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Reporting Rural News: Perspectives on Public Radio Restructuring

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ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at the restructuring of the rural programming on New Zealand's public radio station, National Radio. The overall aim is to provide a holistic account of the changes which includes establishing their impact on programme content, and documenting the reaction of the farming community, and other stakeholders (eg. rural reporters) to them.

Content analysis, defined by Berelson as "a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (quoted in Kaid and Wadsworth, 1989, p.198), explores what the restructuring has meant for the content of *Rural Report* and *Country Life* (previously *Country Saturday*). While content analysis is central to the research, it is combined with other methodologies, namely a survey questionnaire and qualitative interviews, in an effort to more fully investigate the changes.

The viewpoints of key groups are explored through a mail survey and qualitative interviews. Conference lists maintained by the Faculty of Agriculture at Massey University are used to survey members of the farming community as to their attitude toward rural programming and aspects of the restructuring. The interviews allow for input from one former and two current rural reporters, Rangitikei MP Denis Marshall, and Radio New Zealand's Programme Commissioner.

The results demonstrate that the restructuring has impacted upon programme content (especially in regard to the number of stories covered, place of origin, story length and depth, issue coverage, source speaking time and use of the interview technique), and show differences between mainstream and specialist rural coverage which suggest *Rural Report* and *Country Life* are vital if National Radio is to maintain a comprehensive rural news service. Survey respondents are overwhelmingly disappointed with the restructuring and its results, while indicating that National Radio is one of the three most important sources of news for them, and

the single most important broadcaster. In the interviews, reporters suggest the changes were motivated by management policy (particularly their desire to use the reporters' skills elsewhere, and a move toward de-specialising generally) and budgetary constraints. Radio New Zealand justifies the changes on the basis of income loss and the need to better cover the regions, and former *Rural Report* editor Peter Burke, and Rangitikei MP Denis Marshall, address wider issues, such as urbanisation.

The financial and structural problems being faced by public radio have been referred to throughout the research, and these resource issues make it futile to recommend that the rural news service be restored to its previous level. However, the thesis is important for its use of content analysis to establish characteristics of rural news on National Radio, both before and after the restructuring, and its collection of a range of perspectives on the change. Despite the fact that the agricultural sector remains vital to the economic success of New Zealand, and is entwined with the history and psyche of those who live here, rural news has not been the subject of empirical inquiry here. Therefore, it is also hoped that the research, in identifying key areas of interest, will act as a springboard for further research into agricultural news.

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