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Under Investigation

The Fate of Current Affairs Under a Public Service Charter

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Abstract

Public service broadcasting around the world has been under siege in the last 15 years and nowhere more so than in New Zealand, arguably one of the most deregulated broadcasting markets. State owned TVNZ, required to make a profit, retained its ratings and advertising income but became almost indistinguishable from its private competitors.

Amid growing concerns that New Zealand television short-changed its citizens, the government restructured TVNZ and in 2003 introduced a Charter to restore public service values. The Charter emphasises social obligations and content that reflects New Zealand culture and it prioritises quality news and current affairs.

However, while the government has provided \$12million for Charter programming in its first year, TVNZ remains overwhelmingly dependent on advertising income and its primetime programming reflects the tensions between commercial and Charter imperatives. There has been little change to the established commercial formula of running "marginal" current affairs shows in early morning or late evening time slots, and public expectations that the Charter might bring more quality programming into primetime remain largely unmet. Instead, the state broadcaster continues to experiment with a changing line-up of programmes which have been criticised for not delivering on Charter principles, or for failing to capitalise on success.

So far, current affairs seem to be the first casualty of a struggle to meet Charter obligations while retaining ratings. TVNZ is struggling to settle on a formula reflecting Charter principles while maintaining the audience share so vital given the low level of government funding. The paper concludes by asking if New Zealand's experiment of commercially funded public service broadcasting can succeed.

Keywords: Public service broadcasting, Television New Zealand, Current affairs, Television

Introduction

Public service broadcasting around the world has been under siege in the last 15 years and nowhere more so than in New Zealand, arguably one of the most deregulated broadcasting markets (Norris, 2002). By the late 1990s, state owned TVNZ, operating under a commercial model requiring it to make a profit, had become almost indistinguishable from its private competitors, to the distress of many viewers. Amid growing concerns that New Zealand television short-changed its citizens, the newly elected Labour-led government restructured TVNZ and in 2003 introduced a Charter to restore public service values. The Charter emphasises social obligations and content that reflects New Zealand culture and it prioritises quality news and current affairs.

However, while the government has provided \$12million for Charter programming in its first year, TVNZ remains overwhelmingly dependent on advertising income and its primetime programming reflects the tensions between commercial and Charter imperatives. There has been little change to

the established commercial formula of running "marginal" current affairs shows in early morning or late evening time slots, and public expectations that the Charter might bring more quality programming into primetime remain largely unmet. Instead, the state broadcaster continues to experiment with a changing line-up of programmes which have been criticised for not delivering on Charter principles, or for failing to capitalise on success. So far, current affairs seem to be the first casualty of a struggle to meet Charter obligations while retaining ratings. TVNZ is struggling to settle on a formula reflecting Charter principles while maintaining the audience share so vital given the low level of government funding.

Changes to Current Affairs Programming

In the late 1990s, before Labour came to power and the shift towards a charter began, TVNZ ran two weekly current affairs shows in primetime, as well as the nightly news entertainment show *Holmes* (which recently celebrated 15 years on air, a record



for a New Zealand current affairs show). *60 Minutes* ran on Sunday evenings for many years, following the international format of an average three stories per episode, with at least one of these local content. New Zealand's only show with a claim to the title of in-depth current affairs, *Assignment*, based on a one-hour, in-depth and local investigation, ran for a limited season for several years, and was usually broadcast mid-week in the 8.30pm time slot. Both of these shows no longer exist. TVNZ's free-to-air competitor, TV3, picked up the international rights to *60 Minutes*, and the hour-long investigation programme *Assignment* was passed over in favour of a new current affairs format, *Sunday*.

Interestingly, while the mid-1990s were marked by growing concern about the quality of TVNZ's news and current affairs, there were at this time current affairs shows for which there are now no equivalent in the post-Charter era. Running mainly out of primetime in the mid to late 1990s were, at various times, *Meet the Press*, *Backchat* and *Ralston Live*, all of which were based around presenter Bill Ralston, then journalist-at-large, now head of news and current affairs at TVNZ.

During the relatively long transition period between the Government announcing the Charter in early 2000, and the restructuring associated with its official implementation in March 2003, TVNZ began to change its current affairs line-up and introduced three primetime initiatives: interview show *Face the Nation* (now known as *Face to Face*), current affairs show *Sunday*, and the youth-oriented *Flipside* on TV2. There have been some changes to scheduling, and the state broadcaster continues to express commitment to increasing its offerings (for example, it was reported in May 2004 that TVNZ is trying to outbid TV3 and secure the local rights to *20/20*). However *Face to Face*, *Flipside* and *Sunday* remain TVNZ's only primetime current affairs shows other than *Holmes*, which follows the news and is promoted as part of its news package. This paper outlines these three initiatives and what they contribute to primetime current affairs in New Zealand, with a particular focus on what TVNZ claims as its "flagship" programme, *Sunday*.

Flipside

The shifting fate of *Flipside* demonstrates the ratings tensions for TVNZ as a two-channel, underfunded public broadcaster. TVNZ can claim only a mixed success in meeting Charter objectives for young people with this youth-oriented, interactive news and current events show. The experiment was particularly notable because *Flipside* was introduced in primetime on TV2, a channel dominated by overseas entertainment shows aimed at the lucrative younger audience. Although steadily building its audience, the late evening version of *Flipside* was

cancelled in April 2004 and the earlier 6pm show moved out of primetime to the 5pm slot. Commentator Fiona Rae (2004) concluded the programme was "a victim of its own success – taking viewers from TV One, maybe, both from the 6 o'clock news and the relentlessly unhip [late news programme] *Tonight*". This move came just two months after TVNZ's CEO Ian Fraser used *Flipside* as an example of charter programming that would help make TV2 a more rounded channel. He told the *Independent* newspaper, "the moment you've got a new-information program (*Flipside* TV2) which is being played four nights a week, in the early evening, and again at 10.30pm, you're moving the channel towards full service operation" (Wilson, 2004, p.18).

Face to Face

Throughout the 1990s, critics of TVNZ's public service offerings lamented the absence of an in-depth interview show following the cancellation of *Fraser* in early 1998 and the domination of the more racy *20/20* or *60 Minutes* short-segment format. As part of its positioning in the lead up to the charter, TVNZ began showing a local, in-depth interview show, initially called *Face the Nation*, in 2000. It was hosted by the network's former political editor, Linda Clark. The programme was re-launched with some fanfare in 2003 as *Face to Face*. Its new host, Radio New Zealand's Kim Hill, came with top credentials as an in-depth "devil's advocate" interviewer. The show attracted some controversy with Hill's early interviews on the Iraq war situation, particularly a hostile jousting session with John Pilger. By April, *Dominion Post* reviewer Jane Clifton, who described Hill as a "national treasure" and the war focus as "duty interviews", was praising the unexpected choice of subjects for her latest programmes. She also noted that it had taken some time for the studio director to let content triumph over style: "we no longer get close-ups of her biro wringing hands or her Mexican waving eyebrows...Now, blessedly, we just get unvarnished Kim and subject – medium close-up, not all askew; no cutaways to body parts or facial tics" (Clifton, 2003, p.B5). But, however critically acclaimed, such a show will still not pull in big audiences. During the first series of 2004, the half hour show was shunted into a later time slot (10.15pm). Its contribution to TVNZ's current affairs line-up depends on the guests, who have ranged from a "dreary" liver cleansing expert (Drinnan, 2004a) to politicians and comedians. Commending Hill's interview with the National Party's Maori Affairs spokesperson Gerry Brownlee and Labour MP John Tamihere, who debated National's controversial Maori policy, Drinnan observed:

This was good current affairs television: two divergent views in the midst of a major change in the politics of

race in New Zealand...But the lesson for TVNZ is not just that you need articulate guests and timely subjects to make good current affairs. The other lesson is that when it comes to Ms Hill on television, less is more.

This was a point picked up by Saunders (2004) in an analysis of the “quality” current affairs interview. He argued the New Zealand genre places too much emphasis on the interviewer, rather than the interviewee. Top interviewers, he suggested, “have lost the plot. They now seem to think they are actors in the political landscape” (p.33). However, he does not place the blame for this trend with the interviewers themselves:

Responsibility substantially belongs with producers who mistakenly think that studio interviews are a gladiatorial contest between the interviewer and their guest, and debates are about a verbal stoush between people who talk past each other until the chair blows the whistle. (p.33)

At the New Zealand Broadcasting School’s 20th anniversary conference in March 2004, TVNZ’s head of news and current affairs Bill Ralston dismissed claims his network “celebrifies” news presenters; a position rebutted by some other delegates who waved copies of women’s magazines featuring TVNZ stars. Ralston’s counter claims also look hollow in light of *One News*’ latest advertising campaign featuring, for example, specialist business (Owen Poland) and Pacific Affairs (Barbara Dreaver) correspondents: “One Poland, One News”; “One Dreaver, One News”.

TVNZ’s commercial imperatives have arguably increased since it became burdened with charter requirements. A slower paced “unvarnished” show where viewers can concentrate on the interviewee is a risky proposition when ratings research supports a preference for pace, personality and conflict. *Face to Face* is being edged out of primetime and TVNZ is undermining any potential of building audience loyalty by running the programme as an intermittent series.

Sunday

In March 2002, *Sunday* was introduced “in anticipation of the formal launch of the Charter” (TVNZ, 2003, p.9). The new programme replaced *60 Minutes* and TVNZ described it as “replacing a foreign-branded and formatted programme with one that is distinctively New Zealand.” However, there was considerable outcry when it became clear that the hour-long investigative programme *Assignment* had been scrapped to boost *Sunday*’s budget. TVNZ CEO Ian Fraser was staunch in defence of the move. The vast majority of the 29 programmes produced yearly by the *Assignment* team, he said, didn’t “make first base ... in terms of quality” and many were merely colour or feature pieces. Greater rigour

and “prime journalistic values” would be delivered within the framework of *Sunday* (Ian Fraser, personal communication, 29 August 2003).

But nine months later, and two years since its start-up, *Sunday* has failed to deliver. Rather than distinctively New Zealand, the show with its *Xfiles*-style title sequence and tabloid headlines is an uneasy blend of the *60 Minutes* format and the *Assignment* approach. Analysis shows programmes run to a regular pattern of one crime story, one current issue, tackled as a frequently voyeuristic personal story, and a final “feel good” feature. TVNZ bills it as New Zealand’s best current affairs programme claiming it provides “the most in-depth information on the stories you need to know about” (<http://www.tvnz.co.nz>). However, it has been criticised as “an issues-free-zone stuck in a highly contrived format” (Drinnan, 2004b) and is rating poorly. Notably, the programme has failed to tackle the “big issue” of 2004, race relations tensions stemming from seashore legislation. CEO Ian Fraser apologised for this at the Broadcasting School Conference in late March.

In a commentary on Radio New Zealand’s *Mediawatch* programme, Tom Frewen (2004) dismissed *Sunday*’s claim as investigative reporting and current affairs:

The fact that...[it] is more closely related to the [tabloid newspaper] *Sunday News* in content and style, is not first-class journalism and is not current affairs illustrates that, after one year of the charter and two years with Ian Fraser at the helm, TVNZ’s marketing and self-promotion remains as divorced from reality as it ever was.

He went on to say that the programme is “embarrassing in its mawkish tabloid sensationalism” and fails to deliver genuine current affairs:

With its tight focus on the human interest in the plight of individual victims, *Sunday*’s format prevents it from looking at a topic like the foreshore and seabed.

Ultimately, Frewen suggested that aside from Kim Hill’s interview show, the state broadcaster’s only real current affairs show is *Marae*, a specialist Maori news show which runs in the wasteland time slot of Sunday mornings. A fortnight later Frewen pointed out that *Marae* and the new media programme *Agenda* (screening at 8.30 on Saturday mornings) are the only TV current affairs programmes whose offerings influence the news agenda.

A look at the first episode of *Sunday*’s 2004 season provides ample evidence of human interest edging out robust debate. The programme opened with a current story, the controversial deportation of a Sri Lankan girl who entered New Zealand claiming to be a political refugee but who was in fact a victim of

family sexual abuse. The story was much-hyped in the teasers (“this is the story the New Zealand government didn’t want you to see”). The *Sunday* team followed the girl to Sri Lanka, dwelling at length on what her grandmother claimed would be the potentially fatal consequences of her deportation. The Sri Lankan community protested about the “sensationalist coverage” and Drinnan (2004b) observes:

For all its pretence of concern at the impact on the girl for speaking out about sexual abuse, it seems highly likely she is in a worse position after a New Zealand film crew arrived than she was at the start. Was *Sunday* suggesting New Zealand should open its door to sexual abuse refugees? Don’t bother asking. *Sunday* doesn’t do issues.

In the same episode, a story headed “From Choir Boy to Killer” followed the trial of a man for a murder committed many years previously. The programme then turned to the North Island’s recent flooding, which was so extensive it affected the country’s GDP. The event raised a number of crucial national issues, from the efficacy flood control work and the building of homes in flood paths to the response of emergency services, taking in the economics of hill country farming, the adequacy of insurance and the effects of global warming. However *Sunday* tackled it as some kind of “shock and awe” show staged to show city dwellers the perils of nature and the stoic capabilities of “ordinary” rural people used to dealing with the harsher realities of life on the land. “Hard Rain” began with an extended sequence of helicopter recovery of stranded cows, set to blues music, and reporter Jackie Maher saying:

The script could’ve been written in Hollywood but the perfect storm which has continued to ravage the lower North Island is a disaster pure and simple – no special effects needed. Nature, raw and savage, has unleashed a bombardment of rain; winds have gusted up to gale force and beyond. The clash of weather fronts has caused disaster of an epic scale. But this has been relieved by the spirit of ordinary New Zealanders, heartland country people who’ve shown uncommon courage in the face of overwhelming adversity.

Now we all know that pigs can’t fly but above the flood waters of the Manawatu this week cows were winging it and in style...Humans rescuing animals to be expected but out of all the watery misery this week came a remarkable story of one heroic animal which saved her owner’s life.

A local dairy farmer recounted how a cow assisted her to safety when she became caught in flood waters. Aerial shots of the damage gave way to interviews with families isolated by flood damaged roads, who criticised the government’s rescue package and shared their thoughts on the damage. In

the end, *Sunday* was less informative and analytical than the news of the previous week. It failed to identify, let alone explore, the underlying issues.

The season’s offerings did not improve. Two weeks later *Sunday* began by focusing its investigative talents on “The Mistress”, previewed with these words: “It was a bizarre love story, the expensive call girl and the Canterbury farmer...but was it a motive for murder?” This was followed by the fate of boxer David Tua – “The Tuaman’s missing millions: will his last fight be in the High Court?” – and an upbeat item on the “wizard from Weta”, a local company enjoying Oscar success for its work on *Lord of the Rings*.

At a time when New Zealand faced a constitutional turning point over the allocation of foreshore and seabed ownership rights, the country’s best resourced current affairs show on Charter-driven TVNZ led with sex, sleaze and death. The first story concerned the conviction of a Canterbury farmer for the murder of his wife. It was told from the viewpoint of his current wife, a former prostitute and, at the time of the first wife’s death in an unexplained car fire, the farmer’s “mistress”. In a 17-minute item strongly indicative of chequebook journalism, “the mistress” was described as “blonde, 38 and expensive”. We were treated to confessional sound bites from the “former lady of the night, now lady of the land”: “I have to accept I’m a sexy person” and “he was like a boy in a lolly shop”. The interview and narrative were shot through with reconstructions of the fatal car fire, backshots of a seductively dressed “callgirl” walking towards the hotel room where she would meet her future husband, and shadowy pictures of a couple drinking. This was set to the music of Norah Jones and juxtaposed with police photographs. The item raised doubts about the court case and police investigation, but only through a series of vague implications. “Five years ago a phone call between two strangers held the promise of the night. Now the farmer is a prisoner, the escort is a landowner, the wife now deceased”. It appears the story was chosen for no other reason than its role as titillating entertainment.

Even when *Sunday* tackles serious issues with wider implications, as it did in a 14 March item about medical malpractice and patients’ right to know, its treatment tends to be highly emotive and personalised. The item concerned the death of a baby during a waterbirth, the midwife’s alleged responsibility and the potential consequences of her continuing to practise:

It should’ve been the happiest time of their lives, the homebirth of their first born...instead it went horribly wrong...the midwife is guilty, she’s still working. Are we entitled to know her name?

The story exploited every nuance of the parents’ grief, and drew on reconstruction, clips from

commercially produced waterbirth videos, personal photographs and close-ups, variously set to the sounds of panting, a ticking clock, beating heart and violin music. Reporter Jackie Maher made some efforts to engage with the issue, however. She drew (briefly) on comment from the Health and Disability Commissioner, noted that the Nursing Council declined to comment, and summarised the underlying issues:

When a midwife gets it wrong and a baby dies, the grieving parents have a right to some answers. The New Zealand Nursing Council has an obligation to investigate what went wrong and to set the standards of conduct. Mothers who are going to have babies in the future should be able to make an informed choice of midwife without fearing the consequences.

This has little impact, though, on the weight of the story. Ultimately, the poem read by the grief-stricken parents and their tears prevailed. Yet again, *Sunday's* emotion-laden reporting obscured the broader themes and implications.

Similarly, a report on gang activities (also in the 14 March episode), originating in the “tough underbelly” of Australia’s “wild west”, contained only a token attempt at balance and instead effortlessly linked gangs to drugs, courtesy of predominantly unquestioned Police assertions. Western Australia’s police chief, who featured throughout the item, was brought to New Zealand as a guest of the Police Association as part of their lobbying for greater resources and legislative action to tackle “P”. Over shots of presumed gang members at some unnamed location, the item’s preamble stated:

Criminal gangs are fuelling New Zealand’s p-epidemic... They’re known for drug dealing, bashings, bombings and drive-by shootings...In New Zealand there are almost as many patched gang members as there are Police. Their menace can be summed up in one letter: P...leaving a trail of addiction, violence, and nasty seemingly senseless murders.

The item used emotive and loaded language, slow motion footage of a police funeral and featured a mock police raid into a room containing reporter Mark Crysell. It tangentially linked Australia’s experience to local “horror stories”. A short interview with Justice Minister Phil Goff (1 minute 30 seconds) provided a more cautious viewpoint but despite his points about the differences in New Zealand legislation making the changes sought in the programme irrelevant, the Australian views are presented predominantly unchallenged.

The Future of Prime Time Current Affairs

The TVNZ Charter promises “independent, impartial, and in-depth coverage and analysis of

news and current affairs”. While the introduction of the charter, after 14 years where TVNZ was constrained by legislation to be profit-driven raised high hopes, the new law still requires the broadcaster to balance charter objectives with commercial considerations. Further, TVNZ earns big advertising dollars and the Labour government is committed to supporting private creative companies, so the state broadcaster has been given little public money for charter programming. This commercial imperative gives TVNZ slight incentive to reinstate public service values in the shape of in-depth current affairs in its primetime schedule.

The dilemma that faces TVNZ is, of course, by no means unique. Commercial pressures following on the deregulation of broadcasting in the 1980s threatened the survival of public broadcasters around the world (Willard & Tracey, 1990). Many authors have linked these changes to the spread of infotainment formats in Europe (Holtz-Bach & Norris, 2001; Juneau, 1995). There is evidence in Europe that the values of public service broadcasting have been to some extent retained where PSB was well established before deregulation (Holtz-Bacha & Norris, 2001) and there have been efforts to re-regulate and strengthen PSB (Hibberd, 2001; Ward, 2003). Holtz-Bacha and Norris (2001) reviewed evidence that programming formats do influence knowledge and also analysed audiences for preference for public television or commercial television and political knowledge. They found that in most European countries, a preference for public television goes hand in hand with a greater knowledge of political matters.

At the same time public broadcasters are under considerable pressure to imitate the commercial model. According to Norris, Pauling, Zanker and Lealand (2003), who examined public service broadcasters in six countries: “There is political pressure on public service broadcasters to win ratings ... a crude but useful measure of the continuing cultural and informational relevance of public service outputs to national citizens, thus justifying the state’s involvement or the licence fee” (p.46). The result, they say, has been “a marked shift to commercial scheduling and branding strategies among generalist public broadcasters...a growing market ‘audience orientation’ and increasing reluctance to risk ratings by programming minority or risky programming in primetime” (p.46). As Blumler (1999) comments, “even in Britain, the birthplace of missionary public service broadcasting, television today offers more slice-of-real life ‘docusoaps’ than analytically pedagogic documentaries; single-subject current affairs programmes are being replaced by faster pace magazine programmes” (p. 242). If major public broadcasters with government or licence fee funding are affected, the commercial pressure at TVNZ with its reliance on advertising is much stronger.

Concern about the spread of commercial television values and infotainment programmes and their detrimental effects on public life and political participation in Europe and North America has been widespread (e.g. Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Kellner, 1990; Putnam, 2000). It is not only academics who are worried. Krönig, London editor of *Die Ziet*, says a British Film Institute survey showed seventy percent of programme makers believed the quality of television has fallen and over half of those working in news and documentaries said they had been pressured to distort the truth to create more exciting programming. He concludes: "We hear a lot about re-creating civic society and enhancing social cohesion. However, this will not be possible when opposed by a media industry in the grip of unfettered market forces and guided by commercial values only" (2000, p.48).

Such liberal laments about the decline of journalism have met some resistance from those who celebrate popular culture or believe that the tabloid trend has brought important private issues into the public sphere (e.g. Grabe, Zhou & Barnett, 2001; Lumby, 1997 in Turner, 1999). Turner writes of a generalised shift in the UK, USA and Australia "away from information-based treatments of social issues and towards entertaining stories on lifestyles or celebrities, and an overwhelming investment in the power of the visual" (p.59). He is critical of simplistic critiques of "other news" as merely an "irresponsible aberration or a failure of taste" (p.67) and is wary of the all-too-broad

'tabloidization' label. However, he points to the "predatory side of the tabloid trend in news and current affairs". He argues there are power issues involved in "the bullying foot-in-the door reporter, ...the lynch-mob mentality of so called 'attack' journalism, or the sleazy self-righteousness of the 'hidden camera' stories" (p.68). Turner points out that journalists use arguments about the importance of information in democracy to mask commercial motives. More recently, in an analysis of Australian current affairs programming, Turner (2003) suggests audience appeal drives topic selection and story construction, which in turn gives rise to shows divorced from the daily news agenda. The results of such an approach, mirrored in our analysis of the New Zealand situation,

Are not usually news or current affairs stories of social or political importance, deserving close investigation. Rather, they are simply a matter of genre: stories are processed into the news and current affairs format in order to turn them into a recognisable genre of entertainment. (p.140)

Clearly the impacts of what Turner calls "journalism's institutional reconciliation with its commercial function as a form of entertainment" (p.75) are only just beginning to be explored. We endorse his call for a more profound examination of what is happening; a task we believe should be tackled from a number of perspectives.

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