, became the *Bay of Plenty Times* rural editor, including editing the monthly publication *Country News*. I broke the story about the discovery of the vine disease Psa on a Te Puke kiwifruit orchard on 5 November 2010.

Over the coming months and years, I witnessed and wrote about the pain, sorrow, loss and also the determination and innovation of growers and the industry to survive the impacts of the disease. The threat

was met head on, and the industry survived by working together, being flexible and innovative and never forgetting the human toll it was taking.

I accompanied a group of growers to Italy in 2011 to see the devastation the disease had caused there and to find answers, if any, to combat it in New Zealand.

In 2012 I joined Tauranga based Sun Media, owned by Claire and Brian Rogers, as editor of *Coast and Country News*. In 2018 I left to write the book *Seeds of Success - The stories of New Zealand's Kiwifruit Pioneers* to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of New Zealand Kiwifruit Growers Inc.

“

**It's amusing now to remember the public uproar 'renaming kiwifruit' caused**

Together with journalist Sue Hoffart, I wrote for the 2021 publication *Psa, The New Zealand Story*, produced by Kiwifruit Vine Health and edited by Lisa Gibbison. For some years I have also been a freelance writer for HortNZ's publications and for the *New Zealand Dairy Exporter*.

Every day as a journalist I've learnt something new. It's a richly rewarding career which has taken me to North America, Italy, Europe, Japan and throughout New Zealand. I've been privileged to meet and talk with people from all walks of life and been humbled by their trust, especially those recounting stories of grief, loss and hardship.

I've been impressed too, by the generosity of so many who have shared their knowledge, especially those in the horticultural industry.

Now that Graham and I have moved to Māpua in the Tasman Region, it's time to enjoy family, friends and exploring the South Island and beyond. ●