



**Reshaping Public Broadcasting: the New Zealand
Experience 1988-2003**

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Introduction

New Zealand is a small country, with a population of 4 million. It is a Westminster-style democracy with a reputation for pursuing policies to the extreme. Ideological policies are more easily implemented because there is a unicameral legislature; a classic case being the removal of all restrictions on the foreign ownership of media, a measure hurriedly passed into law in 1991 with no public discussion.

The indigenous population, the Maori, have a special place in the life and culture of the country through the Treaty of Waitangi.¹ Maori are currently around 15 per cent of the population. There are sizeable communities of Pacific Islanders (7 per cent) and Asian migrants (7 per cent).

This paper sets out to examine one aspect of New Zealand's broadcasting reforms – the work of NZ On Air, a statutory body established to allocate funding to achieve social objectives in broadcasting, this funding to be contestable between broadcasters. It should be noted that the contestable funding regime applies only to television, and it is this regime which is the focus of this paper, in the light of interest shown by other countries in its success or otherwise.

Public radio in New Zealand is treated quite differently. Unlike television, radio in New Zealand had always had some non-commercial stations or networks, which continued to be publicly funded (bulk-funding) under the new regime. Although this bulk funding is administered through NZ On Air, neither this nor other NZ On Air responsibilities (remote transmission, archiving) will be dealt with in this paper. It is concerned solely with the contestable funding system for television.

Background

In the mid-eighties, television in New Zealand consisted of two channels, both state-owned and run by the Broadcasting Corporation of New Zealand (BCNZ), a statutory corporation. Viewers paid a licence fee of \$71.50², all of which went to the BCNZ, who were also responsible for running 34 radio stations, both non-commercial and commercial, and the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra. While the BCNZ may have owed its original inspiration to the BBC model, the fundamental difference was that in New Zealand, television has always been based on a mixed funding model. Both television channels took advertisements from their inception (the first channel began in 1960, the second in 1975), with the proportion of total revenue derived from advertising income increasing over the years. By 1984, around 85 per cent of the BCNZ's revenue was commercial.

Thus the seeds of an enduring tension were sown early on. The BCNZ was a public broadcaster and required under its governing legislation (the Broadcasting Act 1976) to meet the Government's social objectives in broadcasting. Yet it had

become obliged to operate as a commercial organisation to a greater and greater extent. Politicians were reluctant to take the publicly unpopular step of increasing the licence fee, preferring to accept a greater reliance on commercial funding. In the early days of television advertising was permitted only on certain days of the week. But the advertising-free days steadily disappeared until by the late eighties only Sunday morning remained free of advertising.

Broadcasting operated in a highly regulated environment. The quasi-judicial Broadcasting Tribunal closely controlled entry into the broadcasting market. Licences for radio stations were issued in accordance with explicit government policy, which required the Tribunal to take account of the impact on existing broadcasters of any new services. Hearings were long, arduous and expensive. Licences for television frequencies could only be issued with the express permission of the Minister of Broadcasting.

Enter the Labour Government of 1984, committed to freeing up the economy from the straitjacket of controls under the previous National government of Robert Muldoon. The new Labour government, encouraged by a group of reformist Treasury officials, set about implementing a series of measures loosely categorised as following the principles of the free market – measures designed to stimulate fuller and fairer competition and to end a regime of subsidies which had protected local industries up to this time, notably the farming sector.

1. Deregulation of broadcasting

By 1988 it was the turn of broadcasting to feel the heat of reform. A government minister described its plan as ‘the most far-reaching restructuring and deregulation of broadcasting not only in this country but anywhere in the world’ (Richard Prebble, quoted in Day 2000: 367). The guiding principles of the plan were to increase competition and consumer choice and to separate clearly the commercial from the non-commercial.

The deregulation package had three main components:

1. Opening up the airwaves to competition. Broadcasting frequencies were to be auctioned off to the highest bidder and could be traded. The Broadcasting Tribunal was abolished. Effectively any broadcaster willing to pay the market price for a licence could enter the industry. There were no programming requirements or conditions attached to such licences. These changes were put in place in the Radiocommunications Act 1989.

It should be noted that the first steps towards competition in television had been taken several years earlier, with the decision to award a licence for a third television channel. It was the lengthy process of hearings under the Broadcasting Tribunal which had convinced some Labour politicians of the urgent need for change. TV3 won the licence in 1987, but by the time they were ready to go to air in 1989,

deregulation had dissolved the system in which they had been conceived and consequently they faced a tougher, more competitive environment.

2. The BCNZ was restructured into two separate State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), Television New Zealand Ltd (TVNZ), and Radio New Zealand Ltd (RNZ). SOEs were to be run as commercial businesses, with profits as the primary objective, and the return of a dividend to the Treasury. This change meant that TVNZ had no programming requirements stipulated in legislation. Even the broad Reithian objective – that broadcasting should inform, educate and entertain – was dropped from the new Broadcasting Act, despite the phrase being specifically included in the agreed social objectives.
3. The social objectives of broadcasting, described as public service objectives, were to be separated clearly from commercial objectives. The two key public service objectives, as agreed by the Labour Cabinet, were:
 - To reflect and develop the New Zealand identity and culture by obtaining, commissioning and broadcasting a range of programmes to inform, educate and entertain;
 - To ensure that the people of New Zealand have access to television and radio broadcasting services offering a range of programmes which will cater in a balanced way for varied interests of different sections of the community.

The social objectives were to be met through a system of publicly funded grants to be administered through a Broadcasting Commission, a new way of distributing the income from the licence fee.

Restrictions on foreign ownership in broadcasting were relaxed and later (1991) abolished altogether. But there was to be no letting go of controls on broadcasting standards. A new authority, the Broadcasting Standards Authority (BSA) was established to handle complaints from the public and monitor standards (e.g. taste and decency).

Consideration was given to the introduction of quotas for New Zealand programmes (local content), but in the end even proposals for a voluntary quota did not proceed.

2. The rationale for contestable funding

It is significant that the core of the rationale for a separate body to administer public funding to achieve the social objectives in broadcasting came from economic theorists in the Treasury. Early hints can be seen in the Treasury submission to the Royal Commission on Broadcasting in 1985. The concept of

public broadcasting was considered under the heading of tax funded broadcasting, with the conclusion that:

'It was unnecessary for the Government to operate publicly owned and operated stations to achieve the objectives, and that, in the interests of efficiency, it would be preferable for the Government, perhaps through delegated bodies, to use funds from general taxation to buy non-commercial programmes for transmission by commercial broadcasting.'

(Treasury, 1985: 44)

At this point, public broadcasting has been reduced to non-commercial programming, affirmed in another conclusion:

Non-commercial objectives should be removed from the BCNZ, being replaced, where the Government decides it to be necessary, by explicit contracts between the BCNZ and the Government for the undertaking of such activities.

(Treasury, 1985: 63)

The Treasury also recommended that the licence fee be abolished.³

A second economic argument was the preference for distinction between the funding of a service and the providing of that service – the funder/provider split. It was felt that without such separation there was a tendency for “provider capture”, meaning it was often very difficult to know exactly what the providers were doing with funding if it was allocated to them directly.

The officials charged with implementing these reforms saw a number of advantages of using a grants system:

- Competitive neutrality and greater competition between broadcasters. The state broadcaster need not be disadvantaged by the costs of carrying certain programmes which other broadcasters do not face;
- Costs and benefits are readily identifiable (transparent);
- The clear targeting of assistance to particular social groups;
- Flexibility in mechanisms for delivery of public service programmes;
- Costs are kept down as it is a “top-up” system. Few programmes are completely non-commercial and advertising revenue where available can be topped up with grant funding.

(Officials Report, 1988: 16)

3. How NZ On Air has interpreted its remit in respect of television

NZ On Air, born as the Broadcasting Commission, had its remit laid down in the Broadcasting Act 1989. Its key requirements were:

- To reflect and develop New Zealand identity and culture;
- To promote programmes about New Zealand and New Zealand interests;
- To promote Maori language and culture;
- To ensure a range of broadcasts is available to provide for the interests of women, children, the disabled and minorities, including ethnic minorities (youth were added in 2001).

In its funding of television programmes, NZ On Air was required to:

- Promote a sustained commitment by broadcasters to programmes reflecting New Zealand identity and culture;
- Ensure that reasonable provision is made for the funding of television drama and documentaries.

There were also criteria for assessing proposals to fund programmes. Among them NZ On Air had to have regard to:

- The level of contribution (funding or resources) from the applicant;
- The potential size of the audience.

From the outset, it was clear that NZ On Air was going to interpret its remit as not being confined to the funding only of non-commercial programmes. Despite the emphasis in the earlier Treasury submissions and to the consternation of senior executives in TVNZ, it was going to fund programmes for the mainstream in prime time.

The first executive director of NZ On Air, Ruth Harley, delivered her message unambiguously and without delay:

'The challenge is not only to make programmes about New Zealanders and for New Zealanders, but to make programmes that they want to listen to or watch; programmes that appeal to a majority of our stakeholders.'

(Harley, 1989)

By stakeholders, she meant all licence payers, as NZ On Air derived all its income from the licence, known as the Broadcasting Fee. Her determination to fund both mainstream and minority programming was reflected in her report in NZ On Air's first annual report:

'...NZ On Air has part-funded quality prime time programmes to ensure a wide range of mainstream viewers are exposed to popular programmes about New Zealanders. Without funding from the Broadcasting Fee, fewer such programmes would be available for the enjoyment of New Zealand audiences.'

(NZ On Air, *Annual Report 1989-90*: 4)

Note that she stopped short of claiming that all such programming would not have been made had it not been for NZ On Air. Here was the kernel of the dispute with TVNZ in the early period of NZ On Air's existence. TVNZ believed that NZ On Air should have been restricting its funding to non-commercial or minority programming, and that by engaging in funding prime time or commercial programming it was reducing the amount of funding available for non-commercial programming.

Indeed at one point (November 1989), TVNZ announced that it was canceling nine of its planned public service programmes, blaming NZ On Air for their lack of funding. TVNZ pointed out that under the SOE legislation it was prohibited from subsidising non-commercial programming from its commercial revenues. It was dependent on NZ On Air for the funding of any non-commercial programming.

NZ On Air were firm in their rebuttal of TVNZ:

'Essentially TVNZ wants New Zealanders' broadcasting fees to be spent on programmes most New Zealanders won't see. New Zealand culture belongs to us all. It is not the sole preserve of minority interest groups. It is too important to be relegated to Sunday morning slots and the like.'

(Norrish, 1990)

Given the wording in the Broadcasting Act on promoting New Zealand identity and culture, it is not surprising that the NZ On Air view prevailed. TVNZ, mindful that their newly arrived competitor TV3 was getting funding for popular programmes, adjusted its position to enable it to claim similar funding. The ultimate irony was not long in coming, when TVNZ, in hot competition with TV3, emerged victorious in gaining funding for a daily popular soap, *Shortland Street*. Despite a rocky start, it became highly successful, running to this day (2004), but public funding ceased after several years when it was clearly established as a commercial success.

By this stage, a redefinition of public broadcasting had effectively taken place. It was no longer related to excellence or quality of programming, rather it was about local content, the phrase used in New Zealand for New Zealand-made programmes, with little concern for the nature or quality of that content.

This may seem an unusual development to observers from the UK, Europe or the USA, where it is taken for granted that programming originated in the home country will make up the overwhelming majority of the schedule of free-to-air broadcasters. The situation in New Zealand is the reverse - here local content

has always struggled for its place in the schedules, sitting at a remarkably low proportion by international standards, around 20 to 25 per cent. This is a direct consequence of two factors. The fundamentally commercial environment and the high costs of local production compared to the abundance of cheap imported English-language programming. It is this reality which underpins the remit of NZ On Air to promote New Zealand identity and culture. Local content can be seen as less commercially viable than imported, and thus it is appropriate to use public funding for the provision of local content.

In any analysis of this environment it is useful to distinguish between two senses of the phrase non-commercial. In its purest sense, non-commercial applies to minority programming which can only be played off-peak in a commercial schedule and which will not attract enough viewers or advertising to cover costs.

But non-commercial can also extend to mainstream programmes which may gain audiences and revenue and even cover costs, but which generate far less profit than a cheap import substitute – hence the broadcaster faces an opportunity cost⁴ by not acting fully commercially if it chooses to screen the local programme.

Estimates of the cost differential between local and imported programmes are inevitably imprecise. The writer of a comparative study of public broadcasters, commissioned by TVNZ in 1997, gave these figures:

‘...according to TVNZ, the cost of local children’s programming is five times higher than imported; entertainment programming costs some 13 times more than imports; documentaries cost 15 times more and drama and comedy can cost 50 times as much as an imported series.’

(Suich 1997: 25)

Such imported programming is often priced at the margin by US, British or Australian distributors, given that the costs of production have already been recovered in the domestic market in many instances.

This background explains why the local broadcasters’ first instinct is to schedule a *Prime Suspect* or a *Jonathan Creek* – proven programmes – rather than a risky new local drama with few star names. It also explains why NZ On Air’s legislation specifically targets drama and documentaries as well as children’s and minority programming. These are the endangered genres, at risk if they are not supported.

The implications of equating public broadcasting with local content were soon made clear. One of the founding members of the Board of NZ On Air (its governing body, appointed by government) has described how “some influential members of the public” responded to the idea that public broadcasting was all about local content:

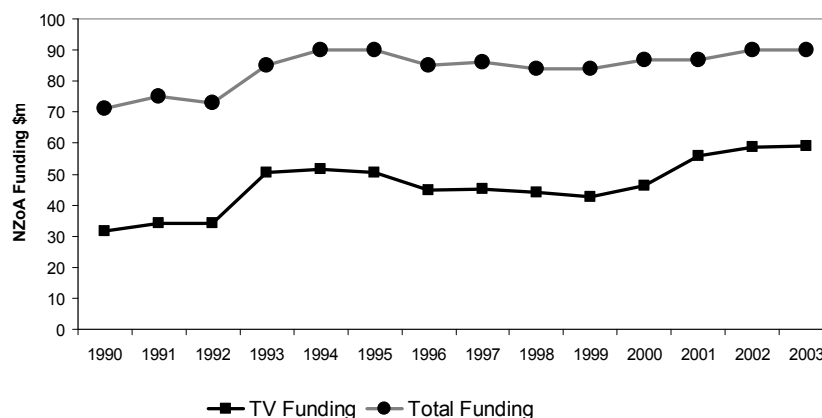
‘Referring back to Lord Reith and the BBC, they insisted that NZOA should concentrate its television funding on informational or educational programmes. Their slogan was not “New Zealand” but “quality”. Some of these critics wanted revenue from the broadcasting fee to be used to buy BBC programmes directly or to fund the removal of advertising from some days of the week.’

(Horrocks, 1995: 98)

4. NZ On Air: the financial arrangements

NZ On Air was given the power to collect the licence fee, but the funding of television programmes is only one of its several responsibilities. It also funds public radio (two non-commercial national stations), access radio, and the promotion of NZ music on radio, as well as transmission to remote, non-commercial areas, and some archiving activities. By 2003, television was taking the majority of the funding, as illustrated by the following graphic.

Total Television Funding and Total NZoA Funding 1990-2003



Source: NZ On Air Annual Reports 1989-2003

The rise of total funding available from \$71m in 1990 to \$90m in 1994 can be attributed to a determined campaign to get more and more people to pay their licence fees – by 1997 compliance had reached 95 per cent. The rise in television funding in 2001 followed the abolition of the licence fee, and the move to direct government funding, including a modest increase of some \$6m.

Soon after NZ On Air was established in 1988, the Government raised the licence fee from \$71.50 to \$110 (July 1989). While this raised NZ On Air’s revenue by some \$22m, its total funding has always seemed stretched to cover its various responsibilities. The amount of public funding for broadcasting is an ongoing issue (see [8.4 below](#)).

When it comes to allocating the funding for television programmes, the process has become honed and refined over the years. Almost all funding (85 per cent) is allocated to independent producers rather than the broadcasters, who generally

do not have in-house teams working in the genres funded by NZ On Air. But producers pitching for funding must have secured an agreement from a broadcaster that it will screen the programme if funded. In some areas, the broadcasters may enter a pitching round with a slate of programmes they wish to commission from independents if funding can be agreed.

When NZ On Air agrees to fund a programme, this will be an agreement to part-fund a programme. No programmes, not even those which are strictly non-commercial, are funded 100 per cent, the broadcaster will be expected to pay a broadcast licence fee at the very least. In other circumstances the broadcaster may contribute resources (studio, or editing for example) or cash. There may be other funding bodies involved in some projects (see [5.1.1 below](#)).

Futhermore NZ On Air has always regarded its funding of television programmes as an investment, not a grant, despite the fact that the Government’s statements regarding its reform proposals in 1988 referred to “publicly funded grants”. NZ On Air contracts with producers ensure that any returns from overseas sales of funded programme go primarily to NZ On Air. Although such returns have been minimal, this is an issue of increasing importance as the potential for rights exploitation expands.

5. Advantages and achievements of the model

5.1 The growth of local content

Given the equation of public broadcasting with local content, it is not surprising that NZ On Air monitors levels of local content closely, producing an annual Local Content Survey. As the table below indicates, the total amount of local content has risen steadily since deregulation.

TOTAL LOCAL CONTENT HOURS BY GENRE 1988 – 2002

Source: NZ On Air, Local Content Survey 2002

Notes: Figures cover TVOne, TV2 and TV3 only

Prime time is 6pm to 10pm

	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Drama/Comedy	39	59	55	86	223	264	283	357	357	336	406	364	386	363	447
Documentaries	43	36	107	139	175	190	207	257	252	269	334	331	242	260	349
Children's	325	440	534	739	1264	1019	861	745	783	806	600	620	591	488	583
Children's drama	12	21	25	20	33	27	2	28	12	0	13	9	6	14.5	0
Maori	131	144	143	111	163	170	156	173	218	256	255	287	371	396	387
Information	213	253	208	213	226	431	477	415	867	1147	1485	1191	1041	1272	1322
Sports	509	691	1653	1283	1735	1075	1531	1545	1077	865	999	1010	1239	791	1299
News/Current Affairs	550	709	997	924	1009	1023	1087	1045	1198	1440	1751	1835	1876	2073	2111
Entertainment	292	458	528	525	886	588	364	454	302	482	453	496	433	532	703
Total NZ Content	2112	2804	4249	4039	5715	4788	4969	5018	5066	5601	6296	6143	6185	6190	7201
% of Schedule	23.9	31.8	24.2	31.7	30.2	23.2	23.2	19.7	19.2	21.3	24	23.4	23.5	23.6	27.4
Total Prime Time	686	943	189	1281	1640	1769	1821	1546	1586	1636	1647	1686	1602	1629	1732
% of Schedule	23.5	21.6	27.2	29.3	37.5	40.5	41.7	35.4	36.3	37.5	37.6	38.5	36.5	37.2	39.5

Hours of local content have more than tripled, from 2112 in 1988, to 7201 in 2002. But because the number of channels has increased, with TV3 launching in 1989, and all three channels have moved to 24 hour transmission, local content hours as a percentage of the total schedule have barely moved at all – indeed in the later years of the 90s the proportion was actually lower than in 1988.

Prime time is perhaps a more valid indicator. There the proportion is markedly better now than in the late eighties.

But NZ On Air does not fund all local content by any means. NZ On Air does not fund the three genres in the second category in italics – sports, news and current affairs and entertainment - with rare exceptions. NZ On Air concentrates its funding on the six genres in the first group. Its funding contributed to no more than 20 per cent of the total local content hours in 2002, some 1432 hours (Local Content Survey 2002). If the indicator taken is first-run hours, the figure drops to 15 per cent or 861 hours in 2002.

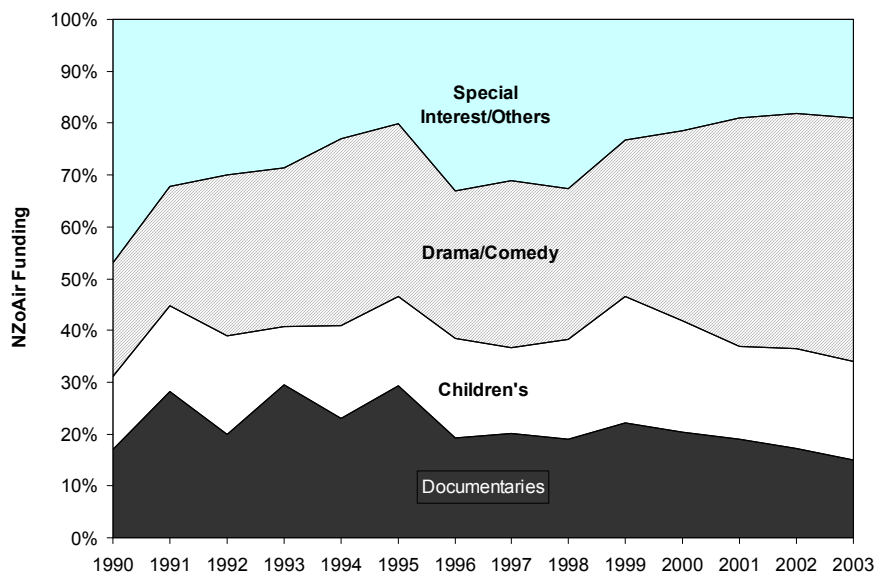
But NZ On Air is often funding the more expensive genres of local content, drama for example, so if the indicator is the proportion of the cost of all local content, the figure rises to around 30 per cent, as estimated by NZ On Air in 1998. At that time NZ On Air spelt out its priorities as follows:

'NZ On Air's focus is on what may be seen as the endangered species in a commercial broadcasting environment – local drama and comedy, documentaries, and programmes for special interest audiences like children and minorities in the community – programmes which can't easily be justified in commercial terms but which are needed to ensure that New Zealanders have access to a rich and diverse television diet that reflects and develops our culture.'

(NZ On Air, Annual Report, 1998)

The following graph indicates the proportions allocated by genre over the years.

Television Funding by Genre 1990-2003



Source: NZ On Air Annual Reports 1989-2003

Notes:

1. Special interest includes Maori programmes (in the Maori language) only until 1994, after which funding was taken over by a separate agency (see 5.6). In recent years special interest has included arts, culture and performance.
2. Drama/comedy includes children's drama
3. Documentaries includes some series of information and magazine programmes

5.1.1 The genres – drama/comedy

NZ On Air has developed a strategy for each of the four main genres or areas it funds.

In respect of drama/comedy, it should not be assumed that the number of hours funded by NZ On Air bears a close resemblance to the hours listed as local content in 5.1. Since 1995 most of those local content hours (approx 260, being both first-run and repeats) are for the soap *Shortland Street*, which was funded by NZ On Air only in its early years. Repeats can also distort the local content figures. The level of funded hours in drama/comedy/children's drama has risen from 49 hours in 1990 to 107 hours in 2003.

NZ On Air expects to fund little more than half the cost of the drama it invests in. Some of a drama's budget may be sourced internationally (20-30% per cent) or from other agencies such as the NZ Film Commission. In 2003, NZ On Air contributed 52 per cent of the costs of its drama programmes, 67 per cent of the

costs of its comedy programmes and 90 per cent of the costs of its children's drama.

NZ On Air's drama strategy is to achieve a sustained, consistent presence of New Zealand drama across the three main free-to-air channels, using series or anthology drama to encourage appointment viewing with audiences.

5.1.2 Documentaries

NZ On Air has been largely responsible for the emergence of two mainstream documentary strands, screening in prime time, one on TV One and one on TV3. These strands are effectively bulk-funded in that the broadcaster can be confident that the funding will be available providing suitable ideas are forthcoming. Similarly several series of information or magazine programmes are funded under the documentary category. In 2003 there were 109 funded documentary hours. NZ On Air contributed 61 per cent of the costs.

An effective working relationship between funder and broadcaster led to the creation of a new kind of mainstream or popular documentary during the period 1990-1995 contrary to overseas trends. Roger Horrocks, a founder Board member of NZ On Air and a key member of the team that negotiated commissions with the broadcasters, comments:

'Documentaries had largely disappeared from the primetime schedule of overseas commercial channels. New Zealand came to produce relatively more documentaries for primetime than any other country.'

(Horrocks, 2003)

However, by 1996 in the climate of preparation for sale TVNZ decided it had 'too many documentaries' (Horrocks, 2003). Mainstream documentary came under siege, and the range of subject matter narrowed. Arts coverage was reduced to magazine programmes with short items. The underlying tension between NZ on Air and the broadcasters was exposed:

'When we ask "what kinds of documentary should be the priority?" the main complication has always been the basic difference between a broadcaster's view and that of NZ On Air. As a commercial enterprise the broadcaster has to ask: "what will make the most money for us?" whereas NZ On Air is required to "reflect and develop New Zealand's identity and culture.'

(Horrocks, 2003)

In the period since 1996 there has been evident dissatisfaction with the trends in documentary programming, notably from the documentary makers. They are concerned that the range of topics that can successfully be pitched to broadcasters is very narrow and that several documentary styles are being missed, including biography, history, natural history/science and socio/political. They also feel that there has been little flexibility in the treatment options open to them once projects had been successfully pitched. These factors are said to

have resulted in a blandness apparent across New Zealand-made documentaries, with a decline in the quality of both storytelling and research.

In response, NZ On Air is revising its documentary strategy to try to create a wider spectrum of documentary programmes, from experimental, low-cost, innovative projects to “blue-chip”, higher-cost, “in-depth” documentaries. These changes will require broadcaster support and agreement.

5.1.3 Children’s programmes

Because children’s and young person’s programmes are invariably scheduled in off-peak timeslots, broadcasters will not commission this genre without substantial financial assistance. In 2003 NZ On Air funded 436 hours of children’s programmes, contributing 98 per cent of the costs and covering all the conventional age-groups – pre-schoolers, 5-9 year olds, 9-14 year olds, and youth (14-18).

A revision of the strategy for children’s programmes is also under way. In recent years NZ On Air has supported a range of linking or variety shows, believing that these shows will inject New Zealand identity and culture around the imported cartoons in what has been dubbed the “vegeburger” approach. But by 2003 NZ On Air had decided that its ability to invest in new stand-alone projects to compete with imported programming was severely constrained. Its new strategy is eventually to exit from the linking or variety shows in favour of investing in competitive stand-alone series or programmes.

This tension between the local and the global has been one of the dominant themes in the treatment of children’s programmes by NZ On Air. As one expert observer put it:

‘The mainstream programming for New Zealand children is becoming a monoculture where short bursts of local material wrap around global cartoons. It is increasingly difficult for producers to propose other longer form local genres within a system where the gatekeepers are conservative commercial broadcasters hungry for the advertiser appeal of ratings.’

(Zanker, 1999)

The extension to this theme is the relative impotence of NZ On Air in an area where the commercial pressures can become extreme.

‘It can be argued that there is market failure for local children’s programming in New Zealand. Commercial broadcasters are reluctant to schedule untested local children’s material. NZOA is powerless to force them to do so.’

(Zanker, 1999)

5.1.4 *Special interest programmes*

This category includes programming for minorities, series such as *Asia Downunder*, *Tagata Pasifika* (for the sizeable migrant communities from the Pacific Islands), *Queer Nation* and *Inside Out* (for the disabled). Such programmes are always scheduled off peak. In 2003 NZ On Air contributed to 146.5 hours of programming for this group of minorities.

In recent years the category has also included a further genre identified by NZ On Air, Arts, Culture and Performance. By 2003 this sub-category was receiving 107 funded hours, with NZ On Air contributing 74 per cent of the costs.

5.1.5 *Maori programmes*

When NZ On Air was established in 1989, it had the responsibility for funding all Maori programming, both in the Maori language and in English for mainstream audiences. However, in 1993, the government set up a separate funding agency for Maori, Te Mangai Paho (TMP), in response to a legal challenge by Maori groups who argued that under the Treaty of Waitangi the government had a responsibility to protect Maori language and culture. A Ministerial directive required NZ On Air to transfer 13 per cent of its income from the licence fee to Te Mangai Paho.

After the licence fee was abolished in 1999, Te Mangai Paho gained its funding directly from government. But the biggest boost for Maori came with the government's decision in 2000 to set up a separate Maori television channel. Much of Te Mangai Paho's funding is currently being spent on programming for this new channel, which is due to launch in early 2004.

NZ On Air continues to have a significant role in funding Maori programming for the mainstream, in order to ensure a 'good presence of Maori programming within the general television diet' (Annual Report, 2003). Maori stories, themes and personnel are encouraged within drama applications, and each of the mainstream documentary strands is required to fulfil a Maori quota of 15 per cent of the broadcaster's documentary slate.

5.2 *Diversity*

NZ On Air makes much play with the concept of diversity, in that the objective of its television funding is 'to support programmes across a wide diversity of genres and interests.' Such changes as are planned are 'to encourage creativity and diversity' within the funded categories (Statement of Intent 2003-4).

It is undoubtedly true that most of the programming funded by NZ On Air would not be commissioned by broadcasters in a wholly commercial environment. To that extent NZ On Air is responsible for a level of diversity that would not have occurred without NZ On Air. But, as has been seen above with both documentaries and children's programmes, a certain narrowness or sameness has set in, suggesting that the mantra of diversity is not being fulfilled. There

have also been notable gaps, such as the absence of significant children's drama for many years. These are ongoing issues for the agency, which is addressing concerns through its strategy reviews.

5.3 *Independence*

NZ On Air is seen as being independent of all vested interests, especially political or commercial interests. Although it has the status of a government agency, and has a Board appointed by government, it operates at arms-length from government. Indeed there is a clause in the Broadcasting Act that prohibits the Minister of Broadcasting from giving a direction in respect of a particular programme, or regarding news and current affairs programming. Any ministerial directives must be published.

Having a funding agency separate from the broadcasters allows the agency to act as an advocate for the rights of the broadcasting audience as citizens rather than as consumers – the latter being the inevitable focus of broadcasters dependent on advertising revenue.

5.4 *Contestability*

Making public funding available for programming to be screened by a number of broadcasters (in practice two, but ideally more) is a cardinal feature of the NZ On Air model. It provides for a measure of genuine competition in ideas and creativity, which has arguably brought about the effective development of programmes and enhanced responsiveness to audiences. In certain key genres or sub-genres, NZ On Air will only fund one programme per year, which can mean intense competition between producers and broadcasters. Examples are the development of the first soap (*Shortland Street*), or programmes for the different age-groups for children (only one pre-school programme, or for 5-9 year olds etc).

Because there are a considerable number of independent producers all pushing ideas and vying for funding, contestability provides the opportunity for a range of different perspectives and voices to be heard, and hence for the achievement of diversity of programming. As the funded programmes screen on several channels serving different demographics, contestability also means that such programmes are seen by a variety of audiences.

For the independent producers, contestability is vital to their survival. If public funding were to be confined to one broadcaster (presumably the state-owned TVNZ), and they were to fall foul of that one outlet, their livelihood would obviously be at risk.

Historically, most NZ On Air funding goes directly to the independent producers – 85 per cent in 2003, with the remaining 15 per cent going to TVNZ who make a number of programmes in-house, such as the youth news show *Flipside* or the rural magazine *Country Calendar*.

Most funded programmes are broadcast on TVNZ's two channels – for both 2002 and 2003, the breakdown between broadcasters was TVNZ 80 per cent and TV3 20 per cent.

A further argument for contestable funding allocated through an independent agency is that there is value in the creative tension between funder and broadcaster. Horrocks cites the experience of funding documentaries:

'It is a matter of record that this push-and-pull between broadcaster and funding body produced good ratings and deep respect for the genre (reflected in audience research).'

(Horrocks, 2003)

Similarly with the soap *Shortland Street*, with tension between NZ On Air's "political correctness" and the broadcaster's desire for excitement:

'These seem to me good examples of how the involvement of NZ On Air produced a better result than money simply being given to TVNZ.'

(Horrocks, 2003)

5.5 *The Growth of the Independent Sector*

As indicated above, the independent sector has been the primary beneficiary of the NZ On Air regime, and has developed accordingly, although most still regard their existence as precarious. Before deregulation, there were few independent production houses, with TVNZ being virtually the sole employer.

The twin pressures of deregulation and competition led TVNZ to shed most of its in-house production. To reduce costs and cut staff, whole departments in drama, features and documentaries were disbanded, throwing open opportunities for the independents. At the same time, NZ On Air started with a deliberate bias in favour of funding ideas from the independents. As one of the founding Board members put it:

'In 1989 the members of NZOA started out with the urgent thought that this might be the last chance to get local production firmly established in television before satellite and pay services swamped the culture with imports.'

(Horrocks, 1996)

Few would deny that the presence of a strong independent sector has considerable benefits in terms of the diversity of ideas and treatments, and that competition between independents together with tight management by NZ On Air has delivered programming which is extremely cost-effective by any standards.

If a comparison with Australia is to be made, there the conventional wisdom is that regulation via a system of genre-specific quotas has been largely

responsible for the strength of the local production industry and the success of a number of programmes in export markets. In New Zealand, in the absence of quota regulation, it is the existence of NZ On Air that lies behind the strength of the independent sector of the industry.

6. Weaknesses of the model

6.1 *The gatekeeper issue*

The principal difficulty with the NZ On Air regime has been what is termed the gatekeeper problem, when the broadcasters refuse to broadcast certain sorts of programmes or choose to transmit them at what NZ On Air describe as inhospitable hours. (One of the best examples of this is TVNZ's scheduling of *Tagata Pasifika* on Sunday mornings, when much of the target audience of Pacific Islanders are at church).

Essentially this is a reflection of the fundamental tension between the social and cultural objectives of NZ On Air and the commercial considerations of the broadcasters. This tension is rather more apparent in respect of the minority programming promoted by NZ On Air, than its mainstream or prime time programming. But NZ On Air's resolve to move beyond the sameness of commercial documentaries may prompt problems with broadcasters as to where to place more experimental or less commercial examples of the genre.

On some occasions, broadcasters have chosen to turn down programme ideas, even with the promise of full funding from NZ On Air. This highlights the commercial framework in which the broadcasters operate, in that there will be an opportunity cost to taking such programmes. The broadcaster is arguing that it can gain both audience and revenue by scheduling a cheap imported programme in the slot, a programme which may attract significantly more commercial revenue than the NZ On Air alternative.

Inevitably there will be horse-trading, between the broadcaster and the funding agency, over the contribution each side is to make to the budget and the timeslot. Negotiation is everything because at the end of the day NZ On Air's cultural objectives can never overrule the commercial imperatives of the broadcaster (Horrocks, 1996). The question is whether this situation is adequate for the fulfillment of cultural objectives.

6.2 *The model subsidises private, foreign-owned, broadcasters*

TV3, which receives 20 per cent of NZ On Air funding for television, is wholly owned by CanWest, a globally active media conglomerate based in Canada. Some critics of the NZ On Air model point out that public funding is contributing to the profits of a private, foreign-owned company, and that such profits accrue to the shareholders of that company, wherever they are.

For its part, TV3 responds that in the first place, the public funding does not go to TV3, but to the independent producers who make its local programmes. Secondly, TV3 contends that with the exception of the documentary strand *Inside New Zealand*, all publicly-funded programming either just breaks even or makes a loss (Impey, 2003).

TV3 would be less likely to commission New Zealand drama or documentaries if it were not for NZ On Air funding. This assertion is really untestable unless funding were withdrawn from TV3, in which case it would have to decide how to meet the known appetite of audiences for New Zealand programming. A schedule devoid of local content except for news and current affairs would be one possibility, but what then of those wider social and cultural objectives promoted by both government and NZ On Air?

6.3 *The model dilutes the concept of public broadcasting*

NZ On Air is frequently held up as a success story, by virtue of its promotion of diverse local content and its commitment to the endangered genres. This is public broadcasting, New Zealand style. But it can also be argued that this is to confine public broadcasting to a very narrow definition, a minimalist position that omits many of the quality elements that distinguish the remit of the traditional public broadcasters.

In countries where there is a traditional public broadcaster, the concept of public broadcasting pervades an institution, informing and guiding all that it does. It is an ethos that colours its whole approach to broadcasting, going far beyond any particular programme. The former Director-General of RTE, the Irish public broadcaster, in a speech to a New Zealand audience, saw public broadcasting in this light:

'It is not simply a case of welding on some areas of defined social responsibility to an otherwise wholly commercial organisation. It also follows that the public character is reflected in the overall schedule and is not something which inheres in individual programmes which are then distributed across a schedule, somewhat like sultanas in a fruitcake.'

(Collins, 2003)

This goes to the heart of a key philosophical debate as to what constitutes public broadcasting, and how far any defining principles can be adapted to particular environments. Can there be true public broadcasting in an environment where there is no public broadcaster? Suffice to say at this point that there may be a strong argument for the role of the public broadcaster in safeguarding the public interest.

'The question is whether a powerful public corporation can better promote the public interest in broadcasting than subsidies scattered across a predominantly commercial industry. Does the public interest need a face, a history and the coherence that a single institution represents?'

7. The reforms of 1999

Through most of the 1990s, the National Government was in power, with the prevailing view that the state broadcaster TVNZ should be sold. From the mid-nineties, its Board and management were charged with preparing the company for sale. This was the background to what many saw as the excessive commercialism of TVNZ, visible in cheap populist programming, in the amount of advertising on screen, and in the profits returned to the government as dividends. The Labour leader, Helen Clark, denounced the crass commercialism of TVNZ, especially TV2.

When Labour returned to power in 1999 (in coalition with the Alliance Party), they had a clear policy for broadcasting reform. In respect of television, they were committed to retaining both TVNZ channels in public ownership, but to using them for public purposes, specifically for the promotion of cultural identity and diversity and for the provision of democratic debate covering a range of issues and a variety of perspectives.

Accordingly TVNZ's priorities were to be refocused, from making profits to providing a quality service. It was to be given a Charter laying out programming objectives (there had been none laid down under deregulation), and was to be allowed to retain a greater proportion of its profits.

The licence fee, abolished as an election bauble in the last days of the National government, was not re-introduced by Labour. Alternative means of funding public broadcasting were looked at. NZ On Air was to continue, although it was acknowledged that the revenue raised from the licence fee had not been enough to fund the range of programmes needed.

In a bid to raise the levels of local content, Labour also undertook to introduce format-specific quotas for both radio (New Zealand music) and television.

In the event, the Charter for TVNZ took longer to complete than expected, finally taking effect from March 2003. It is similar in approach to other public broadcasters' remits or charters, and has been described by the CEO of TVNZ as "aspirational" rather than prescriptive.

TVNZ must now pursue dual objectives: on the one hand it must fulfill the objectives laid down in the Charter, on the other hand it is charged with maintaining its commercial performance. Some critics say these objectives are incompatible; certainly it is generally seen as a difficult balancing act. In recognition of its change of mission, TVNZ is no longer a State-Owned Enterprise. Under the TVNZ Act 2003, the television part of the company is now a Crown-Owned Company (with the auspicious, official, acronym CROC), and no longer required to pay a dividend to the Crown. The television business has been

separated from the transmission arm of the company, which is to continue as an SOE.

To enable the new TVNZ deliver on its Charter objectives, the government is providing some direct funding to the company - \$10.7m in 2003, and \$15m for the following two years. It is recognised that there are additional costs involved in implementing the Charter, both in more New Zealand programming, and in reduced advertising revenue from some programming which is less than fully commercial.

The government also increased its funding for NZ On Air (funded directly by government since the abolition of the licence fee) by \$6m annually, taking its total funding to \$97m.

The commitment to introduce content regulation in the form of quotas has not been fulfilled. Following considerable lobbying from the industry (CanWest threatened to quit TV3 if quotas came in), the proposal has been watered down to a voluntary quota, with an industry group working on the appropriate levels.

These reforms cannot properly be described as re-regulation, nor do they imply that deregulation had comprehensively failed. Much of the framework of deregulation remains in place – notably the opening up of broadcasting to competition, the auctioning of spectrum and the removal of restrictions on ownership. The limited forms of intervention remain as originally constituted, namely the Broadcasting Standards Authority and NZ On Air.

Indeed NZ On Air is seen by some as the most successful of the elements of deregulation (Smith, 1996). It has fulfilled its objectives as originally conceived by the officials seeking to target public funding at specific groups. It has maintained a consistent view of public broadcasting. After a decade at work, it is seen as needing more money, but not as requiring radical reform.

The target for the reforms of 1999 was clearly TVNZ. It was not performing adequately as a public broadcaster, but this was not so much a consequence of deregulation itself as of the privatising climate of the 90s. It was the urge to sell TVNZ which corrupted its performance. Labour believes that a reformed and refocused TVNZ can play its part again in the effective delivery of public broadcasting.

8. Current issues and future options

8.1 The allocation of public funding

There are currently three main sources of public funding for television:

- Direct government funding for Te Mangai Paho (TMP), for Maori programming, \$55m in 2003.

- Direct government funding for NZ On Air, \$59m allocated to television in 2003.
- Direct government funding for TVNZ, \$10.7m in 2003.

The funding for TMP is primarily aimed at programming for the new Maori television channel, due to launch in early 2004. The case for separate funding for this purpose is not in dispute.

But direct funding for TVNZ has prompted recent discussion. TVNZ has said that since it now has additional responsibilities as a public broadcaster, with a Charter that overlaps the brief of NZ On Air, it should receive all the public funding available for mainstream television.

Both NZ On Air and TV3 vigorously oppose this position. In fact, this is an argument as much about power as money, as NZ On Air programming flowing to TV3 amounted to no more than \$11m in 2003. TVNZ's real aim is to avoid having to apply for funding to NZ On Air in a contestable process.

NZ On Air have counter attacked, by proposing that the direct funding to TVNZ should be allocated through them. They argue that the presence of this direct funding has distorted the level playing field between the broadcasters. They are finding it harder to agree contribution figures with TV3, who say they are disadvantaged by not having access to direct funding as TVNZ does.

8.2 *TVNZ's Charter funding*

This raises the question of what should TVNZ be spending its direct funding on (\$10.7m in 2003). In the first part-year of direct funding, reported on in the TVNZ Annual Report for 2003, it became apparent that most of the direct funding was being used to finance the TVNZ contributions to ongoing NZ On Air funded programmes. This led to charges that TVNZ was making a mockery of the Charter.

TVNZ pointed out that, because of the uncertainty around the start date for the implementation of the Charter (delayed several times), it had chosen to direct the first year's funding into established programmes meeting Charter criteria. Many critics, this writer included, expected that the Charter funding would be used for new and distinctive programming, additional to programming which was conventionally funded by NZ On Air. TVNZ has said it is looking at such possibilities for the future.

8.3 *All funding systems are under review*

The current funding arrangements may seem something of a mish-mash – an *ad hoc* system of multiple funding doors. It is not a simple system of one fund for government support of the creative industries, or even for the support of television. But for the independent programme makers, simple is not necessarily good; they would far prefer many doors to one door. A system with a number of

access points is also likely to promote diversity, in that different voices and different approaches may find their way through the different doors.

Whether the officials who are hovering around broadcasting policy will see it this way is another matter. There are two important reviews under way. The first is a review of all the funding arrangements for all the agencies concerned with the creative industries – this review flowed from a government-initiated report by the Screen Industry Task Force, charged with growing the export potential of the screen industry, which includes film as well as television.

The second review is inspired by the current Minister of Broadcasting, a former academic who gained this portfolio in 2002. He is masterminding a review of public broadcasting, going back to first principles. These two reviews are quite different in their origins and their focus and may well produce conflicting ideas.

8.4 The quantum of funding

There are two further issues likely to be addressed in some form by both reviews. The first concerns the amount of public funding committed to television. Is it enough? If not, how much more is appropriate?

It is a familiar theme in NZ On Air literature that they would like to do more, and there is much more they could do, if more funding were available. Such pleading can be seen in a wider political context – on the one hand politicians are well aware that funding to reduce hospital waiting lists or to provide more teachers will resonate more strongly with most voters than money spent on culture or television programmes; on the other hand comparative studies indicate that New Zealand spends less on cultural intervention than other countries.

In 2000, a report commissioned by the New Zealand Television Broadcasters Council found that the amount of public money New Zealand spends on television per capita is among the lowest in the western world – NZ\$12 in New Zealand, compared with NZ\$45 in Australia and NZ\$144 in the UK (Television Regulation and Local Content in Six Nations).

In 2002, a Canadian report compared 25 OECD countries, in terms of public funding for public broadcasting as a percentage of GDP in 1999. The figure for New Zealand was found to be the lowest of any country except the United States, where public broadcasting has always been marginalised (Norris, 2003). Even if the 1999 figures are updated – since then New Zealand has committed to additional public funding, in the form of the direct funding to TVNZ for the Charter, and to funding for the Maori Television Service – the ranking hardly improves.

But in a small country, with an economy which has slipped down the ranks of the OECD in recent years, public funding will always be tight and vigorously contested. NZ On Air's performance must be judged against the limited quantum it has been obliged to work with.

8.5 *Will this model hold for the digital age?*

The second issue concerns planning for the future. The current model is essentially intervention contestable across the national free-to-air channels, on the principle that the benefits of public funding should be equally accessible to all, and that public money should be invested to provide the maximum benefit to the greatest number. But these principles become less appropriate as audiences fragment, as pay TV takes a greater market share, and as broadband makes the me-channel possible.

An earlier study commissioned by NZ On Air (Norris, 2001) examined some of the possible options for NZ On Air as pay TV becomes more dominant and as the commercial free-to-air model comes under threat. Among the key questions raised:

- Should some NZ On Air programmes migrate to pay? For example New Zealand documentaries on a documentary genre pay channel. If not first-run, then repeats from the substantial NZ On Air archive?
- Would it be more effective to target children and minority audiences through pay? Once there is evidence that more children are watching the offerings on children's channels such as Nickelodeon than on the free-to-air channels, should there not be New Zealand content on those channels?
- Are not niche pay channels for minorities, and content-rich sites on the internet accessible on demand, the most efficient way of addressing the needs of minority audiences?
- Given the existence of specific pay channels for minorities, should public money continue to be used to address the needs of minority audiences on free-to-air channels? Savings could be used to fund additional mainstream programming.

A full discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper.

New Zealand is behind other countries in the transition to digital. There is a digital direct-to-home satellite subscription service (Sky) but no digital free-to-air offering as yet. TVNZ may, at some point, launch a suite of digital free-to-air channels akin to the BBC model. But even if this were to happen, it would not negate NZ On Air's consideration of pay channels. Niche digital free-to-air channels, as in the UK, may attract minimal audiences. It is fundamental to the system that publicly-funded programming goes where its target audiences are.

9. **Conclusion**

In many ways, the NZ On Air model can be seen as one fashioned for the circumstances of New Zealand at a particular time. But in the 15 years since its inception it has evolved and consolidated, to the point now in 2004 where it is firmly embedded. The model can be seen as 'the most relevant and practical

version of public broadcasting for New Zealand television' (Horrocks, 1996). There is consensus that the promotion of local content must be the priority – there is little public agitation now for a non-commercial channel, which in any event would seem to be looking backwards rather than ahead to the digital future. Furthermore those with a preference for highbrow programming from the BBC are a fading demographic, overwhelmed by multi-cultural youth who are no respecters of the cultural cringe of earlier generations and who are increasingly confident of their own voice.

In attempting to draw any general conclusions from the New Zealand experience, two points should be considered. The first is that the funding model must be examined within its context, within the whole ecology of broadcasting. The second point is that much depends on whether the approach is from an economic perspective or a cultural one.

What we have had in New Zealand is a contestable funding regime within a context of extreme deregulation, with effectively no public broadcaster and NZ On Air bearing the full burden of the responsibility for public broadcasting. This is completely different from the notion of a “top-sliced” contestable fund grafted on to an environment such as that in the UK, where there is a dominant public broadcaster and commitments to public broadcasting from all the free-to-air broadcasters. In the UK, such a fund would be an important but minor part of the fabric of public broadcasting, whereas in New Zealand the contestable fund is public service broadcasting. Such major differences should serve as a caveat in deriving lessons from the New Zealand experience that might apply elsewhere.

For New Zealand the ecology has changed, and much will turn on the outcome of the reforms of 1999, which have barely begun to take effect. While not amounting to full re-regulation, the change is substantial. NZ On Air is no longer the sole voice of public broadcasting – the intention is that TVNZ, as a publicly-owned broadcaster, will assume a new responsibility for public broadcasting as laid down in its Charter. This change of climate should ameliorate some of the practical gatekeeping difficulties outlined earlier in this paper. It would be surprising if the reformed TVNZ were to spurn NZ On Air initiatives as happened in TVNZ's most commercial, pre-sale period after 1996. It is expected that the outcome of the reforms will thus be to bring the New Zealand ecology back from the edge and somewhat closer to other western countries.

In essence, the New Zealand model reflects one side of the philosophical debate at the heart of public broadcasting. Is the starting point market failure, or is it a wider remit concerned primarily with the delivery of social and cultural objectives (IPPR, 2003)? It must be concluded that public broadcasting New Zealand style is minimalist and prompted by notions of market failure. As one of New Zealand's more perceptive economic commentators put it:

'It is important to distinguish between a broadcasting system whose purpose is cultural but is subject to market disciplines and a broadcasting system which is to meet market objectives and thereby contribute to culture.'

(Easton, 1997)

The New Zealand model is clearly the latter. Yet it has worked for New Zealand to a considerable extent, from both economic and cultural perspectives, and the reforms should improve it. If from the outset there had been a determination to achieve the former system of cultural priorities, all would have been very different.

Endnotes

¹ The Treaty of Waitangi 1840 is the founding document of New Zealand. Available: <http://www.govt.nz/en/aboutnz/?id=a32f7d70e71e9632aad1016cb343f900>

² All dollar figures in the text refer to New Zealand Dollars. At the time of writing (06/01/04) £1 = \$2.71 NZD.

³ The licence fee was eventually abolished in 1999.

⁴ The return from the use of an asset or resource in the next best alternative that is foregone by virtue of its actual use.

Biography

Paul Norris is Head of the New Zealand Broadcasting School at CPIT (Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology). His previous career was in television journalism and management. After almost twenty years with the BBC in London, he returned to New Zealand in 1987 as Director of News and Current Affairs at TVNZ as the company prepared for deregulation and competition. In 1994 he became a Group Director at TVNZ, before joining CPIT in 1996.

His special interests are public policy on broadcasting, the digital future, media ownership and media law and ethics. He is a regular commentator in the media on these topics.

He is a co-author of three reports commissioned by NZ On Air: *Local Content and Diversity - Television in Ten Countries* (1999), *New Technologies and the Digital Future* (2001) and *The Future of Public Broadcasting: the Experience in Six Countries* (2003).

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