

The Death of a Genre?: Television Current Affairs Programmes on New Zealand Public Television

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Abstract

“We need the angry buzz of current affairs programmes” (Professor Sylvia Harvey in Holland, 2006, p. iv)

“In a public system, television producers acquire money to make programmes. In a commercial system they make programmes to acquire money” (Tracey, 1998, p.18).

Television current affairs programmes have from their inception been a flagship genre in the schedules of public service broadcasters. As a television form they were to background, contextualise and examine in depth issues which may have appeared in the news. They clearly met the public broadcasters' brief to 'inform and educate' and contribute to the notional 'public sphere'. Over the past two decades policies of deregulation and the impact of new media technologies have arguably diminished the role of public broadcasting and profoundly affected the resources available for current or public affairs television with subsequent impacts on its forms and importance. This paper looks at the output of one public broadcaster, Television New Zealand (TVNZ), and examines its current affairs programming through this period of change

Introduction

From their inception current affairs programmes have played an important part in the schedules of public broadcasters offering a platform for citizens to debate and assess issues of importance. They are part of the public sphere in which the audience is considered to be made up of thoughtful, participating citizens who use the media to help them learn about the world and debate their responses and reach informed decisions about what courses of action to adopt (Dahlgren & Sparks, 1991). Here “issues of importance to a political community are discussed and debated, and where information is presented that is essential to citizen participation in community life” (Herman & McChesney, 1997, p.3).

However one of the most dramatic changes to western broadcasting in the last 15 to 20 years has been the lessening of commitment by many western broadcasters to public service broadcasting (Comrie, 2002; Norris, P., Pauling., B Zanker., Lealand, G, 2003; Tracy, 1998; Willard & Tracy, 1990). Within public service broadcasting current affairs programmes have traditionally been a key genre for contextualising and examining news and contemporary issues.

Current affairs programmes began in 1955 in Britain with *Panorama* screened by the BBC. Prior to this, the coverage of political and current events had been weak and these programmes filled a journalistic vacuum. Current affairs programmes aimed to critique, pose questions, investigate and challenge (Holland, 2001). The genre built on the shorter treatment of stories in the news to give audiences a much needed understanding of important issues and contribute to democratic life (Holland, 2006).ⁱ

Modern current affairs programmes however have received much criticism with many suggesting the genre has lost its way and may be in possible terminal decline (Barnett & Seymour, 1999; Franklin, 1997, Hirst, White, Chaplin & Wilson, 1995; Turner, 2005). In response to the criticism other industry practitioners and academics argue that the genre has simply changed with the times and altered to meet the demands of the broadcasting environment becoming more popular, accessible and democratic than the traditional current affairs programmes (Alysen, 2000; Lumby, 1999, Holland, 2001, Macdonald, 2003).ⁱⁱ

New Zealand’s broadcasting system has followed the pattern of other Western countries with a withdrawal from public service broadcasting. Originally a hybrid system it was composed of a mixture of some commercial funding and public service principles which later moved towards a deregulated commercially driven environment from the late 1980s (Debrett, 2005).ⁱⁱⁱ The broadcasting system has been described as a “political football” where the metaphor reflects the continuous restructuring that has been the hallmark of broadcasting since its inception. This paper looks at TVNZ and examines its current affairs programmes during the period of deregulation to the present. I argue that as the broadcaster has moved away from public broadcasting principles, current affairs programmes have declined in their ability to perform their original function and are symptomatic of the decline of public service broadcasting in New Zealand. This is reinforced with a brief description of the subject coverage of the programme *Close Up* in 2005/ 2006 and a comparison with the Charter current affairs programme *Agenda* during the same period.

The Withdrawal from Public broadcasting

The key turning point from what was a loosely public service broadcasting system was the impact of the neo-liberal policies introduced after the election of the 1984 Labour government and followed by successive governments in the 1990s. These changes were viewed as impacting negatively on programming in New Zealand by bringing about tabloid news and current affairs as well as other losses in quality (Atkinson, 1994; Edwards, 2002; Kelsey, 1995). The resulting changes and emphasis on profit was so great that Harcourt says of the years of deregulation at Television New Zealand (TVNZ):

TVNZ is, according to a TVNZ study, the world's most successful publicly-owned broadcaster- if you look at the bottom line. It may have almost abdicated any notion of public service broadcasting but it makes loads of money: \$NZ 21.6 million in the final months of 1999 (2000, p.18).

The impact on news and current affairs was congruent with the effects of a “commercially skewed system, the country's most widely accessed news and current affairs service was reinvented to serve a ratings agenda” (Debrett, 2005, p.79). After another period of restructuring seeking to redress some of the extremes of the deregulation model, TVNZ was to change from an SOE (State owned enterprise) to a CROC (Crown Owned Company) and given a set of guiding principles in the form of a Charter in 2003. However critics still wonder if New Zealand broadcasting will ever see a return to ‘quality’ news and current affairs as promised in the Charter (Cocker, 2006; Comrie, 2005; Thompson, 2004). The conundrum of this attempt at re-regulation is that TVNZ must still return a profit to government, while seeking to deliver on the principles of the Charter.^{iv}

Current affairs programmes in New Zealand

Current Affairs television programmes began in New Zealand with *Compass* in 1963, *Column Comment* followed in 1964 and was a long running, widely watched commentary on New Zealand journalism (Day, 2000). The style of programming was a new experience for the audience, broadcasting executives and politicians alike and the Holyoake administration of the 1960s became the first New Zealand administration to experience media questioning in a more aggressive and intense style. Politicians were extremely wary of the new forms of current affairs programmes and made a number of demands which led many to believe that these programmes were still open to government intervention or at least self censorship (Day, 2000). In 1968 this was to change with *Gallery*, which replaced *Compass* (Day, 2000). Old constraints were discarded and interviewers and producers were able to engage more forthrightly with politicians and other community leaders (Saunders, 2004).^v

The current affairs programmes of the 1990s have been critiqued with the suggestion that in reaction to the environment of fierce commercial pressure they have become watered down, often delivering a ‘context free’ snapshot of reality, steeped in tabloid values (Comrie & Fountaine, 2005b; Franklin, 1997; Herman & McChesney, 1997). For many New Zealand commentators there has been a direct link between a perceived increase in tabloid stories and presentation with the impact of deregulation (Atkinson, 1994b, 1994c, 2001, 2006; Comrie, 2002; Edwards, 2002; Hayward, 2003; Kelsey, 1995, Saunders, 2004).

These concerns have not abated with the adoption of a Charter by TVNZ in 2003 with the observation that this has done little to improve a poor situation (Comrie & Fountaine, 2005b). The perception is that its failure has resulted from an inversion of the news hierarchy with a focus on stories which focus on personal tragedy, celebrity, scandal, relationships and sexuality and these aspects are being privileged over the political or business angled stories that were typically the focus of current affairs programmes (Lumby, 1999).

TVNZ

In the mid 1980s after the election of the fourth Labour government with its agenda to reform the economy using neo-liberal economics, Television New Zealand was changed from an organization that loosely embodied aspects of public service television, to an organization whose remit was to make a profit as a State Owned Enterprise (Harcourt, 2000). The process of deregulation opened the market up to both local and overseas competition (Comrie & Fountaine, 2005). Between 1987 and 1990, New Zealand's publicly owned two-channel television system was transformed into a commercial three-channel market-driven system. The Broadcasting Act of 1989 turned TVNZ into a State Owned Enterprise and gave it responsibility to operate with the same business principles as its commercial rivals (TVNZ, 1991).

In this period, TVNZ changed dramatically as it grew to meet competition from TV3 and number of narrow-casters (Atkinson, 1994b). There was a move toward softer or tabloid news and this led to an increase in criticism of the commercial imperative with "a rising tide of criticism about 'quality', particularly in the top-rating *One News* and various current affairs programmes" (Comrie & Fontaine, 2005b, p102).^{vi}

The *Holmes* programme, TVNZ's flagship current affairs offering, screened after the news and was presenter-driven. Its format demanded there even the most apparently difficult subject matter was to be treated in a manner to be attractive to a majority of viewers. This was a shift away from the prescription of the traditional current affairs programme where the idea was to stimulate engagement and possibly action. *Holmes'* aim was to provide a compelling mix of topics, from an emphasis on a central issue of the day to lighter features of the 'human interest' type. This entertainment-oriented approach was designed to sustain viewers already watching from the news (Holmes, n.d).^{vii} Thompson says:

Holmes was an enormous success in terms of delivering audience share, but its personality driven format, drawing on Paul Holmes' ability to insinuate himself as the ostensible voice of middle New Zealand, worked better with human interest issues than with serious analysis of political and economic affairs (Thompson, 2005, p. 2).

Holmes bore little resemblance to what would traditionally be thought of as current affairs and sacrificed more serious journalistic norms to gather viewers. During the late 1990s other current affairs programmes in primetime were *60 Minutes*, based on the international format which ran on Sunday evenings and *Assignment* which was New Zealand's in-depth current affairs programme. It ran for several years on limited runs and no longer exists (Comrie & Fountaine, 2005b). After the charter formally began in March 2003, new initiatives were taken with current affairs programmes. These were *Face the Nation* which became *Face to Face*, *Agenda*, *Sunday* and the youth focused programme *Flipside*, which screened on TV2. Since their inception, *Flipside* has gone and *Face to Face* has since been cut due to low

ratings. A programme that has received critical success is *Agenda*; however it is placed in a Saturday morning slot, which is not conducive to rating well (Comrie & Fountaine, 2005b).^{viii}

Paul Holmes departed in 2004 to join another channel and was replaced by presenter Susan Wood. The *Holmes* programme was renamed *Close Up*.^{ix} Thompson questioned the claimed improvement with the change of presenter and said of Wood's efforts:

On several occasions so far, Wood's has introduced issues with colloquial and emotive expressions of opinion more akin to talk-back radio than serious and balanced current affairs (2005, p.2).

In late 2005, Susan Wood announced her resignation from *Close Up* and has been replaced by TVNZ political reporter Mark Sainsbury. This change coincided with a ratings battle with the *Campbell Live* programme broadcast on the competing channel Television Three (TV3). The problem for TVNZ, Comrie & Fountaine suggest, is that "the new law still requires the broadcaster to balance charter objectives with commercial considerations" (2005, p.14). This recent run of changes shows the public broadcaster still has major difficulties in achieving this balance. Though the mid 1990s was a time marked by concern over the quality of current affairs programmes there are, Comrie & Fountaine suggest, no equivalent shows produced in the post-charter era and the current state of *Close Up* suggests the environment has only become tougher. They state TVNZ's commercial imperatives have "arguably increased since it became burdened with charter requirements" (2005b, p.10).

Atkinson argues the pressure to produce ratings is problematic for news and current affairs programmes and "for all the talk of 'consumer sovereignty' commercial media are chiefly concerned with delivering audiences to advertisers (Atkinson, 2006, p.5).^x

The different modes of address in news and current affairs programmes since the changes of deregulation have been explored by Atkinson and he says they are symptomatic of a "hybrid consumption setting" (2006, p.10).^{xi} This change he says has intensified over the decades. Of these one of the worst culprits is *Campbell Live*'s John Campbell:

Campbell has certainly entered the political fray as a participant rather than a third-party mediator, and the question is how long he can use the alibi of public interest to defend actions that are not journalism. The trick so far seems to be that he has so far been able to convince his audience of his own sincerity (Atkinson, 2006, p. 12).

The ratings suggest however that Campbell is making inroads on *Close Up* and the audience share has been split between the two programmes. With John Campbell's approach it makes the task for *Close Up* a difficult one.^{xii} Applying Comrie's (1996) subject categories in research on the news to this programme, it is clear that *Close Up* is attempting to compete with its rival by similar subject coverage.^{xiii} A sample of episodes from the Charter period 2005/2006 from January to December demonstrates that the programme relies heavily upon cultural, entertainment, crime and human interest stories (TVNZ, 2007)^{xiv}. For a full explanation of subject categories see Appendix 1. These figures show that although the publicity material from TVNZ in the Charter period suggested a return to hard news, what has occurred is more a continuation of focusing on human interest, entertainment and crime stories.

Table 1

Subject categories	Total
Politics and Government Acts	17
War and Defence	3
Diplomacy and Foreign relations	1
Economic Activity	4
Agriculture and environment	1
Public Health and Welfare	10
Education	1
Science technology and invention	-
Crime	16
Accidents and disasters	6
Sport	14
Culture	32
Maori	2
Human Interest	31
Public Moral problems	5

Table showing total number of subject occurrences over 50 episodes of Close Up from 2005/2006

In contrast, *Agenda*, the Charter current affairs programme screened on Saturday mornings is closer in style and subject matter to traditional current affairs programmes (agendatv.itmsconnect.com/ 2007).^{xv} The data shows the subject emphasis on *Agenda* is on politics and government acts with no human interest stories and no discussion of crime or accidents and disasters and is a marked change from the subject matter covered by *Close Up*.^{xvi} The comparison between the two programmes demonstrates the different subject matter required for prime-time current affairs viewing in a commercially driven environment versus an off peak time slot.

Table 2

Subject categories	Total
Politics and Government Acts	57
War and Defence	3
Diplomacy and Foreign relations	11
Economic Activity	9
Agriculture and environment	1
Public Health and Welfare	
Education	3
Science technology and invention	
Crime	
Accidents and disasters	
Sport	
Culture	5
Maori	3
Human Interest	
Public Moral problems	1

Table showing total number of subject occurrences over 50 episodes of Agenda from 2005/2006

TVNZ has withdrawn its charter programming or located it in early morning weekend schedules.^{xvii} It is also at present producing a ‘flagship’ current affairs programme which is a *mélange* of magazine and current affairs formats. The consequence of this reaction to competition is problematic and Atkinson says:

Letting the market prevail therefore has consequences. It is a recipe for more entertainment-oriented, human interest story-telling, avoidance of topics that divide us (e.g., politics and public affairs), and the proliferation of tabloid crime coverage, often with a conservative law and order focus (2006, p.5).

Conclusion

Current affairs programmes were originally produced in a public broadcasting era and were designed to provide depth and analysis of important and serious topics. As western broadcasting has altered and public service broadcasting has diminished, current affairs as a genre appeared especially vulnerable under intense commercial conditions. Since the adoption of a Charter, for TVNZ current affairs programmes seem even more vulnerable in the primetime slots. Thompson says of the latest approach in the ever-changing system:

The practical third way philosophy ‘tends to promote the pursuit of social-cultural democratic goals in whatever policy space remains after market imperatives have been accommodated’ (2004, p.62).

The data on *Close Up* shows a programme dominated by human interest and entertainment stories and sports, while the Charter programme *Agenda* focuses on politics.^{xviii} The failure of the Charter to reinvigorate the production of prime-time current affairs programmes means:

TVNZ will remain primarily a conduit for consumer oriented programming in which its charter directive to ‘provide comprehensive, impartial, authoritative and in-depth coverage and analysis of news and current affairs in NZ will be all but impossible’ (Debrett, 2005, p.81).

The experience under the Charter so far has shown that when these programmes do not reach the ratings required, they fall off the schedule (Sainsbury, 2005). Kim Hill’s charter current affairs programme *Face to Face* is an example of this and demonstrates how even with the attempt at a return to ‘quality’ programming the genre does not sit comfortably in the current ratings driven environment.

This raises many issues about the current affairs genre in general and how it has fared in the New Zealand context. Whether commentators agree or not on concepts such as quality, the data raises questions as to whether the genre can still critique, pose questions, investigate or challenge. Current affairs programmes once worked because of a belief in what they could provide and their decline can be seen as symptomatic of the decline of public service values. If the programmes are deemed too serious such as the interview format of *Face to Face* or too educative with too little entertainment, then they are usually axed. The commercial backdrop of a deregulated environment is still the main driving focus of TVNZ and it looks like this will not change in the near future. This is a problematic environment for the traditional current affairs genre to thrive or survive.

Endnotes

ⁱ This was achieved by the presentations of politicians to the public through television appearances and this became a key part of the public sphereⁱ (Herman & McChesney, 1997)

ⁱⁱ The debate about current affairs features questions about the very nature of what the programme or genre is. Programmes like *60 Minutes* and *20/20* would not have been considered current affairs.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a discussion of New Zealand's turbulent broadcasting environment see Debrett's (2005) *Extreme Makeover: The recurring motif of New Zealand broadcasting policy*.

^{iv} Alan Cocker's (2006) *The Television New Zealand Charter: Rethinking Deregulated Broadcasting* argues the TVNZ charter is an example of flawed public policy formulation and implementation. Peter Thompson's (2004) *Unto God or unto Caesar? Television after the TVNZ Charter* discusses practical and ideological tensions assumed within the current government's approach to regulating the broadcasting sector in New Zealand.

^v This was believed to be a coming of age for New Zealand current affairs programmes with Brain Edwards as the main interviewer and Des Monaghan as producer. Edwards was encouraged to adopt a harder more aggressive style and it was during these years that current affairs broke from its past restrictions.

^{vi} Atkinson notes that tabloid journalism has been seen on New Zealand television in the head-to-head current affairs magazines, *60 Minutes* and *20/20*.^{vi} He argues that the increase in reality television and talk shows such as *Cops*, *Sally Jessy Raphael* and *Oprah Winfrey* have influenced the style of current affairs programmes in New Zealand, and he suggests the prime-time commercial television tabloid presence was felt more in Television One and Television Three News and the companion current affairs programme to *One News*, *Holmes* (Atkinson, 2001).

^{vii} This programme brief was written by TVNZ but does not contain a date or publication title. It was written for the first series of the *Holmes* programme.

^{viii} Saturday and Sunday mornings are often given to minority programming that TVNZ does not screen in primetime.

^{ix} Wood offered her personal asides and opinions on the outcome of 0900 'phone in' polls.^{ix} In a poll taken on whether the controversial Civil Union Bill should go ahead, Wood presented a questionable poll as fact, as well as making reference to her role as a concerned mother (Banks, 2004).

^x The problem with the ethos of consumer sovereignty is that it rests on the crude "utilitarian notion that people know what they want, rather than being cumulatively conditioned by what is available" (Atkinson, 2006, p.5).

^{xi} He has mapped the changes by categorising the three main forms of delivery associated with the news and current affairs under different broadcasting systems (Atkinson, 2006). Using a scale of P1 to P3, he suggests that most presenters have moved from P1 which features aspects normally associated with the public sphere notions to far more commercial performances. P1 is the norm of more public sphere type journalism, P.2 is primarily focused on cost-efficient delivery of news commodities to lucrative demographic groups and P.3 is focused on more persuasive theatrical displays of journalistic roles designed to initiate controversy, generate publicity and be seen as glamorous in the quest to maximize audiences (Atkinson, 2006).

The P1 approach suggested responsible journalists behave as trusted third-party mediators and accept some version of their responsibilities. There have been tendencies in Western Journalism for the lofty P1 goals to be displaced by more commercial P2 and entertainment oriented P 3 criteria.

^{xii} AGB Nielsen Media Research showed *Close Up's* share of viewers aged 5 and above ranged between 32 and 35 percent in 2006 and TV3's rival *Campbell Live* took between 14 and 16 per cent of the age group though the gap narrowed when the channel's target audiences were considered (*NZ Herald*, 2006).

^{xiii} There were approximately two hundred programmes listed and a sample of 50 programmes was chosen at random to show general subject trends.

^{xiv} For a full list of *Close Up* archive stories see

http://tvnz.co.nz/cda/tvznz/archive/?search=&media=§ion=close%20up&style=tv_one

^{xv} A sample of 50 programmes were chosen consecutively over the two year period to show general subject trends. This was necessary as *Agenda* screens once a week rather than each week night.

^{xvi} Peter Thompson (2004) outlines debates about how some popular Charter programmes like long running soap *Shortland Street* is a Charter programme which screens in prime-time, though programmes which will not rate highly are too risky to appear in the prime-time slot. *Agenda* is such a programme.

^{xviii} The number of political stories on *Close Up* were within this sample quite high however many of them focused on political scandals. In contrast within this sample there were very few stories on acts of parliament or broader economic stories.

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Appendix 1

The subject categories Comrie used were:

<i>Politics and Government Acts</i>	Government acts and politics at local, regional, national and international level
<i>War and defence</i>	War, defence, rebellion, armed intervention, military use of space. Includes World War 2 anniversaries and Nazi hunts.
<i>Diplomacy and foreign relations</i>	Both foreign and domestic items dealing with diplomacy and foreign relations. Includes United Nations. Covers such issues as ANZUS and the nuclear debate
<i>Economic activity</i>	General economic activity, share market, money, prices, labour, wages, natural resources, transportation and travel.
<i>Agriculture and environment</i>	Includes fishing and forestry as primary export industries (subcategory of the environment)
<i>Public health and welfare</i>	Health, public welfare, social and safety measures, welfare of children and marriage and marriage relations.
<i>Education</i>	Includes resourcing and industrial matters.
<i>Science, technology and invention</i>	Science and technology other than that related to defence or health and medicine.
<i>Crime</i>	All crime stories, including criminal proceedings in court, police stories and police resourcing.
<i>Accidents and disasters</i>	Both human-made and natural disasters.
<i>Sport</i>	Organised sport (includes climbing).

<i>Culture</i>	Classic arts, history, ethnic (excluding Maori), entertainment and amusements, media (sub categories popular and classic).
<i>Maori</i>	Maori issues include political issues, resources and culture (Maori moral problems and crime sub-categories).
<i>Human interest</i>	Human interest, obituaries, animals, cute children, juvenile interest, Royals and weather, when not part of accident and disaster category.
<i>Public moral problems</i>	Human relations and moral problems, including alcohol, divorce, sex, race relations and civil court proceedings.