

Examining the changing face of television current affairs programmes in New Zealand from a 'political economy' perspective.

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This paper will look at the changing face of current affairs television programmes in New Zealand from a political economy perspective. As part of that exploration it will examine the contending cultural studies position and address the claimed limitations of the political economy method. The Political Economy approach provides a framework from which to examine key areas of change in Western and New Zealand broadcasting. Many Western governments have lessened their commitment to public service broadcasting and the political economy method is well suited to research where economic structures, social and cultural life are interconnected, and can be used to evaluate these relationships. For New Zealand broadcasting a defining event of recent years was the application of neo-liberal policies after the 1984 election, taken even further by successive governments. These changes mirrored other Western nations where broadcasting became increasingly commercial, deregulated and globalised. As debates continue about the reduction of quality current affairs programmes on New Zealand television, this paper will explore the application of a political economy approach to changes that have occurred to this television genre.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most dramatic changes to western broadcasting in the last 15 to 20 years has been the lessening of commitment by many western broadcasters to public service broadcasting (Norris, P., Pauling., B, Zanker., R., Lealand, G, (2003); Tracey, 1998; Willard & Tracey, 1990). New Zealand is one of the most deregulated broadcasting markets with close to 20 years of profit driven broadcasting although TVNZ (Television New Zealand) the state broadcaster has since 2003 attempted to address the perceived imbalance of an almost wholly commercial system. This was done with the introduction of a Charter that prioritises quality news and current affairs. In New Zealand, many critics cited the impact of the neo-liberal policies embraced after the election of the 1984 Labour government and then successive governments of the 1990s as having a negative impact on programming in New Zealand in terms of tabloid news and current affairs as well as other losses in quality (Atkinson, 1994, Edwards, 2002, Kelsey, 1995). Many of these same critics see certain drivers impacting heavily and playing a key part in this decline. These are factors that cannot be removed from trends that have affected western broadcasting as a whole and include deregulation, globalisation, convergence and technological innovation.

The structures of broadcasting in New Zealand have been dramatically changed since the mid 1980s. As a means of examining these and other types of broadcasting changes the political economy approach is concerned with research into the economic and institutional structures, patterns of media ownership, broadcasting revenue and explores the technological changes and other economic or institutional factors that impact on the way that media operates and its impact on the content broadcast (Casey, Casey, Calvert, French & Lewis, 2002, McChesney, 1998). In this period, New Zealand was opened up to the forces of globalisation, deregulation and competition.

Barnett sees the impact of globalisation and deregulation as almost unstoppable:

The “forces of deregulation and corporatisation are gathering pace in a seemingly inexorable shift towards concentration and consolidation of ownership. The inherent risks are, I believe, severe: a tendency towards monopoly and therefore less pluralism and diversity of voices: less innovation and risk taking; and more homogenised forms of journalism which are less equipped to challenge vested interests” (Barnett, 2004:12).

There is evidence that the changes initiated in the 1980s and further still in the 1990s by successive governments has dramatically impacted on the standard of and quality of New Zealand television programmes, most notably in the key areas of news and current affairs programmes (Atkinson, 1994, Comrie & Fountaine, 2005; Edwards, 2002, Hayward, 2003). This paper will explore the usefulness and limitations of the political economy approach to a study on current affairs programmes and briefly consider the contending cultural studies position.

CURRENT AFFAIRS TELEVISION PROGRAMMES

Current affairs programmes were initially created in Britain in 1953 with the programme *Panorama* which was soon taken off air after initial bad reviews. When it was relaunched it was to become an institution of British broadcasting. The broadcasting environment was one of public service broadcasting with the key elements to entertain, educate and inform (Golding & Murdock, 2000). Public affairs television in the United States was to begin in 1951 and the first programme was called *See It Now* (Tracey, 1995).

Current affairs television programmes were unique from their inception, their purpose to look more in-depth at stories than was possible in news programmes. The programmes built on news items and were to provide

depth, context and breadth. They could focus on issues that took weeks or months to examine, and they were a useful addition to news where stories that could not be covered in the time available could be researched and investigated in more depth (Holland, 1997, Alysen, B, 2000). They were also to become an important information source for the public and regarded as a vital interface between broadcasting and politics.

In a contemporary discussion of their role, Barnett says that these programmes also serve a deeply political action:

A healthy democracy depends upon a culture of dissent and argument, and that the mechanisms of the market-place on their own cannot be trusted because in a world of privately owned media, owners influence content (2003, 13).

The current affairs genre was where politicians presented themselves to the electorate and they have been a key part of what Habermas has characterised as the public sphere (Herman & McChesney, 1997). ¹The concept is important as a 'democratic society depends on an informed populace making political choices' (Ibid: 3). For some the public sphere is best served by 'non-profit, non-commercial public service broadcasters like the BBC that tend to be relatively independent and therefore capable of some degree of objectivity (Ibid). The crucial factor is that there is no restriction on the range of viewpoints expressed and that the powerful economic and political actors cannot drown out the idea of media representing aspects of society. The idea of the public sphere has influenced other scholars like MacPherson, Alex Carey and Noam Chomsky who have pointed out those societies with largely commercial media systems are often 'filled with rampant depoliticisation' (McChesney: 1998).

¹ This refers to the role that broadcasting can play in a democracy as a forum where political issues are discussed and debated and more importantly information that is important for citizen participation is disseminated.

POLITICAL ECONOMY AND CULTURAL STUDIES

The political economy approach is interested in four contemporary and interconnected trends. The first is the increasing concentration of ownership in the media industries where corporations like Disney or Time Warner have grown to establish media empires with ever growing interests in all areas of production and distribution. The second area is the general move towards the deregulation and the increasing commercialisation of broadcast media. For those organisations that were existing commercial systems this has often meant even greater freedom to move away from any public service obligations. The third trend is the globalisation of media production and distribution. McChesney says that globalization may well be the “dominant political, social and economic issue of our era” (1998:1).² The final main concern of political economy is the examination of the expansion of media forms and outlets. Critics suggest that though there are more channels, this does not necessarily mean a greater variety of content, merely a differing marketing pitch to the viewers or consumers of certain high spending demographics (Casey et al, 2002; McChesney, 1998; Golding & Murdock, 2000).

When comparing the political economy and cultural studies approaches it can be said that both come from a ‘broadly neo- Marxist view of society and both are “centrally concerned” with the constitution and exercise of power” (Golding & Murdock, 2000:71). However this shared base obscures the different historical approaches. In contrast to the political economy approach, cultural studies are more concerned with how meanings vary in a text and within the overall context of that text. The emphasis is on how the audience members interpret media and incorporate it into their world view. This approach views audiences as active subjects, who make sense of the situation rather than as passive victims of a media system. One of the ideals behind this position was

² It refers to the process where capitalism is increasingly seen as a process that takes place on a transnational process. McChesney also says it is one trend in a complex capitalist system. Driven by neo-liberal policies that promote profits and the free flow of goods with minimal regulation as the example of an efficient and viable economy (1998: 2).

to counter the argument that audiences did not receive pleasure or have varying responses to texts. Also important was to dispel the notion that popular culture was simply trivial and or manipulative (ibid).

One of the strengths of the cultural studies approach is that it does look at the contradictions, class issues and pleasures that texts provide. A cultural studies approach however, says little about how these texts as products of culture industries actually do operate and how an economic organisation operates on the production and circulation of meaning. It also does not examine how people's ability to consume this material is "structured in the wider economic formation" (Golding & Murdock, 2000: 72).

A central concern of the political economy approach is the relationship between political economy and broadcasting policy. Governments through regulation and funding have the capacity to shape or influence the political economy of broadcasting systems. As governments withdraw from public broadcasting obligations broadcasting is often treated as an economic tool and not a cultural resource. One of the most noticeable changes of the 1990s has been the emergence of a global commercial media market built on new technologies and the global trend towards deregulation. There is now a global oligopolistic market that covers the spectrum of media and is now crystallizing with very high barriers to entry.

McChesney suggest that the relevance of the political economy approach is that it cannot explain all aspects of communication activity but what it can do is examine the "context for most research questions in communication" (1998: 4).³

The application of this to current affairs programmes can be seen with research carried out after deregulation in New Zealand. Atkinson noted a

³ In media studies, debates around political economy focus on the extent to which the ownership and revenue structure of a television company influences the content of its programming.

trend in the news towards depoliticisation (Atkinson, 1994). This supports those political economy critics who suggest that the commercial media tends to reinforce depoliticisation among the citizenry and the retreat from state regulation and public funding of broadcast media affect the capacity of the media to perform its democratic function (McChesney, 1998:8)

This is particularly relevant to the New Zealand situation as the push for ratings and pressures to make a profit impacted heavily on programming at TVNZ throughout the 1980s and 1990s. From 1989, after the deregulation of the broadcasting environment there were major changes to the media environment with no limits on foreign ownership of media companies, or on cross-ownership and a failure to impose local content quotas (Harcourt, 2000). Harcourt says:

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

In contrast to this argument is the idea that these programmes are popular and it is the snobs and intellectuals who argue for a return to quality. This is a concern not merely for the cultural studies proponents, New Zealand television broadcaster Paul Holmes said of the criticism of his then current affairs programme *Holmes*:

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: 31).

In New Zealand, the criticism that the news changed dramatically with deregulation has been substantiated with research that showed major changes to TVNZ's flagship *One News*. Atkinson's research showed the programme had major signs of morselisation and depoliticisation (Atkinson,

1994). This was later replicated in studies of the news by Comrie and Cook. Other critics suggest that the new programmes have changed to meet audience needs and this is a democratising effect as they make programmes more accessible and relevant (Holland, 2001; Lumby, 2003). These debates are important and present some of the most pressing concerns about the quality of news and current affairs. Often these debates divide those who follow a political economy structural examination from those of the cultural studies position, who see merits in the new programmes and their popularity.

NEW ZEALAND CURRENT AFFAIRS

British current affairs programmes hit their stride in the 1950s ushering in a 'golden age of television' with American public affairs programmes following suit. New Zealand made a somewhat slower and more pedestrian attempt to produce programmes in the current affairs genre (Day, 2000, Tracy, 1995). *Compass* was the first attempt made in 1963. *Column Comment* looking at the press followed in 1964 and was a widely watched long running programme (Day, 2000).

This was a new experience for the audience, broadcasting executives and politicians alike. The Holyoake administration of the 1960s was the first administration in New Zealand to be put under such scrutiny. Politicians were extremely wary of the new 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* (Ibid). Old constraints were discarded and interviewers and producers were able to engage more forthrightly with politicians and other community leaders (Saunders, 2004).

TVNZ operated 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

levels. TVNZ deemed it a matter of policy that its first programming responsibility was to news and current affairs (TVNZ, n.d.).⁴

Broadcasting took a new turn in the late 1980s. Like Britain and the United States the New Zealand television market became more competitive. Cook suggests that “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: 6).⁵ Harcourt says: “Public broadcasting in New Zealand was last sighted in the late eighties but was officially declared an extinct species in 1989” (2000: 18). New Zealand broadcasting of the 1990s was so advertising reliant that advertising and promotional content on TVNZ was up to 15 minutes in an hour and educational programmes were dropped in favour of American infomercials for exercise machines and diet schemes (Harcourt, 2000:18). In the key areas of news and current affairs this was ratings at any cost. One method used to do this was to prioritise crime stories, and victim stories in favour of stories on politics or the economy (Atkinson, 1994).

The 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. In 1988, the Broadcasting Corporation of New Zealand (BCNZ) that was formed in 1980 to merged two channels under a single corporation was disestablished to allow the formation of an autonomous commercial television company, the State Owned Enterprise, Television New Zealand. It had 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, 1994).

⁴ 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.

⁵ New Zealand in fact, took the deregulation model of broadcasting further than these other nations.

Atkinson has critiqued a number of trends that occurred since deregulation 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 ownership structure of media, for example, is important in determining programme outputs to those applying a political economy approach. In countries where media are controlled by government, programming may be expected to either subtly or overtly reflect the interests of those in power. Privately owned media in contrast is more likely to be sympathetic towards a pro business view of the world, which may or may not coincide with the interests of political leaders (Barnett, 2004). The commercially driven focus of New Zealand television broadcasters meant that “was not only a matter of ratings but constant calculations as to the profit and loss on each slot, each hour of television, and whether a different audience demographic could attract more advertising revenue” (Horrocks: 58).

Following deregulation the changes of the 1980s were so dramatic that Kelsey says by 1995, news and current affairs were in a bad way. The news and current affairs programmes took on a ‘moral of the story’ view that Kelsey suggests was given through non-verbal cues. The all important in depth studio interviews and investigative journalism were replaced by “populist crusades, group encounters and evasive or a rigidly combative interview” (Kelsey, 1995; 330). Analysis of complex issues became structurally impossible purely through the fact that sound bites had been reduced. By 1992 more than three quarters of all interviews had been reduced to ten second sound bites (Ibid).

The sources of news changed as well with a privileging of political and business elites. They were treated as authoritative sources which in turn gave them leverage over the language, agenda and perspectives that were heard (Kelsey, 1995). This is a point that will be returned to as it is often claimed by cultural studies theorists that the more popular types of programming actually allow different voices, giving those traditionally excluded from public affairs a voice.

When there were attempts at investigative journalism these were often met with hostility. For example, a documentary linking the Labour government with big business drew a number of defamation writs (Kelsey, 1995). This is very like the 'flak' that Herman and Chomsky suggest creates self-censorship. (1995: 2).

Throughout the 1990s at TVNZ, their flagship current affairs programme was the *Holmes* show, which enjoyed ratings success. 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 the entire programme's 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).⁶ The *Holmes* programme was however considered by some critics to be an "unabashedly infotainment" programme.⁷

The tensions that are often evident in the discussion of the quality of current affairs programmes was evident when the *Holmes* programme aimed to represent the perspective of ordinary people in battles with bureaucrats, politicians or sundry authorities. Critics however, were less impressed with the trends *Holmes* represented. Saunders argues:

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.

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).

Since commercial broadcast media tend to generate the bulk of their revenue from advertising, programming is likely to be tailored to the needs and interests of advertisers. This involves not only delivering the kinds of audiences most likely to buy their products on display, but doing so in a way that keeps viewers or listeners receptive to commercial messages. This has both ideological and aesthetic consequences. In ideological terms this type of media favours consumerist rather than citizenship approaches to problems and excludes negative messages about those businesses that advertise and about the corporate world in general. Aesthetically, programmes will tend to be written or structured in ways that ensure a smooth transition to commercial breaks and this trend was noted in the format of *One News*. Horrocks says of the commissioning process of the commercially driven period:

Programs offered free by funding bodies or production companies or sponsors were often rejected, series were abruptly cancelled, and commissioned programs were re-jigged. All value criteria other than ratings or income were eliminated, a process that was seductive for some television executives... (2004: 58).

CULTURAL STUDIES

Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field which provides an understanding of phenomena and relationships that were not accessible in pre existing disciplines (Casey et al, 2000; Golding & Murdock, 2000). It explores the relationship between the audience and the text, it is concerned with the relationship of the texts to the audiences and the relations between existing class and social relations. As previously mentioned, one of the main differences between the political economy approach and cultural studies is that culture is autonomous- not a simple reflection of economic structures.

There are critics who complain of all encroaching tabloidisation and entertainment values in current affairs television (Franklin, 1997, Comrie & Fountaine, 2005, Turner, 2003). Other critics argue that the changes evidenced in current affairs programmes are not always negative, and that the earlier programmes were 'bland,, standardized and often limited in their appeal" (Macdonald, 2003: 59). They argue that popular forms offer alternative views to 'official' or power-bloc' knowledge even if this does not feed into political action. Fiske argues that the 'power-bloc' constructed the public sphere in the 18th century and has maintained control ever since (1992). The "definition of what was important for the people was not of course made by the people. Information need not always be associated with objective truth, but can be explicitly associated with the social position and political interests of those who mobilise it" (Fiske, 1992: 46). Glynn (2000) also picks up this argument and says that 'tabloid television' which includes popular current affairs shows, talk shows and 'reality TV' genres, breaks down the hierarchies of discourse of established journalism and allows for a heterogeneity of voices and points of view. Potentially, white middle class masculine authority is challenged by these types of programmes and non-conformist, black and women's perspectives may gain greater voice in the media than before.

In terms of current criticism of current affairs programmes in New Zealand this does not appear to be the case.⁸ Langer, however, takes the cultural studies perspective further, that other news, be these everyday stories about accidents or weather that make no claims to be political or newsworthy allow ordinary people's concerns to affect criteria on news worthiness. There have certainly been plenty of these stories on New Zealand television. Yet it is hard to argue that the many hours of ratings driven human interest stories are really doing anything other than offering sensation and distraction. The public sphere has been criticised further by those cultural studies purists who argue that it is an inherently male domain and that Habermas and others did not

⁸ The focus of New Zealand commercial current affairs seems to be narrow this is an area that requires empirical examination however.

notice or appreciate the “gendered subtext of the concept of the public sphere” (Van Zoonen, 1991: 230).

For Lumby, many of the critics who see a decline and loss in quality are actually quite accurate in their description of the shifts evident in form, content and the role of the media. However, Lumby believes they fail to put those shifts into a broader social and political context. Further, she argues that too much public debate on the media is grounded in elitist and anachronistic assumptions about what’s best for the general public. The traditional high brow media formats are not she adds, ‘value free’ and they are founded in a top-down model of public debate in which experts and others in the know decide which issues are important and proceed to explain and debate them on behalf of ordinary people. She does acknowledge that at the tabloid end of media from talkback to daytime talk shows, women’s magazines and downmarket commercial current affairs programmes are characterised by opinions and stories with no claim to expert knowledge. As chaotic, populist and populated by vocal ordinary people this end of the media sphere may be, she suggests, a place that you can most often hear ordinary people speak out on their own behalf (Lumby, 2003). One of her central points is that democratisation has occurred through a diversification not only of voices but also of ways of speaking about personal, social and political life. The contemporary media sphere constitutes a highly diverse and inclusive forum in which a host of core issues once deemed apolitical, trivial or personal are now being aired.

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. The cultural studies theorists would say that this is an elitist argument. However, 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.

Since Paul Holme's departure in 2004 to another television company there have been few differences in the approach used by the replacement presenter Susan Wood. Wood offers her personal asides and opinions on the outcome of 0900 'phone in' polls.⁹ 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".¹⁰ 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: 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: 14). The mid 1990s were marked by concern over the quality of current affairs programmes and there are, Comrie & Fountaine suggest, no equivalent shows produced in the post-charter era. They suggest

⁹ These polls have no validity as an indicator of public opinion.

¹⁰ During the late 1990s apart from *Holmes* the other current affairs programmes in primetime were *60 Minutes* which ran on Sunday evenings, and *Assignment* which was New Zealand's in-depth current affairs programme. It ran for several years on limited runs and now no longer exists (Comrie & Fountaine, 2005: 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 was at least a critical success was *Agenda*, however it was placed in a Saturday morning slot, which was not conducive to rating well (Comrie & Fountaine, 2005).

TVNZ's commercial imperatives have "arguably increased since it became burdened with charter requirements" (2005:10).

These programmes represent a philosophical change from the traditional view of current affairs where context and background were the essential underpinnings of the genre. Current affairs programmes like many other formats or genres have been affected by deregulation policies. 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 a genre current affairs seem especially vulnerable to the effects of hybridisation and reality television. Current affairs programmes in many countries are in crisis but arguably this is even more so in New Zealand.

CONCLUSION

In New Zealand neo-liberal policies have been applied to broadcasting in a sustained and uncompromising way for close to twenty years. Critics in New Zealand have noted that the reduction in current affairs quality has been widespread. Despite the criticisms that many of the programmes that have been screened are popular, issues still exist about whether or not ratings are an accurate measure of a programme's success.

The doubts that some cultural theorists express about 'top-down' definitions of quality and the public sphere are important debates and point to the need for further research into what audiences get from programmes. There is evidence however, in the existing research into news programmes carried out in New Zealand that the demands for profit and revenue have had a dramatic influence on the programme quality. There is a growing awareness in the academic world Horrocks suggests, that single factor studies are of limited value. In New Zealand, because of our smallness "we are concentrated, closely interconnected and therefore highly sensitive to change" (Horrocks, 1996). Those who promote the political economy approach see the trend in deregulated broadcasting markets towards monopoly and less pluralism and diverse voices which has implications for a country the size of New Zealand.

Further, the standard of journalism in a deregulated system is often less innovative and less equipped to challenge vested interests, which suggests that this approach is important for analysing a broadcasting system like New Zealand's (Barnett, 2004). As cultural studies is mainly interested in the way that mechanisms of discourse work within a particular text or texts then political economy is concerned to explain how the production concerns may be impacting on the text. In New Zealand where the application of neo-liberal policies was so complete, the political economy approach can tease out these varying impacts with a clarity that an examination of the texts cannot do and where a focus on this approach means that a huge part of the broadcasting equation remains unexamined.

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