"Knowing" through the News

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Abstract: A major policy thrust of New Zealand’s current centre-left Labour coalition government is building a “knowledge economy”. The Government, in a "third way" approach has recast some social development endeavours in a business-friendly model. So, restoring a public broadcasting ethic into TVNZ, a commercially-focused, state-owned television service is presented as crucial in developing the creative industries to stimulate growth of the knowledge economy. Public service broadcasting (PSB) with its trinity of information, education and entertainment has long been regarded by the faithful as a key tool in disseminating knowledge and building a civil society. However, PSB struggles to find a place in modern democracies which subscribe to market choice and competition. Moreover, PSB supporters find it difficult to justify funding in an era of thousands of communication channels. The Labour-led Government restructured TVNZ as a crown-owned company and introduced a PSB broadcasting charter. The charter principles open with a commitment to quality news and current affairs. Television news is also significant because studies show it is the chief way people obtain information about their social and political environment. In New Zealand this importance is enhanced by the dominance of TVNZ's news, regularly among the ten most-watched television programmes. But what information does TVNZ news deliver and has its charter made a difference? The paper reports on a content analysis of pre- and post-charter news, examining a random sample of news bulletins from 2000 and 2003. It also compares this with privately-owned TV3 news and with TVNZ news content of the mid 1980s, before commercialisation. Because TVNZ remains overwhelmingly dependent on advertising, news values have barely changed. The paper concludes by questioning whether television news with its rigid formats and dependence on visual and entertainment values can provide the knowledge required for citizens to engage in informed debate.

Keywords: Television News, Public Service Broadcasting, Television Charter

Introduction

When New Zealand’s centre left Labour Party returned to power in a governing coalition in 1999 it brought the “third way” approach to national politics and a promise to re-create public service television by means of a Charter for state-owned Television New Zealand (TVNZ). Labour’s broadcasting plans were the result of long-term dissatisfaction with some consequences of a sweeping deregulation of broadcasting which the Party had initiated in 1988. Among the changes were: commercial tendering of broadcasting frequencies; breaking-up the old broadcasting corporation (BCNZ); turning the two TVNZ channels (TV1 and TV2) and the transmission service into a State Owned Enterprise (SOE) with a primary obligation to make a profit; and making the licence fee allocation for television a contestable fund open to private channels and independent film-makers.

In the late 1980s TVNZ, which has always been largely funded by advertising, took to its new commercial role with gusto and was so successful in reinventing itself that it quickly drove its newly established private competitor TV3 into bankruptcy\(^1\). Leading the way into TVNZ’s lucrative prime-time on the “information oriented” TV One was a revamped, half hour One Network News programme fronted by a highly popular duo and a folksy weather presenter. The move to tabloid values and a chatty format swiftly drew scorn from critics as “the cootchie coo news” (Edwards, 1992, p.15) or “teenage mutant ninja news” (Allan, 1990, p.52). However, TV1’s news kept a huge, loyal audience throughout the 1990s, regularly taking the top spot in the weekly national audience figures.

During this time TVNZ regularly returned large dividends to the government and its “cash cow” status was one reason the centre-right National Party government of the time delayed selling it off along with other state assets privatised at the time. Reduced profits and the impending costs of digitalisation lessened TVNZ’s attractiveness, though, and in the lead-up to the 1999 general election the state-owned broadcaster was clearly being readied for sale. However, the incoming government had different plans, and restructuring TVNZ also conveniently fitted with Labour’s campaign vow to end the “cul-
ture of extravagance” in the by now largely market-oriented public sector of the economy.

The TVNZ Charter

The proposed TVNZ Charter was strongly resisted within TVNZ, which feared government interference and loss of profits. Private broadcasters and producers (who worried their funds would be cut) were also vocally opposed, as were a number of politicians across a broad ideological spectrum. However, the charter process, which included restructuring TVNZ as a Crown company, separate from the transmission service, was strongly backed by New Zealand’s powerful prime minister, Helen Clark. After a sometimes bitter three year battle, accompanied by a change in broadcasting ministers, the forced resignation of the TVNZ board chair and a number of changes in its top management, the Charter was formally implemented on 1 March 2003.

The Charter is in line with public service charters in other countries. Its first objective says that TVNZ will “provide independent, comprehensive, impartial and in-depth coverage and analysis of news and current affairs”. Its second objective addresses the broadcaster’s role in promoting “informed and many-sided debate”, stimulating critical thought and increasing the chances for citizens to take part in public life. It calls for: quality, integrity and creativity; the commitment to inform, educate, entertain; and provision for a wide variety of interests, especially for neglected minorities. Participation of Māori and the presence of a significant Māori voice receive special mention.

Interestingly, during consultation, the Charter was amended to include a commitment to promote the interests of the independent New Zealand film and television industry. This provision reflects the place of broadcasting in the Labour government’s policy platforms. Broadcasting has become part of the government’s wider strategy of stimulating New Zealand’s creative industries for social and economic benefit. A recent strategy document published by New Zealand on Air (2003), which disburses state funding for broadcasting, describes broadcasting as playing a central role in fostering the “knowledge economy” and helping New Zealand’s drive for “an innovative, high-growth future” (p.6).

The government, then, has two aims for broadcasting. Publicly owned broadcasting, by providing serious, ultimately ‘uneconomic’ programming that commercial broadcasters would be unlikely to air, can help build a stronger, more informed citizenry. This meshes with the government’s “third way” commitment to building community and public capa-

city. Further, the broadcasting minister speaks frequently of the “mixed broadcasting economy” where, with little funding available, a partnership exists and “privately owned media and production companies can flourish alongside public broadcasters” (Maheury, 2004, pp. 2-3). The government has a vested interest promoting the growth of private broadcasting and related industries. In this scenario, not only is the money invested in public broadcasters likely to be strictly limited, but also a considerable proportion of that money would be expected to benefit independent creative industries through outsourcing production. The government regards creative industries (along with new technological developments) as part of a developing economy of innovative goods and services, based on knowledge, which will lessen New Zealand’s dependence on primary production.

Therefore, the drive towards restoring public service television is, on one hand, underpinned by the government’s social purpose, but on the other, subtly undermined by its economic aims. The result is a Charter requiring more diverse, informative and creative programming, and a legislative purpose requiring TVNZ to maintain its commercial performance. Public funding attached to charter delivery has been around $15 million a year, is controversial and not guaranteed. TVNZ remains overwhelmingly dependent on advertising and the sort of commercial programming that will bring in ratings.

Early evening television news, at the gateway to evening prime time viewing and a major component of channel branding, is vitally important in the ratings battle. TVNZ’s One News had developed a highly successful, popular and commercial format influenced by American local news programming (Atkinson, 1994). There is very little financial temptation for the news makers to alter their product, despite the exhortations of the Charter. Moreover, news managers can argue that the gathering and presentation of news must not be compromised by quota-style criteria implied in the Charter.

Methodology

Our contention is, however, that social responsibility theory (which news managers subscribe to, especially when invoking immunity or demanding access and other privileges) says that the media have obligations to society and that they should provide a forum for ideas (McQuail, 1994). If this is the case, then news content should be closely assessed to see the extent to which it fulfils its social responsibility function. Further, television news – because it is the major information source (about politics, in particular) for people in developed countries – should be a prime

\(^2\) Māori are the indigenous people of New Zealand, who are promised a “partnership” status in New Zealand’s public sphere through the Treaty of Waitangi.
target for this kind of on-going scrutiny. Our investigation into the content of TVNZ news was designed to help us answer the question of how well it fulfils the criteria of informing society and whether the introduction of a Charter calling for comprehensive and in-depth coverage has, in its early stages of implementation, made a difference. To provide a crucial context and comparison for TVNZ’s performance, we also studied the content of TV3’s prime time news and compared them both with findings from before the development of the current commercial news model. In short, by examining what is in the nightly news, we can assess whether it adds to the Charter’s goal of “programming that contributes towards intellectual, scientific and cultural development” and the government’s vision for a “knowledge society”.

The hour-long, prime time news bulletins on New Zealand’s two major free-to-air channels were chosen for analysis – state-owned TVNZ’s One News and CanWest-owned TV3’s Three News. Both programmes screen nightly between 6 pm and 7 pm. Bulletins from two randomly selected constructed weeks (of seven nights) were analysed for subject matter, story duration and a number of other variables. Because our prime concern was to see if TVNZ’s public service charter had caused a shift in the nature of coverage, especially in relation to the channel’s private competitor, we studied coverage in two years: 2000, when the Charter was being discussed and resisted at TVNZ; and 2003, the year the Charter was implemented. For a longer term perspective we drew on results from earlier, broadly comparable New Zealand studies.

While the analysis covered a wide range of variables, including sourcing, this paper concentrates on reporting the amount of actual news in the news bulletins, what was covered in news stories, and how much time was devoted to particular subjects. The subject classification employed originated with Deutschman in 1959, which was modified by Stempel (1985), and is widely used for studying American newspapers and television newscasts. This category system, further adapted for New Zealand by Comrie (1996), allowed historical comparisons of TVNZ news back to 1985 (TV3 was not established until 1990 and there has been less analysis of its news).

The fifteen subject categories were: politics and government acts; war and defence; diplomacy and foreign relations; economic activity; agriculture and environment; public health and welfare; education; science and technology; crime; accidents and disasters; sport; culture; Māori issues; human interest; and public moral problems (human relations and moral problems including alcohol, divorce, sex, race relations and civil court proceedings).

The bulletins were pre-recorded and analysed by a team of five coders. The intercoder reliability for the full content analysis schedule, which included a number of qualitative decisions, was 85 percent.

Results and Discussion

How much News?

The sample comprised 56 news bulletins and a total of 1386 stories. On average the TVNZ news programmes had 25 stories and the TV3 programmes 24. The average story length overall was 1 minute 28 seconds with little difference between the two channels.

When stripped of the weather, headlines, previews, reviews and advertisements the news “hour” was a mere 36 minutes (with TVNZ providing 37 minutes of news and TV3, 35 minutes). On average, then, the news hole takes up only 60 percent of the total bulletin time.

Looking at the changes in TVNZ news between 2000 and 2003 it can be argued that there was no improvement, but in fact an arguable reduction, in the quantity of information provided following the implementation of the Charter. The average story length of TVNZ items in 2000 was 88.9 seconds and in 2003 it was 86.3 seconds. The amount of news (as opposed to advertising, promotions, headlines and weather) was 62.7% of the news hour in 2000 and 60.9% in 2003.

What was in the News?

Subject content was measured in terms of percentage of news time given over to that particular subject category. Table 1 shows the results, arranged in rank order.

By far the most dominant news subject was sports. Overall, around a third of the bulletins was devoted to sports items (TVNZ 31.4% and TV3 37%) and in 2000 nearly 40% of TV3’s stories were sports items (although this figure dropped in 2003). Sports coverage was so big that overall it was greater than the next three categories – crime, politics and human interest items – combined.

The second most important subject in terms of overall time was crime news. Overall it took up 11.3% of the news hole. However, the amount of political coverage across years and channels was almost the same as the amount of crime coverage. Because political stories tend to be longer, though, there were considerably fewer political stories than

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3 The source of most of the historical figures is Comrie (1996). A follow-up study was undertaken which is partially reported in Comrie (1997).
crime stories. In 2000, both channels devoted more of their time to politics than to crime (TVNZ 13% politics and 9.2% crime; TV3 14.1% politics and 11.5% crime). However, this order was reversed on TVNZ in 2003 which is not the development looked for given the nature of the Charter promises. The result for TV3 in 2003 was even more dismal with political coverage at 8.0% of the news hole taking up less time than either crime (10.9%) or human interest stories (10.1%).

Human interest items and stories of accidents and disasters were overall the fourth and fifth of the top five subject items in the news. Economics, health and welfare items, and war and defence stories were also relatively important at 5.7%, 5.2% and 4.7% respectively of the news hole. While the culture category was relatively large on TV3 in 2003, reflecting at 6% a number of stories on popular music and films, this was generally a less important subject, along with agriculture and environment, diplomacy and foreign relations, Māori issues, science and technology, public moral problems, and education.

**Table 1: Time Spent on News Subjects as a Percentage of News Hole**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport 34.5%</td>
<td>Sport 31.3%</td>
<td>Sport 31.5%</td>
<td>Sport 38.6%</td>
<td>Sport 36.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crime 11.3%</td>
<td>Politics 13.0%</td>
<td>Crime 13.8%</td>
<td>Politics 14.1%</td>
<td>Crime 10.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Politics 11.0%</td>
<td>Crime 9.2%</td>
<td>Politics 8.9%</td>
<td>Crime 11.5%</td>
<td>H/interest 10.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H/interest 8.0%</td>
<td>H/interest 8.8%</td>
<td>Economics 7.5%</td>
<td>H/interest 6.7%</td>
<td>Politics 8.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accidents 6.0%</td>
<td>Accidents 7.7%</td>
<td>H/interest 6.6%</td>
<td>Accidents 6.5%</td>
<td>Culture 6.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economics 5.7%</td>
<td>War/Defence 6.0%</td>
<td>Health 6.1%</td>
<td>Health 4.3%</td>
<td>Economics 5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health 5.2%</td>
<td>Economics 5.8%</td>
<td>Accidents 5.3%</td>
<td>Economics 3.8%</td>
<td>War/Defence 5.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>War/Defence 4.7%</td>
<td>Health 5.6%</td>
<td>Diplomacy/Foreign Affairs 4.6%</td>
<td>Maori 3.3%</td>
<td>Accidents 4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture 4.0%</td>
<td>Culture 3.7%</td>
<td>War/Defence 4.5%</td>
<td>War/Defence 3.1%</td>
<td>Health 4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture/Environment 3.0%</td>
<td>Agriculture/Environment 3.0%</td>
<td>Agriculture/Environment 3.9%</td>
<td>Culture 2.7%</td>
<td>Agriculture/Environment 3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diplomacy/Foreign Affairs 2.5%</td>
<td>Maori 3.0%</td>
<td>Culture 3.5%</td>
<td>Agriculture/Environment 1.9%</td>
<td>Diplomacy/Foreign Affairs 2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maori 2.0%</td>
<td>Diplomacy/Foreign Affairs 2.1%</td>
<td>Maori 1.6%</td>
<td>Science/Technology 1.2%</td>
<td>Science/Technology 1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science/Technology 0.9%</td>
<td>Moral Problems 0.4%</td>
<td>Science/Technology 1.4%</td>
<td>Maori 1.2%</td>
<td>Moral Problems 0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Problems 0.8%</td>
<td>Education 0.4%</td>
<td>Moral Problems 0.5%</td>
<td>Diplomacy/Foreign Affairs 0.8%</td>
<td>Education 0.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education 0.4%</td>
<td>Science/Technology ---</td>
<td>Education 0.3%</td>
<td>Education 0.4%</td>
<td>Maori ---</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The small size of the diplomacy and foreign affairs category in the sample was perhaps a surprise considering the importance of the Iraq war and its coverage in 2003. In 2003 TV1 did devote 4.6% of its sampled coverage to diplomacy and foreign affairs stories and 4.5% to stories about war and defence, while on TV3, 2.6% of coverage was classified as diplomacy and foreign affairs, and 5.4% war and defence. This contrasts with coverage of TVNZ between 1985 and 1990 where 9.5% of the stories were coded as diplomacy and foreign affairs and 8.1% were war and defence. Further comparisons with earlier television coverage will be made later in the paper.

A clearer picture of the nature of television news coverage is presented if subject categories are combined as in Table 2. We created two coherent groupings which reflect the major opposing functions of news. Politics, diplomacy and foreign affairs, and economics were combined to represent the bulk of the serious informational side of news in a “political grouping”. The four categories of crime, human interest, accidents and disasters, and public moral problems were combined in a “tabloid grouping”, representing tendencies – always inherent in the news – to provide excitement, shock and titillation. The subject of war and defence was separated out so it could be clearly identified. War as a category can be closely related to politics and diplomacy. But – depending on treatment – it can also be a staple diet of tabloid newspapers. Sport was clearly a category of its own. The other subjects (agriculture and environment, health, education, science and technology, culture, and Māori issues) have been grouped together being generally smaller categories and less clearly fitting into a dichotomy of “tabloid” versus “political”. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that “tabloid” subject matter makes up over a quarter of the news and there is little difference between the pre- and post-Charter era on TV1, and the public broadcaster and its commercial competitor. When this is combined with the emphasis on sport, overall 57% of TVNZ news and 64% of TV3 news is given over to tabloid news subjects and sports entertainment.

In contrast, across both channels and years, only 19% of the news on average is devoted to the political grouping, with TVNZ doing a little better in this respect than TV3. The subject matter of the “others” category can also be “tabloid” in nature. The “culture” category in particular frequently concerned popular music and films.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sport</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabloid</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War &amp; Defence</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

When the categories are grouped in this way it shows that there has been little change in the amount of time given to them on TVNZ between 2000 and 2003. Viewers could reasonably expect a greater amount of time to be given over to serious versus tabloid topics once TVNZ was operating under a Charter. The comparison with TV3 does show, however, that perhaps consciousness of the Charter may have arrested a further slump in political stories and growth in tabloid content between 2000 and 2003.

Better or Worse? Comparing Recent Coverage with Earlier Television News

When figures for 2000 and 2003 news are compared with TVNZ news content from 1985 through to 1996 some interesting patterns appear. On the positive side, there is more national news at night now than there was in the mid to late eighties. Until April 1989 there had been a 40 minute national bulletin, followed by a 20 minute local news programme. Then came the crunch time, when local prime time news programmes were dropped in favour of 30 minutes of national news followed by 30 minutes of entertainment current affairs programme, *Holmes*. From 1989 until 1995, once advertisements, promotions, the weather and chit chat were removed there was only about 19 minutes of news time each night. If the sports segment is discounted a mere 15 minutes was left for the day’s news from home and abroad. As broadcaster and critic Brian Edwards (1992) said, “It can’t be done. At least not well” (p.21).

In 1995, following criticism from politicians and academics, and – perhaps more significantly – competition from *Three News*’ aggressive promotion,
TVNZ’s news programme was expanded to an hour. This boosted the news hole in 1996 to an average 37 minutes 24 seconds; minus sport, the total was 29 minutes.

Less positively, however, compared with a couple of decades earlier an increasing percentage of the bulletin time is devoted to “non-news” like advertising, promotions, headlines and the weather. In 1985, 80% of the bulletin time was news, which declined steadily to 61.5% in 1996. It appears this ratio has not worsened since then as the figures for 2000 and 2003 were the same as for 1996, with TVNZ’s One News doing slightly better than TV3 (where in 2000, only 57.4% of the news hour was devoted to news).

While there has been some improvement in the figures for the amount of time given to news overall, the bad news for those who rely on television for their knowledge of the world is the substantial increase in the percentage of the news bulletin devoted to sports news. Cook (1998) is among many who have referred to sports news as “non news”. From 1985 through to 1996, on TV One, sports news made up just over a quarter of the time given to news as a whole. As we saw above, by 2000 and 2003 this had jumped to 31% on TV One and more than 37% on TV3. Further, student research has documented a near doubling of sports content in weekend bulletins between 2000 and 2004 (Bourne, 2005). This change at least partly reflects the increasing professionalism in sport. Rugby and cricket went fully professional in New Zealand in the mid 1990s and the “selling” of sports through commercial sponsorships and television rights has accelerated (Harvey, 2002) along with a growth in sports public relations. Not only does sports news have its own substantial segment, but sports news now often features in the rest of the bulletin (frequently in the top third) and in 2000, TVNZ devoted several major stories to previews of the America’s Cup yacht race (an event the channel sponsored and had television rights for).

While entertainment in the news hour in the form of sports has increased, coverage of politics, diplomacy and foreign affairs has declined. On TV One in 1985 and 1987 almost a quarter of the bulletin (24.6%) was devoted to politics and diplomacy. In 1989 and 1990 this had dropped to 18.4%, and by 1996 – even though this was the year of the country’s first election under MMP – there was a further reduction to 16.1%. The decline continued in 2000 to 15% for both TV One and TV3 and in 2003 to 11.5% for TV One and a mere 10.6% for TV3. When we add economics to the “serious” political grouping (politics, diplomacy and foreign affairs, and economics) the trend becomes clearer. Again, on TV One this grouping took up 34.6% of the news hole in 1985 and 1987; in 1989 and 1990 this had dropped to an average of 26.8%; in 1996 it was still 26.6%. But by the current study period the average percent of time spent on the political grouping was 21% for TV One and 17.5% on TV3 (see Table 2).

The long term figures show that serious coverage has given way not only to sports coverage, but to tabloid topics. In 1985, crime was a mere 3% of the news, but in 1996 crime coverage was up to 13%. It seems there has been some decline since this peak, as the average for both channels in the 2000/2003 period was just over 11%. However, TV One’s crime coverage in 2003 took up 13.8% of the time given to news (see Table 1). Again, grouping subject matter gives a clearer picture of the trends across time, as shown in Table 3. The amount of time given to the tabloid grouping (crime, accidents and disasters, human interest, and public moral problems), as a proportion of news time, increased markedly on TV One between 1985, when it was 15.8%, and 1989 and 1990, when it was 27.6% and 27.3% respectively. In 1996 it was 25%, a little less than the 2000/2003 average for both channels. Prior to 2003, the political grouping shows a steady continuous decline (apart from 1987), which must be taken seriously by those who are concerned about the informative content of news. There was a very slight increase in 2003 on TV One. The space once given to political subjects has given way to tabloid subjects and more recently to sports.

Table 3: Subject Groupings as a Percent of Total News Hole, 1985 to 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broadcaster and Year</th>
<th>TV 1 1985</th>
<th>TV 1 1987</th>
<th>TV 1 1989</th>
<th>TV 1 1990</th>
<th>TV 1 1996</th>
<th>TV 1 2000</th>
<th>TV 1 2003</th>
<th>TV3 2000</th>
<th>TV3 2003</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>36.2%</td>
<td>27.1%</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>21.0%</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabloid</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
<td>27.6%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
<td>25.9%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabloid &amp; Sport</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td>46.0%</td>
<td>46.3%</td>
<td>51.1%</td>
<td>51.9%</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
<td>58.7%</td>
<td>64.5%</td>
<td>63.0%</td>
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The two groupings combined show a continued upward trend resulting in current figures of well over half of One News and nearly two thirds of Three News being spent on topics which do little to inform citizens. While the figures for TVNZ are better than those for TV3, it is clear that most of its news space is taken up with topics that do very little to contribute...
to intellectual, scientific and cultural development, as called for in the Charter.

Conclusion

Journalism’s underlying ethic is based on the notion of building resources for citizenship. But figures given in this paper indicate that New Zealand’s television news audiences are not getting the sort of news needed for them to take part in informed debate.

The figures also show that while state-owned TVNZ performs better than TV3 in the amount of news time given over to more serious subject matter, there has been little sign of improvement since the introduction of the Charter. While TVNZ management speaks of willingness to implement the Charter and talks of a change in approach and internal culture, there is little chance of true Charter-related change in TVNZ’s prime time viewing while the organisation remains so completely dependent on commercial revenue. The change in content in TVNZ news since 1985 has been very closely related to commercial pressure. In 1985, the broadcaster had no private competition for its lucrative advertising income. By 1987, the Broadcasting Tribunal hearings to decide who should run a private third channel had finished and TVNZ management was busy repositioning and rebranding its two channels to face competition. News was becoming more colourful and pacy, but still contained heavy political coverage. By 1989, TVNZ had become a SOE and the new news format was established in readiness for TV3’s planned start up later in the year. The first year of competition with TV3 followed in 1990. By 1996, following TV3’s inroads into One News’s figures in the younger demographics of the large Auckland market, TVNZ was endeavouring to recapture this audience. There was also increasing competition for television sports coverage rights and TVNZ was under pressure to maintain its high dividend returns to government. The increasing commercial content and sensational style of coverage during these years is related to the growing competitive and financial pressures placed on TVNZ at the time. The fact that One News recently won the 2005 Qantas Media Award for best news programme only underlines the lack of serious alternatives for viewers seeking robust news content.

It is of particular concern that while the news hour is losing “information” content, the state broadcaster’s current affairs shows are also being criticised for sensational coverage and an inability to grapple with serious issues (see Comrie & Fountaine, 2004). While TVNZ has instigated a format for “one off” shows (such as One News Insight) to debate key issues like policing, the results of this longitudinal study raise serious questions about the type of information received by viewers. In a country about to go to the polls for the 2005 General Election, where 90% of voters follow election news on television “always” or “sometimes” (Banducci & Vowles, 2002), short changing citizens in the flagship news hour has potentially far reaching implications for democracy.

References


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