

BROADCASTING SYMPOSIUM

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IAN FRASER

Paper on session entitled: *Television and Cultural Identity*

Thinking about what role I'm here to play. Now that I run a symphony orchestra, am I to talk up my own book by suggesting there should be more symphony concerts on television. Or more dance productions. More opera, more Shakespeare, a lot more slow, respectful coverage of the visual arts – from the school of Yoko Ono on prozac. Or am I expected to make out a self-interested case for better television current affairs – after all, ever since Michael Parkinson returned to the chat show format he is the master of, I have been awaiting the call. (Mind you, pushing to do real current affairs on NZ TV these days looks more and more like a couple of bald men fighting over a comb.) Self-interest should perhaps even drive me to make a plea for more of a certain brand of nature documentary – the sort described as "giraffes fucking to Mozart". You provide the giraffe, I'll get the lads to do some Mozart.

I want to say that, from my salient at the NZSO, I see an arts sector which pulses with energy and originality and, increasingly, at the highest level of executant skill. To the extent that our artists shape our cultural identity, it seems to me we're in pretty good hands. And what is it they think they're doing? I'm sure they're not consciously engaged in Project New Zealand Identity. Any more than our best novelists are straining any longer, if they ever were, to produce The Great New Zealand Novel. They're doing what comes naturally. Driven, perhaps, by the Socratic axiom that the unexamined life is not worth living. They're explorers after meaning. They have a compulsion to impose order on the flux of things. They're miners of the depth and richness that lies often just below the surface of our lives. When they're successful, and an act of communication takes place, they have the power to move us, to change us, even, God help us, to induce ecstasy. I mean all of that when I define culture, prosaically, as "an expression of the patterns of meaning within a society". And I suppose I could go on to say that our culture is what provides us with a firm sense of identity, a firm sense of place and belonging. This is not a narrow view of cultural identity. Rugby fits within the definition, especially if you accept John Mulgan's account of rugby in New Zealand as "religion and desire and fulfillment all in one".

So, what's television doing in a place like this? Some cynic said recently that television is called a medium because it is neither rare nor well-done. (That's along the lines of David Frost's paradox, that television is a contraption that allows you to be entertained in your living room by people you'd never have in your house). Well, I have to say that I don't really regard television as a "medium" at all, I'm not much interested in live telecasts of Beethoven concerts, or the ballet – or even telecasts of work like Michael Parmenter's *Jerusalem*. I saw snippets of *Jerusalem* the other night on a big screen at the NBR Business Sponsorship of the Arts Awards and I thought

the video imagery reduced and impoverished and trivialised what is, I am certain, a great work of art. I don't think television is much of a medium for that stuff. Let them go to the concert hall or the opera house for those experiences – unless all we're interested in is a record of the proceedings – and let them pay for it. And let me bank the money in the NZSO's imprest account!

BUT! – I do think television, far more than it is now, should be engaged in the great project that animates most artists, most creators. I mean – the business of exploring for meaning, mining for depth and richness, from time to time proposing the unique and the difficult and the strange, the sophisticated and the complex and the grown-up. What we know about talk-back radio is that it is based on the reinforcement of popular views, to the point where it's often nothing much more than an echo-chamber for prejudice. I want television to aim higher than that. Or, at least, I want a place on television where more than that is available. Since we're not a hick nation, I can't see why we should have hick television. And, please, don't tell me this is an elitist demand. Clive James disposed of that sort of name-calling 8 years ago in a piece in *The Spectator*, where he said, inter alia:

“Rupert Murdoch despises the mandarins who presume to decide what the people ought to have. He thinks there is a clear distinction between that the giving the people what they want. But you don't have to be a mandarin to be confident about giving the people what you think they ought to have. All you have to be is one of the people. The deregulators who want nothing but niche marketing call it democracy. If it is, it is a mean conception of it.”

I think it's clear that television isn't doing too well on this wider account of its mission. To state this is not to send an Exocet in the direction of the people who run, in particular, TVNZ. They have a mandate from the government – a direction from their shareholder. Under the SOE Act they have to operate as a successful business. The secondary aim is “to have regard to the interest of the community... when they're able to do so”. TVNZ is a successful business, by most commercial yardsticks. They've quite effectively been about their father's work. They return a handsome dividend to the government. In discharging their business remit, of course, they had a lot of experience to fall back on, even before the passage of the SOE Act. I remember only too well what happened after Muldoon became Prime Minister in 1975, and resolutely refused to raise the licence fee as a way of punishing the channels for expressing independent or dissenting views. The result was that the state's television channels came to rely increasingly on commercial revenue. So they're good at giving advertisers what they want. But they don't seem to be anything like as good at really satisfying the wants and needs of viewers. Out there on the couches of the nation, the evidence more and more is that the hungry sheep look up and are not fed.

I did a programme about television in 1996 and as background I took a look at some of the survey results. They suggest that television is missing the boat – in fact, the gap between the television operators and the boat is widening inexorably year by year. In 1992 an Insight survey showed that 48% of adult viewers were dissatisfied with the standard of television. By 1996 the number was up to 65% - 2 out of 3 adult viewers were dissatisfied. In late 1997, a NZ On Air survey asked people how they felt about television. 24% said they felt better. 32% said they felt about the same. 40% said

they felt worse about television. Have those levels of dissatisfaction fallen over the last couple of years? I don't think so. Here's a conundrum, then. A system that offers more and more schlock TV, because the ratings say those are the programmes the people really want, and yet every time a qualitative survey is carried out, more and more of the people tell the pollsters that television doesn't meet their needs.

Another angle of this was the survey conducted in August last year that suggested that the potential of television for informational purposes is under-used. More than 70% of viewers strongly agreed that they wanted to see television which kept them "informed", "in contact with the rest of the world" and also gave them the opportunity "to learn about new and different things".

So, why are so many of us convinced we're not getting what we want? A good part of the reason has to be that, undercurrent arrangements, television has become a vehicle for purely commercial purposes, and the audience's needs are only tangential. I don't believe the **ratings** measure audience need. In fact, whatever they do measure, it's pretty crude. One commentator put it like this: "Consider a station choosing between two programmes, one of which will engage an audience that will value it greatly, the other which will attract a much larger audience but an audience not much fussed by that particular programme. In the user-pays system of the conventional market, the smaller audience might be able to outbid the large audience, thus maximising the efficiency with which the broadcasting slot was used. Without user pays, there is no signaling mechanism registering intensity of preference. (Audience ratings surveys don't ask)".

In October last year, the BBC finally produced its long-awaited report *BBC News: The Future*. The report was based on exhaustive quantitative and qualitative polling. All viewers, says the report, not just up-market viewers, state a preference for serious news. Audiences expect the BBC to provide intelligent coverage of all significant stories – they do not want us to dumb down. They also want more coverage of the arts and culture but not, says the report, by trivialising the agenda. Ordinary people, the report goes on to state, want complicated issues to be made sense of in a lucid way.

I'm not going to sign up to Lindsay Perigo's party and say that TVNZ is braindead. But I do think television is describing a descending parabola – and I think that's what the majority of viewers believe, too. Without getting into an orgy of hand-wringing, it looks as though it's going to get worse. We're embarked on a shift to digital television. The free-to-air channels will experience a hit to their advertising revenues once digital delivery is bedded in. (In saying this, though, I also submit that most viewers will continue to do most of their viewing with the major networks.) This is likely to mean a cutback in the amount currently spent on programming and that the decline in the quality of programmes is likely to be even more marked. **What I want to see, as a counterweight to these trends, is a network which balances the need to keep up ratings with the public obligation to provide quality television.**

Let's try to tease all this stuff through to a conclusion. Time for me to put my hand up. I want the form of public service television which Michael Grade, the Chief Executive of Britain's Channel 4, characterised 3 or 4 years ago as "editorially driven, where the

satisfaction of the individual viewer is the primary objective, where cultural objectives are as highly valued as commercial ones.” Brian Easton has proposed that it is “important to distinguish between a broadcasting system whose purpose is cultural but is subject to market disciplines – and a broadcasting system which is to meet market objectives and thereby contribute to culture.” I have the latter currently. I want the former. That doesn’t mean I’m going to object to NZ On Air putting money into *Shortland Street* or light entertainment like *Showcase*. I’m not trying to make a case for the direction of public funds to support only so-called quality programming. My definition of culture and identity is much wider than that. And I’m mindful of the fact that the elite depend less on television to shape their sense of national identity. They turn to literature, poetry, painting, theatre, music. Television is a mass medium, watched by the masses who are almost totally dependent on television for their image of themselves and their culture. I want a public broadcaster. I want a broadcaster that will do better than just making the programmes advertisers want.

Since one of the jewels in the crown of our culture is a democratic form of government, I want broadcasting that will help to empower people towards better decision making. Communication is the cornerstone of the democratic process. Communications requires a searching, energetic, critical broadcasting system as a venue for discussion and debate. We know what a public television model could do because we have experience of what public radio does.

I don’t think we have a chance of seeing it as things stand. The surveys I quoted earlier – and a heap of anecdotal evidence – tells us that the public has a higher expectation of TVNZ than what TVNZ can discharge, constrained as it is by its duty to be a good SOE and return a commercial profit to the government. I don’t want to get into the detail of whether the public television I want will carry commercials or be commercial free. That’s an argument for another place. What I want is a channel which would not be commercial in its purpose – but it could conceivably be commercial or semi-commercial. The fact that it is not wholly commercial in its purpose will almost certainly mean a widening of the menu. A NZ On Air study published last year states that “over recent years NZ On Air has experienced difficulty in meeting its legislative requirements. The narrowing of what broadcasters are prepared to accept is clearly a flow on effect from increased competition and the pressures for profit. Even when a programme is offered to them free of charge, broadcasters may decline to accept it on the basis of opportunity cost.” Well, that’s what has to happen when broadcasters behave in a totally commercial way.

I don’t expect TVNZ to reform itself. It’s doing what it’s been told to do by statute – and it’s doing it well within those narrow terms. Reform is the business of government, representing the wider interests of the public. Do I have a problem with state intervention in a medium so central to our society and culture? Not any more than I query the state’s role in matters like health, education, law and order or defence.

I think there are various recipes which can move us along the path I favour. Some are more commercially and economically sustainable than others. We could sell TVNZ – both channels – to Rupert or Kerry and start again to build a free-to-air, public broadcaster from the proceeds of the sale and from taxation. Hello! Doesn’t strike me as a go-er. We could flog TV2 and retain TV One in public ownership as a wholly

or partially non-commercial channel. I quite like that option on days of the week beginning with T. And I suspect it could be sustainably funded. But I used to have blazing rows with Neil Roberts, who told me it couldn't. Then there's the Paul Norris thesis. Give TVNZ a charter like Radio NZ's, by which it is required to meet defined and measurable public broadcasting objectives. Change its act so it no longer has to maximise profits and send most of them to Treasury. Empower it to reinvest – in the **culture**. Let it continue to be funded by commercials (though maybe less of them) and keep it part of TVNZ. Its chances of survival will be better as part of a large, financially strong company, powered by profits from TV2 and BCL. That could be the right solution – but to achieve the paradigm shift you'd need inside TVNZ a neutron bomb. Keep the structure in place but change the people.

Then there's Bill Ralston's policy – set out a couple of months ago in Metro. Put in place a workable, effective quota regime. Quotas will ensure that quality services and programmes fostering our culture and identity are available across all the free-to-air channels. Then the government could sell TVNZ and have a fund of up to a billion dollars to fund NZ On Air productions which would be more appealing to the broadcasters because of the quota system. “Dear Lord”, says Bill, “there has to be some flaw in this?” Well, I can think of a couple. I suspect the structure I want will embody features of a number of these models. None of them seems to me sufficient on its own. But the thing I know, without laying myself open to the charge of fence-sitting, is that television needs to be better if it's going to build cultural identity. Sorry, chaps, it's not good enough. That means I'm less concerned about seeing **more** of New Zealand on air, though I want that too, than **better** of New Zealand on air. So I want a system that produces and incentivises higher quality New Zealand programming, whatever the ownership model. As for cultural identity. If we get it right we'll soon be in that blessed state my mother often aspires to. “Let's try it,” she says. “We won't know ourselves.”

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