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**The Commercial Imperative in Broadcasting News:
TVNZ from 1985 to 1990**

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for the degree of PhD in Human Resource Management
at Massey University

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ABSTRACT

Between 1985 and 1990, broadcasting services in New Zealand underwent significant restructuring and deregulation. This was part of a global surge of broadcasting deregulation caused by a mix of technological, political and economic factors threatening Western public service broadcasting systems (Willard & Tracey, 1990).

The switch in New Zealand television from public service broadcasting to a commercial approach was both swift and profound, affecting TVNZ and its output at all levels. This study seeks to trace the effects of that transition on a key product, the news.

The research epitomizes the growing tensions between two major models of broadcasting as marketplace ideology gains ascendancy over public service approaches. This tension has its counterpart in journalism, with its on-going conflict between a commercial rationale and an informative purpose based on notions of empowering citizens.

The major study objective was to identify the influence of deregulation and competitive pressure on the nature of TVNZ news from 1985 to 1990. Three methodologies were employed: a historical review, a content analysis and a qualitative news analysis.

The research takes the perspective of a growing number of scholars arguing for the importance of public service broadcasting (Price, 1995; Scannel, 1990; Tracey, 1992) and an informative news industry (Bennett, 1993; Bernstein, 1992) as a basis for a healthy democracy in a world of technological change.

Historical methodologies, especially interviews, were used to identify the roots of the change, key personalities and decision points which resulted in TVNZ's legislative and internal orientation to profit making. Newswriters described conflicts over techniques and news values, and losses and gains represented in the new style.

A content analysis of early evening news bulletins between 1985 and 1990 quantified changes in subject matter and the sourcing and attribution of news. Results confirmed a shift towards a more commercial approach. They showed a reduction in time given to the national news, reduced story length and shorter sound bites (on-camera statements by news sources). There was a swing away from serious news subjects (such as politics, economics, diplomacy and foreign affairs) in favour of more entertainment-oriented subjects (crime, accidents and disasters, human interest, and public moral problem stories). TVNZ news continued to rely on official sources, but increased its use of victims and ordinary citizens as news sources. There was a reduction in cited sources.

The qualitative news analysis backed up these findings. It demonstrated how greater pace was introduced into the bulletins and showed growth in emotional, tabloid language in stories and headlines. Analysis of individual news stories used Wyatt & Badger's (1993) typology to demonstrate a shift of function in news items, from information to vicarious experience. The analysis identified verbal and visual techniques used to heighten emotion and increase audience involvement.

The study shows how commercial pressures and the drive to increase ratings results in a news mix which short-changes citizens. This threatens democratic participation in a world where most people seek their information from television news and where changing technologies threaten to create a new class of the information impoverished (Kellner, 1990). Because the commercial imperatives shaping news are underpinned by legislation, there can be little long-term change without law changes to reinstate the primacy of PSB values into at least one of New Zealand's publicly-owned television channels, and to target funding for public service news programmes.

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