

**Political
Economy
Research
Centre**

*Impoverishing
the Mediated
Public Sphere in
Aotearoa New
Zealand*

*Wayne Hope
October 2015*

Find out more:
gold.ac.uk/perc
[@goldperc](https://twitter.com/goldperc)

Impoverishing the Mediated Public Sphere in Aotearoa New Zealand: The Slow Demise of Television News and Current Affairs

The last episode of TV3's *Campbell Live* on 29 May 2015 signalled the end of primetime current affairs on New Zealand television. In many ways, its demise also marks the end of the once thriving mediated public sphere that had developed in the country since the 1960s; to be replaced by a set of transnational, financialized corporations with market goals.

Campbell Live succeeded inspite of the prevailing conditions. Today in New Zealand, apart from the Maori Television Network (established in 2004), free-to-air channels are saturated with tabloid infotainment shows, sponsored reality TV formats, advertising segments and product placements. Interviews with public figures and issues-based reporting were consigned to early morning weekend slots. Against the trend, *Campbell Live* began on 21 March 2005 at 7pm with Carol Hirschfield as producer and John Campbell as presenter/correspondent/reporter. The show was always a hybrid. Interviews with politicians and public figures and issue-driven stories mingled with lighter infotainment pieces and programme sponsorship. The then owner of TV3 and sister channel TV4, Canada's Canwest media conglomerate, exemplified the North American model of commercial television. Each successful network required a high profile news brand and news presenter to push primetime ratings. John Campbell was TV3's major identity and investment. The rise and fall of *Campbell Live*, amidst a changing media landscape, reflects the worsening plight of primetime current affairs television and the mediated public sphere.

Roll back a few decades, to before the neoliberal policy shifts of the Labour government in the 1980s, and the country was experiencing a thriving public sphere. My conception of the public sphere refers to guaranteed freedoms of association, expression and publication, and their independence from arbitrary state power, religious authority, and private commercial interests. Actually existing public spheres of communication within legal environments, artistic and literary communities, political parties, representative institutions, universities, and media domains can be outlined *and* evaluated against their own implicit value claims (Habermas, 1992; Hope 2012). On these criteria, a nationally-mediated public sphere had emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the context of a Keynesian Social Democratic polity and a Westminster two-party system, a semi-independent network, the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation (NZBC), was established (1961). This ended formal ministerial control of the airwaves and initiated a new relationship between government, broadcasting and journalism. Although NZBC bureaucrats were paternalistic, broadcasting journalists were, for the first time, able to interpret political issues (Cleveland, 1969). Radio programmes, such as *In the News*, *Checkpoint* and *Viewpoint* introduced listeners to political commentary. On the NZBC's single television channel, the current affairs programme *Gallery*, fronted by Brian Edwards, challenged government ministers and criticized official institutions, such as the Police and the Security Intelligence Service. In 1973, the year after Labour gained office, a new Broadcasting Act further enhanced the autonomy of broadcast journalism. The Broadcasting Ministry portfolio was abolished and replaced by a 7-member council presiding over Radio New Zealand (RNZ) and a competitive two-channel, colour television network. This represented a public broadcasting system loosely based on the BBC model.

Although the National Government of 1975 introduced a new Broadcasting Act reducing the institutional autonomy of Television New Zealand (TVNZ) and RNZ, governments could no

longer manage news independently of news professionals. The stock figures of journalists and politicians were at the foreground of mediated public life. Audiences became accustomed to interview formats and adversarial debate over economic, social and foreign policy. Television programmes, such as *Close Up*, *Dateline Monday*, and *News at 10*, combined interviews, studio discussion formats and investigative pieces (Hope 2012).

Over the same period, newspapers from the four major centres – Dunedin Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland – advanced the range and depth of news coverage. The New Zealand Press Association (NZPA), a conservative newsgathering organization, was complemented by the Parliamentary Press Gallery. Each major newspaper had between one and six journalists reporting daily. Outside of controversial issues, gallery correspondents provided day-to-day coverage of Parliament, along with reportage on farming, commerce, industry, finance and public administration. Although such journalism was not critical or investigative, the available range of commentary was extended. In some newspapers and magazines, such as *The Listener*, enterprising journalists could tackle volatile topics, such as race relations, youth culture and protest activism.

Thus, the 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of a nationally-mediated public sphere shaped by a semi-independent broadcasting system, a modern commercial press, and current affairs journalism. Meanwhile, traditional constructions of national identity, which had shaped the officially-mediated public sphere, were challenged by new social movements. Most importantly, against the backdrop of white settler capitalism, a Māori cultural resurgence and an associated struggle for land rights openly contradicted the colony-to-nation progress myth upon which kiwi national identity had been founded. Second wave feminists, Green activists, anti-Vietnam war protestors, and an anti-apartheid movement, opposed to sporting ties with White South Africa, also challenged conventional notions of New Zealand-ness. The political issues of women's reproduction rights, equal pay, New Zealand's involvement in US military interventions, forest and lake conservation, and All Black rugby contacts with South Africa dominated news and current affairs. Māori land occupations, women's conventions, protests against US dignitaries, South African sports teams and environmentally-destructive energy projects were national media events.

From 1984, under neo-liberal policies introduced by the Fourth Labour Government, broadcasting was deregulated and media communication infrastructures were absorbed by transnational corporations. TVNZ and RNZ were turned into dividend-gathering state-owned enterprises (1989). The entry of Sky, a pay-television network, allowed its subsequent principal shareholder, News Corporation, to acquire live match rights for major sporting codes: rugby union, rugby league, cricket, netball, English premier league soccer. The concurrent entry of TV3, as a regionally-owned private television network, was initially unprofitable and local shareholders went bankrupt. As of 1994, the new principal shareholders were Canadian media conglomerate Canwest (10%), Westpac Bank (48%) and an official receiver (32%) (Rosenberg, 1994). Canwest was then Canada's largest media corporate with film, print, television and other off-shore holdings in Ireland, Northern Ireland, the United States and Australia. Between 1996 and 2000, it assumed control of the consortium running TV3 (and later TV4) and acquired a raft of commercial radio stations. In 1990, New Zealand's telecommunications infrastructure was sold to Bell Atlantic and Ameritech (34.2% each) along with local banks and businesses. The following year, under a National Government even more committed to neo-liberalism, all restrictions on foreign media ownership were lifted.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, transnational media communication conglomerates continued to colonise the mediated public sphere (Hope, 2012). The effects upon broadcast news journalism and current affairs were multiple and long-lasting. Soon after broadcasting deregulation, Radio New Zealand management received 15% salary cuts, other staff either lost overtime rates of pay or were placed on part-time contracts. At TVNZ, intense competition with TV3 for advertising revenue resulted in major lay-offs across news desks and among production staff. In December 1990, regional news services in Christchurch and Dunedin were removed as were Sunday night news shows (Scott, 1995).

In the case of prime time television news bulletins, a team of American news consultants transformed the existing format into infotainment packages. The central purpose was to build and maintain ratings flow between advertising segments. Content analysis undertaken by Joe Atkinson for the period 1985 to 1992, demonstrated a marked decline in item length and a prevalence of brief sound bites. Emphasis shifted from issues relating to politics, economics, public policy and industrial relations to those of crime, human interest and natural disaster (Atkinson, 1994). Daniel Cook's analysis of TVNZ's *One Network News* from 1984 to 1996 found that the average news item length fell from 90 to 70 seconds and commercial breaks increased from 12% to 23% of the entire bulletin (Cook, 2001).

The style and content of television current affairs on TVNZ and TV3 also changed markedly. Sarah Baker's analysis of such programmes from 1984 to 2004 indicates a diminishing item length and a "significant decline in the coverage of serious political and informational subjects and a sustained and measurable move to more entertainment-oriented current affairs programmes" (Baker, 2012, p.221). In 1984, on TVNZ's *Sunday* and *Close Up* programmes, median item lengths were 19.1 and 16 minutes respectively. By 2004, *Sunday's* median figure was 13.3 minutes. In 1994, five years after TVNZ introduced the magazine-style *Holmes* show, its median item length was a paltry 5.7 minutes (p. 129). This long-running programme, fronted by media personality Paul Holmes, encapsulated the growing prevalence of tabloid formats. Baker's research also indicated an increase in crime, celebrity, human interest, and other entertainment-oriented stories. In 1994, *Holmes* and TV3's *20/20* devoted 45% and 56% respectively of programme time to such content. By 2004, these figures had risen to 62% and 79% (p.146).

Within this unforgiving commercial environment, *Campbell Live* from its inception developed a real national presence. A public sphere ethos drove stories about security service surveillance, environmental pollution, public health, declining real wages, overcrowded housing, and New Zealand residency scams. Ordinary citizens spoke straight to camera minus the elaborate formatting typical of infotainment and reality TV shows. *Campbell Live's* resilience in a non-public service setting was truly remarkable.

However, the show's future became problematic from 2007 when Canwest sold its 70% stake in Mediaworks to HT Media, a subsidiary of the Australian private equity firm Ironbridge Capital for NZ\$790 million. This exemplified a new financialized phase in the transnational colonization of domestic media. Mediaworks was the holding company for TV3, TV4 and a nationwide stable of commercial radio stations. After the 2008 global financial collapse and global recession, falling advertising revenues worsened Mediaworks' financial position. In the year to 2009, it posted a NZ\$314 million loss (Mollgaard & Rosenberg, 2010). Subsequently, Ironbridge swapped its own financial debt for equity injections from Goldman Sachs, the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS), and Bank of New Zealand (BNZ). By mid-2012, Mediaworks' debt restructuring involved two new major debt holders – TPG Capital and

Oaktree Capital Management. The latter group bought NZ\$125 million worth of Mediaworks' debt from the RBS and BNZ. By late 2013, Mediaworks was owned by Oaktree Capital (26.7%), RBS (21.9%), TPG Capital (15.7%), Westpac (14.6%), RABO Bank (14.6%), and JP Morgan (6.5%) (Myllylahti, 2012). Oaktree Capital raised its ownership stake to 43% in 2014 and 100% in May this year. With these developments, *Campbell Live* was in mortal danger; short-termist financial imperatives required a new business model for TV3.

Julie Christie, Mark Weldon and other Mediaworks managers favoured multi-platform broadcasting, low-cost reality TV shows and infotainment programmes with a skeletal staffing structure. The phrase 'current affairs' would be maintained to obscure the objectives of restructuring and to taint *Campbell Live*'s accomplishments as a dated, tiresome form of the genre. In the latter context, a New Zealand Herald report on May 23 this year reported that "Mediaworks management viewed *Campbell Live*'s crusading journalism as a liability that stretched viewer patience". They described on-going coverage of the November 2010 Pike River coalmine explosion and resulting controversies as a cause of viewer "fatigue" and criticized the emphasis given to "the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquake, "GCSB spying" and "child poverty" (Nippert & Thompson, 2015).

The eventual demise of *Campbell Live* marked the end of a historical trajectory. State-run broadcasting without current affairs formats lasted from the early 1920s until around 1960. The subsequent development of a semi-independent broadcasting system fostered a culture of television journalism based on public sphere principles. New Zealand's neoliberal policy revolution, broadcasting deregulation, and the transnational corporate absorption of national media reshaped television news and current affairs such that tabloid-infotainment formats prevailed. The financialization of media ownership generally and of Mediaworks in particular completes the trajectory. After *Campbell Live*, Māori Television's *Native Affairs* is all that remains of prime time current affairs. Yes, there is the internet and a thriving political blogosphere and an advertising-free though cash-strapped radio national network where public issues are debated. However, the commercially-blasted television landscape has impoverished the journalistic public sphere.

References

- Atkinson, J. (1994). 'The State, The Media and Thin Democracy' in A. Sharp (Ed.) *Into The Dark: the changing role of the state in New Zealand since 1984* (pp. 146-177). Auckland University Press: Auckland.
- Baker, S. (2012). *The Changing Face of Current Affairs Television Programmes in New Zealand 1984-2004*. PhD Dissertation, School of Communication Studies, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland New Zealand.
- Cleveland, L. (1969). 'The New Zealand Mass Media System: Functions and Responsibilities' in *Political Science*, 21 (2): 36-47.
- Cook, D. (2001). 'Deregulation and Broadcast News Content: One Network News from 1984 to 1996'. In J. Farnsworth and I. Hutchinson (Eds). *New Zealand Television: a Reader* (pp. 139-144). Dunmore Press: Palmerston North.

Habermas, J. (1992). *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (T. Burger and P. Lawrence, Trans.). Cambridge: Polity.

Hope, W. (2012). 'New Thoughts on the Public Sphere in Aotearoa-New Zealand' in M. Hirst, S. Phelan and V. Rupa (Eds) *Scooped: the politics and power of journalism in New Zealand* (pp. 27-47). AUT Press, Auckland, New Zealand.

Mollgaard, M. & Rosenberg, B. (2010). 'Who Owns Radio in New Zealand?' in *Communication Journal of New Zealand*, 11 (1): 85-107.

Myllylahti, M. (2012). *New Zealand Media Ownership Report*. Centre for Journalism, Media and Democracy (JMAD), AUT, Auckland.

Nippert, M. & Thompson, W. (2015). 'Campbell's Crusades Irked TV3 Bosses' in *New Zealand Herald*, May 23.

Rosenberg, B. (1984). 'News Media Ownership in Aotearoa' in *The Word*, July-August, 6.

Scott, J.M. (1995). *Neo-liberalism at Work: Media Politics and the Employment Contracts Act*. MA Thesis, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.

Wayne Hope is Associate Professor in the School of Communication Studies, Auckland University of Technology. He co-edits the on-line journal *Political Economy of Communication*, and his new book *Time, Communication and Global Capitalism* (Palgrave-Macmillan) will be published in January 2016.



Aotearoa-New Zealand philosophy - New Zealand Journal of Forestry. Forty Years in Aotearoa New Zealand. Biobanking in Aotearoa New Zealand - CiteSeerX. Bilingual Education in Aotearoa/New Zealand - Cascadilla Psychology Aotearoa - The New Zealand Psychological Society. Some of these issues relating to media mentoring were explored in a study investigating the use of digital media and devices in children's storytime programming in Aotearoa New Zealand. The research had three phases: an online questionnaire of library services (response rate 38%); nine telephone interviews with librarians with responsibility for children's services and programming; and an online questionnaire of caregivers (responses = 28). New Zealand has another name, Aotearoa, which means "the land of the long white cloud" in the Maori language. The first Maori settled in New Zealand about a thousand years ago. They came from Polynesia and were excellent sailors and fierce warriors. Zealand means "Sea Land" in Dutch. But the Dutch never settled there. In 1769, the English explorer James Cook claimed New Zealand for Britain. New Zealand has got it all " snow-capped mountains, fast-flowing rivers, green forests and peaceful lakes with crystal clear water. You can spend a whole day by some lake or river and be the only person there. Although New Zealand has adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the rights of the Maori population remain unfulfilled. In addition, New Zealand has not ratified ILO Convention 169, an international legal instrument that specifically addresses the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples. The Māori people. The Māori people represent 15% of the total population of 4.5 million in New Zealand. The progress continues in the recognition of the rights of the indigenous peoples in Aotearoa, with the pioneering decision of Wakatū and the continued impulse in the settlement of the historical claims of the Treaty. Aotearoa (new zealand) iw 2019. Written on 24 April 2019. Posted in Aotearoa / New Zealand.