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Hypercommercial Television: An Introduction

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the introduction and spread of hyper-commercial broadcasting on free-to-air television in New Zealand. It begins by defining the key terms and then moves to outline the circumstances under which such broadcasting developed. Drawing on a content analysis of television schedules, the paper will show the rapidity and extent to which networks chose to screen hypercommercial television forms with a specific focus on two particular examples of the genre.

KEYWORDS

hypercommercialism
commercial speech
television
New Zealand
marketing
promotional culture

INTRODUCTION

For the purposes of this paper, ‘hypercommercial broadcasting’ simply refers to television programming that is supported by commercial messages over and above standard magazine advertising. Obvious examples include programme sponsorship, product placement and infomercials. More specifically however, the 1990s in New Zealand saw two particular examples of hypercommercial broadcasting that deserve focussed investigation.

MAGAZINE/ADVERTORIAL PROGRAMMING

Magazine/advertorial programmes are those in which a significant portion of the time is devoted to advertorial promotions of featured goods. In this context ‘advertorial’ refers to infomercial or infomercial-style segments that are integrated into the show. This process can be extremely blatant; infomercial spokespeople (and infomercial excerpts) can be seamlessly integrated into the show. It can also be relatively subtle; presenters and guests can ‘chat’ and

offer 'information' and this is only revealed as an infomercial when the product is advertised at the end of the segment.

There are two examples of this programming as Television New Zealand looked to target both morning and afternoon audiences (and used one show for each). *Good Morning* was designed so that companies could buy four-minute advertorial slots for \$2700 each (Marketing 1996: 2). Advertisers were also encouraged to 'sponsor information segments' (The Independent 1996a: 33). Initially at least there were no advertisement breaks in the show and Sue Chapman, TVNZ's assistant director of Sales and Marketing, was indirectly quoted as saying that 'the subtlety of the distinction between programming and paid advertising on *Good Morning* will break new ground' (Marketing 1996: 2). Although there was considerable criticism of *Good Morning* (see for instance Hogg 1996), it was very successful commercially: in June 1996 the show was doubled to two hours after generating over four thousand calls a day and rating five per cent for women in the 25 to 39 age bracket and in 1997 TVNZ added a major sponsor (The Independent 1996b: 26; Marketing Magazine 1997b: 2).

From the perspective of an infomercial marketing company, *Good Morning* offered two clear benefits. Firstly, one infomercial slot on the programme could generate as many calls as an entire infomercial (Infomercial company marketing executive pers. comm.). Secondly, *Good Morning* did not require changes to the infomercial 'pitch':

When Suzanne [Paul] launches into her sales pitch, she's a whirling dervish throwing doggy-bowlfuls of cigarette ash, paper clips and crisps on a carpet square and then, like a magician, making them all disappear with the mini-sweeper. The 'interviewer' stands uselessly, her feverish platitudes overridden by Suzanne's bullish, unstoppable sales patter. (Hansen 1996: 59)

Of course, the infomercial slots within the *Good Morning* benefit from the legitimacy (and audience size) of the surrounding editorial content.

Typically, in 1996 viewers could expect 28% of an episode of *Good Morning* to be devoted to infomercial slots, with that figure reducing to 18% in 1999 and 14% in 2002.¹ However these figures are somewhat misleading. In 1996 there were no commercial breaks during *Good Morning*; infomercial slots provided the only outlet for commercial messages. By 1999 commercial breaks had been introduced and typically accounted for 10% of total broadcast time.

When the infomercial slots and commercial breaks are added together the total proportion of commercial messages in a typical *Good Morning* episode was relatively constant: 28% in 1996; 28% in 1999; and 24% in 2002. This is especially important given that infomercial

marketing companies could use the commercial breaks to reinforce the commercial messages within the programme (by running commercials for the promoted products). Of course, there was considerable potential for crossover between the infomercial slots and editorial segments on *Good Morning*. In August 1998 for instance, the host – Mary Lambie – decided to get a new hairstyle after Suzanne Paul had her hair cut short (Hartnell 1998). And in a 2003 interview Lambie said of ‘Mad Butcher’ Peter Leitch: ‘I intentionally have no real interaction with the advertorial people because I do editorial, but you can't help yourself with him’ (quoted in Bates 2003: 10).

This points to the most obvious area in which *Good Morning* represents an evolution of the infomercial form in New Zealand – the greater legitimacy offered to the infomercial as a form of television. Structurally – and arguably thematically – there is very little skill involved when producing a ‘live’ infomercial insert for *Good Morning*; a presenter simply repeats the patter from an infomercial. However by virtue of its context that patter can be afforded the imprimaturs of normalcy and acceptance. This is mirrored in the careers of two of the ‘hosts’ of the infomercial segments. One of the earliest ‘hosts’ moved into presenting magazine shows in her own right and then became a Sky TV newsreader. Another moved from hosting infomercials on *Good Morning* to judging contestants on *Dancing with the Stars*.

The second magazine/advertorial programme - *5.30 with Jude* - was launched in March 1997 and was sponsored by *The New Zealand Women's Weekly* whose staff ‘starred’ in the show with regular advice, news and editorial slots (Marketing Magazine 1997a: 4). As the show developed, the explicit link between sponsor needs, commercial concerns and editorial content became increasingly acknowledged:

The segmented magazine style content also made [*5.30 with Jude*] attractive to sponsors and [Executive Producer Richard] Driver says the *Woman's Weekly* was identified early on as a possible partner. ‘We felt there was potential for commercial and editorial companionship between the two,’ he says, ‘and I think they were looking for some kind of masthead, electronic kind of version of their magazine.’ (McNickel 1999: 41)

This ‘companionable’ approach posed obvious problems for regulators, not least because of the show’s potential to blur the distinction between advertising and editorial:

We had a few complaints about that [...] and we had to make some rulings on whether [the programme] was an ad or not. And, really, when you find out - she starts talking about women’s menopause and then you finish up with, ‘Here’s these Blackmores products for women’s menopause,’ and you saw what it was at the end – it was clearly an ad – and we said, well, you have to go right back because she

started at the beginning and the whole thing was an ad (Glen Wiggs, Executive Director, Advertising Standards Authority, personal communication).

In practice this merely ensured that such segments were subject to Advertising Standards Complaints Board standards rather than those of the Broadcasting Standards Authority; ‘programming’ guidelines did not therefore apply to the whole of the broadcast.

This is the area in which *5.30 with Jude* represented an evolution of the infomercial form in New Zealand – the abdication of ‘broadcasting’ control to ‘advertisers’ for (partial) programme content. Although this had been signalled in other arenas, the choice to allow commercial messages to permeate editorial content to this degree is highly concerning. Arguably, the (unspoken) basis of such a decision is a neo-liberal perception of viewers that both reifies their intelligence – ‘people can make up their own minds’ – and devalues their rights as citizens as such commercial speech is implicitly normalized and naturalized.

This is especially true given that the commercial speech within *5.30 with Jude* was structurally and thematically indebted to the infomercial – the style was that of an infomercial (i.e. relentlessly positive and resolutely product-centred) and calls-to-action were employed to promote sales – and this debt was clearly identifiable (see for instance Truth 1997: 10). *5.30 with Jude* did not survive the 1990s. Tie-in deals with television programmes became significantly less popular prior to the 1999 election and *The New Zealand Woman’s Weekly* did not renew its sponsorship of *5.30 with Jude* (AdMedia 1999: 31; Marketing Magazine 1999: 2).

REVENUE ENHANCED PROGRAMMING

This pattern of intermingling commercial speech in the programme and commercial with linked commercial messages during advertisement breaks is one hallmark of revenue-enhanced programming (REP). Additionally, with the presence of a call-to-action (CTA), the result is deemed sufficient, within marketing literature, to be classed as REP. The key point is that an example of REP ‘looks like good network television and also incorporates the *proper elements* which make the consumer respond and buy the products being offered’ (Miller 1997: 36, emphasis added). Clearly it is not possible to confirm whether a programme is in fact an example of REP without confirmation that infomercial elements were deliberately included and production companies are understandably reluctant to offer such ‘commercially sensitive’ information. This is especially important given that the rhetorical climate surrounding the

infomercial is such that it is often used as a term of abuse and as shorthand for ‘trashy’ programming.

However there is at least one instance where there is sufficient evidence that the REP formula was used: *Woolworths Ready Steady Cook*, which was launched on TV3 in 1998. At the time the sponsorship deal was the largest entered into in New Zealand, estimated to be worth at least NZ\$1 million (The National Business Review 1998: 47). It was part of a stable of sponsored shows – such as *Mitre 10 Changing Rooms* and *Ansett New Zealand Time of Your Life* – produced by Auckland’s Touchdown Productions (Floyd 1999). TV3 used *Woolworths Ready Steady Cook* to try to combat TVNZ’s dominance of the 7-7.30pm slot but the show was a critical and ratings failure and was removed after its initial run in September 1998 (Vasil 1998: 23; Waikato Times 1998: 14; Fallow 1998: 27).

Woolworths Ready Steady Cook returned in April 1999 at 6pm on TV2 (Vasil 1999: 27). It is likely that TVNZ saw the show as appealing to younger viewers (as TV1 and TV3 screened their major nightly news bulletins from 6–7pm). The commercial orientation of the show did receive some criticism. As one newspaper television reviewer wrote: ‘like many locally-made shows, *Ready Steady Cook* is so entwined with commercial messages that it’s hard to separate the show from the ad breaks and it can end up as bland as blancmange’ (Mackay 1999a: 51), and ‘shows such as *Woolworths Ready Steady Cook* [...] the ads are so obvious that the shows should just be treated as half an hour of advertising’ (Mackay 1999b: 51). When the show ended it was responsible for a drastic downturn in the number of local content entertainment hours screened on TV2 (OnFilm 2001: 1).

The potential for such negative feedback was at least acknowledged by production staff. Nonetheless, the view was that the REP model provided the only mechanism through which the format could be offered to New Zealand viewers:

[*Woolworths Ready Steady Cook*] was totally funded by Woolworths – totally funded [...] [W]hat happens there; [are we] going to put it into the 5.30 slot on TV2? Now, [the broadcasters are] either going to put children’s programmes in there or they’re going to put free programming – you know, the seventeen other shows they got with the big *Terminator* movie. They are *not* going to spend money on that slot on TV2 because it’s not worth it to them. The only money they have to spend is between 7[pm] and 9.30[pm], maybe 10[pm] – primetime, where they make all their money. So if you’re going to go to them and suggest that you’re going to cost them money to deliver something to them at 5.30 they’re going to go ‘F*** it, I don’t wanna know.’ So what we do is we go ‘S***, it’s still a good show. How do we fund it? Woolworths.’ They [gave] us everything [...] that show’s delivered – that show *was* both on TV3 and TV2 when it was on air – delivered for free. And so all we asked of the broadcaster was, ‘Play it.’ And it then

becomes local programming for them which does a little bit better than a *Simpsons* rerun and they're happy – they get a better number, people feel as if they're still watching New Zealanders and hopefully everyone bears with the fact that *Woolworths* is all over it. (Independent producer, personal communication.)

Importantly, the relationship between the broadcasters' commercial needs and the marginal cost of programming outside primetime is explained here. Simply put, in New Zealand television in the late 1990s networks required a guarantee that they would not lose money before they would broadcast 'local' programming in certain timeslots.

Another key point here is that the commercial speech present in the 'programme' was more substantial than an advertorial or sales-based focus to the information presented via the cooking competition. *Woolworths Ready Steady Cook* employed calls-to-action which when added to the fact that the programme was delivered 'pre-paid' is a significant indicator of the REP model. At two per cent of a standard commercial half-hour (24.5 minutes), this represents 'only' approximately twenty-nine seconds of call-to-action. It must be remembered however that this is a Direct Response Television device deliberately employed to promote viewer response *within* the supposedly sacrosanct editorial content of a programme. And in this particular case nineteen per cent of the editorial content was devoted to product tie-ins (that is, the overt naming, demonstrating and recommending of branded products), which functionally replicate the standard mode of address within the infomercial format.

Although *Woolworths Ready Steady Cook* was shown to be heavily influenced by the infomercial through the REP format (see for instance Johnson 2000 and Johnson and Hope 2001), normatively it was an accepted part of New Zealand television. Networks remained convinced that, despite negative and/or critical feedback, this form of broadcasting is defensible (even if their arguments become convoluted). When asked about the blurring of the line between advertising and editorial that such programmes necessitate, one network executive replied:

You could argue that [...] it's all about the integrity and consistency and applying common sense to saying, 'This is a programme [as opposed to an advertisement] because it meets the majority [of programme criteria].' There is a part of it that, if it was stand-alone, yes, is commercial but as part of an overall programme delivering against the programme philosophy it is considered part of the programme - but we're going to identify it so we don't confuse the viewers (Personal communication.).

Once again, at heart this sentiment is based on an idealized view of the audience – they should not be unnecessarily bothered (by the network or in themselves) at this integration of

advertising and editorial content. And this integration can be particularly blatant with branded products and other commercial promotions featuring prominently in the ‘programme’ (see Figures 1 to 3). In allowing commercial speech to be visible so prominently within ‘programming’, broadcasters are clearly allying themselves with the view of the direct marketing industry, a spokesperson for which argued that REP was:

a natural extension of the use of the medium. I mean, it’s both entertaining and informative, and commercial. People can discern the difference. If you were to slap ‘Advertisement’ over the front of the programme, would it change anything? I don’t think so. (Personal communication).

Given these sentiments and the extent of such programming in the late 1990s, it is almost certain that the REP format was employed in New Zealand television (even if ultimate proof of this remains dependant on confirmation from production or network insiders).

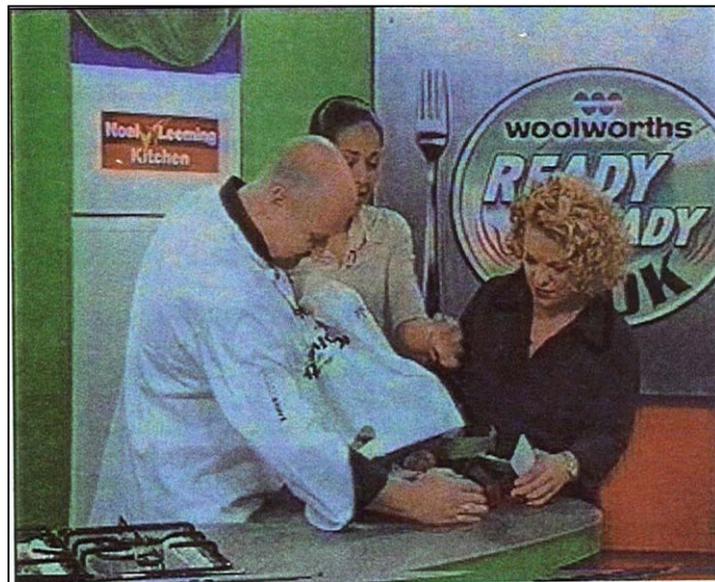


Figure 1: Background branding (*Woolworths Ready Steady Cook*, September 1999).

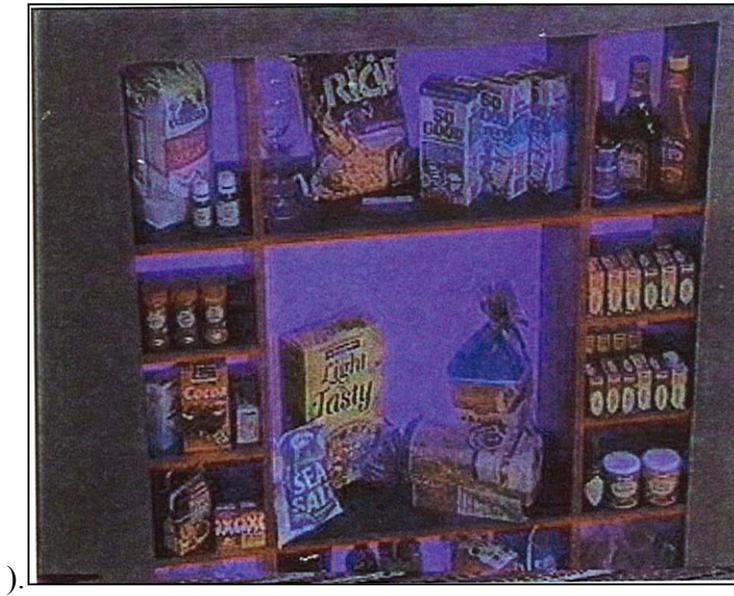


Figure 2: “Well-stocked larder” (*Woolworths Ready Steady Cook* September 1999).



Screenshot 3: Product visibility (*Woolworths Ready Steady Cook*, September 1999).

CONCLUSION

Subverting the norms of television by adapting the infomercial form to find a role within ‘normal’ timeslots is perhaps understandable given the dominance of neo-liberal policy and practices in the 1980s in New Zealand. And while it is true that it became somewhat harder to embed hypercommercial broadcasting forms within the television landscape after the election of the Labour/Alliance government in 1999, variations on these programming styles remained

a feature of local screens. Overall it is clear that there are two lessons that can be derived from the New Zealand experience of the 1990s.

Firstly, without regulatory limits such as rules about the infiltration of commercial speech into programming advertisers will develop new methods to incorporate their messages within the 'editorial' space of television. Secondly, such developments may not be overly popular but they can be successful in generating sufficient viewership to maintain their presence in otherwise marginal timeslots. Taken together these facts suggest that once hypercommercial broadcasting forms are permitted, they are almost impossible to limit or remove.

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¹ These data are taken from analyses of typical shows held by the New Zealand Film Archive.