

## A world in retreat: the reconfiguration of hybridity in 20th-century New Zealand television

Brennon Wood

SOCIOLOGY PROGRAMME, MASSEY UNIVERSITY, NEW ZEALAND

### INTRODUCTION

Not that long ago, television was a medium preoccupied with underwriting a taken-for-granted realm of the normal. As many commentators have argued, however, over the latter part of the 20th century its content increasingly departed from any such sense of the mundane. These departures were signalled in particular by the advent of hybridizations that cut across the categories into which programming is customarily divided. Television's cultural forms have lost their former rigidity and are increasingly confounded. What was once kept apart is now mixed together.

One way of approaching media content is to divide it into types, as in the genre analysis initially developed in film studies. There are, of course, numerous ways to categorize television output and thus many controversies between the advocates of competing classification systems. Recent programming developments, however, have called the classificatory drive itself into question. Why insist on making distinctions when, as Corner (1996: 43) comments, 'television's generic system shows an increasing tendency towards hybridisation and reflexivity'? If televised culture has become comprehensively intertextual then any attempt to define discrete types seems wrong-headed. The analysis of hybridity has thus typically been conducted by investigating particular programmes rather than by exploring large-scale quantitative variations. However, if hybridity is content that somehow transgresses distinct categories then analysis must begin by defining the distinctiveness of these categories. As we must understand the distance that is crossed, formal content analysis still has its uses.

To date, the most systematic analyses have developed in the field of documentary studies and have accordingly focused attention on the advent of prime-time 'reality programming' in particular (see for example Bondebjerg, 1996; Corner, 1996; Kilborn and Izod, 1997; Nichols, 1994). 'Reality TV', with its radical mixing of fact and fiction, is certainly an important part of the puzzle. However, to focus narrowly on such programming risks misunderstanding contemporary developments. An overemphasis upon the stylistic departures of reality TV fails to appreciate much of what is indeed novel about hybridization in the 1990s. As Kilborn (1994: 421) comments, 'there is nothing intrinsically new about most of these reality strands'.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, to treat hybridity as a variation upon the documentary tradition is clearly limited, for documentaries have always been more significant as film than as television. Analysis needs to consider both a broad historical frame and a wide range of television content. Only on these terms can we begin more fully to appreciate the complexity of televisual hybridization.

My intention here is to expand the historical context in which hybridity is discussed and thus to deepen the appreciation of its complexity. Hybridity is not all of one piece. Drawing upon diverse resources, it comprises a range of different types that have developed unevenly over time. I investigate these shifting configurations over the past 30 odd years of New Zealand television. Hybridity is typically equated with a radical undermining of the distinction between fact and fiction. I show, however, that such undermining is characteristic of recent developments rather than of hybridity per se. By focusing on trends in programming as a whole rather than in prime time in particular, I highlight the significance of infomercials, a hybridization that has largely been ignored in discussions to date. The analysis thus sheds light on the relationship between hybridity and the commerce of television.

### **Mapping the field of hybrid transgression**

The analysis of hybridized television has centred on changes in the status of reality, focusing in particular on the mixing together of styles that formerly segregated the domains of fiction and non-fiction. My interest here is also with the discursive relationship between televised contents and any sense of a world outside these contents. Invoking the problematic status of reality inevitably raises the spectre of interminable philosophical dispute and I do not propose to resolve such ancient arguments here. Proceeding without the benefit of meta-theoretical certainty, I will pragmatically treat reality as a product of televisual discourse. Reality refers here to the discursive construction of worldliness, of a peopled realm of things and events. By this count, then, reality is not the preserve of one sort of

programming. Rather, all media content produces worldliness and so can be typed according to the variety of ways in which it accomplishes this sense of the real. Generally speaking, television can be divided into four modes – fact, fiction, entertainment and advertising. Each of these four modes produces reality in a distinctive way.

### *Fact*

Factual programming privileges the sense of an objective world outside the confines of the content and to which that content refers. The characteristic types of factual television are news, current affairs, documentaries, practical advice shows and religious broadcasts. These contents tend towards ‘the discourses of sobriety’ that, as Nichols (1994: 47) puts it, ‘attempt to represent the state of affairs in the historical or natural world itself rather than offer openly imaginative representations of it’.

### *Fiction*

Fictional programming conveys the sense of a world that is imaginatively constructed within the confines of the content itself. The characteristic types of television fiction are drama, feature film and some forms of comedy.<sup>2</sup> These contents internalize reality; as Nichols (1991: 109) says, ‘we enter into a fictional world’ as ‘a unique imaginary domain’. Accordingly, the truths of fiction ‘cannot be arrived at by a shortcut through causal history’ (Branigan, 1992: 200). The people and events depicted are not located in an external world; they are characters and stories whose relations make sense within the invented context.

### *Entertainment*

Entertainments represent people who exist beyond the confines of the content itself. These people act ‘as themselves’ in televised fora that have been specifically designed for the exhibition of spectacles of various kinds (public talk, singing, competing for prizes and so on). The characteristic types of programming are game shows, musical acts, talk shows, variety programmes, broadcast sport and some forms of comedy.<sup>3</sup> These entertainments convey a theatrical sense of reality as performance.

### *Advertisement*

Advertisements market products, typically in 30–60-second ‘spots’ grouped together in segments. Each advertisement refers to a commodity that exists

outside its content and aims to increase the circulation of that commodity. These commercials, however, 'are not "about" products, but are images of desire and pleasure that overwhelm the product they are attached to' (Fiske, 1987: 116). As Williams (1980: 185) argues, the crucial message of modern advertising is 'that the material object being sold is never enough'. With this emphatic deferral of objective reference, advertisements displace reality; they conjure up a sense of the world through 'magical inducements and satisfactions'.<sup>4</sup>

The four conventional modes of television produce reality in discursively distinct ways. Fact externalizes reality with referential pointing while fiction internalizes the world as imaginative invention and entertainment stages reality as theatrical performance. Advertisement, on the other hand, deploys discourses of magical substitution; it conjures up the real. Although these distinctions are no more than rules of thumb, they express readily recognizable differences that can be used to further the analysis of hybridity. Of course, any typology necessarily involves a loss of detail. In assigning types of content to a mode, such as news to fact, my analysis is twice-removed from the intricacies of any particular programme. My concern here, however, is with developments across rather than within the four modes.

I propose to investigate hybridity as a distinctive form rather than as a trend within existing forms. Hence, for example, I do not consider how entertainment values have increased in programmes that remain identified and scheduled as news, but I do explore the advent of information shows about celebrities as a hybridization that systematically compounds fact with entertainment. As this implies, the four modes are ideal types that for analytical purposes are treated as constants. Though this is a significant limitation that renders the analysis incomplete, it is a useful reduction. The loss of detail at programme level is made up for by a more general purview which, I intend to show, highlights the complexity of hybridizing trends. Although a widely acknowledged characteristic of hybridity, this complexity has often frustrated attempts at analysis.

Consider, for example, the case of 'reality TV', an important focus of recent discussions. Kilborn (1994: 423) defines reality TV as 'a hybrid mix of presenter talk, *vérité* material, dramatic reconstruction and various forms of audience participation'. Such definitions prompt attempts to nail down hybridity by identifying its characteristic internal properties. On these grounds, Cavender and Bond-Maupin (1993: 305) describe reality programming as 'a new television genre'. Given the increased frequency of hybridized expression such attempts at generic identification are understandable, but they have not proved successful. The definition of reality TV has remained 'notoriously imprecise' (Kilborn and Izod, 1997: 157). Dauncey (1996: 93–5) argues that by the mid-1990s French reality shows

had become ‘increasingly resistant to a cataloguing based on programme format’. Rather than develop format typologies, he suggests a ‘thematic approach’ derived from ‘the context of general trends in French television scheduling’.<sup>5</sup> On these terms he divides reality TV into everyday dramas of courage, talk about feelings and civic action. The problem with such classification, however, is quite apparent – these thematic unities do not distinguish hybridized reality from many other sorts of television content. Maintaining the sense of transgression demands some sort of formal analysis and cannot rely solely on the identification of recurrent themes.

Genre and thematic analyses fail because both can succeed only by normalizing the hybrid. They lose sight of the categorical crossing that defines this sort of content. Rather than focus on the repetition of conventional attributes, analysis must centre on the operation of relational processes. Dauncey is thus right to insist on the need to contextualize hybridity within general scheduling trends. Rather than integrate hybridity as a new genre, I will use the above four content modes to identify recurrent forms of hybrid transgression. Drawing on both existing literature and my own empirical investigations, it is clear that a delimited range of crossings between fact, fiction, entertainment and advertisement have developed. These forms of crossing are hinges that turn the conventional modes upon each other. Four characteristic hinges can be identified.

### *Re-enactment*

Re-enactments are dramas and films ‘based upon’ people and events that exist in an external world. Typically this basis is signalled outside the content’s narrative flow, through the use of advance publicity and the opening and closing credits. The content itself is constructed with wall-to-wall fictional techniques and thus has the internal coherence of an invented world. As Nichols (1991: 21) argues, the re-enacted content simultaneously externalizes an historical world (to which it refers) and ‘has the status of an imaginary event’. Re-enactments thus compound invention with reference; they construct reality by hinging fact upon fiction.

### *Diversion*

In an entertainment mode, diversions portray people performing ‘as themselves’ in televised fora. However, these fora are external contexts that have not been specifically designed for the spectacle presented. Such programming includes ‘making of’ shows about media productions, quasi-journalistic news about celebrities, out-take compilations of ‘bloopers’ by such celebrities, and reality programming and ‘home video’ compilations that depict unusual

events in everyday domestic and occupational situations. Reference and performance are here compounded in a detour through what Langer (1998: 35) calls the 'especially remarkable'; these are stories concerned with the comings and goings of 'institutional and celebrity elites' and with the daily upsets of 'ordinary people'. Fact is hinged upon entertainment by diverting the mundane through the exceptional and vice versa.

### *Absorption*

Absorptions refer to extreme situations with reconstructions, *vérité* footage and presenters' reports either on location or in news-like studios. Such programming includes reality TV about law enforcement, medical and emergency services, shows about dangerous stunts, natural disasters and the supernatural, along with tabloid news packages of similar material. These contents combine factual reference to situations where taken-for-granted reality has radically broken down with fictional techniques that heighten dramatic impact. Unlike re-enactments, which base fiction upon externalized fact, here fact and fiction coincide. The real is constructed through absorptions that make fact and fiction disappear into each other.

### *Infomercial*

Infomercials are 'programme-length commercials' broadcast outside prime-time hours. They market products in 30-minute packages that combine multiple demonstrations with testimonials from experts and consumers, interspersed with several brief 'hard sells' that state the offer and provide purchasing details. Infomercials compound advertising with fact, presenting themselves as quasi-news programmes or investigative consumer reports that interview the commodity producer, studio audiences and the proverbial 'man in the street'.<sup>6</sup>

Re-enactments, diversions, absorptions and infomercials are various ways of compounding the four conventional modes of television content. Each makes a different sense of the world because each is a different way of crossing between fact, fiction, entertainment and advertisement. What is more, these differences have a history.

## **The historical transformation of hybridity**

The above categorical distinctions have been used to undertake a content analysis of 20th-century New Zealand television. A database has been

constructed that samples all programming in the month of October for the years 1966, 1975, 1979, 1987, 1990, 1993, 1996 and 1999.<sup>7</sup> Sampling has been restricted to nationally networked, 'free to air' broadcasters (excluding both the regional and satellite operations of the 1990s); 14,728 individual programmes (not counting advertisements) have been coded, amounting to approximately 10,800 hours of broadcast time.<sup>8</sup> Analysis focuses on the distribution of total broadcast hours. Over the last 30-odd years of the 20th century there has been a more than thirteen-fold increase in the overall amount of televisual discourse. Here, however, my interest is in changing emphases and thus the analysis focuses on proportions rather than aggregate hours.

Beginning in earnest in 1960, television was a late arrival in New Zealand by comparison with many northern hemisphere societies. However, its subsequent development has followed a pattern familiar in much of Europe, with public monopoly steadily retreating before deregulation and privatization. Given the extent to which New Zealand television has been deregulated, the case can be expected to have some general relevance. Moreover, New Zealand television has historically relied heavily on imported content, in particular from the United States and Britain.<sup>9</sup> It has thus been described as 'a house without a mirror', as a medium that fails to reflect local realities (Barnett, in Norris and Farnsworth, 1997: 71). While the lack of such mirrors may thwart nationalist aspirations, it also means that the New Zealand case provides a window onto the world of Anglophone television.

As Table 1 shows, the last decade of the 20th century saw profound changes in the configuration of televisual discourse. Fiction was clearly dominant from the 1960s to 1990, comprising more than half of total content. From 1990 on, however, fiction went into relative decline; by the end of the century it had slipped to below one-third of content and was no more than marginally ahead of its nearest rival. The decline of fiction was preceded and accompanied by significant changes in relations between the

**TABLE 1**  
Content mode by year (% of total hours)

|               | 1966      | 1975      | 1979      | 1987      | 1990       | 1993       | 1996       | 1999       |
|---------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Advertisement | 4.8       | 8.5       | 9.4       | 11.3      | 14.7       | 19.5       | 18.4       | 16.2       |
| Entertainment | 15.7      | 16.0      | 15.9      | 10.9      | 10.7       | 14.5       | 10.3       | 12.6       |
| Fact          | 22.6      | 17.9      | 14.5      | 17.8      | 14.4       | 16.2       | 21.6       | 15.8       |
| Fiction       | 52.3      | 56.5      | 57.7      | 55.9      | 57.3       | 45.4       | 36.0       | 29.3       |
| Hybrid        | 4.6       | 1.1       | 2.5       | 4.1       | 2.9        | 4.4        | 13.7       | 26.1       |
| Total         | 100       | 100       | 100       | 100       | 100        | 100        | 100        | 100        |
|               | (n = 228) | (n = 704) | (n = 655) | (n = 842) | (n = 1459) | (n = 1784) | (n = 2228) | (n = 2919) |

three other conventional modes. Until the late 1970s, fact and entertainment were the second and third most frequent respectively, with fact gradually declining to 14.5 percent and roughly level-pegging with entertainment by 1979. From this time on the relative significance of advertisements steadily increased. By the 1990s fact and advertisement were the second and third most prominent modes of televisual discourse. At the end of the century, they stood on equal footing at some 16 percent of content, while entertainment, close behind at 13 percent, had become the relatively least frequent mode.

During the 1990s, the relative standing of fiction rapidly declined and the significance of advertisements was entrenched. This reordering was accompanied by an increasingly frequent use of hybridized expression. Until the early 1990s, hybridity was a minor feature of televisual discourse; at less than 5 percent of content it remained the least common mode. From this period on, however, it began to dramatically increase in significance. By 1996 hybridity had surpassed entertainment; three years later it had overtaken fact and advertisement as well. At the end of the century, it was only narrowly the second most common mode. Amounting to approximately one-quarter of all content, hybridity was now more or less on a par with fiction. Table 1 not only confirms claims about the increase of hybridization but also situates this trend within a far-reaching reorganization of television content. Moreover, as Table 2 shows, hybridity itself was caught up in this discursive re-ordering. The 1990s transgressions were markedly different from those of previous years.

The four hybridizing hinges have received varying emphases since the 1960s. Fictional re-enactments of fact were clearly dominant until the mid-1970s, comprising over 80 percent of all hybridized content. From 1975 on, however, re-enactment began to decline, dropping to 36 percent and second ranking in 1987 and then falling sharply throughout the 1990s such that by the end of the century it was an insignificant form of hybrid expression. The decline of re-enactment was accompanied by both innovation and expansion of alternative forms. The only other hinge operating during the

**TABLE 2**  
**Hybrid hinge by year (% of total hours)**

|              | 1966     | 1975    | 1979     | 1987     | 1990     | 1993     | 1996      | 1999      |
|--------------|----------|---------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| Absorption   | 0.0      | 0.0     | 2.1      | 14.0     | 30.5     | 35.5     | 12.8      | 5.3       |
| Diversion    | 18.9     | 17.5    | 45.3     | 49.7     | 19.4     | 40.2     | 5.8       | 6.6       |
| Infomercial  | 0.0      | 0.0     | 0.0      | 0.0      | 9.4      | 7.6      | 77.8      | 87.5      |
| Re-enactment | 81.1     | 82.5    | 52.6     | 36.3     | 40.7     | 16.7     | 3.6       | 0.6       |
| Total        | 100      | 100     | 100      | 100      | 100      | 100      | 100       | 100       |
|              | (n = 10) | (n = 8) | (n = 16) | (n = 35) | (n = 42) | (n = 79) | (n = 306) | (n = 763) |

years of re-enactment's dominance was diversion, coming a distant second at less than 20 percent of hybrid content. From the late 1970s, however, these compoundings of fact with entertainment increased in significance, reaching a high point of 50 percent and first ranking in 1987.

The late 1970s also saw the development of a radically new hinging of fact upon fiction. At first a relatively minor development, absorption rose from 2 percent of hybrid content in 1979 to 14 percent in 1987. By 1993 it had reached a high point of 35 percent, in second place only slightly behind diversion. From 1993 on, however, both absorptions and diversions pegged sharply downwards, such that by the end of the century each was standing at just above 5 percent of hybrid content. Their fall was matched by the rapid rise of a new non-prime-time form that compounded fact with advertising. First appearing in 1990, between 1993 and 1996 infomercials soared from 7.6 percent to 77.8 percent of hybrid content. By 1999 they stood at some 88 percent, far outstripping their nearest rivals.

The dramatic increase of hybridized expression in the 1990s took place along with considerable changes in its internal composition. Re-enactment had already been in steady decline for more than 20 years, with diversion and absorption having risen to become the two dominant hinges. From the early 1990s, however, re-enactments began to decline even more sharply, ending the century at less than 1 percent of hybrid content. During this same period, the relative significance of absorption and diversion also fell precipitously, albeit less far. By the end of the century, infomercials ruled the field. They had emphatically displaced re-enactment as the most common way of crossing between the conventional modes of televisual discourse.

### **A world in retreat**

Although hybridity has been a persistent feature of New Zealand television, its relative standing dramatically increased in the 1990s, making it one of the most common forms of expression. Not only was there more of it, but there was also a dramatic change in its context and character. Late 20th-century hybridization was very different from that which preceded it. Each of the four hinges is a distinctive way of constructing the world and the people who live in it. The shifting relations between these hinges reveal the contours of a broader transformation that has undermined the post-war cultures of social and historical confidence.

From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, content was comprehensively dominated by fiction and hybridity was the least common mode. Moreover, hybrid contents were relatively undifferentiated, with by far the great bulk consisting of re-enactments. Typically, re-enactments are biographical reconstructions that draw on the traditions of the 'biopic', one of the oldest

cinema genres, in which a story is premised on the life of 'a real person whose real name is used' (Custen, 1992: 6). In a factual mode, re-enactments refer to a world that exists outside the content itself. In factual content, however, the televised image and this external reality are indexically linked. The image and the referent correspond, as the famous definition has it, 'point by point'. Re-enactments rupture this indexical bond (Nichols, 1991: 21). Instead of a point-by-point correspondence, fictional images are 'based' upon factual referents.

Facts are clearly the junior party in this hinging. In most re-enactments, 'all the documentary elements have been subject to a thoroughgoing creative transformation' (Kilborn and Izod, 1997: 145). Explicit references to external reality are usually assigned to the margins, as an envelope signalled in the opening and closing credits.<sup>10</sup> Facts operate as a 'base' precisely by being systematically externalized, thus allowing the content itself to be organized along familiar fictional lines. Thus it is not surprising that re-enactments were the prevailing form of hybridity when fiction was the dominant mode of television content. Although fiction provides its main organizing principles, this hinging does not corrode the independent standing of factual reference. Indeed, quite the reverse. Re-enactments externalize facts; rather than dissolve fact into fiction they arc across the two, leaving their boundaries intact. This is a hybridization that disturbs but in so doing protects the conventional distinction between invention and reference.

The other, minor hybridity operating until the mid-1970s is a similarly limited form of transgression. Diversions hinge entertainment upon fact by representing people performing 'as themselves', not on some purpose-built stage, such as a talk-show studio, but rather in their own everyday lifeworlds. Thus, in many respects, diversions are diametrically opposed to re-enactments. The indexical bond between image and external referent is preserved rather than ruptured; we see the 'real person' in their 'real world', not an actor on a set. This indexical correspondence, however, does not replicate the 'straight look' of factual sobriety. Instead, there is a theatrical excessiveness that aligns diversions with what Langer (1998: 49), in his study of tabloid television, dubs the 'especially remarkable'. There are two main variants of such stories – some focus on 'the ordinary routines of extraordinary individuals' while others deal with 'the extraordinary actions of ordinary folk'. On the one hand, there is celebrity journalism, such as *Entertainment Tonight*, that takes us 'behind the scenes' into the lives of famous people. On the other hand there is programming like *Candid Camera* and the various 'funniest home video' compilations, focusing on typically humorous and often embarrassing upsets in the daily lives of ordinary people.<sup>11</sup>

Diversions invoke news values to emphasize either the affairs of the famous or the breakdown of normal expectations in everyday life. As the

familiar interpretation has it, these values exnominate a realm of taken-for-granted routines (Fiske, 1987: 290). By obsessively highlighting what oversteps its boundaries, the news establishes an implicit and undisturbed domain of the mundane. Diversions work in the same way. According to Langer (1998: 148), these are stories about fleeting and flamboyant deviations from the everyday, deviations that underscore the 'mastery and control' of people who have the 'resources, will to succeed, and self-motivating optimism to conduct their lives'. The 'especially remarkable' signifies that people 'can be the principal instruments for making their own fate'.

Factual programming externalizes the world in order to depict it as readily at hand. As Nichols (1991: 3) argues, the discourses of sobriety 'assume they have instrumental power; they can and should alter the world'. Although the two forms of hybridization in operation until the mid-1970s compounded these discourses with fiction and entertainment, neither undermined the distinctiveness of fact. Re-enactments not only preserve the externality of fact but, as Sturken (1997: 76) suggests, they are premised on the conviction that the meaning of historical events can be retrieved and creatively transformed. Diversions project reality by detouring it through the remarkable. Although they depart from sobriety, ultimately they reinforce an instrumental sense of control. These impersonations and detours thus imply a degree of confidence about the external world's availability for effective individual action. In a context dominated by fictional invention, both re-enactment and diversion transgressively maintained the integrity of factual reference. They are conventional forms that consolidated the fact/fiction divide as the organizing axis of a televisual discourse that was marked by low levels of hybridity and a stable set of cultural discriminations.

All this, however, began to change in the late 1970s. Although the dominance of fiction continued at previous levels, the other conventional modes jockeyed for position. The most notable feature here was the continued rise of advertisements, such that by 1987 they had overtaken entertainment. Hybridity remained the least common mode, but from the late 1970s to 1990 there was considerable change in its internal composition. Re-enactments declined; although remaining in the first order, they were no longer the clearly primary form of hybridity. Their position was now challenged, not only by diversions but also by a radically new hinge. First appearing in the late 1970s, absorptions quickly rose in significance. By 1990 they amounted to nearly one-third of all hybrid expressions.

In a factual mode, absorptions use news-like reports and on location footage to refer to situations where taken-for-granted reality has profoundly broken down. These breakdowns are considerably darker than the upsets highlighted by diversions. Their themes typically concern those struck by

accident, the criminal, the diseased and the supernatural. Reference to these extremes is combined with fictional techniques that heighten dramatic impact.<sup>12</sup> Like re-enactments, then, absorptions hinge fact upon fiction. For example, they often 'reconstruct' historical events; like re-enactments, they use actors to represent 'real people'. In absorptions, however, these reconstructions are clearly and repeatedly labelled (often using a caption and voice-over) and are combined with other contents, including presenter talk, footage of police or medical emergency services, material from surveillance cameras and recordings (often by amateurs) of dangerous situations (Bondebjerg, 1996: 39; Fetveit, 1999: 792). Rather than wall-to-wall fictions 'based' on facts, here the emphasis is on a 'packaging' together of diverse ingredients (Kilborn and Izod, 1997: 159). As this suggests, absorption and re-enactment are quite different ways of hinging fact upon fiction.

Whereas re-enactments rupture the indexical bond between image and referent, in absorptions this link is made redundant by the simultaneity of its polarities. As Nichols (1994: 54) says of reality TV, absorption 'succeeds in activating a sense of the historical referent beyond its bounds but also works, constantly, to absorb this referent within a tele-scape of its own devising'. Accordingly, 'reference to the real no longer has the ring of sobriety that separates it from fiction'. Like diversions, absorptions are intoxicated by situations where everyday routines no longer apply. Diversions, however, highlight upsets that exnominate a world of effective action and thus help to sustain the distinction between fact and fiction. Absorptions, with their radical 'aesthetics of immediacy' (Nichols, 1994: 59), not only do away with this distinction but also thereby renounce the powers of exnomination.

Rather than exnominate the mundane with the remarkable, absorptions exhibit 'a spectacular oscillation' that 'makes the strange banal' (Nichols, 1994: 45–6). It is simply an inescapable truism that the world consists of 'situations and events of startling horror, intense danger, morbid conduct, desperate need, or bizarre coincidence'. Individuals live in a context dominated by 'random and inexplicable forces of chaos and darkness' (Dovey, 2000: 95). Happy endings are the result not of actions by those subject to these forces but by the deeds of others who fortuitously appear and who can offer no more than temporary respite until the next outbreak of disorder. As Langer (1998: 149) comments, such stories are guided by 'an undercurrent of fatalism'. This is not a world of instrumentally successful individuals; rather, it is a world peopled by the victims of uncontrollable forces.<sup>13</sup> In closing the gap between image and referent, absorptions corrode the sense of an external theatre of effective action. Compared with re-enactments and diversions, then, they signal a profound loss of historical confidence.

The advent of absorptions was a prelude to dramatic changes in the composition of television content in the 1990s. During this decade, advertisements approximated the levels of factual programming, entrenching their position ahead of entertainment. More profoundly, the standing of fiction collapsed while hybridity rose rapidly to become the second most common mode. These changes were accompanied by further shifts in the forms of hybridization. Re-enactment declined to the point of virtually disappearing altogether. From 1993 on, diversion and absorption tracked downwards, their place emphatically taken by a new hinge. First appearing in the early 1990s, infomercials soared in significance to comprise nearly nine-tenths of all hybrid broadcasts by the end of the century.

Infomercials appear outside prime-time hours. Typically, they market a seemingly endless array of 'self-improvement' products – fitness equipment, personal growth tapes, cosmetics, dietary and cooking aids, and so on. As Caldwell (1995: 292) argues, with their lengthy form and stylistic techniques they 'evaporate completely the distinction between program and advertisement'. Although infomercials are like 'spot' advertisements in that both are commodifying discourses, the two are significantly different. Unlike advertisements, infomercials are emphatically 'about' the product for sale. Their longer time frame allows for less symbolic compression and a protracted reiteration of the commodity's material properties. As these references deploy the instrumental power of facts, it is not surprising that infomercials have often been charged with 'counterfeiting the news' (Chester and Montgomery, 1988).

Whereas advertisements conjure up the real with images of desire and pleasure, an infomercial compounds such magic with painstaking insistence that use of the commodity will directly realize these desires in the world. Reference becomes not so much a source of sobering facts as an obsessive incantation. Facts, then, are very much the junior party. References to an external world are not only linked with but also subordinated to advertising.<sup>14</sup> The grounds for this subordination had already been established by the absorptions of the 1980s. By displacing the fact/fiction divide, absorptions corroded the sense of a transformable world. The 1990s intensified this displacement, most notably through a sharp reduction in the levels of fiction.<sup>15</sup> The declining significance of differences between reference and invention opened up space for a new hinging of fact upon advertisement. Infomercials are thus in many respects an elaboration upon earlier cultural developments. Like absorptions, they do not project an external reality that can and should be changed. Instead, infomercials propose various 'self-improvements' that fit people into a reality that currently exists and in terms of which they are somehow or other deficient. Fatalistic about the world, infomercials deflect instrumentality inwards. Rather than manifestos of historical confidence, they are self-help manuals for the victimized.

## Conclusion

The blurring of once-demarcated content modes is an outstanding feature of contemporary New Zealand television. As also seems to be the case elsewhere in the world, by the end of the 1990s hybrid transgression was routine. Many analysts have sought to understand this turn by focusing narrowly on developments in certain types of programming. The documentary tradition and the advent of reality TV in particular have received much attention. A portmanteau term encompassing diverse types of programming, reality TV has proved difficult to define. Moreover, generalizing on the basis of a category that is both narrow and indefinite has resulted in analyses that underplay the complexity of televisual hybridization. Paradoxically, many interpreters pose hybridity as if it were an undifferentiated category. Given that the hybrid mixes what is customarily distinguished, this charge no doubt seems misplaced. However, hybridity is often treated not just as a complex of conventional modes but also as simple in its complexity. There is a lack of attention to systematic variations that organize the field of transgression.

I have used the definition of conventional contents to identify a range of hybrid hinges. My investigation of this typology has shown that in the 1990s hybridity was both more frequent and quite unlike that of previous years. Until the mid-1970s, content was dominated by fiction and hybridity was both rare and relatively undifferentiated. Most hybridizations were re-enactments, 'true stories' that based fiction upon fact, while the rest were diversions that turned fact upon entertainment by detouring the mundane through the remarkable. These two hinges hybridize the factual in ways that preserve its distinctiveness. Both the relative infrequency and characteristic forms of hybridity underpinned a culture in which facts, fictions, entertainments and advertisements were separate discursive events. Stabilized by the divide between reference and invention, television content conveyed a sense of normality that robustly consigned reality to a limited array of types.

The rise of hybridity in the 1990s was preceded by a profound reordering of these discursive priorities. Although fiction remained dominant and hybridizations were still the least common form of expression, from the late 1970s there were shifts in both the relative standing of the minor content modes and in the character of hybridity itself. Signalling increased commercialization, advertisement levels surpassed entertainment and rose to near equal footing with fact. Moreover, by 1990 re-enactment had declined to the extent that it no longer unequivocally ruled the field and a new hinge, absorption, had surpassed diversion as the second most common form. Unlike the pre-existing hinges, absorptions radically undermined the projection of an external reality distinct from imaginary inventions. During the 1990s this undermining was comprehensively

generalized to televisual discourse as a whole. The erosion of the fact/fiction boundary set the stage for two subsequent developments – the collapse of fiction, both as content mode and as re-enactment hinge, and the ascendance of a new compounding of fact with advertisement, the infomercial. Surprisingly, both these developments have been largely ignored in discussions of contemporary hybridization.

Most interpreters focus on the collapse of the fact/fiction divide, arguing that there has been an erosion of the real as an objective context of human interaction. Some celebrate a populist disrespect for the status quo, others fear an Americanizing ‘infotainment’ that undermines the already vulnerable traditions of public service broadcasting (Branston, 1993; Brants, 1998). By transgressing the boundaries of once-familiar positivities, hybridity opens up opportunities that can be turned to diverse ends. It is a mistake, for example, to reduce the hybrid to an identification of fact and fiction; such identification is a characteristic of late 20th-century forms in particular. Moreover, both sides of this equation must be considered. Anchored in the documentary tradition, interpreters have been preoccupied with consequences for our sense of the factual. According to Nichols (1994: 54), in reality TV ‘reference now *is* a fiction’. Similarly, White (1996: 19) emphasizes how ‘the referential function of the images is etiolated’. Establishing the world through reference is certainly a crucial cultural moment; all the hybrid hinges I identify involve some sort of crossing with facts. However, a single-minded concern with the factual has downplayed the consequences for fiction. It seems to have been forgotten that the arrow runs both ways, that fiction is now reference, that the inventive function of images has been etiolated. The capacity to direct attention inwards and focus it upon an invented world has been reduced. Clearly, any interpretation of contemporary hybridity must attend to this cannibalizing of the imaginary.

The 1990s were marked not only by identifications of reference and invention but also by a new hinging that compounded fact with the magical substitutions of advertising. Despite their obvious significance for any account of hybridity, very little work has been done on infomercials. Infomercials appear overwhelmingly in the early morning hours, television’s ‘down time’. On the other hand, most systematic interpretations of hybridity have focused upon the emergence of prime-time reality TV. Clearly, there is a logic in attending to prime-time developments, not least because this is when audience levels are highest, but we should be wary of taking such a focus for granted. A number of writers have rightly argued that the recent rise of hybridized forms takes place in a context of increased commercialism (Bondebjerg, 1996; Dauncey, 1996; Dovey, 2000; Kilborn, 1994). It is certainly true that prime time is a matter of commercial definition. Paradoxically, however, concentrating on these

hours has deflected attention away from those very contents in which the impact of commerce is most strikingly evident.

Infomercials inherited the cultural terrain of the 1980s, when advertising rose to the level of facts and absorptions identified imagination with reference. By undermining the status of fiction, absorption freed up reference for recombination with the wishful thinking of advertisements. Like absorptions, infomercials do not open out upon a world that can be known and creatively transformed. Unable to change the world, its victims can aspire only to 'self-improvement'. Commercialization in the 1990s thus reconfigured not just the conventional contents of television but their various hybridizations as well. Here too the business of broadcasting has circumscribed instrumentality and impoverished the imagination.

## Notes

1. According to Gunning (1999: 47, 52), the main product of late 19th-century cinema was 'actuality films', often made by amateurs using concealed cameras. Films and photographs displayed 'a new fascination with daily life and a nearly prurient interest in uncovering scandalous or otherwise deviant material', especially in 'the burgeoning urban slum jungle' of the lower classes.

2. Comedic fictions are sustained, scripted and acted dramatizations, such as situation comedies.

3. Comedic entertainments are magazine-style compilations of 'skits' and studio or club performances by comedians appearing as themselves.

4. On the interpretation of advertisements as magic, see Leiss et al. (1990: 23–6). See also their discussion of fetishism and the 'transformational function' of modern advertising (1990: 63, 319–27).

5. Fishman and Cavender's (1998) investigation of 'crime TV' is an example of such thematic analysis.

6. See Parsons and Rotfeld (1990). Mackay (1997) notes that infomercials are sometimes presented as full-length dramas ('storymercials'), though this is rare.

7. The selection of sample years is determined by the institutional history of New Zealand television, ranging from the state monopoly of the 1960s to the late 1980s advent of deregulated and commercialized competition between 'state-owned enterprises' and private multinationals. See Day (2000) for an overview of these developments.

8. The primary source for programme details is the scheduling published by the New Zealand *Listener*, supplemented by Brooks and Marsh (1999) and a variety of online sources, notably the Internet Movie Database (<http://www.imdb.com>). As less than 1 percent of programmes could not be detailed, the category 'unknown' has been deleted from the analysis. Levels of advertising are derived from the regulatory limits that operated prior to the late 1980s and from various surveys undertaken in the subsequent years of deregulation. The main sources of advertising information are Day (2000), Suich (1997) and Yeabsley et al. (1994).

9. Of the sampled 9150 programme hours (i.e. excluding advertising), some 48 percent is US-sourced, 28 percent is locally produced and 16 percent is imported from Britain.

10. Re-enactments tend towards what Corner (1996: 34) calls the ‘documentary-drama’ rather than the ‘dramatised documentary’. As Rosenthal (1995: 17) argues, most docu-dramas are not so much ‘reconstructive investigations’ as mixes of ‘biography and entertainment’ that show ‘a rather loose regard for the truth’.

11. Diversions thus draw on thematic structures that are common in re-enactments. According to Custen (1992: 215), since the 1970s televisual biopics have ‘valorized the ordinary’ either by depicting the ‘elite famous’ in tabloid fashion or by focusing on ‘the lives of everyday people to whom unusual things happened’.

12. On the appeal to styles drawn from melodrama, horror, action movies and police dramas, see Bondebjerg (1996: 37), Dovey (2000: 78–81) and Kilborn (1994: 432).

13. Absorptions radically generalize pre-existing themes rather than invent them anew. Representations of ordinary people as victims, for example, are also common in biopic re-enactments (see Custen, 1992: 223–8).

14. Tom (1995/6) reports that (relative to total duration) infomercials contain less information than conventional ‘spot’ advertisements.

15. Whether this decline has occurred elsewhere in the world is unknown. Dauncey (1996: 94) suggests that in France the levels of both fiction and reality TV rose during the 1990s.

## References

- Bondebjerg, I. (1996) ‘Public Discourse/Private Fascination: Hybridization in “True-life Story” Genres’, *Media, Culture & Society* 18: 27–45.
- Branigan, E. (1992) *Narrative Comprehension and Film*. London: Routledge.
- Branston, G. (1993) ‘Infotainment: A Twilight Zone’, *Innovation* 6(3): 351–8.
- Brants, K. (1998) ‘Who’s Afraid of Infotainment?’, *European Journal of Communication* 13(3): 315–35.
- Brooks, T. and E. Marsh (1999) *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows, 1946–Present*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Caldwell, J. (1995) *Televisuality*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Cavender, G. and L. Bond-Maupin (1993) ‘Fear and Loathing on Reality Television: An Analysis of “America’s Most Wanted” and “Unsolved Mysteries”’, *Sociological Inquiry* 63(3): 305–17.
- Chester, J. and K. Montgomery (1988) ‘TV’s Hidden Money Games: Counterfeiting the News’, *Columbia Journalism Review* 27: 38–41.
- Corner, J. (1996) *The Art of Record*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Custen, G. (1992) *Bio-pics*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Dauncey, H. (1996) ‘French “Reality Television”: More than a Matter of Taste?’, *European Journal of Communication* 11(1): 83–106.
- Day, P. (2000) *Voice and Vision*. Auckland: Auckland University Press.
- Dovey, J. (2000) *Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television*. London: Pluto.
- Fetveit, A. (1999) ‘Reality TV in the Digital Era: A Paradox in Visual Culture?’, *Media, Culture & Society* 21: 787–804.
- Fishman, M. and G. Cavender (eds) (1998) *Entertaining Crime*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Fiske, J. (1987) *Television Culture*. New York: Routledge.

- Gunning, T. (1999) 'Embarrassing Evidence: The Detective Camera and the Documentary Impulse', pp. 46–64 in J. Gaines and M. Renov (eds), *Collecting Visible Evidence*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kilborn, R. (1994) "'How Real Can You Get?': Recent Developments in 'Reality' Television", *European Journal of Communication* 9(4): 421–39.
- Kilborn, R. and J. Izod (1997) *An Introduction to Television Documentary*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Langer, J. (1998) *Tabloid Television*. London: Routledge.
- Leiss, W., S. Kline and S. Jhally (1990) *Social Communication in Advertising*. New York: Routledge.
- Mackay, J. (1997) 'Selling in the TV Down-time', *Marketing Magazine* 16(2): 35–7.
- Nichols, B. (1991) *Representing Reality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Nichols, B. (1994) *Blurred Boundaries*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Norris, P. and J. Farnsworth (eds) (1997) *Keeping it Ours: Issues of Television Broadcasting in New Zealand*. Christchurch: Christchurch Polytechnic.
- Parsons, P. and H. Rotfeld (1990) 'Infomercials and Television Station Clearance Practices', *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* 9(2): 62–72.
- Rosenthal, A. (1995) *Writing Docudrama*. Boston, MA: Focal Press.
- Sturken, M. (1997) 'Reenactment, Fantasy, and the Paranoia of History: Oliver Stone's Docudramas', *History and Theory* 36(4): 64–79.
- Suich, M. (1997) *Benchmarking Public Broadcasters: How TVNZ compares with other State-owned Broadcasters in Australia, Britain and Canada*. Report commissioned by Television New Zealand, no publisher.
- Tom, G. (1995/6) 'The Information Content of Infomercials', *Review of Business* 17(2): 42–5.
- White, H. (1996) 'The Modernist Event', pp. 17–38 in V. Sobchak (ed.) *The Persistence of History*. New York: Routledge.
- Williams, R. (1980) *Problems in Materialism and Culture*. London: Verso.
- Yeabsley, J., I. Duncan and D. James (1994) *Broadcasting in New Zealand: Waves of Change*. Wellington: New Zealand Institute of Economic Research.

**Brennon Wood** is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Massey University, New Zealand. He has published in the areas of cultural and media studies. His current research focuses on the institutional and discursive reorganization of broadcasting.

**Address:** School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North, New Zealand. [email: B.A.Wood@massey.ac.nz]