

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## WHAT ANNIVERSARY? NEW ZEALAND “CELEBRATES” FIFTY YEARS OF TELEVISION

*Geoff Lealand*

History takes time. History makes memory. (Stein 1949)

New Zealand is one of the newest and most geographically distant nations on the globe, first discovered by Dutch explorer Abel Tasman in 1642 and first visited by British explorer James Cook in 1769, following settlement from 1300 CE by dispersed tribal (*iwi*) groupings of Maori (*tangata whenua*, or “people of the land”). Given this short history and great distance, technological innovation and the general advances of Western culture traditionally have been slow to arrive in New Zealand but, once available, have been embraced with great eagerness as a means of reducing distance from the rest of the world, as well as sharing the benefits of other developed Western countries. From the early decades of the twentieth century, New Zealanders became keen film-goers, avid radio listeners and, with the arrival of television, enthusiastic viewers.

Political inaction and technological delays, however, meant that television arrived a decade or so later in New Zealand than it did in other developed countries. In Britain, television broadcasting resumed after a wartime hiatus in 1946, with an equivalent service in Australia beginning in 1956. In New Zealand, there was some early experimentation with television (such the transmission of pictures in the late 1920s by Dr Robert Jack, professor of physics at the University of Otago) and considerable public and press speculation, into the 1940s and the post-war years, about its imminent arrival.

One such speculation appeared in *Cue* magazine, a fortnightly bulletin produced to entertain and educate soldiers in the Second Expeditionary New Zealand Force stationed in North Africa. A feature article entitled “The Wonder of Television” concluded that:

When the war is over, this new science of simultaneous broadcasting of sight and sound promises to develop into a great new industry, and to bring into the family circle a fascinating world of entertainment and education. New Zealand is preparing for television, and in a few years' time a network of television stations will cover the Dominion and hundreds of people will be engaged in providing a new and wonderful way to spend leisure hours. (*Cue* 19, 1945, 4)

Despite the promise, returning soldiers had a long wait until they encountered television on New Zealand soil. The first official transmission beyond experimentation began on 1 June 1960. As a consequence, this became a very significant date in New Zealand television history, marking the fiftieth anniversary of its introduction, the celebration of which is the primary focus of this chapter. However, it is important to put this history in context, given that the late arrival of television had a persistent influence on the structure and purpose of the medium in New Zealand.

## **The Historical Development of Television in New Zealand**

Political inaction and governmental delays were significant factors in the slow arrival of television in New Zealand. As Lawrence Simmons (2004, 52) argues, changes in government during the 1940s and 1950s meant that enthusiasm for introducing television both waxed and waned. Several Labour administrations favoured a rapid introduction, setting up an Interdepartmental Committee in 1949 to steer the development of television. With the return to power of a conservative National administration later that year, plans were put on hold until 1958 when Labour returned to power. In the interim, conservative politicians justified the delays through the perceived high costs of television, a reluctance to fund a new service for the public, and a deep-seated suspicion of the new medium.

Labour politicians, on the other hand, largely saw television as a necessary extension of publicly controlled and financed radio broadcasting. A highly influential 1959 position paper written by the then-Secretary of Industries and Commerce, Dr William Sutch, provided the impetus for Prime Minister Walter Nash to initiate moves to set up a state-owned television station in Auckland in 1960, followed by Wellington and Christchurch in 1961 and Dunedin in 1962. Most of the country was able to receive a television signal by 1966 when the general election was covered by television for the first time.

Sutch was motivated by a belief in television's educational potential, as well as being one of the very first advocates for privileging local content:

A decision to make television programmes of our own should be a deliberate act of policy and not a course to be adopted only when public pressure demands it ... programmes dealing with our social, economic or cultural activities ... should enrich the lives of us all. (Sutch, in Simmons, 2004, 52)

As a primary architect of early New Zealand television, Sutch was a more enlightened, less class-bound version of Lord Reith, the founding father of the BBC. Based on Sutch's recommendations, television developed in New Zealand as a dual system incorporating public service characteristics (funded by a licence fee imposed on set ownership) and commercial imperatives. This entailed a formal, high-minded presentation style with an emphasis on news and "quality" entertainment, coupled with cheap imported programming and revenue produced by advertising content.

It can be argued that this experiment in hybridity (television founded and funded by a mixed economy) has been one of the prevailing characteristics of New Zealand television over the last fifty years. Another significant and sustained characteristic has been the role of successive governments, both of the Left (Labour) and the Right (National), in the development and restructuring of television. In other jurisdictions, competing interests have been quartered and quarantined, such as in the UK case of a public service BBC and a commercial ITV and pay TV system—even though such distinctions have become increasingly blurred in recent years.

These two primary funding sources—public and private—have always shared a close relationship, in that intervention has privileged either the first objective or the second, depending on the ideological bent of the government in power. In the closing years of the twentieth century, for example, a third-term Labour government attempted to shift the two-channel, state-owned Television New Zealand (TVNZ) broadcaster back to public service imperatives. With the election of a National coalition government in 2008, the Television New Zealand charter was discarded and a commercial direction reimposed and reinforced. Television New Zealand was discharged of its public service obligations under the charter and encouraged to pursue a more openly commercial agenda.

## The New Zealand Television Landscape

These conflicting interests have shaped the dynamics of television in New Zealand, making it a system susceptible to change and uncertainty and seeing it experiencing a state of perpetual flux. It may also be the reason why building and sustaining loyalty to particular channels or broadcasting institutions in New Zealand has always been difficult—indeed, increasingly so. A lack of a personal investment or commitment to television as a medium on the part of shareholders or viewers is a theme that will be explored further in this chapter with regard to the very muted response to the fiftieth anniversary of television in New Zealand.

For much of its history, the primary relationship has been not between television and viewers in New Zealand, but between television and commerce (with government policy being the catalyst). In the closing decades of the twentieth century, while public service television around the world faced serious challenges, New Zealand led the way in the deregulation of broadcasting, removing all constraints on overseas ownership and commercial activity. The two state channels became state-owned enterprises, required to maximise profits and return annual dividends to the government. This resulted in a new set of considerations, and rather bewildering financial transactions. For example, media academic Peter Thompson estimates that between 2003 and 2008, Television New Zealand received NZ\$95 million from the government, to meet programming obligations of the public service variety under its charter (this included provisions for “minority” audiences, such as children and women), but also returned NZ\$142 million in annual dividends to the government (Thompson, 2009).

Added to the mix in the late 1990s was pay TV, with Sky Network Television—the majority shareholder of which was the Australian company Nationwide News Pty Ltd, a subsidiary of the global conglomerate News Corp. Sky Network Television—quickly became the dominant player, reaching 47 per cent of New Zealand households by March 2011. In addition to a broad provision of entertainment from overseas, information channels and ownership of the free-to-air network Prime, Sky owns exclusive rights to live coverage of prime sports, such as Rugby Union, Rugby League and cricket. Two other national free-to-air channels, TV3 and TV4, which have had a series of offshore owners (currently owned by the Australian private equity firm Ironbridge Capital), are in sustained competition for audiences, with the point of difference often being locally produced content. For example, *Outrageous Fortune*, a

locally produced drama series (South Pacific Pictures, 2005–10), was screened on TV3.

The suspicion persists that the shift towards unbridled commercial objectives in state-owned television is a prelude to full commercialisation of Television New Zealand, and the eventual sale of TV One and TV2. The current National coalition government has declared that this will not happen during its current term (to run until late 2011 at the time of writing), but there is no certainty that it might not happen if it were re-elected.<sup>1</sup> This would again place New Zealand in a remarkable—but possibly not enviable—vanguard of television territories having no significant state-owned or state-funded national public service broadcasting (PSB) channels. In the meantime, Television New Zealand continues to meet its obligations of returning an annual 9 per cent on its assets to the government.

There will be some compensations, for there have been some tangible benefits from the decades of deregulation. The two-channel, free-to-air Māori Television Service (established in 2004), state funded through an annual grant to provide specific funding to fulfil Treaty of Waitangi obligations under Vote: Māori, and which might properly be called a public service provider, continues to attract good audiences and critical approval for its innovative programming and language support. The immensely popular local drama series *Outrageous Fortune* was sold to the United Kingdom and United States as a format, and generated an exhibition at the Auckland Museum. The weeknight medical/serial drama *Shortland Street* (South Pacific Pictures, 1992– ), together with news and current affairs, continues to dominate ratings for free-to-air television.

The Freeview channel TVNZ7 provides for an older, educated audience with its mix of locally produced content (such as *Media 7* and *The Court Report*) and overseas documentaries, even though the government has declared that, from June 2012, it will no longer fund this channel. The funding agency New Zealand On Air continues to play a critical role in supporting vulnerable genres (children's, special interest, documentaries) for the local market, receiving more than NZ\$127 million in 2009–10 as a direct government grant, and allocating 64 per cent of this to television productions. Another funding agency, Te Māngai Pāho, allocates up to NZ\$20 million annually, specifically for Māori language or Māori interest programming. These two government-funded agencies, which contribute to the programme mix on both mainstream and Māori television, may be all that remains of a residual public service element in New Zealand television if TVNZ7 disappears from the schedules and there is not a change of government or change of mind. Thus, while there will

still be non-commercial strands of programming (children’s, documentaries, special-interest programmes) and Māori Television, there will be no dedicated public service television channel in the national media mix.

These agencies and interventions can be regarded as historical or rear-guard attempts to ameliorate the real or perceived shortcomings of a totally commercial television system. One structure, New Zealand On Air, is a residual safeguard put in place at a time when deregulation of broadcasting really hit its stride; the others are more recent additions to the landscape, put in place in times of a more public service-friendly government, or through governments being obligated to meet Treaty of Waitangi requirements.

### **Celebrating Fifty Years of Television**

The background against which New Zealand prepared itself to celebrate fifty years of television transmission in June 2010 was shaped by a number of factors. These included: a confused and confusing system of television funding and transmission largely as a consequence of the unique history of television in this country; a potentially small, but largely static, audience faced with a proliferation of viewing choices; and a proliferation of channels and content, with a corresponding fragmentation of the large, general audience that had prevailed in the early years of television. As in the early days of television in New Zealand, content remains dominated by imported programming, with locally produced drama, news and sport often being more popular. Local content across six main free-to-air channels comprised 33.7 per cent of broadcast hours in 2009 (New Zealand On Air 2010, 6). As in other countries, both free-to-air and pay TV face serious competition from newer digitally based routes of delivery and viewing (downloads, box-set DVDs), and although public service television content lingers in some areas of free-to-air programming (such as advertising-free preschool programming, or in content funded by New Zealand On Air), the majority of programming is shaped by commercial imperatives, or accessed through pay TV, with a stable audience base dominated by older viewers, especially in the very broad and undifferentiated demographic of fifty years and over.

What could be found in 2010, as New Zealand prepared itself to celebrate fifty years of television, was a very different kind of television landscape from that which existed at the time of the twenty-five-year celebration in 1985. At that time, the celebration was marked by a wide range of programmes, revisiting and re-viewing the beginnings and development of the medium in New Zealand, and the publication of

Robert Boyd-Bell's popular and significant history, *New Zealand Television: The First 25 Years* (1985). After only twenty-five years, nostalgia for the early days was nevertheless very evident, and there was an expectation that the kind of television New Zealanders were seeing in the 1980s would most likely continue.

The mood in 2010 was very different. The state-owned broadcaster, Television New Zealand, which had been present since television began, and had dominated the television landscape through five decades, cobbled together several historical reviews of its television past, starting with a combination gameshow/light entertainment programme, *Cheers for 50 Years* (TV ONE 1 June 2010). The network passed on a more substantial New Zealand On Air-funded documentary (reportedly because it considered there would be limited viewer interest) in favour of a poorly received programme, which one commentator described as "making a show that is the equivalent of offering some chips and a litre of orange juice at someone's fiftieth anniversary on the job" (Gibson 2010, A3). Ratings data reported a sizeable audience watching *Cheers for 50 Years* (an estimated 760,000 viewers from a potential audience of four million viewers), but as one reviewer tartly commented:

[It] resembled a light entertainment show from a small former Soviet state ... That it was popular wasn't surprising. It had a certain can't-look-away car-crash quality. (Baillie 2010, A3)

The largely negative response to this programme prompted TVNZ to quickly cobble together other anniversary programmes, such *50 Years of Television News* (TV ONE, 27 June). This programme was scheduled against a competing history series on Prime, which added more fuel to the criticism of TVNZ's choices:

It wasn't a bad effort, merely rather perfunctory ... But once again, the network failed to trust viewers. Heaven forbid that we should be subjected to serious content for such a long time—so they lightened it up with bloopers. (Clifton 2010, B8)

Looking back, while these criticisms may seem rather inconsequential and local, they point to an underlying malaise in state-owned television in New Zealand, which failed rather miserably in the celebration of a significant historical event in New Zealand history—a history in which TVNZ had been the dominant player and primary focus for setting the agenda in respect of social, cultural and political change. As one media commentator remarked on the TVNZ history of television news: "It's the latest example of slack-jawed handling of the fiftieth anniversary. The

celebration has come to symbolize TVNZ’s dying gasps as a national broadcaster.” (Drinnan 2010, 6)

The responsibility for charting the historical development of the medium was largely left up to another channel. New Zealand On Air funded a seven-part documentary television series, *Fifty Years of Television in New Zealand*, produced by an independent company, Cream Media, and directed by veteran director John Bates. This screened in June and July 2010 on the second-tier free-to-air channel Prime, owned and operated by Sky Networks—a channel that customarily attracts about a 5 per cent share of the New Zealand audience. This seven-part series featured, in turn, *From One Channel to One Hundred* (the early days of television in New Zealand, to the multi-channel environment of today); *Let Us Entertain You* (with a focus on local TV entertainers); *Conflict* (the role of television in social unrest and change); *Winners and Losers* (television and sport); *Telling Stories* (local TV drama); *A Sense of National Identity* (the role of television in nation-building); and *Taonga TV* (the development of Māori television). The emphasis was very much on the role television had played in social, cultural and political life in New Zealand over the decades, with a particular focus on its role as a national forum and as a force in shaping national consciousness. There was, however, little discussion of the impact of imported drama.

Other than these television examples, there were few public acknowledgements of the fiftieth anniversary of the introduction of the medium. Most press coverage focused on television’s approach to the anniversary, and as yet there are no coffee-table histories or academic appraisals in print to compare with scholarly examples of Australian television history, such as Graeme Turner and Stuart Cunningham’s *The Australian TV Book* (2000) or Alan McKee’s *Australian Television: A Genealogy of Great Moments* (2001). A number of websites—most specifically the fan-site <http://www.throng.co.nz> and the New Zealand On Air-funded <http://www.nzonscreen.com>—provided special content, but there was a general dearth of investigative and evaluative histories across the range of possibilities. It is difficult to identify why this was so. The dearth could have been a consequence of the declining hold of television over the nation, the small market for both academic and popular writing on the subject or just a general lack of interest.

## **New Zealand Television History: An Academic Project**

My own research activities began in late 2008, when I realised that a significant historical moment was looming with respect to television in

New Zealand and I subsequently initiated a two-year, faculty-funded project, “Towards a History of Television in New Zealand, 1985–2010”. The objective of this research was to examine and record the second twenty-five years of television in New Zealand according to the following rationale. During the first twenty-five years, television was still largely a novelty and, arguably at its most potent in terms of influencing the social and political climate of the country. It was also a much simpler service, with one publicly owned free-to-air channel, later joined by a second similar channel. The history of these early decades has been well documented in Robert Boyd-Bell’s (1985) book, in Patrick Day’s (1994) *Voice and Vision: The History of Broadcasting in New Zealand* (Volume Two), and in the memoirs of key figures of the time. In contrast, the second twenty-five-year period has been less well-documented. There have been good appraisals of the political economy of recent decades. These include Paul Smith’s *Revolution in the Air* (1996); an edited collection by Roger Horrocks and Nick Perry, *Television: Programming the Nation* (2004); Lealand and Martin’s *It’s All Done With Mirrors: About Television* (2001); as well as a discussion of specific television shows in Dunleavy, *Ourselves in Primetime: A History of New Zealand Television Drama* (2005). In general, these texts are intended for an academic rather than popular readership. There has, however, been no comprehensive history that covers all significant aspects of the second twenty-five years. Nor has there been a history that incorporates the memories and experiences of *television viewers*, even though the 1980s and 1990s were the most tumultuous decades for television in New Zealand—years in which channels proliferated, older models of public service were in decline and new commercial models were in ascendance. This was also a period during which technology was reshaping both the content and delivery of television.

### **Key Personnel, Policy-makers and Programme Makers**

With these explanations in mind, a research strategy was developed to focus on the period of 1985 to 2010 in New Zealand television history. In addition to assessing and cataloguing a very large personal resource of file boxes containing news clippings, reports and publications (spanning the early 1980s to 2009), the first year of the project included a series of face-to-face interviews with key figures from New Zealand television’s recent past. A completed questionnaire was returned from a larger number of such people, resulting from personal approaches or distribution at the

Screen Producers and Development Association (SPADA) 2009 conference.

This strategy produced significant research data from a small but important pool of informants (seven interviews; twenty questionnaires), who continued to occupy important roles in New Zealand television in 2009, ranging from chief executives of television networks to heads of programming, head of news and current affairs, chief executives of independent production companies, programme makers, and the chief executive of a funding agency. These key figures tended to fall into three broad camps: former senior television executives who now occupied significant roles in the independent production sector and who were highly critical of recent trends in New Zealand television (Television New Zealand, in particular); programme makers or senior network workers who were largely positive about their organisation's performance, but more critical of rival broadcasters; and former television workers, who now occupied important roles in serving or setting policy for the television industry. The career trajectories of these informants, a selection of whose comments are provided below, illustrate the ease with which people move between or across the various sectors of a small industry sector, and the ways in which they accommodated or challenged the broader forces of change.

In both the interviews and questionnaires, there was unanimous agreement in response to the opening question: "In your opinion, has the second twenty-five years of television in New Zealand been markedly different from the first twenty-five years?" Comments acknowledging the dramatic shifts in television included:

There are two key differences—TVNZ becoming less of a public broadcaster and much more commercial, and secondly the advent of other broadcasters. (Commissioning editor)

Depends how you measure it. In respect of progress, the first twenty-five years was markedly different. In respect of what viewers (especially kids) are doing today, it is massively different. The power base has shifted, in terms of what screens and what doesn't. (Independent producer)

In the first twenty-five years, there was little choice, and viewing was more communal. But the claim that television was better back then is bullshit. Television remains a dynamic medium—one which is undergoing reorientation, rather than redundancy. (Head of media company)

Because of my age, I am now more sanguine and don't regard the second twenty-five years as better or worse than the first twenty-five years—just different. (Head of independent production company)

Participants were asked to respond to the following assessment of the state of New Zealand television made by veteran producer and trenchant critic George Andrews in a radio interview in October 2009:

A lot of chickens are coming home to roost from what's been a spectacular failure of public broadcasting policy which has been going on in New Zealand for more than fifteen years. It's a complete shambles. (2009)

There was agreement and disagreement with this judgement, once again shaped by where those responding were positioned in the industry. Comments from those who agreed with Andrews included:

As far as public service broadcasting is concerned, only MTS [Maori Television Service] has not been sullied by an indecent interest in the bottom line. (Independent producer)

There has been failure in policy. The [TVNZ] Charter was a nonsensical intervention. If there is any area of life which demands a bipartisan approach it is the media because it is so important. (Head of independent production company)

New Zealanders' perception of public broadcasting is at odds with the way it is funded in this country. Both Australia and the UK significantly fund public service broadcasting but TVNZ has been given a dual mandate which is flawed. (TVNZ executive)

A number of respondents had mixed feelings about the quote from Andrews:

It depends on whose shoes you're in. Sky is happy. Free-to-air TV is unhappy. Viewers don't seem to be unhappy, with record PUTs [People Using Television]. (TVNZ executive)

I gave up on PSB a long time ago. Even though it can be regarded as a cornerstone of democracy, it has faced an unstoppable tide ... in the old days, we [programme-makers, heads of production] used to decide what was good for the viewers; now you have sales and marketing telling you what is good. (Head of independent production company)

Several respondents vehemently rejected Andrews' claim:

Television delivers on so many fronts today—diversity of programmes. Increased NZ content, targeted channels. Twenty-five years ago there was virtually *no* NZ content. The last fifteen years (let alone twenty-five) have seen the public embrace and request NZ television. (Head of independent production company)

There is a lot of outstanding television created here. We cannot continue to afford a “BBC point of view” in a tiny, deregulated market. (Senior TVNZ executive)

TV in NZ has never been non-commercial (except for Freeview), thus the root of the “problem” is older than fifteen years. (Senior executive, funding agency)

These responses suggest that although there were divergent opinions regarding the shifting priorities of television in New Zealand, there was also a sense that change was inevitable and beyond the capacity of these individuals to control or confine it. Change was seen to be a consequence of the internal tensions between public service objectives, and the need to fund and/or profit from the commercial potential of the medium, as well as the ideologically driven interventions by successive governments.

Those interviewed were also asked to nominate what had been *gained* (or *improved*) in the second twenty-five years of television in New Zealand, and what had been *lost* (or *discarded*) as the result of change. Perceived improvements included: quality; better and faster access to content; increased choice and variety; improved technology, with New Zealand becoming part of the international broadcasting world through the freeing up of the spectrum; and more programme diversity, with increased local content geared towards a parochial audience.

Along with positive elements of change, there was a sense that things had been lost or abandoned along the way. Thus it was observed that the interests of advertisers had been privileged over the interests of audiences, and that there was a declining interest in the cultural role of television, with little room left for creative innovation, deep insight or trailblazing.

In its fifty years of existence, numerous claims have been made about television’s role in initiating or nurturing a sense of cultural consciousness or identity amongst the New Zealand public, and the participants in these interviews were asked whether this was so. There was general agreement that television had an important role in nation-building, as in the following comments from various respondents:

It has created the platform for all to simultaneously share in triumph, tragedy and entertainment. (Producer)

We have imperfect television to reflect the imperfect society we have become. (Producer)

The large diet of US content promotes “Coco-Cola imperialism” ... but local news, current affairs, drama and factual shows all help define our place in the world and sense of self. (Commissioning executive)

It’s pervasive and popular. It’s still bigger than most media options. (Funding executive)

Finally, those being interviewed agreed with the proposition that, along with changes wrought by structural interventions and technological innovation, there had been substantial shifts in the relationship between television and its audience, as in the following comments:

Television audiences are no longer loyal. They have so much choice how they graze and take the best from all media available. (Commissioning editor)

Fragmentation caused by multiple access points means more tastes can be catered for. In the past, limited channels meant broad offerings. (TVNZ executive)

The older age group has remained strong but the younger audience accesses many other choices. (Producer)

More media-savvy, more worldly ... more demanding. (Funding executive)

We have become more technologically literate and the remote control is the key to the kingdom. (Producer)

### **The Voice of the Viewer**

The preceding commentaries on the changing nature of the New Zealand television audience appear to be based on institutional constructions of the audience (ratings, in particular), and feedback from friends and colleagues. Obviously, such perceptions have real limitations: ratings in New Zealand are based on a Peoplemeter panel of 550 homes and reflect an older, middle-class demographic, just as television executives tend to be recruited from narrow socio-economic backgrounds.

The comments above are important in that they reflect the perceptions of important figures in the management, programming and funding of television in New Zealand. However, these comments cannot be regarded

as accurate representations of people’s television viewing experiences. To reveal such experiences, we have to look elsewhere, and so the second phase of my research project concentrated on finding ways to capture the experiences of the “ordinary” television viewer.

The celebrations of June 2010, provided no special spaces for viewer feedback, other than commentaries on the various efforts of the broadcasters hosted by websites such as *Throng: New Zealand’s TV Watching Community* ([www.throng.co.nz](http://www.throng.co.nz)). There were no places—whether a website, television forum or dedicated publication—where viewers could reflect and speculate on the influence of television on their own lives, or those of their friends and family.

In response to this neglect, I set up a blogsite, *History of Television in New Zealand* (<http://www.historyoftvinnz.com>) in advance of the screening of the Prime series.

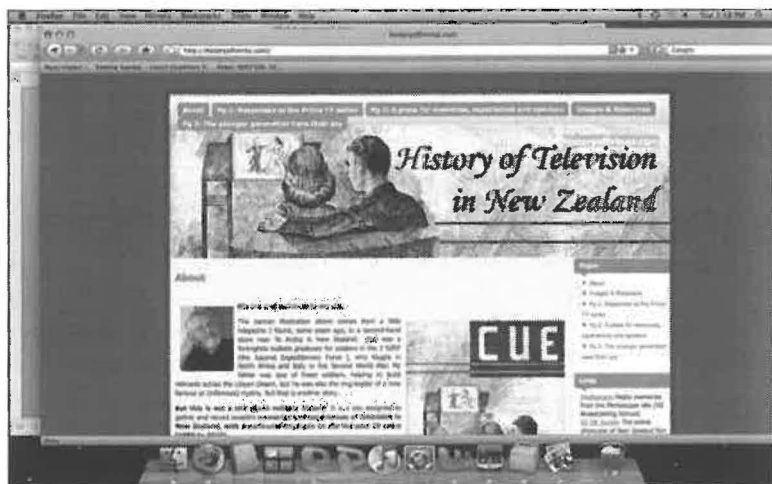


Fig. 13-1. Home page: <http://www.historyoftvinnz.com>

After one full year of operation (February 2010 to February 2011), the site had 106 unique users, with a total of 133 posted comments from New Zealand contributors. This represented 54 pages of print-out and, in terms of web-based research in a small country, could be regarded as a modest success. In its most active months (June to August 2010), the site certainly generated more traffic than the more ambitious and colourful *TVLand Australia* site (<http://www.tvlandaustralia.com>), a project of the Australian

TV and Popular Memory research team (see chapters by Healey, McKee and Turnbull in this volume).

The scale of the response to a web-based blogsite such as *History of Television in New Zealand* demonstrates the limitations of this style of research. While there is a wealth of advice available about increasing traffic to and subsequent participation in blogsites, there is also a great deal of blind faith in the mantra “Build it and they will come”, especially for the novice blogsite creator. Although blog-based research offers many advantages over more traditional research methods (mail questionnaires, telephone interviews) in that it provides access to potentially large research populations at a low cost, it raises another set of considerations. These include issues of transparency and confidentiality, difficulties in achieving random samples, competition (“cutting through the clutter”) and the ensuring the veracity of postings. Contributions to blogs tend to emanate from the highly motivated and opinionated, and on occasion include disruptive or contrary voices.

The *History of Television in New Zealand* site was greatly advantaged by a number of initiatives designed to steer potential participants towards it. Most importantly, Prime agreed to add a message (or “tag”) to the closing credits of each episode of *50 Years of Television*, directing viewers to the blog as an opportunity to “share their memories”. The site was publicised through other blogs, such as *Throng* and *Public Address* ([www.publicaddress.net](http://www.publicaddress.net)), and was assisted by unsolicited recommendations, such as a citation for the “Website we love” in the 12 June issue of the high-circulation *New Zealand Listener* (Rae 2010, 67).

### Responses to the Blog

The site provided opportunities for viewers to respond to the Prime series in a number of guises. For example, the first page of the blog provided a space for contributors to provide views and reviews of the seven-part Prime series, as well as to reflect on other efforts to mark the anniversary. Comments included:

Prime’s first instalment ... was superb. It was intelligent, informative, a riveting combination of record and analysis, and in its content and presentation had a quality sadly lacking in much of television today—respect for the viewer. In short, it was the programme that TV One’s earlier lamentable effort should have been. (Gavin, 14 June)

As a viewer of television (rather than a media professional or commentator) I was struck by the depth and quality of our television history. (Nigel, 14 June)

Dialogue developed between contributors over issues such as television’s role in the social unrest created by the racially selected 1984 Springboks (South African) Rugby tour, and some omissions from the Prime series, such as particular examples of local drama, or a lack of attention to the role of advertising or imported programming. Connections were also made to discussions elsewhere, on various blogs or discussion lists. Additional comments included:

Last night’s Prime ep highlighted what I like about this series. People who made the dramas were asked to comment and could speak at reasonable length ... I agree that we needed audience responses too and a comparison with imported drama series. (Alpaca, 12 July)

Tonight’s episode on national identity was superb. I almost cried when they mentioned Kaleidoscope, ninety minutes of art on prime time and people enjoyed it! ... It’s a documentary about TV which is in itself good television. (Alpaca, 18 July)

In both posts, this respondent was positive about the serious tone and broad historical sweep of the Prime series and was generous in praising it.

The first page to be made available on the blog, one month ahead of the first screening of the Prime series, provided a place for contributors to post general reflections on television past and present. To start a discussion, I posed the same question I asked of my interviewees: “Do you think the second twenty-five years ... have been significantly different than the first twenty-five years?” Responses included:

In a nutshell—yes. But not necessarily in a good way. The rot set in with the arrival of Julian Mounter [British-born former Director of TVNZ, 1986–91], who clearly had no respect for the unique viewing patterns that New Zealanders developed over the years, really didn’t care about us, and was primarily in it for the money. (Rusty Viewer, 2 June)

I think there is a bit of “distance lending enchantment to the view” at play. Over the last twenty to thirty years there has been as much dross as there is now, the main difference being that it was not interrupted quite so often. (Ben, 4 June)

Selected comments from often richly detailed contributions included:

How was the second twenty-five years different? 1989 and TV3, for a start. That's when we really lost public broadcasting. TVNZ in general were absolutely terrified and they over-reacted all over the place. That's when the newsreaders were coached (in the US?) on how to appropriately emote; when [TV current affairs host] Paul Holmes arrived with that folksy talk-radio schtick; when ratings ruled every decision. (Rob, 17 June)

the atmosphere is not the same. The nation is not all watching the same one of two shows per night and talking about them the next day in the smoko room or the playground ... [but] New Zealanders like to see television that looks, sounds and acts like themselves ... New Zealanders tune into local content. (GeoffT, 26 August)

These contributors could identify important shifts in the New Zealand television environment, and on occasion revealed their level of knowledge when they identified key individuals who they held responsible for such changes.

Blog page three was created for a very specific set of contributors. In the opening stages of my second-year course "Television: Medium, Narrative & Audience" at the University of Waikato, I require my students to write a short autobiographical essay about their experiences of television as a child and teenager. They are also encouraged to write about their changing use of television as young adults, as well as to make observations on the use of television by immediate others (younger siblings, parents, friends). This provided me with unique insights into the experiences and prior knowledge such students bring to class. In 2011, I asked the thirty students in the class to post their essays directly on to the blog. This served a number of purposes: it provided students with the chance to post material on a publicly available site, and it effectively broadened the age range of contributors. In general, contributors to other areas of the site were considerably older, judging from the knowledge they displayed about the local history of television, and the detail contained in their postings. The primary experience of television for these students would have been the last twenty to twenty-five years, and they produced long, detailed prose about childhood days of cartoon and variety shows, tracing the different patterns of use in the teenage years and, quite frequently, observing how they now found themselves watching the kind of programming initially considered the territory of parents and adults.

The television histories of these young New Zealanders (and a number of international students) included the following recollections:

Television has played a babysitter role in my life from a very young age ... it is my friend and it will be with me for my existence. (Alex, 25 July)

They'll deny it, but my parents raised me on television. I've eaten dinner in front of it for as long as I can remember. (Ashleen, 29 July)

As a teenager, I found television a way to examine how other people live their lives. I watched a lot of teenage programmes such as *Dawson's Creek* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* ... It was a way for me to somewhat gauge if my life could be considered normal. (CE, 22 July)

As might be expected, most students watched programmes targeted at their demographic, but sometimes this was more of flirtation than a long-term commitment, as shown by the following comment:

Reality game shows were also a favourite of mine during my mid-teens, such as *Survivor* and *The Amazing Race*. However, the saturation of this genre coupled with typecast contestants caused my interest to drop rapidly—I didn't want to experience reality, I wanted to escape from it. (jkl, 28 July)

A number of international students contrasted their use of television in the birth country with what happened in their adopted country, as in the following comment:

I used TV to help me cope with the NZ accent. A friend suggested that I always tune in to the local news to get used to the accent. It was difficult at first, as it is different to the American accent that I was accustomed to hearing [in the Philippines]. (ilr, 29 July)

With very few exceptions, all these students greatly valued the role of television in their childhood and teenage years. Even though a good number had changed their viewing patterns and were now watching the medium through online access, they still regarded such content as "television", and were very protective of its place in their lives:

I do not believe that television (TV) is an idiot box. Given that the majority of the lessons are not exclusively formal. Some are educational; some are life lessons. (mke, July 30)

I do not know what my life would be like if television did not exist. (moniqueh, 30 July)

In their way, these last two quotes evoke a much earlier assessment of the role of television attributed to Marshall McLuhan, when he headed the National Association of Educational Broadcasters in 1959: "Television is teaching all the time. It does more educating than the schools and all the institutions of higher learning." This view is echoed by the comment of

Muppets creator Jim Henson: “Television is basically teaching whether you want it or not.”<sup>2</sup>

With respect to the students represented here, they are combining a passionate commitment (a demonstrated love of television and acknowledgement of its role in their lives) with a formal study of the medium in an institution of higher learning. However, while television remains central to their lives, it is not clear whether they make distinctions between public service content and commercial content in the same way that older viewers continue to do.

### Some Final Thoughts

One year on from the fiftieth anniversary, television in New Zealand continues to be subject to relentless change. The future of the public service-oriented Freeview channels looks increasingly bleak, with TVNZ6 (previously a publicly funded channel on Freeview) now converted to a commercially oriented “youth” channel, and with government funding of TVNZ7 to cease in June 2012. These moves could well leave New Zealand in the unique position of having no English-language public service provider. This would place the country in even more stark contrast to Australia, where the institutions of the ABC and SBS remain thoroughly grounded in the national consciousness, although not without repeated challenges to their existence.

Nevertheless, in times of crisis such as the February 2011 Christchurch earthquake and the even more devastating events in Japan in March 2011, television channels in New Zealand have shown a willingness to reassume their public service responsibilities, in terms of information sourcing, crisis management and reassurance, which was the core role of television in its first twenty years of existence in New Zealand. However, it would seem that there is little prospect of returning to the halcyon (rose-tinted?) days of television remembered by the contributors to this history.

The *History of Television in New Zealand* blog, and its contribution to this chapter, can only ever provide a partial and conditional history of the past twenty-five years of television in New Zealand. Nevertheless, if the blog had not been created, even that sliver of history would never have been recorded, as television in New Zealand moves into its third quarter, at a time when the medium faces unprecedented changes in technology, shifts in audience behaviour and significant reorientations in global geopolitics. In many ways, the consequences and possible outcomes of these changes will be most visible in the small but highly developed television environment of New Zealand. The past is indeed a different

country where things were done differently. However, while the past can to some extent be known and understood, the future of television in New Zealand is yet to be discovered.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The National government has since been re-elected for another term.
- <sup>2</sup> See <http://www.angelfire.com/ms/MediaLiteracy/TVQuotes.html>, accessed 17 March 2011.

## References

- Andrews, G. Radio interview, National Radio (New Zealand), 14 October 2009.
- Baillie, R. "Really, you shouldn't have". *New Zealand Herald*, 3 June 2010: A3.
- Boyd-Bell, R. *Television in New Zealand: The First 25 Years*. Auckland: Reed Methuen, 1985.
- Clifton, J. "TVNZ can't resist adding froth". *New Zealand Herald*, 30 June 2010: B8.
- Day, P. *Voice and Vision: A History of Broadcasting in New Zealand, Vol. 2*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1994.
- Drinnan, J. "TVNZ readying 50<sup>th</sup> special, mark II". *The Business Herald*, 11 June 2010: 6.
- Dunleavy, T. *Ourselves in Primetime: A History of New Zealand Television Drama*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2005.
- Gibson, E. "Viewers pan TVNZ's 50-year celebration". *New Zealand Herald*, 3 June 2010: A3.
- Horrocks, R. and N. Perry, eds. *Television in New Zealand: Programming the Nation*. Auckland: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Lealand, G. and H. Martin. *It's All Done With Mirrors: About Television*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 2001.
- McKee, A. *Australian Television: A Genealogy of Great Moments*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Rae, F. "Website we love". *New Zealand Listener*, 12 June 2010: 67.
- Simmons, L. "Television then." In *Television in New Zealand: Programming the Nation*, edited by Roger Horrocks and Nick Perry, 44-73. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Smith, P. *Revolution in the Air!* Auckland: Longman, 1996.
- Stein, G. *A Manoir: Last Operas and Plays*. New York: Rinehart, 1949.

Such, W.B. *The Economics of Television in New Zealand*. Wellington: Department of Industries and Commerce, 1959.

Thompson, P. "The Demise of the TVNZ Charter", 2009. Accessed 21 January 2011 at <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL0903/S00356.htm>.

Turner, G. and S. Cunningham. *The Australian TV Book*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2001.

"The Wonder of Television". *Cue* 19, March 1945: 1-4.