

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

Baker, S. School of Communication Studies, Auckland
University of Technology, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1020,
New Zealand, sbaker@aut.ac.nz

Abstract 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.

Keywords: Current affairs, broadcasting, political economy

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 (Comrie, 2002; 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. TVNZ (Television New Zealand) has been forced by government legislation to address the perceived imbalance of an almost wholly commercial system, with the introduction of a Charter in 2003 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; Hayward, 2003; Kelsey, 1995). Many of these same critics see certain drivers impacting heavily and playing a key part in this decline. These are the same factors that have affected western broadcasting as a whole and include deregulation, globalisation, convergence and technological innovation but it is argued that the impacts in New Zealand have been more profound due to the almost complete adoption of a neo-liberal economic approach.

The structures of broadcasting in New Zealand have been dramatically changed since the mid 1980s. As a means of examining these and other broadcasting changes the political economy approach is concerned with research into the economic and institutional structures, patterns of media

ownership, broadcasting revenue, the technological changes and other economic or institutional factors that impact on the way that media operates and their 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 developed in the 1990s by successive governments has dramatically impacted on the standard and quality of New Zealand television programmes, most notably in the key areas of news and current affairs (Atkinson, 1994, Comrie & Fountaine, 2005; Edwards, 2002, Hayward, 2003). While many of these critics cite the introduction of commercial imperatives and hunger for ratings as key to the decline in these areas, other observers argue that these programmes simply reflect audience needs. It is this tension between the perceived decline of quality and the counter argument that these programmes simply reflect popular choices that lies at the heart of a discussion of such matters. This paper will explore the usefulness and limitations of the political economy approach to a study of current affairs programmes and briefly consider the cultural studies position which tends to accommodate those who contend that the programmes are popular and represent audience needs.

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. Debates exist about what contemporary current affairs programmes are as they are often now very different to the traditional notion of current affairs programmes. The term current affairs programme may now include material that may even be infotainment or reality television. More importantly newer lifestyle programmes and infotainment programmes cover some of the subject matter more traditionally seen as traditional current affairs fare (Alysen, 2000). This paper

largely contrasts the difference between the traditional current affairs programmes with the newer efforts that may be more tabloid or entertainment focused. It is in this point of difference that much of the debate surrounding the current affairs genre is situated.

In a contemporary discussion of their role, Barnett says that (traditional) current affairs programmes produced by public broadcasting organisations 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 sphere¹ (Herman & McChesney, 1997). The 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: 3). The crucial factor is 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).

As the neo-liberal approach took hold in New Zealand broadcasting for example, there was the introduction of new current affairs programmes that tended to a more tabloid treatment of stories (Atkinson, 2001; Cook, 2000; Comrie, & Fountaine, 2005). It is argued that there is a direct correlation between the structural, political and economic changes and the changes to programming within television in New Zealand as broadcasters adapted to the new economic and regulatory environment.

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

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.

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

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 standpoints behind this position was 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: 7). This position is very important when examining the 'quality' of a genre like current affairs programmes. From a cultural studies perspective, there are pleasures for the audience in programmes that focus on areas that were not normally covered by these programmes. So a reduction in stories on politics and an emphasis on new subject areas like health and celebrities could be seen to be as important as politics and economics from a cultural studies perspective.

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). As political economists might argue the New Zealand audience has been subjected to programmes that are not providing for them as citizens, a cultural studies approach might argue that other needs are being met.

A central concern of the political economy approach is the relationship between political economy and broadcasting policy and this is especially the case in the New Zealand where government policy in the mid 1980s dramatically changed the broadcasting environment. 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 product 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

system where neo-liberal polices promote profits and the free flow of goods with minimal regulation as the example of an efficient and viable economy (1998: 2).

a global oligopolistic market that covers the spectrum of media and is now crystallizing with very high barriers to entry.

This oligopolistic market is a core concern of those viewing media trends from a political economy perspective. McChesney suggests that the relevance of the political economy approach is not that it can 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 trend in television news towards depoliticisation in the stories (Atkinson, 1994). This supports those political economy critics who suggest that the commercial media tends to reinforce depoliticisation in their selection and treatment of news items. The retreat from state regulation and public funding of broadcast media affects 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 television programming 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. The public television broadcaster, TVNZ, adopted the new policy requirement to be as commercially successful as its competitors with zeal. 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 (Harcourt, 2000: 18).

In answer to the concern that ratings and profit have been the key drivers of current affairs programmes is the contending view that these programmes are popular and it is snobs and intellectuals who argue for a return to quality. It is further proposed that those arguing the virtues of traditional current affairs qualities are out of touch with the majority of the New Zealand audience who watch these programmes. As 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 become more morselised and depoliticised (Atkinson, 1994).

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.

This was later replicated in studies of the news by Comrie and Cook. Other critics suggest that new current affairs programmes have similarly changed although some argue this has been to meet audience needs and has a democratising effect as they make programmes more accessible and relevant (Holland, 2001; Lumby, 2003).

New Zealand Current Affairs Programmes

British current affairs programmes hit their stride in the 1950s ushering in a 'golden age of television'. In America in the same decade also saw the start of public affairs programmes. 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 with *Column Comment*, looking at the press, following in 1964 (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 over 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

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.

Corporation of New Zealand (BCNZ) that was formed in 1980 to merge the two public television 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).

Atkinson has critiqued a number of trends that have occurred since deregulation including key changes in the area of 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).

To those applying a political economy approach the ownership structure of media, is important in determining programme outputs. 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 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 it '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 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 items of investigative journalism were replaced by 'populist crusades, group encounters and evasive or a rigidly combative interviews' (Kelsey, 1995; 330). Analysis of complex issues became structurally impossible with the reduction of content to "sound bites" (Atkinson, 1994). By 1992 more than three quarters of all interviews had been reduced to ten second sound bites (Ibid:330). Though ratings tended to be a benchmark of success for broadcasters these critics perceived that what had been a key area for the evaluation of politicians and examining key aspects of civic life was no longer possible or wanted.

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 the 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 taking 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 (Holmes, n.d).⁶ The *Holmes* programme was however considered by some critics to be an "unabashedly infotainment" programme (Atkinson, 2001).⁷

The tensions that are often evident in the discussion of the quality of current affairs programmes was clear when the *Holmes* programme aimed to represent the perspective of ordinary people in battles with bureaucrats, politicians or sundry authorities. This is often a key area of tension between political economy and cultural studies' proponents. From the cultural studies perspective it is a positive thing to privilege ordinary people's concerns and for this reason it could be seen from this perspective to have succeeded. Other 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).

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).

In the New Zealand broadcasting environment this meant that ratings and profits eclipsed all other criteria. There was no balance between the areas of ratings and profits and other criteria such as depth of analysis or coverage of different subject matter.

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.

According to a number of critics focus on ratings led programmes has led to an all encroaching tabloidisation and dominance of entertainment values in current affairs television (Franklin, 1997, Comrie & Fountaine, 2005, Turner, 2003). Other observers 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 further that the 'power-bloc' constructed the public sphere in the 18th century has maintained control ever since. As Fiske states:

(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 takes 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.

Langer, (1998) takes the cultural studies perspective further in arguing 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.

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, it is 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.

Though the cultural studies position has merit these arguments do not stand because many of the changes to broadcasting have been the product of either economic or legislative decisions. These decisions have altered the focus of broadcasting often with economics as the driving force behind them. To argue that these programmes provide more choice when they are not driven by audiences and have profit as their motivation is to ignore the realities of much of the modern broadcasting environment.

The political economy approach offers ways to examine these larger patterns that have impacted on broadcasting. For New Zealand broadcasting this is especially important as the changes experienced have in the last twenty years have been extremely dramatic and have changed the nature of key genres like news and current affairs programmes. The political economy approach offers a way to examine and tease out the various factors. Most important in the New Zealand example is the examination of the impact of deregulation that in the 1990s profoundly altered the programming offered on New Zealand television.

The 1990s and 2000s: Current Affairs In Crisis

To many observers' current affairs was in crisis in the 1990s as not only in New Zealand as worldwide a major shift in the dominant character of television journalism occurred as a market of deregulated markets and the ensuing intense commercial competition. 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* for example 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 Holmes' 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.⁸ 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 (Thompson, 2005: 2). 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 Television New Zealand charter formally began in March 2003 as an attempt to guide the public corporation back to a more 'public service prescription', new initiatives were taken with current affairs

⁸ These polls have no validity as an indicator of public opinion.

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).

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

A political economy perspective would view the current and recent state of current affairs programmes in New Zealand as being continually shaped by commercial pressures unleashed by the policies of deregulation. Though there has been the introduction of a charter to counter some of the criticisms of current affairs and news programmes, there have been many changes in news and current affairs in recent times with the departure of key broadcasters such as news reader Judy Bailey and the start of a new current affairs programme on TV3, *Campbell Live* competing with *Close Up* TVNZ's flagship nightly current affairs programme. Far from being driven by audience need these programmes have instead been designed to appeal to consumers and shaped by a ratings driven environment. The competition for ratings of the 6:00 pm news and current affairs time-slot is fierce and suggests that it is ratings that matter above other considerations.

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 a widespread reduction in the quality of current affairs programmes. Evidence from existing research into news programmes carried out in New Zealand indicate that the demands for profit and revenue have had a dramatic influence. In New Zealand, because of our smallness 'we are concentrated, closely interconnected and therefore highly sensitive to change' (Horrocks, 1996:58). A political economy approach would indicate the trend in deregulated broadcasting markets towards monopoly and less pluralism and diversity of voices has profound implications for a country the size of New Zealand. Further, the standard of journalism in a deregulated system is less equipped to challenge vested interests, which suggests that this approach is important for analysing a broadcasting system like New Zealand's (Barnett, 2004). 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.

Early New Zealand current affairs programmes loosely followed the traditional current affairs model from Britain and the United States. This paper has discussed the origins and rationale of current affairs programmes, noting the importance of context and background that these programmes provided. They also served as an important tool for democracy and the public sphere. As commercial imperatives have overtaken public broadcasting principles in

recent years, the current affairs genre has been distinctly affected with many critics arguing that its public sphere role that the genre once offered has been diminished. New Zealand broadcasting as a case study has been heavily affected by the application of neo-liberal policies. The political economy perspective provides an overarching method to explore the impact of deregulation and the resulting monopolies, reduction in pluralism and the diminution public sphere role of current affairs programmes.

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