

The decline and redefinition of New Zealand current affairs television programmes

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Abstract

This article explores New Zealand current affairs programmes from a critical political economy perspective. Many critics believe the current affairs television genre is in terminal decline in most Western countries. They argue that current affairs programmes have changed to focus on entertainment and news values with combative, personality-focused programmes, rather than political and serious subject matter. Previous research carried out in New Zealand demonstrated that the news media significantly changed after the election of the fourth Labour government in 1984, which instituted a neo-liberal policy agenda. The result was a more commercially-oriented media environment which, many critics argue, reduced the quality of news and current affairs programmes. This reflects the fact that the public sphere has been seriously diminished and that television current affairs no longer functions as it should. In this article, I discuss both the historic and contemporary state of television current affairs programmes in New Zealand. Building on previous research into such programmes, content analysis is employed to ascertain the extent to which the current affairs television genre continues to be shaped by the commercial pressures on New Zealand broadcasting.

Current affairs television programmes in many western countries were conceived as a central feature of broadcasting “filling in the background to the news and serving as a key location for network identity, and for the discharge of television’s public information responsibility and for shaping debate” (Turner, 2005:1). As important as the current affairs genre has been, there is a sense that it has been redefined by the growing commercial pressures that broadcasting has experienced. In the last 30 years, there has been a lessening of commitment to public service broadcasting (Norris et al., 2003; Tracey, 1998; Willard and Tracey, 1990). New Zealand, even within this context, became one of the most deregulated and commercialised broadcasting environments in the world (Baker, 2016). It is against the backdrop of a relentless movement to ever more commercialised broadcasting that this research is undertaken.

Current affairs television programmes have been critiqued for becoming entertainment-oriented not only in New Zealand, but in other Western countries (Baker, 2012; Franklin, 1997; Holland, 2006,

Hope, 2017; Macdonald, 2000). A 1999 study, for example, said that British current affairs television programmes after deregulation were in ‘terminal decline’ (Barnett and Seymour, 1999). In New Zealand, the steady decline of current affairs television appeared final with the end of *Campbell Live* in 2015 (Baker, 2016; Hope, 2017). The demise of *Campbell Live* also, arguably, marked the end of “the once mediated public sphere that had developed in the 1960s” (Hope, 2017: 48). Today in New Zealand, free-to air channels are filled with tabloid infotainment and sponsored reality television formats, advertising segments, and programmes full of product placement. Current affairs television programmes that still deal with issues and public figures have been moved to early morning weekend slots. The one remaining exception to this is *Native Affairs*, which screens on Māori Television. Smith (2016: 23) says “Ten years after its launch, many politicians claim that Māori Television is ‘the best public broadcaster’ and ‘the best of the free-to-air channels’ in this country.” However, “given this larger broadcasting context, one must understand Māori Television in relation to a pervasive commercial climate, with television audiences still highly receptive to imported television content from the United States, Britain and Australia” (Smith 2016: 27). Turner (2005) has identified similar trends in Australia. By the mid-1990s television current affairs ratings there had dropped and the audiences for such programmes were contracting and growing older. In the late 1990s a number of comedic and satiric current affairs programmes were introduced to attract the younger audience. Turner stated that Australian current affairs television programmes were “increasingly tired and aimless, working over the same old territory as each other with ever-diminishing returns” (2005: 3). He concluded that with commercially-driven changes to this genre, the Australian public were being under served and challenged the view that modern current affairs programmes and talkback shows offered a new form of democratization (Lumby, 1999). Turner (2005) instead observed that the changes in programme format are such that the “ideological conversion to seeing their role as primarily a commercial one has been a gradual and often uncomfortable process for many journalists” (159). This has certainly become the case in New Zealand as commercial decisions have impacted on the type and form of programmes produced.

My research is based on earlier studies of New Zealand television news and current affairs programmes. The research data begins in the 1980s and continues through to 2017. This time scale covers the period before deregulation (1984), during deregulation (1994), the charter period (2004), and post-charter period (2014 and 2017) [1]. The data gives clear indications of the trends that have occurred as broadcasting has entered different periods of change. More specifically I examine the impact of deregulation and commercial pressures on current affairs television programmes by utilizing a quantitative content analysis of representative current affairs television programmes sampled from 1984, 1994 and 2004, 2014 and 2017. I also consider the political economy of the major broadcaster TVNZ (Television New Zealand), as it produces news and current affairs under increasing commercial pressure.

Critical political economy and current affairs television programmes

The context of this research concerns the structures of broadcasting in New Zealand that dramatically changed in the mid-1980s. These changes involve patterns of media ownership, broadcasting revenue streams, technical changes and other factors that shape media organizations and content (Casey et al, 2002; McChesney, 1998). In this context, Mosco (2009) states that “communication processes and technologies contribute to the general process of commodification in the economy” (130). The focus on commodification, along with accumulation imperatives provides a vital starting point for

understanding the changing shape of media industries (Fuchs et al, 2010; Hirst, 2011). This perspective is particularly fitting for the New Zealand case. Since the 1980s, radio and television broadcasting has relied more and more on advertising income, and has become locked into commercial imperatives. The advertising and promotional culture around news and current affairs programmes connects the world of production to the world of consumption. In this respect, I work from the standpoint that the “primary concern of critical political economists is with the allocation of resources within capitalist societies” (Wasko, 2014: 260). In this article, the focus is on how the format and content of television current affairs programmes have conformed with growing commercial pressures. In the New Zealand case, television broadcasting institutions became profit-driven enterprises and current affairs television programmes were transformed.

The study of political economy is important as media create and distribute many of the symbolic resources of the world. Media are major institutions “in the economic and political fabric of our societies” (Wasko 2004: 310). Such institutions are also the vehicle which connects the world of production to the world of consumption through advertising and promotional culture. Today, political economy is manifest within several different paradigms. Wasko (2004) says “several conservative versions have emerged, including a corporatist approach and public choice theory (also known as the new or positive political economy)” (310). Institutional political economy is an approach that focuses on institutional and technological influences and examines the role of evolutionary process and the role of institutions in shaping economic behaviour. The radical, Marxian or critical political economy approach is concerned with the interface between mass communication and mass consumption which makes it an appropriate approach for this research. The move to deregulation and the advent of neo-liberal policies over the last 25 years has meant that mass communication has become a vehicle for mass consumption rather than public knowledge. Changes to programmes and genres are examples of how the growth of consumer culture has become inextricably linked to changes in the styles and forms of broadcasting.

In 1973, Graham Murdock and Peter Golding offered their formulation of the political economy of communication, stating that “the mass media are first and foremost industrial and commercial organizations which produce and distribute commodities” (205-206). Thus, the political economy of communication is fundamentally interested in studying communication and media forms of capitalist industry (Murdock and Golding, 1973). In this context, four historical processes are particularly important; the growth of media, the extension of corporate reach, commodification, and the changing role of state intervention. Here it is particularly important to consider the extension of corporate reach into New Zealand news and current affairs after deregulation. Equally important is the changing role of government intervention as broadcasting became positioned within a neo-liberal policy regime.

From the late 1980s on, current affairs programming on New Zealand television had to compete in a newly commercialized environment. The type of programmes produced were altered to attract and maintain audiences. Here, Geoff Lealand (2002) has noted that:

There are visible trends now apparent in New Zealand television schedules: a shift towards middle-brow or populist programming in prime-time, with a proliferation of ‘reality’ programmes and sponsored magazine programmes; documentaries and ‘quality’ dramas shifting to late hours; competitive scheduling in prime time, aimed at the largest possible audience share; a quick death for programmes which do not attract healthy ratings; a tendency to stick with the tried and true (216).

These trends have fundamentally affected the format and content of television current affairs. In this regard, the influence of advertising is pervasive.

Advertisers are the real customers of a commercial media organisation, not its readers, viewers or listeners... This brings pressure to shield advertisers from views they do not like, to avoid complicated or expensive stories, and to avoid content that does not attract the maximum audience at any given time (Rosenberg, 2007, 49-50).

Eileen Meehan (1986) suggested that ratings are the 'tangible' proof that the networks 'intangible' commodity, the audience, exists and thus the 'commodity audience' comes to be defined by ratings methodologies. The task for broadcasters, then, is to exercise influence within the market and to acquire programming that attracts the commodity audience. In New Zealand broadcasting after deregulation the commodity audience value has been the exclusive indicator of profits and revenue.

Television current affairs: origins and function

To understand the evolving current affairs genre in New Zealand it is important to understand its origins and functions.

From their inception, current affairs television programmes were central to public service broadcasting. The first such programme was *Panorama* (1953), produced by Grace Wyndham Goldie and screened on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). *Panorama* is now the longest running current affairs programme in the world, and focuses on investigative journalism. It originally received poor reviews and was taken off-air and revamped. It returned a month later with a new presenter, Max Robertson, and from there began to make headway. In 1955 *Panorama* was re-launched with Richard Dimbleby as the main presenter; later that year the programme was fronted by Robin Day. These presenters brought gravitas to their role, and the programme went from strength to strength. The first current affairs programme for United States television was made in 1951 and called *See it Now* (Tracey, 1998). Current affairs television programmes on New Zealand television began in 1963 with *Compass* produced by Alan Morris. The programme often imported films from overseas current affairs documentaries, but also addressed both domestic and international issues from a New Zealand point of view (Day, 2000).

This new style of programme explored stories in more depth and provided more context than shorter treatments of news. Before *Panorama*, the background coverage of political and current events had not been a routine feature of weekly or nightly schedules. The new genre built upon the shorter treatment of stories within news bulletins to give audiences a much-needed understanding of important issues. Current affairs programmes, then, greatly contributed to democratic life by presenting important issues to audiences and by focusing on politics and public policy (Holland, 2006). The key distinction between current affairs programmes and bulletins of news was that the former allowed for journalists and interviewers to critique, pose questions, investigate and challenge. There are two formative models of the genre, which were to shape current affairs television. In Britain, current affairs programming evolved within a public service system that became more influenced by commercial imperatives in later decades. In the United States, television broadcasting, almost from its inception, was commercially driven. As Cook (2000) noted, Britain and the United States are "English-speaking, democratic, capitalist, modern and technologically advanced, yet have very different broadcasting systems" (8). What emerged in New Zealand was a 'hybrid' broadcasting system, combining both public service and commercial elements.

Current affairs television programmes have changed markedly from their original intent, meaning and final product. Jeremy Paxman, a longtime 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: viii). Many contemporary broadcasters use the term of 'current affairs' to describe programmes that could be described as magazine-style or infotainment. There are, however, some broadcasters who still describe their programmes as hard-hitting and investigative, though the content tells a different story (Comrie and Fountaine, 2005). New Zealand's *Sunday* programme, for example, was advertised in this manner even though the content remained very light and entertainment oriented. Current affairs television programmes could focus on issues and stories that might unfold over weeks, months and years, and examine the context behind the events that made daily headlines. The distinction between news and current affairs is important as the latter was heavily reliant on research – an area that has also diminished with pressures to cut costs and increase profits (Barnett and Seymour, 1999).

Many critics argue (Baker, 2012; Barnett and Seymour, 1999; Turner, 2005) that the commodification of audiences has sharply reduced the quality of television current affairs programmes, and that this has caused a reduction in public awareness. Others suggest that magazine and tabloid offerings bring in younger audiences, and are less patriarchal than the early programmes (Lumby, 1999). Their argument is that tabloid fare is more popular as it does not focus on serious subject matter (Baker, 2012; Barnett and Seymour, 1999). However, for all the audience gains resulting from a lighter focus, there are substantial information losses as serious subject matter declines.

The genre has not only been critiqued for the decline in quality, there is also the question of whether current affairs programmes even operate and perform as they were originally intended. McNair (2008) argues that the health of broadcasting can be measured by how well current affairs television is made. This was a bellwether category within the United Kingdom's public service broadcasting system and effectively registered the health of public broadcasting practices. When the programmes were found wanting in general, it was said to be a strong indication of declining broadcasting standards.

There are important distinctions between news and current affairs programmes which provide a basis for evaluating the latter. The original versions of current affairs referred to programme subject matter, which was more in-depth than the news. Broadcast news usually consists of short items that are produced at high speed. For many journalists the news is a lead into current affairs, where more time is spent on stories and reporting is in more depth and at greater length. The British regulator Ofcom thus defines current affairs as:

A programme which contains explanations and analysis of current events and ideas, including material dealing with matters of political or industrial controversy or public policy. Also included are investigative programmes with contemporary significance [2].

The consensus in Britain is that current affairs programming covers the issues of the day, in foreign and domestic policy-making, and aims to explore complex issues in greater depth than a news bulletin can (McNair, 2008). However, this is not what contemporary New Zealand current affairs focuses on. There has been a marked change since the 1980s with the rise in entertainment subject matter and the decline in serious information (Baker, 2012). The role of the journalist is another important consideration when examining the contemporary form of the genre. In early current affairs programmes, the journalist ensured that the views of the public were presented to politicians and insisted that politicians present themselves to the electorate.

In contrast with later personality-driven current affairs programmes, the journalist's authority stemmed from their role as mediator rather than their celebrity status (Smith, 1974). During the early current affairs era viewers gained an expectation that every effort would be made to produce a fair account of the arguments or situation under examination. The impact of such current affairs programmes was immediate and far reaching (Holland, 2001). They became important sources of information for millions of people, and were regarded as a vital interface between broadcasting and politics (Baker, 2012).

Alysen (2000) notes, that since the original definitions, current affairs has become a generic term for a range of material that could be termed current affairs, public affairs or, in some cases, infotainment. Holland says:

The investigatory mode based on factual research has been the stock in trade of current affairs programmes from *Panorama* and *World in Action* to the *Cook Report*. These are prestigious programmes with substantial research budgets which, on occasion, have been able to sustain an investigation over a number of years (1997: 163).

She says that the very term 'infotainment' marks a philosophical shift away from the traditional notion of understanding current affairs as a provider of context and background for the news. Newer generic understandings indicate that the genre's content has shifted over time. Content changes have accompanied changes in programme formats, styles of narration, juxtaposition of imagery, and modes of address to the audience. Over the last thirty-five years, these changes have occurred against the backdrop of an increasingly deregulated and commercialized broadcasting environment. This has been the experience in New Zealand, Australia, Britain, and the United States.

One factor working against earlier manifestations of current affairs is the cost of investigative reporting. Because major investigations can take weeks or months to put together, they are much more expensive and time consuming than contemporary forms of current affairs. It is much cheaper to make a 'lavishly produced' infotainment or magazine item than to sustain the kind of outlay that high-quality current affairs programmes take. Those programmes regarded as 'infotainment' can often recoup much of their costs with contras, airline tickets, accommodation, and sponsorship. Such opportunities to contain programme costs are more commercially attractive to a network than a high-cost investigative programme.

There has been a shift in the style of current affairs towards an approach that emphasizes human drama. The solid current affairs of *In Action* or *Panorama* has given way to "tear-jerking schmaltz ..." (McNair, 2008: 5). Producers argue that this is because of the "changing demands of the television audience and the changing economies of production" (McNair, 2008: 5). A similar trend occurred in news and current affairs in New Zealand where, after deregulation in 1989, the emphasis became ratings at any cost (Atkinson, 1994b). Atkinson's research on news suggested a growing proportion of entertainment, crime, victim and human-interest stories and the marginalisation of political and economic issues. These findings were replicated in studies by Comrie (1996) and Cook (2000). For current affairs in particular, "deregulation had fundamentally changed the content, purpose and format of television news bulletins" (Baker, 2012: xii).

New Zealand television broadcasting institutions and current affairs

Since the early 1960s, New Zealand television has experienced the shift from state centred public broadcasting to a radically commercialized system. By the mid-1980s, broadcasting had been

restructured so many times that former Broadcasting Corporation Chairman Ian Cross called it a ‘battered baby’. Gregory (1985) stated that “[w]ith little public consultation, successive governments have reinvented the nation’s broadcasting service to suit changing political circumstances” (98). Further changes continued throughout the late 1980s, 1990s and 2000s such that entertainment oriented news and current affairs became institutionally embedded (Baker, 2012; Jones, 2017).

Deregulation and after 1984-1999

From July 1984, the fourth Labour (centre-left) government introduced neo-liberal policies whereby broadcasting was deregulated and media communication infrastructures “were absorbed into transnational corporations” (Hope, 2017: 48). By 1990, Labour had turned New Zealand into the world’s most deregulated broadcasting market. The airwaves were opened to local and overseas competition and profit became the key driver of state-owned television (Cocker, 1992). Accordingly, the Broadcasting Amendment Act (1989) disestablished the Broadcasting Corporation of New Zealand (BCNZ) and made TVNZ into a State Owned Enterprise (SOE) whose prime responsibility was the earning of dividends. Comrie and Fountaine (2005) suggest that “public broadcasting all but disappeared in New Zealand in the early 1990s...” (102). The two state-owned television channels mimicked privately owned competitors and were constantly under the threat of being sold. Harcourt (2000) also confirmed the profit emphasis when he observed that:

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 (18).

The commercial programming style of TVNZ in the late 1980s and 1990s provoked criticism about the decline in ‘quality’ programming (Edwards, 2002; Saunders, 2004). Format changes to *One News* (from the late 1980s) and various current affairs programmes, such as *Holmes*, were seen as illustrative. Many critics argued that commercialisation served to strengthen the grip of much larger multinational forces (Atkinson, 1994; Comrie, 1996; Comrie and Fountaine, 2005; Cook, 2000). In this regard, Atkinson pointed to “hyper-competition and the global proliferation between niche channels, with multi-channel owners reusing vast libraries of existing content to minimise the expense of producing genuinely novel or original material” (Atkinson, 2010: 414).

The changes in New Zealand television news content after deregulation have been widely explored. Research undertaken by Joe Atkinson (1994b), Margaret Comrie (1996) and Daniel Cook (2000) demonstrated that deregulation had fundamentally changed the content, purpose and format of prime time news bulletins. Atkinson’s research into the effects of deregulation on TVNZ’s *One News* from 1989 to 1990 noted a trend towards depoliticisation and public disengagement (Atkinson, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c). In later research, he remarked that:

Because the market for serious news and current affairs is a small subset of the public attention market, ‘letting the market prevail’ is typically a recipe for more entertainment-oriented editorial content. Only when commercial pressures are artificially restrained (for example, by public service regulation or newsprint rationing), and when the public’s interest in public affairs is exceptionally high (for example, due to war or terrorist attack), is serious news coverage likely to attract mass audiences. But whenever the media is unregulated and there is direct competition for audiences, some news outlets gravitate away from serious current affairs coverage towards more popular

human interest stories - stories about sports, crime, personal tragedy, divorce, sex and human celebrity (Atkinson, 2001: 306).

Margaret Comrie (1996) also explored the impact of deregulation on news in New Zealand. She identified “the growing tensions between two major models of broadcasting as marketplace ideology gains ascendancy over public service approaches (Comrie, 1996: ii). She revealed how increased commercial pressures and the drive to increase ratings resulted in news which under-served citizens in a democratic society.

Cook’s (2000) research also found that deregulation and commercialization had radically altered the news. In news bulletins from 1984-1996 he found that increasing depoliticisation, morselisation, personalisation, tabloidisation, decontextualisation and trivialization reflected a shift at TVNZ from hybrid-public service/commercial broadcasting to a more commercialized model. Many of the 1996 news bulletins studied showed more human-interest and tabloid elements compared to 1984. Cook concluded that the political implications of the human-interest story showed “ominously conservative tendencies in the overtly benign reportage, which suggests the bulletin was not so much *de*-politicised as *re*- politicised in a particular ideological direction” (Cook, 2000:257). Political policy items had also become more depoliticised as they became more tabloid. More recent research by Haley Jones further reveals the commercial pressures affecting the content and structure of prime-time television news (Jones, 2017).

According to Horrocks (2004), the broadcasting model after deregulation with the Broadcasting Act 1989 meant:

increased advertising and sponsorship, more ‘populist’ programmes (with an emphasis on brisk pacing and emotional impact), a rejection of slow and complex modes of presentation, an increased interest in strategic scheduling and the ‘branding’ of channels, and a huge expansion in ratings, market research, and financial scrutiny of every area of the schedule and every series (30).

The commercial nature of New Zealand television broadcasting became increasingly evident throughout the 1990s. Johnson’s (2000) research examines how, after February 1989, TVNZ established a unit to manage sponsorship. This was part of a general strategy to attract audiences by altering “the tone and substance of a programme”. Travel shows, for example, were “at the forefront of the integration of sponsorship and editorial programming” (Johnson, 2000: 125-126). Magazine current affairs programmes of the 1990s such as *Sixty Minutes* and *20/20* were also sponsored, and market oriented formats began to dominate.

The Charter and beyond 1999-2008

In 2003, the fifth Labour government introduced a Charter which sought to redress the excesses of commercialism. However, it was largely deemed to be flawed public policy as TVNZ’s attempt to make better quality television was compromised by profit imperatives (Cocker, 2006). Between 1999 and 2008, three Labour-led governments attempted to revitalise public service provisions within a ‘third way’ policy framework that sought to deliver social democratic policy outcomes under the constraints of a monetarist macro economic framework (Cocker, 2006; Comrie and Fountaine, 2005; Dunleavy, 2008; Lealand, 2008; Thompson, 2000, 2004). TVNZ was restructured as a Crown-owned company (CROC) with a public-service charter; the broadcaster would still need to generate money for the state, but they would also have to meet certain public-service obligations (Thompson, 2005). As outlined in the Charter, broadcasting content would contribute to national identity and citizenship.

Comrie and Fountaine (2005) suggest that although the TVNZ Charter was designed to improve poor performance in quality news and current affairs, content quality actually became worse. The much hyped *Sunday* programme was seen to exemplify the trend:

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 water birth, 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 water birth videos, personal photographs and close-ups, variously set to the sounds of panting, a ticking clock, beating heart and violin music (Comrie and Fountaine, 2005: 13).

With the demise of the Charter after the National government's 2008 election victory, the current affairs offerings on primetime television reflected the changes that Jones (2017) found in regard to prime time bulletins. She says that "the New Zealand networks are rapidly turning to tabloidized and entertainment-focused news to attract audience numbers, and, perhaps even more worryingly, traditionally hard news content—such as politics—is being softened for the same reason" (2017: 118). This trend reflects the findings of my own research into current affairs on New Zealand television from 1984 to 2017. These are outlined below.

Methodology

The sample for each year consists of 15 programmes randomly selected to make a constructed week or equivalent. The methodology is based on previous research into current affairs programmes in New Zealand (Baker, 2012). Programmes were selected from the March- November period (other months are seen as a time of soft news during the summer holiday period). In this research into specific current affairs programmes, the years chosen for examination were 1984, 1994, 2004, 2014 and 2017.

Findings

The quantitative results map two kinds of changes in current affairs television programmes: programme item length (see Table 1); and changing subject matter (see Figure 2). Item length relates to the pace and speed of the bulletin and the desire to keep audiences hooked and interested. Each decade of sampling reflects the broadcasting environment at the time. The 1984 sample pre-dates deregulation, the 1994 sample arises from the deregulation period, 2004 was the Charter period, while 2014 and 2017 represent the post-Charter period.

Table 1 Item length displayed with mean, median and mode in minutes for current affairs 1984, 1994, 2004, 2014, 2017

Programme	Close Up 1984	Sunday 1984	20/20 1994	Holmes 1994	Holmes 2004	Sunday 2004	Sunday 2014	7 Sharp 2014	Sunday 2017	7 Sharp 2017
Mean	15.6	23.1	12.2	6.1	6.8	13.5	11.9	3.1	12.35	3.14
Median	16	19.1	12.2	5.7	6.5	13.3	11.56	3.07	12.1	3.07
Maximum	20.7	46.6	18.1	11	15.8	19.6	24.53	8.2	24	5.25
Minimum	9.3	5	6.3	2.4	0.40	6.4	1.27	0.47	1.35	0.23

Item Length

Item length per item relates to how much information current affairs programmes produce and how much context can be provided. Shorter item lengths are designed to make story items less complex and thus easy to digest. This increases the pace of the programme. The data broadly demonstrates that from 1984 (the period of pre-deregulation) to 1994 (after deregulation), item lengths for television current affairs dropped markedly. The general trend in the data shows that the medians and means of item lengths for both of the 1994 current affairs programmes were substantially shorter than for the current affairs programmes of 1984. From 1994 to 2004 there was a slight increase in the median item length for the *Holmes* programme. *Sunday*'s median item length in 2004, though longer than the median item length for *Holmes* and *20/20* in 1994, does not reach the item length of the 1984 current affairs programmes.

These 'item length' figures suggest that a very different type of current affairs programme came into existence in the 1990s. At that time, much shorter item lengths were removing the in-depth interviews that had been a mainstay of current affairs programmes in 1984. *Sunday*, in 2004, had item lengths that were closer to earlier current affairs examples. However, even at the maximum item length for this date the programmes never returned to the item length times of the 1984 sample. From 1994 to 2004 item lengths stabilised and increased slightly from the 1994 current affairs programmes. The data, overall, suggests that between 1984 and 1994 the changes in item length altered the structure of current affairs programmes, limiting the time to examine subjects in depth or to provide context. From 1994 to 2004, *Sunday* saw an increase in item length compared to *Holmes*. *Sunday*, in 2014, however shows a drop in item length, while *Seven Sharp* in 2014 presents the lowest item length of the entire sample. It is hard to present complex stories in ever decreasing item lengths and this suggests a shorter focus which is at odds with the original principles of current affairs. In the 2017 programmes, *Sunday* item lengths remain quite consistent with the 2014 sample. However, *Seven Sharp* has the lowest maximum item length of all. It can also be observed that the weeknight current affairs programmes in the 2000s contain stories that are even shorter than the *Holmes* programmes of the 1990s and 2000s.

Subject matter change

Figure 2. Celebrity, entertainment, lifestyle and sport subject matter 1984, 1994, 2014, 2017 as percentage

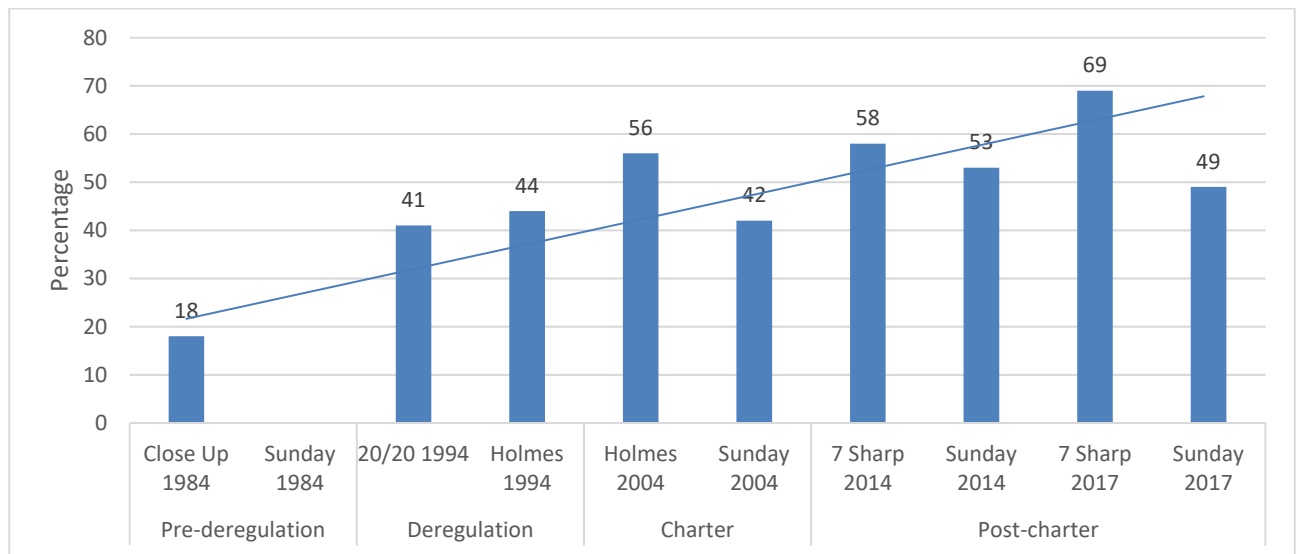


Figure 2 demonstrates that celebrity, entertainment, lifestyle and sport content has increased markedly from the 1980s onwards. From 1984 to 2004, item lengths diminished. There was a significant decline in the coverage of serious and informational subjects and a sustained and measurable move to a more entertainment-oriented current affairs programmes (Baker, 2012). In the Charter period, the increase in entertainment subject matter only continued. In 2014 this was maintained. On TV3, *Campbell Live*'s demise in May 2015 led to the arrival of its much more infotainment magazine-oriented replacement, *Story*, which was cancelled in November 2016. This has since been replaced by *The Project*, another even more entertainment-oriented programme. Furthermore, the loss of *Campbell Live* has created an environment where serious information subjects are eschewed completely in favour of entertainment-oriented subject matter. The more recent post-Charter programme *Seven Sharp* presents a new extreme in celebrity and entertainment subject matter compared to earlier years. The 7pm week-night slot now focuses on current affairs programmes that are highly commercialized and entertainment-driven. Though space constraints prevent a further discussion concerning the formats of these 7pm programmes, my current affairs findings complement Jones' (2017) research regarding prime time news bulletins. She argued that the "commercialization trends identified in the 1990s have continued to worsen" (2017: 118). Her content analysis during 2015 demonstrated that news had become hybridized with 'soft' news characteristics appearing in traditionally 'hard' news. In the current affairs programmes of 2014 onwards this is also the case. Since then, it has become almost impossible to see hard news current affairs stories in week night primetime slots.

Current affairs – An endangered species

These findings show that TVNZ, though New Zealand's state broadcaster, continues to embrace ratings over journalistic concerns. What is especially disturbing is that, after deregulation, hyper-commercialism has become largely embedded within news and current affairs throughout the television mediascape. With this research in mind, there is obvious concern about the future of investigative news and current affairs. As television networks continue to make more entertainment-oriented programmes, there seems to be no end in sight for this process.

This hyper-commercialized broadcasting environment also impacts on the public sphere more generally. The ‘public sphere’ can be defined as a “space in which citizens confer without restriction on matters of general interest” (Hope, 1996: 12) It might also be considered as the social space in which people can express different opinions, discuss problems of general concern, and find solutions based on the input of all. It is the nexus between public life and civil society, a neutral social space where private individuals can debate about important issues without influence from the state and commercial interests (Habermas et al., 1974). Current affairs television, as originally practiced within public service broadcasting, can facilitate and deepen such debates. However, in New Zealand, public service broadcasting has been dealt successive blows over the years. This has resulted in the declining quality of news and current affairs and in the extinction of various types of programmes. When the purpose of public service broadcasting is considered, its eradication has important consequences. Turner (2005) 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 (25).

The move to a highly commercialized media system has become entrenched over the last thirty years without mitigation. The so-called current affairs programmes that have replaced *Campbell Live* since May 2015 reflect this state of affairs. Dallas Smythe (1977) advanced the claim that the audience is the primary commodity of the mass media and suggested that the audiences’ value is determined by negotiations between media organisations and advertisers, working on behalf of major corporations. This has important ramifications in the New Zealand context. The hyper-commercialisation of broadcasting under the ratings system has positioned the audience as a pure commodity to satisfy two overlapping objectives: first, to cut production costs, and second, to maximise audience revenue, especially from favoured demographics (Corner and Pels, 2003). The logical consequence of this for media content is fragmentation and hybridity as programme formats are continuously refined to increase the audiences’ commodity value. Thus, the current affairs genre has abandoned its original traditional long-form studio interview and documentary formats to become ‘infotainment’.

Author bio

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Endnotes

- [1] The deregulation time period in New Zealand was from 1984 to 1995, during which Labour and National governments instituted a broad ranging neoliberal policy agenda. The Charter period starts from 2003 as the Labour Led government under Helen Clark pursued a programme of piecemeal broadcasting reforms. TVNZ’s commercial success had marginalized public service content,

arising from the pursuit of ratings through populist and tabloid content. The post-Charter period began when the National government abandoned the document in 2011.

- [2] The Provision of Public Affairs, London, Ofcom, July 2006
(<http://www.ofcom.org.uk>)

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