

## New Zealand television picks up the pieces

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Created 2001-07-17 23:00

Perhaps there is some logic, if the free market broadcasting genie is ever to be put back in its bottle, that the first such attempt should be made in a culture as literate, internationalist and egalitarian as New Zealand [1]. In short, while the world at large is looking to throw most of the traditions and values of public service broadcasting to the winds of competition, the recently elected Labour Government in New Zealand is determined to return a culture of public service to its state television service: a culture which, ironically, was rolled back under an earlier Labour government.

Last Autumn the Chairman of TV New Zealand, Ross Armstrong, invited me to spend a hectic, jet-lagged five days in New Zealand as a sort of One Man McKinsey. Whether my breakneck induction and off-the-cuff refinement of the issues assisted them, only the board and management of TVNZ [2] can say – but perhaps it is no surprise that the Channel 4 model and experience should be quoted in connection with this challenge. After all, what else is the Channel seeking to do every day than reconcile the ambition to make intelligent, contemporary television with the needs of the marketplace?

So can the television clock really be turned back? In New Zealand or elsewhere? First, a little history.

### 'Mother country' showcase uprooted

A 1970s traveller to this smallest of the former Dominions might have wondered whether their 12,000 mile journey hadn't been an illusion or, at the very least, something of a time travel. The single, state-owned television channel offered a concentrated showcase of the best of the Mother Country. In folk memory a night's viewing might begin with *Coronation Street*, followed by *Upstairs, Downstairs*, followed by *Morecambe and Wise* or *The Forsythe Saga* followed by *Brideshead Revisited* – to be interrupted only by the news from Auckland to Dunedin – until, at something like 10 or 11 o'clock, the service would close down to allow this farming nation to get to bed.

Indigenous production was the poor relation. The news and current affairs programming spoke in tones and attitudes that owed more to Alexandra Palace than Wellington (let alone Waitangi). The opening of a second channel from the same state broadcaster may have done something for choice and, even, for indigenous production, but had little impact on the prevailing culture. Until...

The 1980s saw the arrival of a very different Labour Party in Government. No longer socialist, its economic creed was *Plus Thatcheriste que Thatcher*. It hit the public sector like a South Sea storm. TVNZ was upended, from a comfortable BBC-replica public institution to a profit-driven corporation, in Kiwi parlance a State Owned Enterprise. The balance of its funding was shifted accordingly, from a licence fee with some advertising 'top-up', to an advertising-driven operation with rapidly reducing state support.

## **'Rogernomics' leads to 'advertorials'**

The logic of 'Rogernomics' (Roger Douglas, the finance minister, was its chief architect) was clear: deliver to the New Zealand treasury the maximum revenues possible, unfettered by anything so fussy as content regulation, unfettered indeed – bar the normal expectations of broadcasting truth and fairness – by virtually anything at all! So enthusiastically did TVNZ warm to its new task that, when the Government introduced a third, private sector channel, the first to compete with TVNZ, it was bust within a year and had to be bailed out and refinanced as a knockdown disposal to Camwest.

Nor has TVNZ's onward march stopped there. At the time of the Labour Government's coming to power in 1999, this state-owned broadcaster had a 76% share of all New Zealand television viewing and was delivering something like £30 million annually to the New Zealand exchequer. These, you might say, are problems every State broadcaster would be happy to possess! No wonder the previous Government was planning to sell it off to Rupert Murdoch.

So what exactly so irked the incoming Labour Government in this equation that they swore to redeem it? What complaint could they have against such an apparently MBA-textbook case of 'motivated seller, willing buyer, contented treasury'? Surely not the replacement of *Brideshead Revisited* by *Cold Feet*? Dogma, then? Not exactly.

On my first afternoon I was flicking through the hotel room remote control (there are now four terrestrial channels, two of them TVNZ, two Camwest, plus – of course – there's Murdoch) and hit upon a TVNZ personal finance show on house purchase. But this was to be no *Location, Location, Location*, let alone *Raising the Roof*. It was something of a surprise at the outset to find the programme sponsored by a leading firm of estate agents but I watched on. Up popped a daytime presenter, accompanied by a salesman from the very same estate agents. They began to tour a variety of properties on offer from the self same firm, jointly judging each to be even more thrilling than the last and absolute 'snips' at their respective prices. And so passed half an hour of daytime television – and I began to sense that things, just possibly, had got a little out of hand in this far distant outpost of the free market.

## **The confusions of reform**

British politicians are notorious for complaining much about television and watching very little of it. Their interventions are as often as not prompted by the 'something must be done' editorials that are delivered to them by their cuttings services. And when they do speak about what they actually watch, their habits are sometimes so bizarre as to mark them down as severely dysfunctional. I would hesitate to make any such comparison with their New Zealand counterparts, but the flipside of Labour's bossiness seems to be a *Jewel in the Crown* nostalgia; or, more kindly, a belief that this most powerful of media can offer more than an endless diet of games, quizzes, makeovers and Reality TV. Whether or not the instinct is justified, it must be admitted that in New Zealand, the 1980s Labour Government had a mandate for change. Broadcasting reform featured prominently in their manifesto.

But it is easier to feel ennui with the existing model than to know what should replace it. There is a further problem: New Zealand is a tiny economy, not much more than four million people. Imported programming still dominates, and necessarily always will. Just as TVNZ in the 1970s was simply a mirror to the state of the BBC and ITV, so now it reflects the current state of English-speaking television across the world. Just cracking the mirror won't achieve anything.

Perhaps not surprisingly, progress on re-introducing the ethic of Public Service Broadcasting [3] to TVNZ has been slow and fraught. It has taken over a year to negotiate a form of words that

will constitute a new charter, to come into force in 2002. It is nicely articulated, speaking of the need to “maintain a balance between programmes of general appeal and programmes of interest to smaller audiences”. TVNZ “must seek to extend the range of ideas and experiences available to New Zealanders”. But, like all such documents, it is open to interpretation and raises as many questions as it answers.

For its part, TVNZ is entitled to ask how success in fulfilling these new obligations will be measured. The Government response has been largely unspecific, even confused. Many TVNZ staff members are quietly (or vocally) opposed to their new orders. Meanwhile, the government seems unprepared to forego any of the nice juicy revenues that have been pouring into the Treasury. These are the ingredients for a truly poisonous brew.

### **How to restore public service?**

So is the ambition to restore some sense of public service noble but doomed? This question has relevance far beyond New Zealand, though in Britain it is expressed more in the constant re-invention of that purpose ‘to inform, entertain and educate’ than in its re-discovery. With some of the next parliamentary timetable given over to a new bill establishing the remit of the new regulator OFCOM [4], this is an issue no less urgent in Britain than in New Zealand.

At first sight the Channel 4 analogy is of only limited application to the South Pacific. The Channel has achieved commercial success without – *pace* less sympathetic commentators – losing its intellectual marbles. But it has succeeded as a niche broadcaster in a very populous market where the smaller demographics can still deliver sustainable advertising revenues. That could not be achieved in a market as small as New Zealand.

Then again, while TVNZ could change direction partly by a different strategy in programme purchasing from abroad, local New Zealand production will be the key driver of reform. A national broadcaster can only properly claim that status if it consistently and accurately reflects a nation to itself. But while Channel 4 has been able to draw upon a sizeable and very versatile independent production sector in Britain to establish its status and reduce its dependence on American imports, the New Zealand industry is far more fragile and will need very determined support and guidance to any such end.

But the means to re-acquiring or sustaining a public service ethic in a modern, multi-channel world may not be so different. The aim cannot be to return to some halcyon age of TV of the 1970s, when – in truth – there was much poor television as well as good. That would be to deny the seismic shift that has occurred in popular culture, let alone television, in that time. Rather, it must be to determine the key programmes in one’s armoury; those which, along with a fully alert and intelligent news and current affairs output, differentiate any broadcaster from the pack, and create a true broadcasting signature. This new sense of purpose can be discovered without rebuilding from scratch – though it would undoubtedly involve jettisoning ‘advertorials’ and other attendant schlock!

### **Looking to our laurels**

The conversion may actually be achieved by a small number of new programmes – provided they are programmes of ambition, adequately financed and cherished accordingly. They can come from each and every genre – factual, drama, entertainment. They are the elements that can ensure that not a week passes without leaving a clear imprint in the popular consciousness. And, yes, they are the elements relevant to reputation rather than ratings. For it is at the point that any broadcaster allows its culture to be predicated wholesale on audience figures that it has effectively lost the public service plot. As TVNZ undoubtedly had, before the 1980s typhoon.

This, for me, has to be the definition, and the limit, of sustainable public service in today's commercial television sector. It may appear an unambitious, unradical, or 'managerial' vision; but it is based in the real world of public service broadcasting's history. A small number of programmes have always defined the difference in any decade. In sanctifying memory, we have simply invested a large body of very ordinary and forgettable programmes with the aura of great classics. Television is either part of popular contemporary culture or it is dead. If it fundamentally lacks intelligence, it will atrophy. If TV New Zealand can grasp this nettle, the tide is with them. And the British, on the other side of a shrinking world, might also look to our laurels.

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