

Branding documentary: New Zealand's minimalist solution to cultural subsidy

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Background

This article looks at the impact of industry changes on social documentary production in New Zealand, and draws on a series of interviews with producers, broadcasters and representatives of funding agencies about the funding process, exploring the interplay of tensions that influenced what documentaries got made under the New Zealand system. Documentary outcomes for 1998 are discussed from the perspective of both broadcaster and film-maker, with contemporary developments set within the historical context of the social documentary. At stake in this discussion is the relationship between social agency and cultural subsidy in the global era.

In 1984 the New Zealand electorate ejected the National Party government of conservative protectionist, Robert Muldoon, in favour of Labour under the leadership of the charismatic David Lange. Elected on a platform of social reform the new cabinet, apparently swayed by the arguments of the Treasury and the extent of national indebtedness, embarked instead on a programme of deregulation, privatization and radical public sector reform.

By the late 1980s three events had transformed the nation's broadcasting system. Television New Zealand (TVNZ), the state-owned monopoly broadcaster which had hitherto operated in a quasi-public service mode, funded by a mix of licence fee and advertising revenue, was made a state-owned enterprise (SOE) and directed to return a dividend to government. Second, the country's first commercially-owned television service, TV3, was launched, sparking intense competition for audience share in New Zealand's limited marketplace. Third, there was the Broadcasting Act of

1989 which, among other changes, instituted a unique solution to that area of market failure – local content – which had been particularly problematic for this small, English-speaking nation. The solution was the Broadcasting Commission, which was later renamed New Zealand On Air (NZOA). Among other duties the commission was to administer a minimalist system of public subsidy for specific genres of local content under a competitive grants scheme. The finance for this scheme came from the television licence fee which had in the past been directed to TVNZ, the state broadcaster, for expenditure on in-house production. Under the new system these funds were contestable by both the privately-owned TV3 and the state-owned TVNZ.

The deregulation of broadcasting and the reorganization of Television New Zealand as a state-owned enterprise removed documentary production as an in-house public service activity. Under the new arrangement, NZOA was directed to ‘reflect and develop New Zealand identity and culture’, to promote Maori language and culture, and to cater for certain other minority interest audiences (Broadcasting Act 1989, section 36). Criteria for programme funding also included potential audience size with drama and documentary noted as programme categories for support. NZOA subsequently interpreted its role as ensuring the provision of programmes reflecting New Zealand identity in prime time. This decision complicated relations with broadcasters who had editorial control, and whose written agreement to broadcast was a condition of NZOA funding. In order to secure funding, applicants had to meet both the national/cultural requirements of NZOA and the presale, prime-time requirements of a commercial broadcaster, either TVNZ or its foreign-owned competitor, TV3. While this raised the profile of New Zealand content on television, the policy proved controversial, with minority interest, non-commercial projects failing to meet the broadcasters’ requirements for prime time. The latter were deemed better served through special interest programmes in ghetto time-slots.

The new funding system was widely hailed as a democratizing move, freeing documentary from the bureaucratic constraints of public service broadcasting and what had come to be seen by many outsiders as an ‘elitist old boys’ network of in-house documentarists’. It was particularly welcomed by the independent sector.

A decade later, NZOA boasts of putting an unprecedented 60 documentaries a year on to New Zealand screens. Negotiating two strands of local documentary in prime time on both TV One and TV3, traditionally the territory of high-rating quiz shows and sitcoms is deemed NZOA’s greatest success. Documentary proved the most cost-effective means of delivering local content, drama being not only more expensive in terms of cost per hour, but also carrying far higher risk in terms of ratings. The diversity of origin and content inherent to a series of independently produced documentaries offsets the risk of failure. Pragmatism permeated the system with

documentary, the cheapest genre of screen culture eligible for subsidy, providing a bottom line for local content, a term which conflated national culture and local industry, promoting the national in opposition to imported cultural products.

The new funding system brought significant changes to television documentary. The 'public knowledge project', which the public service broadcaster had previously serviced via documentary, was all but overlooked in the role prescribed for the Broadcasting Commission, with the phrase 'to inform, educate and entertain' omitted from the Act. Other contributing factors in the decline of documentary as 'public knowledge project' were the exclusion of political issues, which were deemed the preserve of current affairs, and the exclusion of more costly documentary forms – the historical and the investigative, and those covering a longer time-frame.

On the other hand, while the Broadcasting Commission was specifically directed to serve that other aspect of the public service remit, 'to reflect and develop New Zealand identity and culture', its interpretation of the Act and its subsequent relationship with broadcasters meant documentary as 'national culture project' was also curtailed. Making prime time the key criterion for funding, the Commission imposed considerable constraints on what could be achieved under the wholly commercial system, virtually precluding the more demanding sub-genres – the essay form, experimental documentary and 'high-culture' subjects. By prescribing a minimal budget for documentary in order to maximize quantity, the Commission excluded longer-form documentary, along with subjects requiring a longer time-frame, thereby imposing more creative constraints on documentarists. By changing its name to NZOA and embarking on its own programme of self-promotion, building brand awareness, the funding agency showed broadcasters the value of 'local content' in winning public approval. To more fully understand the impact of these changes it is necessary to know a little of the system that was replaced.

Television documentary in New Zealand

Television broadcasting was established in New Zealand in 1960 under the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation (NZBC) and initially modelled on the BBC. Its pragmatic hybrid funding structure of commercial and non-commercial days was uniquely New Zealand, and limited funding from the licence fee meant local content was rarely more than 20 percent of the weekly schedule.

A monopoly broadcaster, the NZBC began producing documentaries on a regular basis in the 1970s and screened its first documentary series in 1974. This included the work of independent film-makers, most notable of

which was the ground breaking *Tangata Whenua* series, which attempted to explain Maori culture to non-Maori viewers, breaking with past official discourses of romanticism, cultural decay and 'otherness' to present a Maori viewpoint (Blythe, 1994: 16–18). By the 1980s documentaries were a well-established part of the television schedule, but were now produced primarily within the state broadcaster's in-house documentary units.

During the 1980s, the NZBC had a problematic relationship with the independent sector which had grown up around the government film-making institution, the National Film Unit (NFU), and the television advertising industry. Independent producers hankered for greater access to television production funding and to the airwaves. Recurrent restructuring of television from 1970 onwards periodically raised and dashed their hopes. This sector expanded, in response to government initiatives aimed at developing a local film industry. When changes to the broadcasting system were mooted in the late 1980s, the independents lobbied tenaciously for access to the licence fee monies and to prime-time television, and thus, indirectly, for closure of in-house television production which had been subsidized by the licence fee. It was a cause that meshed neatly with the government's market-liberal agenda for deregulation. Their victory led to the disbandment of the documentary units which they cast as elitist, hidebound and out of touch with the times.

The resultant union, of market liberalism with the social democratic discourse of access, has parallels with the broadcaster-publisher model of Britain's Channel Four. Sylvia Harvey (1994) recounts how that attempt to maximize diversity through access faltered in the competitive enterprise culture of 1990s Britain, when the plethora of small companies which had served it found themselves struggling to survive. There, what had initially promised to be a more democratic system became less so as the effects of market-driven policies drove programme budgets down. While the main advantage was a reduction in programme costs, this didn't necessarily improve the viewing experience. Independent producer, John McGrath, claims the Channel Four process of contestable independent commissioning promoted slot culture, with programme ideas tailored to fit documentary strands (quoted in Keighron and Walker, 1994: 211). Harvey concludes that pluralism is unlikely to be well served by a such a system (1994: 125–6). In the New Zealand context this is a prescient finding for, lacking the differentiated markets of more populous nations, market competition proved particularly punishing.

A documentary industry

The unlikely popularity of local documentary in New Zealand's highly competitive commercial television scene is the product of cooperation

between the funding agency NZOA, the two broadcasters, and ex-documentary maker turned commissioning editor and executive producer, Geoff Steven, who has worked for both broadcasters. Steven's contribution is the creative origination of the two strands *Inside New Zealand* on TV3 and *Documentary New Zealand* on TVNZ, both dedicated to local documentary. By applying the national brand to these time-slots and monitoring the subjects and styles of the documentaries made to fill them, Steven successfully delivered consistently good audience ratings to advertisers and consolidated local documentary within prime time in the weekly schedule. In 1998, NZOA was contributing two-thirds of the budget with the proviso that the proposal meet its cultural requirements and that a broadcaster agreed to put it to air. The broadcaster provided the final third of the budget, sometimes as facilities rather than cash.

One might imagine the increased quantity of documentaries made in New Zealand would gladden the hearts of documentarists, however many are surprisingly critical of the arrangement. The following comment encapsulates the general disenchantment, 'The individuality is gone from the approach to making documentaries . . . you do things by rote because you know that this is the way that guy and that channel wants it' (Hunter, 1998). In effect, the two prime-time documentary strands reflect a very limited diversity.

The branding of local content on New Zealand television was first noted by Avril Bell in two articles published in 1993 and 1995. Bell queried why the New Zealand government, so bent on neoliberal reform, supported cultural subsidy, and why commercial broadcasters acquiesced in a system which, given the cost differential of local and imported productions, incurred avoidable financial loss. Bell found the system a political strategy for the government since, in helping to sustain national identity, it serves to legitimate the state in the face of encroachment from globalization, while also providing a means of manipulating public opinion and action. For broadcasters, she found this loss maker was primarily a public relations strategy, aimed at winning hearts and minds, and warding off potentially more punitive measures of government interference (Bell, 1993: 40). Discussing the symbolic value of New Zealand as signifier, Bell compares its use in export marketing drives, promoting goods as the product of clean green New Zealand, noting how attempts by overseas companies to patent the New Zealand brand led to the establishment of NZ Way Limited to protect and oversee its application. The 'Buy New Zealand made' campaign piggybacked on the publicity and patriotism sparked by this export drive and subsequently also served to win prime-time audiences for local programming on television. The brand reminds viewers as both consumers and the public of the special status of the programme, constructing them as New Zealanders (Bell, 1993: 36). Bell's concluding point is that the national is increasingly used as a brand to sell the local in both domestic

and global markets, with the nation on television 'equated more and more with consumerism and less with citizenship . . .' (Bell, 1995: 197).

National branding constitutes a stage in the commodification of documentary, and the corporate take-over of public space. A unique aspect of this development in New Zealand is that the corporate take-over is a collaborative venture, a Faustian contract, between two commercial broadcasters, one state-owned, and the state funding agency NZOA. Naomi Klein, in her account of the rise of branding and its displacement of production as the pre-eminent purpose of the corporate world, describes brand identity as 'corporate consciousness' (Klein, 2000: 6–7). Discussing recent developments in corporate sponsorship she observes, 'the effect if not always the original intent of advanced branding is to nudge the hosting culture into the background and make the brand the star. It is not to sponsor culture but to be the culture' (Klein, 2000: 30). A fusion of corporate expectations from both broadcasters and NZOA, the New Zealand-branded documentary strands curtail the role of documentary as a site for contestable notions of national identity and culture, asserting a persuasive, promotional or celebratory mode, primarily servicing the survival requirements of the sponsoring bodies.

The New Zealand documentary strands

Inside New Zealand was the first strand, devised by Steven when he was commissioning editor for TV3. The newly launched TV3 was trounced in the ratings war that began in 1989, and slid into bankruptcy within 157 days, but was subsequently revived when Canadian broadcaster CanWest Global took control, initially purchasing a stake of 20 percent but which later increased to 100 percent when broadcasting legislation was changed to allow it (CanWest Global, 1998: 3). The struggling network, originally conceived as a community broadcaster, went downmarket and targeted a younger demographic to attract advertisers. Thus tabloid values and youth appeal were to the fore in the conception of the documentary strand *Inside New Zealand*. In its early years, a documentary on dominatrices, which followed lurid media coverage of a scandal surrounding a sex-related death, drew record numbers of viewers, proving documentary didn't have to be dull. When Steven moved to a similar position at TVNZ he created a lookalike strand *Documentary New Zealand*. Although the two networks initially programmed these strands head to head on Tuesday night, NZOA challenged this and negotiated a scheduling change on TV One. It was one of the few times that NZOA got the better of the broadcasters. However, the victory also lends support to Bell's theory that these strands are primarily public relations exercises for the broadcasters.

The strands rate well in prime time and Steven, understandably proud of his achievement, claims he has created a 'documentary industry' whereby film-makers are able to support themselves solely by making documentaries. The strands provide a practical solution to the problem of how to schedule and promote independently produced documentaries originating from different sources, finding a balance between diversity and predictability, and thus help in winning an audience for documentary.

Repetition and visibility, key attributes of branding, are evident in the ways in which the broadcasters use the national brand in the titles of these two strands to identify their stations as patrons of 'endangered local content' and diverse social concerns. The two documentary strands are widely promoted on television and in other media with the series title getting equal coverage alongside the film-maker's title, promoting the network as a benefactor of local content. Each programme begins with the series opening titles followed by an introduction from the front person, a well-known station identity in each case, keyed against a freeze frame of the series titles. At each return from a commercial break, the series title/station logo is featured and the programme ends with an outro from the front person and brief reference to the topic of next week's documentary, finishing with the animated NZOA logo.

The New Zealand-branded documentary strands enable the broadcasters to position themselves as representing the nation, rather than being merely profit-driven; something which was particularly important for TV3 as a foreign-operated broadcaster. The association also helps to veil the extent to which state broadcasting in New Zealand has been abandoned to commercialism. It is, however, primarily NZOA that has taken the lead in branding documentary.

Saving local content

In its administration of monies for the subsidy of national culture and identity, NZOA allowed local production to be subsumed within a culture industry model whereby indigenous television culture was redefined in minimalist terms as local content. The interests of industry took precedence over those of the public, as producers applied themselves to the battle for survival. Negotiating this shift with commercial broadcasters, NZOA assumed the style and practice of the business sector, strategizing for its own survival in the deregulated environment. By opting for quantity rather than quality the public funding agency established a straightforward benchmark for performance. By opting for a prime-time presence for local documentary it positioned itself prominently in the public eye as the guardian of local content. Branding is a conscious strategy acknowledged

by NZOA employees and commissioners, deemed as a way of giving the public 'a feeling of good value for money' (Crane, quoted in Bell, 1993: 35). Global advertising firm Saatchi and Saatchi was employed to devise the marketing campaign, 'Putting New Zealand on Air' – a message that was incorporated into the NZOA logo, which frequently played on television as an advertisement as well as at the end of NZOA-funded productions. These strategies betokened a siege mentality. The Lange government's reform programme for the public sector drew on theories of institutional economics: public choice theory, managerialism, agency theory, and transaction-cost analysis which were all based on the assumption of individual self-interestedness, encouraging service to individuals as consumers rather than to a public of citizens. Managerialism, which emphasizes management and management skills over policy and professional skills, placed faith in quantifiable performance targets (Boston, 1989, 1991: 2).

Local content was a far easier idea to sell than public service goals – serving minority interests and reflecting national identity and culture. Emphasis on local content invoked national pride in the audience and served the interests of broadcasters and the independent sector. It was a win-win scenario for troubled times. Self-promotion was a necessary defence against free-market ideologues who opposed cultural subsidy of any form, but it sometimes appeared to displace the organization's legislated purpose.

While its television advertising campaign served as public education to facilitate the collection of the licence fee, a market research campaign instigated in 1999 to find out 'what the public thought it should be doing' suggested an identity crisis. The organization was intended to bring transparency to the way in which the broadcasting fee was spent by separating the funding, producing and broadcasting roles. A market research campaign to find out what the public wanted seemed a misappropriation of scarce funds and a poor substitute for public debate on the subject. It also signalled continued preference for reductivist, quantifiable business strategies over the vagaries of concepts such as public interest or public service, seeking to acknowledge viewer's individual desires as consumers rather than their social needs as citizens. In its 2001 report, NZOA announced a new initiative to encourage the sale of NZOA-funded documentaries overseas, noting they were among the most efficiently produced in the world. Citing cost-effectiveness as a primary achievement again suggests a naive managerialist mindset, undervaluing the place of social agency and creative merit as key distinguishing traits of successful social documentary (NZOA, 2001). Under the new system documentary as 'national culture project' was reinvented as a fusion of tabloid values, youth appeal and nationalism.

Branded documentary

Constraints

Having opted for quantity rather than quality NZOA inadvertently confined NZ documentary makers within a narrow range of documentary possibilities, excluding certain forms and encouraging a cheap and cheerful formulaic approach. The NZ \$130,000 budget was usually broken down into two weeks' pre-production, a three-week shoot and three-week edit.

A number of constraints resulted from the low-risk strategy applied by commercial broadcasters, whereby the known was always given preference over the unknown. Thus topics, treatments and forms that have been identified as low-risk, due to proven success elsewhere, were preferred. In New Zealand the risk-hedging approach spawned two clearly discernible trends: the overseas clone and the celebrity presenter. Several producers also noted it was common knowledge that broadcasters regarded Maori faces as an audience turn-off, an awareness that served as a disincentive to explore Maori subjects.

Preference for low-risk topics constrained political documentary. Despite restructuring and the disestablishment of the institutional in-house documentary unit, the old division between current affairs as 'The Political', and documentary as 'The Social', a division which originated in the BBC during the Second World War, is still retained in Television New Zealand (Scannell, 1979: 97). This bureaucratic ruling is now applied to the work of independents just as it was in the past to the work of in-house production units. Although the network broadcasts imported documentaries which feature interviews with politicians, the justification for excluding such interviews from local documentaries posits currency and production time-frame as the quintessence of the political. Thus such content became the preserve of in-house current affairs, with the ruling effectively quashing the production of political or issue-based documentaries. Elsewhere, an emphasis on process and style, rather than content, in distinguishing between these two factual genres recognizes that documentary can bring a different perspective to political issues. TVNZ is also unusual in insisting on balanced representation of opposing viewpoints within documentary, instead of addressing the issue of balance across its schedule, a requirement that is a further obstacle for political documentary (Steven, 1998; Wrightson, 1998).

Similarly, the preference for low-risk forms excludes essay or authorial documentaries, although a special strand for the latter was recently established in a late-night time-slot: an initiative which, if precedents are anything to go by, will have to prove its worth in ratings if it is to survive.¹

The minimalist budget, which virtually excludes any funding for research, brings many limitations. Most of the documentaries that play in

these two strands, *Inside New Zealand* on TV3 and *Documentary New Zealand* on TVNZ's TV One, conform to Winston's definition of television's 'vérité' documentary form – an expedient mix of interviews, reconstructions and observational footage (Winston, 1995: 210–11). This 'vérité' form serves the editorial constraints imposed on documentaries in these highly promoted strands, enabling relatively tight scripting prior to production in addition to accommodating the limitations of the low-budget production schedule. In this routine approach to film-making, little is left to chance and, as a consequence, many of the insights into the complexities of character, and the conflicts and relationships that emerge when shooting over a longer time-frame, rarely make an appearance, to the regret of those film-makers who worked under the old public service system where the constraints of time were not so restrictive. It is this issue of time spent in shooting – allowing for revealing moments to unfold on camera – and in editing – for the crafting of these into a story form – that many documentary makers regarded as essential to the art of narrative, observational documentary making. Several producers interviewed lamented the expedient techniques and magazine style that a three-week shooting schedule and three-week edit obliged them to adopt.

It is a point reinforced by 12 documentary editors in a letter to the New Zealand film industry magazine, *Onfilm*, in November 1999. They compare the time routinely allocated for editing a 50-minute documentary in Britain and Australia – six to ten weeks – with the three weeks allocated in New Zealand. They claim this results in aesthetic editorializing by broadcasters and ultimately in homogeneity in style (*Onfilm*, Nov. 1999: 12).

The low budget allocated for programmes within the New Zealand documentary strands is generally deemed insufficient for investigative documentaries which require a longer time-frame for research and shooting, and for documentaries observing the development of a story through time. Similarly, the research and archival costs entailed in producing historical documentaries militates against this sub-genre.

The low budget also impacts negatively on the film-maker–subject relationship. One producer who had worked within both systems spoke regretfully of the demise of ethical considerations in the pressured competitive grant application process, observing that the aftercare of social actors had been accredited higher status in the public service production unit, as a natural consequence of being in a position of public trusteeship. Consultation between researcher and social actors had once been accorded some latitude in the interests of the mental health of the latter, who would have to deal with the long-term effects of public exposure. Past in-house units functioned within a public service ethos which legitimized producers and directors, often facilitating access. In contrast, the new system operates within a neoliberal ethos which assumes that individuals invariably pursue their own self-interest, apparently obviating the need for any ethical

concerns. Independent producers now find themselves left with this responsibility but without financial recompense, peer support or feedback networks to assist them. The new professional attitude in New Zealand is that documentary is an industry, like any other, in marked contrast to the old professionalism of the in-house unit with its public service protocols.

Another major constraint is the need to structure the documentary around commercial breaks, a process that influences timing and the way in which the story is constructed, and which militates against overseas sales and festival exhibition.

Preferences

There is much evidence that the strands have worked against diversity, although the increase in quantity makes this a contentious point. In 1998 there were 10 documentaries fronted by well-known personalities. Seven of these were comedians who fronted what threatened to become a new sub-genre, comedians driving around the country chatting to the camera and local characters, a hybrid 'road-movie/buddy-movie/stand-up comedy' routine. Narration was replaced with repartee, the presenter as authority or witness replaced with the presenter as entertainer, and subject matter subsequently trivialized. Presenter-led documentaries provided another way in which stations reasserted their presence within the series, exploiting the public relations potential of local content and the national brand with popular television personalities being 'hot-housed', their loyalty to the station secured by retainer. One producer, expressing his irritation with this trend, commented that celebrity presenters were usually an unnecessary cost, placing further budgetary constraints on a project.

Popularization of documentary as local content meant that difference, particularly racial difference, tended to be represented in such a way as to dilute or diminish it. For example, when NZOA imposed a minimum Maori content requirement in the two documentary strands it funded, Maori and Pacific Islanders were most often represented within programmes featuring sports heroes, achievers offered as role models for at-risk youth, or as criminals sharing regrets in order to reinforce socially approved behaviour. This low-risk response to the representation of 'other' played to stereotype and endorsed mainstream values. It is a poor substitute for what documentary had achieved in the acclaimed 1970s series *Tangata Whenua*, in which Maori participated on their own terms and in which racial difference was represented as being of interest and of value in its own right.²

Another low-risk, cheap sub-genre favoured by broadcasters, 'reality' documentary, selected participants to be filmed in constructed situations, supposedly to reveal something new about human behaviour. A case in point was *Dying for a Smoke*, a documentary on adolescent smoking. The

documentary covered the interaction and behaviour of five young people shut up in a house after answering a radio advertisement for volunteers to stop smoking for 48 hours. At one point, presumably when little was happening, packets of cigarettes were sticky-taped to the windows of the house where the participants were staying, presumably by one of the crew. The formula is now a familiar one thanks to *Big Brother*. The constructed situation gives crew privileged access and the right to provoke the participants – frequently to break their resolve – and thereby create conflict for the story.

The ‘inside view’ is another sub-genre that fits the ‘*vérité*’ recipe, conforming to an easy chronological structure, expedient production schedule and low budget while offering multitudinous possibilities in terms of setting: in 1998 these included a supermarket, a restaurant and a group of airforce recruits.

Exceptions

There have been some exceptions to the constraints noted, which reflect the ability of some film-makers to negotiate their way around them. The most remarkable exception to be broadcast in 1998 was *The New Zealand Wars* series. In addressing the issues of bi-culturalism it is arguably NZOA’s best delivery of its legislated goals, to reflect and develop New Zealand culture. Several features distinguished the series from other New Zealand documentaries: it had a formal production style with an academic, Professor James Belich, virtually lecturing the audience; second, it dealt with the controversial subject of Maori/Pakeha relations but from an historical perspective that was more palatable to the broadcaster; third, it was very popular, outrating *Coronation Street*; fourth, drawing on James Belich’s doctoral thesis, it was the product of rigorous research; and, finally, with a budget of NZ \$1.4 million was considerably better funded than most New Zealand television documentaries. One can only speculate as to why the series was so popular, but it seems reasonable to suggest that this signalled an appetite for cultural and social analysis that television had neglected.³

NZOA attributed their success in getting TVNZ to invest in the series to leverage provided by a similar proposal from the competing broadcaster, TV3. It is worth noting that this was a co-production involving TVNZ’s Maori Department, a remnant of the old in-house production system, and a factor that influenced the commissioning decision.⁴ NZOA decided to make participation of the Maori Department a condition of funding – the anxiety being that insensitive breaches of Maori protocol could undermine the production. Another exceptional factor here is the production time-frame. Roger Horrocks (1998), a commissioner with NZOA, suggests the typically high turnover amongst television executives facilitated risk-taking here.

The irony, of course, is that the risk unexpectedly paid off with the series achieving unexpected high ratings.

Another exception, *The Cave Creek Story*, a feature-length investigative documentary made for TV3's *Inside New Zealand* strand, eventuated because the production company chose to invest NZ \$10,000 of its own money to do justice to the story. Exploring events that led to the collapse of a Department of Conservation viewing platform, which had resulted in the deaths of 14 young people, the documentary detailed the findings of a Commission of Enquiry into the collapse. In an era of public sector 'reform' and government cost-cutting, the Commission's finding of systemic failure had singular social resonance. The documentary was also unusual for its longer form, which had been negotiated by the producer. Explaining his company's stand in 1998, the executive producer John Harris, who has a public service background noted:

We . . . brought together a whole lot of facts that may have been brought to the public's attention before, but delivered in a two-hour documentary . . . did really confront people with the full enormity of what a ghastly tragedy it was and how it could have been avoided . . . and we lost [NZ] \$10,000 on that . . . because of the amount of research we had to put into it and because we wanted to put all the dollar value on screen . . . we just couldn't help ourselves spending the money. So we lost money. . . . I feel sore about that because I don't think I should, but on the other hand that's the reality of it. (Harris, 1998)

Other exceptions illustrate the capacity for purpose to triumph over form. *The Bay Boys* featured television personality, poet and comedian, Gary McCormick as a presenter. Revisiting the area where he grew up, McCormick is more witness than entertainer in the intimacies he solicits from discussions with old school friends, Maoris whose lives have been singularly less successful than his own. The result is an unsentimental and non-patronizing reflection of the economic and social disadvantage much of the Maori population faces.

While these exceptions suggest that the broadcaster's non-quality agenda may not be as constraining as it first appears, they rely either on exceptional circumstances, or on a level of producer commitment and determination that is unlikely ever to be anything more than an occasional occurrence in the competitive grants system, where keeping onside with the broadcasters is essential for survival.

Attempts to resurrect public service television

By the mid-1990s public disenchantment with the state of television was beginning to surface. A poll done by the National Business Review in 1996 found two-thirds of viewers dissatisfied with television. Not enough quality/educational programmes was the reason cited (Smith, 1996). By

1998, audience and industry lobby groups were canvassing support for a local content quota, and plans by the National Party-led coalition government to sell TVNZ and abolish the broadcasting fee drew calls for the resurrection of public service broadcasting.⁵ Reinvigoration of public broadcasting subsequently became a key platform in Labour's 1999 election campaign (Thompson, 1999:1).

In May 2001, following public consultation, the Clark Labour government published a draft public broadcasting charter for TVNZ, re-prioritizing the broadcaster's social goals and re-instating the phrase 'to inform, educate and entertain'. The proposed Charter addressed a range of specific issues, from programme standards and editorial integrity, to mainstream access to programmes on Maori language and culture and minority interests, but initial retention of the 'financial objective' – to generate 'an adequate rate of return on shareholders' funds' and operate as a 'successful going concern' – gave the broadcaster little room to manoeuvre (Hobbs, 2000).⁶ The lobby groups who had initiated calls for reform – viewers, academics and industry – were all dissatisfied. Friends of Public Broadcasting (FOPB) rejected the Charter, asserting that 'adding a few social objectives will not deflect TVNZ's commercial momentum'. Citing seven points of failure, FOPB argue for wider-ranging public debate on the issues of a non-commercial channel, and for an end to the exploitation of TVNZ as a cash cow (FOPB, 2001: 1). Writing on the subject of what appeared to be Labour's slippage on the issue of public broadcasting reform, Peter Thompson suggested that the new policies provided a test case for Third Way thinking, promising eventual empirical evidence on whether attempts to fuse social democratic goals with a free trade approach are more than wishful idealism (1999: 1). The Screen Producers and Directors Association (SPADA) lobbied for a local content quota as the best way of preserving and extending diversity and local content on television (SPADA, December 2001). Following substantial public debate, the Charter was finally implemented as part of the TVNZ Act in March 2003, which also reconstituted TVNZ as a Crown Owned Company. Under the Act, TVNZ's television and transmission arms are to be separated – a decision criticized for its emasculation of the broadcaster's ability to implement its chartered goals (Kedgley, 2003). More importantly, retention of advertising as the primary source of revenue for TVNZ means the tension that has long frustrated public broadcasting in New Zealand will continue, and be compounded by the imminent expense involved in the introduction of digital television.

Despite TVNZ's new Charter, NZOA remains the arbiter of production funding, still caught between the obligations of culture and broadcasting's commercial imperative. With ongoing allocation of public monies to the private commercial broadcaster TV3, the existence of NZOA implicitly undermines the new public broadcasting identity being forged for TVNZ.

Continued commitment to market solutions also infused settlement of the local content quota issue. Voluntary quotas negotiated between NZOA, SPADA and the two broadcasters were finally settled in June 2003 with different quotas set for each channel: TV One (50%), TV2 (17%) and TV3 (20%) (NZOA, 2003). The quotas specify minimum hours for 'at risk' genres, but in grouping documentary with entertainment, information and Maori programmes as a single category, plenty of scope remains for broadcasters to subvert the goal of programme diversity without breaching their quota.

Whether or not the newly restructured and chartered TVNZ will open up new and better opportunities for documentary makers, keen to address issues of social justice or national culture, will depend on how much independence and funding is given to commissioning editors and programmers. Present prospects appear limited, given the broadcaster's financial objectives and the rhetoric of key players, for whom representing national culture continues to be more about celebration than reflection.⁷

Conclusion

While New Zealand's minimalist model succeeded in winning a prime-time audience for local documentary, despite the commercial environment, in the process it constrained the form within tightly defined strands and, with national branding severely curtailed, any social function documentary might serve either as agenda-setter for public debate or site for contested visions of national culture and identity. Expectations that opening public funds for cultural subsidy to a more diverse group of programme makers would increase programme diversity were partially met through the increased volume of local production. However, de-institutionalization, the constraints of prime-time commercial television, and low budgets led to low-risk programming that contributed to, rather than countered, homogeneity. Furthermore, the bureaucratic shortcomings attributed to the old public service in-house production system – aversion to contentious programming and the need to address balance within programmes – continued under deregulation.

As social documentary was accommodated within the broadcasting marketplace a variety of new tensions emerged: first, the commodification of the genre – addressing the audience only as consumers and not as citizens – broke with the values and concerns of the past, 'erasing collective social memory' in the words of one producer (Andrews, 1998). Much of broadcasting's past was seemingly expunged from public discourse, with the introduction of market competition framed as liberation from the dull restraining hand of the state. Yet state interference continued via appointments to the TVNZ board and the dependence of NZOA, and

collaboration with market censorship as TVNZ pursued its profit mandate. For many viewers in the older demographic not sought by advertisers, the restraining hand of the market looked very dull indeed. Second, a popular preference for 'vérité' forms and their supposed transparency undermined any authorial voice or impetus for social meaning. Third, casualization of the production workforce intensified self-censorship and opportunism, rather than passion for social justice, as large numbers of producers competed for scarce funding. And, lastly, NZOA, drawing increasingly on business principles, branding and other marketing practices to protect its own survival, undermined the status of cultural subsidy which had been the backstop of social documentary production, tipping the balance towards industry rather than culture.

Claims that New Zealand's branded strands won an audience for documentary and helped build a 'documentary industry' invoke the inherent 'worthiness' of the documentary idea, yet simultaneously undermine it by asserting tabloid values and glib celebratory nationalism. Whether or not publicly subsidized programming can deliver public service goals in a broadcast marketplace depends on the accommodation of priorities other than revenue and ratings. Continued subsidy for social documentary as a discrete genre is a key element in preserving television programme diversity, for as documentary's past truth and reality claims become untenable, only social purpose remains to differentiate the genre from the ragbag of factual programming.⁸

Notes

1. The NZOA-funded local documentary series *Work of Art* played for three seasons in a late-night time-slot before being cancelled by TVNZ due to low ratings.

2. Produced by Pacific Films, the six-part series *Tangata Whenua* was a collaboration between Pakeha writer/historian, Michael King, who conceived the idea, and Maori film director, Barry Barclay. The series attempted to explain Maori culture to non-Maori viewers. Posing the question 'What does it mean to be Maori?', the series was characterized by long takes, a measured pace, respectful interviewing style and the absence of any Pakeha narrator. Film historian Russell Campbell finds the series 'the closest New Zealand documentary had ever come to a discourse originating from within the Maori community' (1990: 107).

3. In a recent paper on focus group research into audience response to the series, Waikato University doctoral candidate, Lisa Perrott (2001), suggested that the New Zealand Wars series acted as a catalyst for reinvigorated public debate on issues of nationhood and decolonization.

4. The other partner in the production was the series' producer, Colin McRae's Landmark Productions. A former journalist and current affairs producer with TVNZ, McRae approached Belich and took the idea first to TVNZ and then with their support to NZOA (McRae, 1998).

5. In 1998 the Green Ribbon Campaign held a conference 'Local Content: An Endangered Species' at Auckland University which was attended by actors, writers,

directors, producers, representatives of the media watchdog group, Media Aware, academics and students.

6. Other recent initiatives to increase mainstream Maori programming include an increase in the informal quota of 15–20 percent for Maori programmes within the two documentary strands, and a new strategy developed via Maori community consultation, Rautaki Maori, which outlines wide-ranging training and development goals designed to increase the quantity, quality and relevance of Maori programming (NZOA, May 2000).

7. ‘We have been determined to see New Zealand’s cultural identity represented and celebrated in film and in both public and private television’ (Marian Hobbs, Minister for Broadcasting, SPADA, December 2001: 5).

8. This article draws on John Corner’s writing on documentary function and form, and the broader debate regarding the Griersonian legacy (Aitken, 1990; Corner, 1991, 1996, 1997; Kilborn, 1996, 1998; Scannell, 1979; Sussex, 1975; Swan, 1989; Vaughan, 1999; Winston, 1995, 1998).

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- Dying for a Smoke* (1998) Director: Alison Carter; Producer: Nicole Hoey.
- Tangata Whenua* (1975) Director: Barry Barclay; Producer: John O'Shea.

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