

The Changing Face of Current Affairs Programmes in New Zealand, the United States and Britain 1984-2004.

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“If television as it developed after 1945 became the poetry of the age, the stanzas got progressively shorter, less taxing, and more devoid of meaning”

(Tracey, 1995, p.120).

Abstract

This paper will explore the changing face of current affairs programmes in three countries, New Zealand, Britain and the United States. News and current affairs programmes have been the subject of much debate in recent years in these three countries. It is common to read of the tabloidisation of news and current affairs and its general decline. This paper will evaluate how key drivers such as legislative changes, globalisation and technological advances have impacted on current affairs programmes in these countries. A recent British study by the University of Westminster is used as one example to discuss the issues facing current affairs as a genre with the claim that it is in crisis and possible terminal decline. For other academics and television executives comes the response that the genre of current affairs has changed with the demands of changing audience taste and commercial realities. This paper suggests that the genre has undergone significant change and is in some crisis. It argues that the change in itself is worthy of investigation and consideration and questions whether the once respected formats of the past that offered context, depth and serious commentary represent the norms of a discarded television genre.

Key words

Current affairs, tabloidisation, genre, commercialisation, deregulation, globalisation

Introduction

This paper will explore the changing nature of current affairs programmes in New Zealand, Britain and America. The question it examines is what has happened to current affairs programmes over a twenty-year period. The time frame covers a period where deregulation became the driving force of broadcasting in these nations and many other western countries (Norris, 2002). The original purpose of current affairs programmes is considered in relation to the new entertainment influenced forms that have emerged in recent years.

The criticism is that current affairs in this time period have become increasingly tabloid and commercial and as a result have reduced in quality. While many critics view this as symptomatic of the deregulated commercialised broadcasting environment, the opposing point of view that current affairs programmes have simply changed to meet the demands of the broadcasting environment is also discussed. The paper also questions whether there is something still recognizable as current affairs television programmes and if they have changed form does this matter.

Further, some of the latest developments affecting current affairs in New Zealand, such as the efforts to implement a 'public service' Charter for Television New Zealand are examined.

The broadcasting environment in the last twenty years in New Zealand, Britain and the United States has experienced varying levels of deregulation and have become increasingly competitive. As a result of pressure to achieve high audience ratings current affairs programmes in New Zealand in recent years have been the subject of sustained criticism for a perceived lack of quality, with the suggestion the genre displays increasing signs of tabloidisation and has become distinctly entertainment oriented (Atkinson, 1994b, 1994c, 2001; Comrie & Fountaine, 2005a; Edwards, 2002; Hayward, 2003).

In the United States, current affairs programmes developed in an already competitive commercial system but commercial pressures steadily increased in the 1980s with the proliferation of new stations and competition for the existing networks. Alongside these changes, rapid technological growth has meant competition from new technologies such as satellite, cable television and the internet which added extra pressure to this complex environment. Many critics suggest that in reaction to the environment of fierce commercial pressure; current affairs have

become watered down, often delivering a ‘context free’ snapshot of reality, steeped in tabloid values (Comrie & Fountaine, 2005b; Franklin, 1997; Herman & McChesney, 1997).

The influence of entertainment values in western media is so great that Langer suggests in relation to television news, that to some it has become:

...overwhelmingly oriented around a media logic of entertainment values which has led inexorably and fatally to a ‘post journalism era’ where in news terms a kind of entertainment programming is always given precedence over doing deeper, more complete and accurate reports (Langer, 1998, p.8).

The term current affairs refers to a genre of programming traditionally seen as distinct from the ‘news’ which is still broadcast in Britain and New Zealand, with American broadcasting executives and critics often referring to the same genre as public affairs programming. For many the term itself, however, no longer refers to its original meaning. Jeremy Paxman, long time journalist for the BBC’s flagship current affairs programme *Panorama* says:

The very expression ‘current affairs’ seems to belong to another era, when well educated chaps in corduroy suits made sense of a world in which events moved slowly (Lindley, 2002, p.viii).

One of the central concerns in the criticism of current affairs is that like the news, the programmes often exhibit examples of ‘dumbing down’ and have become preoccupied with celebrity personalities. MacDonald says:

When David Beckham, the captain of England’s football team, broke a bone in his left foot on 10 April 2002, concern about his injury dominated the news in Britain. The conflict in the Middle East, simultaneously reaching such depths of degradation as to prompt concerns about Israel’s aggression, struggled to compete for attention....this mesmerizing preoccupation with celebrity personalities and human interest is one of the central complaints of those who allege that the media are ‘dumbing down’, or indulging in ‘infotainment’ or ‘tabloidization’ at the expense of serious news (2003, p.57).¹

¹ Infotainment refers to magazine programmes that try to be “informative, serious and entertaining” (Casey et al, 2002, p 10).

The cause of such a focus on celebrities is the intense competition for viewers that encourages an avoidance of examining domestic or international current affairs (Macdonald, 2003). Current affairs programmes Macdonald says, are ‘increasingly shunted around the schedules and parade populist titles such as ‘Frankenstein Foods’ and ‘Nicking the Neighbours’. Both programmes she said came from BBC1s flagship current affairs programme *Panorama* (Macdonald, 2003, p.57). A further criticism and concern for the critics of tabloidisation is that the information that aims to be entertaining becomes ‘newszak’, a product designed for a particular market, which is delivered in “snippets” which the audience only needs to modestly consume (Franklin, 1997, p.4-5). There is a concern then that this style of current affairs programme does not address the audience as citizens but rather simply as consumers who are mainly concerned with gossip or scandal (Macdonald, 2003, p. 58). It is alleged this type of programming becomes depoliticised, and events are viewed as “detached from social processes and purely random, driven by chance or luck (Curren and Sparks, 1991, p.58) As a consequence of these changes, many see the genre in crisis, (Barnett & Seymour, 1999; Herman & McChesney, 1997; Macdonald, 2003; Turner, 2005).

Other critics and broadcasters respond that the genre has changed with the demands of changing audience taste and commercial realities. Holland says that entertainment or ‘infotainment’ news and current affairs programmes are popular and enjoyed by new audiences, and the genre has built upon new trends in broadcasting such as reality television. There are also questions about what current affairs programmes are and whether new formats embodying elements of ‘magazine and infotainment’ formats can fit the earlier definitions of current affairs (2001).

There are many strands in a discussion of these topics, which include issues about genre. Many post-modern theorists suggest genres no longer make sense and are an outmoded concept from film studies (Casey et al, 2002). There are debates about hybridity, and the fusion of entertainment formats with news and current affairs. Also, when considering the practicalities of modern broadcasting there is a certain reality to the costs of television production and investigative journalism which are considered high, where even the most expensive lavishly produced infotainment or magazine programme is cheaper than traditional current affairs programmes (Alysen,

2000). Taken together these changes have impacted heavily on the genre, and with the additional impact of reality television, have made inroads on what was considered traditional current affairs.

Of the changes that have occurred many critics have isolated key drivers that have affected the television environment as a whole, and news and current affairs specifically. Globalisation, new legislation, and technological developments are issues that will be touched upon as the paper examines current affairs programming in the three nations surveyed.

Current Affairs in Britain

British current affairs programmes began in 1955 with *Panorama* produced by Grace Wyndham Goldie and screened by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). It was originally screened in 1953 but after bad reviews was taken off air. When it was relaunched it became an institution of British broadcasting. Prior to this, the coverage of political and current events had been weak. The major difference between current affairs programmes and news was that current affairs programmes were in the privileged position to make criticisms, pose questions, investigate and challenge (Holland, 2001).

The news programmes of this period were a presentation of facts around the news of the day. The original definition of current affairs referred to programmes which dealt with important subject matter in more depth than the news. The programmes built on news stories, exploring background and context to issues (Alysen, 2000). Traditionally an enclave within the BBC, it occupied a protected and special place.

Current affairs provided a distinct arena for the discussion of stories that did not fit within the news framework. These programmes could also focus on issues and stories that took place over weeks, months and years. They provided a distinctive function of examining the context behind the events that made the daily headlines (Holland, 2001).

The impact of current affairs programmes was immediate and far reaching (Holland, 2001). They became important sources of information for millions of people, and regarded as a vital interface between broadcasting and politics (Home Office, 1977). The role of the journalist was to ensure that the views of the public

were presented to the politicians and to insist that the politicians present themselves to the electorate. Unlike later personality - driven current affairs programmes the journalist's authority at this time came not from an authoritative position, but rather in the role as mediator (Smith, 1974). Current affairs in this era exhibited impartiality and balance and viewers gained an expectation that every effort would be made to produce a fair account of the arguments or situation under examination (IBA, 1983-84).

Contemporary Issues in British Current Affairs

Recent debates suggest a loss of programme quality is due to widespread deregulation and competition (Franklin, 1997; Barnett & Seymour, 1999). From the beginning current affairs were safely ensconced within the public service broadcasting system. The 1990s saw the impact of intensified commercial pressures and the effect of the Broadcasting Act of 1990 which had enacted a measure of deregulation. The replacement of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) by the Independent Television Commission (ITC) was another defining event in government moves to deregulate broadcasting. The ITC oversees a new system of franchise bidding based on the highest tender for broadcast licences and this has created an inevitable increase in commercial pressures to win large audiences at low cost, in order to recoup the cost of the franchise. This has arguably resulted in a lowering of production values and a loss of 'quality'. Further influenced by globalisation there have been a number of mergers and takeovers in the 1990s, so that a few large companies now rule terrestrial commercial television (Casey et al, 2002).

The effects of globalisation and policy change due to deregulation were felt within the BBC. The competitive influence of the growing number of commercial channels and the competition arising from the development of satellite, cable and digital technologies had a direct impact. They have acted to influence programme styles, content and schedules. The BBC's commitment to serve 'the nation' under public broadcasting principles has had to be re-evaluated in the light of the pressures to retain a significant audience share (Casey et al, 2002; Franklin, 1997).

These environmental changes have impacted on current affairs programmes. Many strong current affairs programmes like *World In Action* and the innovative *Tonight* have been produced in Britain. *Panorama* initially filled a void on television.

It found effective ways of reporting and presenting what was happening in the world to the mass television audience. Similar programmes followed and many died, while *Panorama* remained a “potent symbol of public service broadcasting” (Lindley, 2002, p.viv). However, as factual programmes “proliferated and audiences fragment” as a consequence of the pressure of deregulation and increasing competition, Paxman describes the will to keep *Panorama* afloat as flagging (Lindley, 2002, p.viv). He claims it has fallen from serious programme to flimsy infotainment, and that at times, it chooses to chase ratings with tales from Hollywood (Lindley, 2002).² Franklin also suggests that the investigative journalism of the 1980s evident in *Panorama* and *World in Action*, has given way to story-led tabloid formats (Franklin, 1997).

The drive for ratings has meant that there has been a greater emphasis placed in current affairs on “domestic, consumer and ratings-friendly subjects” and a decline in coverage of foreign affairs and the more complex political and economic subjects (Barnett & Seymour, 1999). This phenomenon has also been exacerbated by a reduction in budgets, leading to a squeeze in programme costs. This has led to a reduction in the key area of research. These elements have combined to produce a decline in ground-breaking programmes or any project which requires long-term commitment, time and money (Barnett & Seymour, 1999).³

There have, however, been attempts to trial more popular magazine approaches to current affairs. Both the BBC and Channel Four have tried to bring in new audiences by using ‘cross genre’ formats and interactive programmes. Audiences for these formats in the late 1990s have increased and are stable but current affairs output overall in peak hours have fallen by 25 percent. Further research has suggested that audiences do not view the importance of current affairs as high as the news and there is less programming devoted to politics and international current affairs than ten years ago. There is more of a popular approach than in the hey day of *Panorama* and ITV current affairs programmes like *World In Action* and *This Week*. The accessibility

² Lindsey discusses a *Guardian* reviewer’s caustic review of a *Panorama* programme that contrasted the failure of western security services to prevent a terrorist attack with ‘prophetic’ Hollywood blockbusters. The reviewer said the programme was ‘tasteless and dumb’ (Lindley, 2002, p.380).

³ According to Barnett & Seymour’s study, the genre of current affairs is in crisis and possibly in terminal decline. There has been a sharp reduction in audiences for current affairs programmes. All programme makers and commissioners interviewed reported that that the genre is under extreme pressure in today’s multi channel environment (1999).

of presentation and material in the infotainment-type current affairs programmes of today may have prevented a further decline in audiences (Barnett & Seymour, 1999).

American public affairs television

The first regular news programme *Camel News Caravan* began in 1947, and was broadcast by National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) (Tracey, 1995; Wheen, 1985).⁴ The emerging television news specialised in short treatments of the news in order to retain audiences in a commercial television system. Current or public affairs programmes developed from this and gave more in-depth treatment of news items. The first current affairs programme for United States television was made in 1951 and called *See it Now* (Tracey, 1995).⁵

A comparison of the United States broadcasting environment shows differences to the English model of broadcasting. In Britain, even when commercial broadcasting and competition began, they retained a strong desire to maintain an ethic of public service broadcasting, even in the commercial sector (Cook, 2000). However, broadcasting in the United States has always been a commercial industry, and the degree of commercialism intensified in the 1980s and 1990s. In the present environment, advertising revenue, audience ratings, and “good” demographics are the measure of success as calculated each night (Blumenthal & Goodenough, 1998).⁶

The present day broadcasting environment in the United States came about through a series of policy decisions made in the 1920s and 1930s that gave “primary use of the airwaves to the corporate sector” (Blumenthal & Goodenough, 1998, p xv). Fearful of foreign takeover it was deemed more important for America to have local corporations controlling the sector. From the late 1940s until the late 1970s three networks dominated American television. The 1970s saw the reinvention of the

⁴ *Camel News Caravan* was sponsored by Camel Cigarettes and the commercial aspect of the news was established.

⁵ Prior to this television programmes in the 1950s had been criticised as a ‘vast wasteland’ and the American television industry was rocked by a rigged quiz show scandal in the 1950s.

⁶ The focus here is on commercial mainstream networks, and not on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). Unlike Britain, which has a strong public broadcasting history, PBS started after commercial television in the USA (1967) and does not have the same strong tradition in American television.

television industry in America. Changes by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) freed up ownership allowing a growth in television stations (Blumenthal & Goodenough, 1998).⁷

By the late 1970s the stable government regulation that had existed began to change and with this came the idea that the markets could do a better job of regulation than the government (McChesney, 2004). Individual stations began to change hands more frequently. As cable viewership increased, the audience for the broadcast networks decreased. The fight for audiences only sharpened with the change in legislation and the spread of new technologies. The move away from current affairs programmes pioneered in the 1950s began in the 1970s. With the broadcasting of local news on local stations, there came a realisation that news was cheap, reliable, popular and therefore good for revenues (Tracey, 1995).⁸

In the mid to late 1970s new magazine formats such as (*60 Minutes* and *20/20*) proved especially effective, and not as costly as other prime-time public affairs programmes. Prior to this, the network news divisions had operated without much regard for budget restrictions and were not under the same demands as other departments to make a profit. News was the only truly serious and responsible aspect of a network organization whose primary mission was entertainment (Blumenthal & Goodenough, 1998). Former CBS news president Richard Salant told a conference in 1990 that he:

Took pride in being known at CBS as the executive in charge of losing money... The entertainment programmes like sitcoms made the money and docos and public affairs programmes were regarded as prestigious loss leaders (Salant as cited in Tracey, 1995, p.132).

⁷ Another important period of government legislation incorporated neo-liberal assumptions which altered the mediascape in the 1980s. During this period there was a decisive increase in the domination of media policy making by business. The net effect was to see well funded policy activists begin working to see that “public interest regulation was reduced and ultimately discontinued” (McChesney, 2004, p.48).

⁸ As the battle for ratings and revenue increased, production techniques from other television departments were co-opted by news and current affairs divisions like ‘music, graphics and market research’ (Lumby, pg 45).

However, the move to a local news focus received criticism “that local news was singularly untouched by substance or journalistic merit”, resulting in an erosion of serious television journalism (Tracey, 1995, p.131). In the 1980s as the networks became part of larger conglomerates, considerable pressure was brought to bear on news divisions to increase profits and reduce costs. The arrival and spread of cable and regional networks increased the battle for ratings.⁹ The demands for ratings, Tracey suggests, were not in the best interests of good journalism. The coverage by television of the ‘real’ world had by the 1970’s changed from an ethos of journalism to one of entertainment (Tracey, 1995).

There was a sharp reduction in television documentaries and public affairs after 1982. Where previously topics like defence, foreign affairs, history, culture and crime, were the favoured subjects, these changed to personal subjects such as health, drugs and lifestyle (Mascaro, 1994, p.239). The changes in public affairs programming were also influenced by assumptions about what the audience wanted. One of the first of the new form of public affairs television was *A Current Affair* which started screening in 1986. This programme included traditional human interest stories and racier segments which included wet t-shirt competitions and strippers (Lumby, 1999). As a result, the treatment of public affairs and the personality of the anchor often became more important than the content of the information being communicated. The advent of new magazine programmes was to change public affairs television. The most well-known of these new formats is *60 Minutes* (Tracey, 1995).

A ratings success, *60 Minutes* is the most consistent current affairs top ten programme of the past 25 years and has been number one in the ratings on 16 occasions and has never been lower than tenth (Tracey, 1995). Unlike the longer form documentary its success can be attributed to a number of factors. Each episode has three or four stories per episode ranging from the serious to the amusing, sometimes even flippant in its subject matter. Part of its appeal is that it heightens the emotional investment by the audience, largely reflecting issues through human experiences. Don Hewitt the ‘father’ of *60 Minutes* described his ideas for the programme, “if we packaged reality as well as Hollywood packages fiction, I’ll bet we could double the

⁹ Where in 1975 there were three networks, by 1990 there were four commercial networks and more than a hundred regional and cable networks (Lumby, 1999)

ratings” (Chicago Tribune, 1981, p.15). Heightening the emotional and entertainment appeal was a strategic move designed to win audiences.¹⁰ These programmes were driven by story selection and through the popularity of presenters like Barbara Walters and Hugh Downs (Madsen, 1984).

Magazine format programmes were criticised however for their one-sided and sensational handling of events and reporting (Black, 1987). Shaw, when analysing a selection of programmes, says the programmes “failed to provide important insights or a sense of fair play” (1987). The programmes in Shaw’s analysis omitted important information in the stories covered, showing a lack of serious journalistic skills.

Critics of current and public affairs television argue there has been a move away from an emphasis on rational discourse, driven by “analysis” to programmes which have “pleasure” or entertainment at their centre (Turner, 2005; Tracy, 1995). A key change that these programmes represented was the inversion of the news hierarchy that pushed public-sphere stories focusing on economics and business aside in favour of private sphere stories. Stories that focused on personal tragedy, celebrity scandal, relationships and sexuality were privileged over the political or business angled stories (Lumby, 1999, p.47). With the move to the entertainment focus has also come the blurring of the boundaries between the real and unreal. Tracey argues this is nothing new, and that drama docs for example have long been part of public affairs output. The issue however is one of the integrity of the exercise and the manner in which it is undertaken (1995).¹¹

In contrast to those who critique the development of reality television and changes to public affairs programmes, others believe audiences have changed, and audiences enjoy the new style programmes. US celebrity newswoman Barbara Walters suggests:

The world has changed...there’s more interest in people’s personalities and more interest in gossip and what makes people tick. People are not interested

¹⁰ *60 Minutes* format was copied in programmes such as *20/20*, *48 hours*, *Prime Time Live*, *Street Stores* and *Day One* (Tracey, 1995). In the 1980s, *60 Minutes* cost less to produce than prime-time dramas and earned higher ratings

¹¹ The advent of reality television has strongly impacted on non-fiction television. The term refers to new programmes that began in the early 1990s like *Cops*, which recorded dramatic police work. Now the term refers to a wide range of programmes ranging from *Survivor* to *Temptation Island* or more lately *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* (Lumby, 2003).

in foreign policy. They are interested in making their lives better and in human-interest stories (Walters as cited in Alysén, 2000, p.174).

Morisett has also commented on the effects of the changes in the genre on the democratic process, arguing that “most political analysts contend that television has undermined rather than strengthened civic life”, producing programmes which offer slogans instead of substance”...and “virtually no attempt is made to educate voters or to address their concerns” (Morisett as cited in Tracey, 1995, p140). A claimed result of this is that it has produced a deepening disenfranchisement of the voting class who have turned away from mainstream journalism and the core institutions of democracy (Tracey, 1995).¹²

Patterson also argues that the shrinking news and public affairs audience suggests that these programmes have resulted in a weakened democracy. The news is based increasingly on what will interest an audience, and not on what audiences need to know (2000).¹³ The long-term effect of soft news on the public appears to be leading to a diminishing overall interest in news and public affairs. Patterson, does concede that there is a place for elements of soft news, however to “build the news around something other than public affairs is to build it on sand.” Soft news can “spice up” the news but cannot “anchor it” (Patterson, 2000, p.9). If used with restraint it can expand an audience, though ultimately it will, he argues, “wear out an audience” (Patterson, 2000, p9).

New Zealand Current Affairs Programmes

Current Affairs television programmes began with *Compass* in 1963 produced by Alan Morris (Day, 2000). *Compass* often imported films about overseas current affairs issues and its major contribution was as the first programme to address both domestic and international issues from a New Zealand point of view (Ibid). *Column*

¹² As a consequence of the focus on entertainment, one of major sources of political discourse in the United States has become the talk show, such as *Larry King* on CNN. These programmes are relatively soft, and easy for politicians to handle. The information for the public becomes easy to digest, agreeable and accessible. To the extent Tracey says that “the programmes have in fact become the ‘McDonalds’ of political discourse, and became known to political strategists as ‘direct contact’ television” (1995, p.141).

¹³ Defenders of this style of news Patterson suggests believe there is no point in news if there is no audience and that soft news provides important information for citizens as well. However, evidence suggests that the soft news “imposes a net cost on democracy” (Patterson, 2000, p.3).

Comment followed in 1964 and was a long running, widely watched commentary on New Zealand journalism.

Current affairs programmes dealt with political issues and this was a new experience for the audience, broadcasting executives and politicians alike. The Holyoake administration of the 1960s became the first New Zealand administration to experience questioning and analytical news and current affairs. 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).¹⁴

Early in the 1980s Television New Zealand (TVNZ) was still operating under a semblance of public service principles. The Broadcasting Act of 1976 charged TVNZ with public service requirements for its information programming, especially in regards to news and current affairs. The importance of news was very important at both regional and network level. TVNZ deemed it a matter of policy that its first programming responsibility was to news and current affairs (TVNZ, n.d.).¹⁵

Broadcasting took a different turn in the 1980s. Like Britain and the United States the New Zealand television market became more competitive. Cook suggests, “the changes to broadcasting in New Zealand were part of a wider change to economic and to a degree political orthodoxy throughout much of the western world” (Cook, 2000, p.6).¹⁶

In 1984, the fourth Labour government was elected with an agenda to reform the economy using the prescription of 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 (Harcourt, 2000). The

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ This is a policy document published by Television New Zealand which refers to the 1980s but does not have an exact date of publication included.

¹⁶ New Zealand in fact, took the deregulation model of broadcasting further than these other nations.

process of deregulation opened the market up to both local and overseas competition (Comrie & Fountaine, 2005). A radical turnaround in the corporate culture at TVNZ occurred 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 impacted on TVNZ turning it into a State Owned Enterprise with a responsibility to operate with the same business principles as its commercial rivals (TVNZ, 1991). From 1987 to 1990, TVNZ changed dramatically as it grew to meet competition from TV3 and number of narrowcasters (Atkinson, 1994b). There was a move toward softer or tabloid news (Cook, 2000). 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, 2005, p102).

Atkinson has critiqued a number of trends that occurred since 1985 including key changes in the news and current affairs programmes. He notes that tabloid journalism has been seen on New Zealand television in the head-to head current affairs magazines, *60 Minutes* and *20/20*. These are New Zealand formats of the American programmes with some New Zealand material included. 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. Most notably he suggests the prime-time commercial television tabloid presence has been felt more in Television One and Television Three News and the companion current affairs programme to *One News*, *Holmes* (Atkinson, 2001).

The *Holmes* programme was considered by some critics to be an "unabashedly infotainment" programme. The brief for *Holmes* indicates the aims were 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. The central dynamic of the programme was the appeal and broadcasting skills of Paul Holmes and the programme was presenter-driven, with him demonstrating full ownership of all the programmes content. The brief states that even the most apparently difficult subject matter was to be treated in a manner to be attractive to a majority of viewers. This surely was a tip to the more

entertainment-oriented approach, designed to sustain the viewers already watching from the news (Holmes, n.d).¹⁷

Holmes aimed to represent the perspective of ordinary people in battles with bureaucrats, politicians or sundry authorities. Holmes said of his own programme:

We used humour. This was a sin and, despite the tradition of cartoons, the newspapers had a terrible problem with it. *Holmes* was “infotainment”. It was, I felt, a term used by snobs of dull intelligence and little imagination” (Holmes, 1999, p.31).

Critics however, were less impressed with the trends *Holmes* represented. Saunders argues:

Whereas audiences in other English speaking countries can hear really good current affairs interviews and debates, that option is not available here, unless you subscribe to Sky TV, or use the web (2004, p.32).

In contrast to what was expected in the traditional original current affairs model he argues that current affairs have become interviewer focused. Interviewers now have become the focus of the programme and the focus on the interviewee has been lost.

The 1990s and 2000s: Current Affairs in Crisis

To many observers current affairs was in crisis in the 1990s as worldwide a major shift in the dominant character of television journalism occurred. Previously the importance of non-fiction television lay in the perception that here was an important means of nurturing public debates about issues that mattered.

TVNZ’s current affairs flagship programme *Holmes* bore little resemblance to what one would originally think of as current affairs. Instead it sacrificed more serious journalistic norms to make a programme as appealing as possible for the greatest number of viewers.

During the late 1990s apart from *Holmes* the other current affairs programmes in primetime were *60 Minutes* which ran on Sunday evenings, based on the

¹⁷ 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.

international format and *Assignment* which was New Zealand's in-depth current affairs programme. It ran for several years on limited runs and now no longer exists (Comrie & Fountaine, 2005b, p. 7).

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, Sunday* and the youth focused programme *Flipside*, which screened on TV2. Since their inception, *Flipside* has gone, *Face to Face* has since been cut due to lack of ratings, and *Sunday* has been taken off-air. The programme that did make at least a critical success was *Agenda*, however it is placed in a Saturday morning slot, which is not conducive to rating well (Comrie & Fountaine, 2005).

Returning to the legacy of Paul Holmes, since his departure in 2004 to *Prime* there have been few differences in the approach used by the presenter Susan Wood on the replacement programme *Close Up*. Wood offers her personal asides and opinions on the outcome of 0900 'phone in' polls.¹⁸ In a poll taken on whether the 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). This move from objectivity to personal comment did not fit with TVNZ's promotional material that the programme was not about "personality". Thompson also questions whether there has been substantial change and says of Wood's efforts:

On several occasions so far, Woods 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).

The problem for TVNZ, Comrie & Fountaine suggest is that "the new law still requires the broadcaster to balance charter objectives with commercial considerations" (2005, p14). Though the mid 1990s were 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. They suggest TVNZ's commercial imperatives have "arguably increased since it became burdened with charter requirements" (2005, p.10).

¹⁸ These polls have no validity as an indicator of public opinion.

While arguments around the shift drive to more entertainment oriented current affairs continue, not everyone believes that the perceived entertainment focus is all audience-driven, and many see it as a result of the shift to commercial imperatives. The problem for current affairs programmes is that newer lifestyle programmes and infotainment programmes have set the agenda for subject material. These programmes represent a philosophical change from the traditional view of current affairs where context and background were the essential underpinnings of the genre.

The essential problem with the perceived tabloidisation or more personalised forms of news or current affairs is that the social or institutional context is often removed; if it is all about the individual then the relevant structural factors can be missed. If news or current affairs simply focuses on tragedy, as enthralling as these pictures might be, the audience may well miss vital information or analysis of policy decisions. Information that may well affect them as individuals may well be left out. Macdonald says “To give them, or us as readers/viewers, a sense of potential agency, connections between the ‘personal subject’ and the ‘motor force (s) of history need to be activated ” (2003, p. 63).

Recent studies have tried to address the effects on audiences, specifically in relation to being informed on public affairs.¹⁹ The original importance of non-fiction or in this case current affairs television rested on “the enlightenment belief in the importance of rational discourse about human affairs” (Tracey, 1995 p.141).

Current affairs programmes like many formats or genres have been affected by deregulation policies in New Zealand, the United States and Britain. This has resulted in changing genre formats and increased commercialism. With the increasing commercialism and new forms of television, the boundaries between different programme types have become blurred and as genre current affairs seem especially vulnerable to the effects of hybridisation and reality television. Current affairs programmes in these countries are in crisis but arguably this is even more so in New Zealand. There is little doubt that changes implemented, in programmes like *Holmes*,

¹⁹ Watching public television is associated with higher levels of political information than watching commercial television; there is a reduction in knowledge of public affairs with commercial television, and a greater awareness with audiences who watch public television (Holtz & Norris, 2000)

have created popular programmes and a resulting high audience share. The problem remains, however, over how much depth of debate that these programmes offer.²⁰

In New Zealand, there has been tendency for current affairs to resort to standardized, polarized and antagonistic formats where the public is no better informed than they were before, although the programmes may give the illusion of authentic debate.²¹ Some critics question further how seriously TVNZ has taken the intention to make current affairs more serious with a charter. As Witchel says of the current environment:

At present New Zealand broadcasting is anticipating the start of new current affairs programmes running head to head. *Close up at 7* is now just *Close Up*, but the time-honoured tradition of treating viewers like morons hasn't changed (2005, p70).

The question that arises from many of the criticisms of current affairs is why does tabloidisation matter? The answer returns to the origins of the genre. As Turner says:

“... news and current affairs is one of the benefits that broadcasting licensees can and should offer to the community as a whole in return for their operation of a public resource. Such principles were put in place to enhance the operation of democracy by ensuring the provision of independent information to the citizenry. If those principles were worth defending once, and the need remains today, then the disappearance of the place where they might be enacted is of serious concern (2005, p.25).

The second aspect Turner suggests is that broadcasters hide behind the argument that they are being democratic- however their motives are more often commercial than democratically motivated (2005).

²⁰ 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 ” (2005, p. 2).

²¹ Atkinson’s research on news found increased tabloidisation, morselisation, and depoliticisation which all suggested a greater entertainment focus. This was replicated in Cook’s and Comrie’s later studies. These findings cast doubt on the level of informed debate in an environment where important issues and context have been neglected.

New Zealand current affairs have often inherited a history of policy and legislative changes which closely mirrors that of Britain and the United States. The pursuit of ratings and revenue has resulted in the hybridisation of current affairs television.²² As these changes have radically altered the nature of ‘current affairs’ there is a question of whether the respected formats of the past that offered context, depth and serious commentary represent the norms of a discarded television genre.

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²² By this it is meant a combination of entertainment and infotainment programmes rather than a strictly traditional current affairs focus.

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