

## **The TVNZ 7 Decision and the Decline of Public Television in New Zealand**

*An open letter of concern to the Prime Minister, the Minister of Broadcasting, the Minister of Communications and Information Technology, and the Minister of Finance.*

We the undersigned express our collective concern about the government's decision effectively to force the closure of TVNZ 7 by ending its funding. Our concern is heightened by the fact that this is one more in a series of steps by the government to dismantle the little that is left of public broadcasting in our country.

If New Zealand is a country with high ambitions, it needs to ensure that it has a healthy media environment. Public service is an essential ingredient of this because it provides a range of options not covered by the commercial sector. Most OECD countries ensure that citizens have access to at least one public service television channel. They do so both as a response to market failure and as a recognition that public television can contribute to a better informed society. And knowledge is a crucial asset for any country in the contemporary world.

Public service television is even more important in a country of such limited size. Our small population means that New Zealand's commercialised television channels simply cannot provide the range of programming that viewers want and should be able to access in the interests of democracy as well as cultural identity.

In radio, New Zealand has a national public service network, Radio New Zealand (RNZ), and publicly-funded Maori radio stations. In television, it has two publicly-funded Maori channels (Maori TV and Te Reo) which are performing an important function – but there is no national television service equivalent to RNZ.

TVNZ 7 and (until March 2011) TVNZ 6 have offered an important extension to the range of available programmes and schedule diversity. This has been possible only because the two channels have not relied on commercial revenue and so decisions about content have been insulated from the pressure to maximise ratings and advertising income.

Pay television cannot satisfy the same needs. It would be wrong to assume that Sky provides a range of programming that can replace the role of a public service channel. Sky provides relatively little in the way of local content other than sports, Sky having effectively monopolised the rights to the latter.

Importantly, Sky commissions almost no new local content outside of sports. Instead, it merely airs the programming that free-to-air networks have taken a commercial risk to provide. Even if the government requires New Zealand on Air (NZoA) to fund local content for Sky channels, Sky will not replace the free-to-air networks as an important commissioner of this content because the audience share of its non-sports channels is far too small to justify the production cost.

The cost of Sky is prohibitive for many New Zealand households and the closure of TVNZ 6 and 7 will leave a significant gap not only in the choice available on the Freeview platform but also in the government's plans to commence analogue switch-off by 2012. Even then, given Sky's current market share of around 48 per cent of homes, we can expect that as many as two million New Zealanders may not be able to afford a Sky subscription.

Public subsidies for television production (allocated by NZoA and Te Mangai Paho) are particularly important in ensuring that local content can remain part of television's programme mix. In terms of public provisions for television production, NZoA cannot provide a complete answer. It is a funder, not a broadcaster, and it is entirely dependent on the commercial channels that are willing to play programmes. As our television system becomes more commercial and competitive, broadcasters are becoming more narrowly focused. Funding is only one

incentive for a broadcaster, and ratings, advertising, and a consistent channel identity (brand) can be more important to them than the possibility of public funding.

TVNZ 7 and TVNZ 6 have shown that public service channels can consistently offer choices that commercial channels do not. For the first time in many years Kiwis had local commercial-free entertainment and quality children's programming, exploration of art and cultural issues along with in-depth quality news and current affairs programmes. The loss of TVNZ 6's Kidzone is particularly concerning because 6 was the only channel offering high quality commercial-free programming for children. Now this channel has been locked behind a pay-wall which means that only some of our children will have access to these programmes. Meanwhile, TVNZ 7 carried programmes dealing with politics, media, and the courts that no commercial channel would touch in primetime.

This kind of material should have been made available on TV One and TV2, as it once was, and more members of the public would then have been aware of it. But at least TVNZ 6 and 7 offered an option. And that is the value of public service channels – we may not watch them exclusively but we value the fact that they are available. Our country's excellent public radio network accumulates a large cumulative audience as New Zealanders dip into it over the course of the week. Public service broadcasting expands the range of options in ways that commercial broadcasting simply cannot.

A international comparative study completed in 2009 (by a distinguished team of European and American scholars) found that good public service systems attracted more viewers than their commercial counterparts, fostered greater knowledge of public and international affairs, and reduced the knowledge deficit in disadvantaged areas of society.

It is wrong to assume that public service television merely panders to an educated elite who can always afford to subscribe to Sky if they are unhappy with free-to-air programmes. Ministry for Culture and Heritage research shows that general New Zealand audiences recognise the benefits of high quality news, current affairs, educational programming and other public service-related content for society as a whole. They may not use such services all the time, but they do use them, and they agree it is important that our country should have them.

Over the past five years, one government decision after another has undermined the health of New Zealand's broadcasting environment – including the failure of recent governments to make a success of the TVNZ Charter, the continuing demand for dividends from TVNZ, and now the decision to pull the plug on TVNZ 6 and 7. Universally accessible public service broadcasting is not a luxury – it is a means of helping the country to meet its goals of literacy, higher education levels, better health outcomes, and the smart, flexible, creative thinking needed to be competitive in today's world.

We know that there are solutions to the above problems but urgent action needs to be taken so that the opportunities are not permanently lost. As one immediate step, we urge the government to put its current broadcasting policy directives on hold, including the move to discontinue the funding for TVNZ 7, and instead to implement a new review of the funding and regulatory needs for New Zealand television. This review needs to give particular consideration to four key areas:

- 1) how to fund public service television provisions in a way that insulates them from commercial pressures;
- 2) what regulatory arrangements need to be introduced for pay television;
- 3) how to sustain the current range of free-to-air channels on which half of our population continues to rely; and
- 4) how to ensure that an appropriate range of television content, and local programmes especially, continues to be provided on free-to-air channels.

We speak as academics with research expertise in broadcasting industries and related policy matters. Some of us have also been involved in television production, or in public funding bodies, or in the making of public policy.

Each of us will have our own way of developing the points raised in this letter, but we all share the main concerns expressed here. Above all, we are deeply worried about the ways in which the potential of public television has been undermined in our country and this issue has now reached crisis stage.

Thank you for your attention.

Yours in good faith,

Signed (in alphabetical order)

Dr. Brenda Allen	Senior Tutor, Department of Film, Television and Media Studies	University of Auckland
Dr. Andy Asquith	Director, Public Management Group	Massey University, Albany
Dr. Joe Atkinson	Senior Lecturer in Political Science	University of Auckland
Jane Berney	Lecturer, Advertising Creativity, School of Communication Studies	AUT University
Dr. Michael Bourk	Lecturer, Department of Media, Film and Communication	University of Otago
Dr. Philip Cass	Postgraduate Programme leader, Department of Communication Studies	Unitec Institute of Technology
Dr. Christine Cheyne	Associate Professor, School of People, Environment and Planning	Massey University
Dr. Ursula Cheer	Associate Professor of Law (Media Law)	University of Canterbury
Dr. Margie Comrie	Associate Professor, School, of Communication, Journalism and Marketing	Massey University, Wellington
Dr. Joost de Bruin	Lecturer in Media Studies	Victoria University of Wellington
Dr. Vijay Divadas	Senior Lecturer, Department of Media, Film and Communication	University of Otago
Dr. Giles Dodson	Lecturer, Department of Communication Studies	Unitec Institute of Technology
Dr. Trisha Dunleavy	Senior Lecturer in Media Studies	Victoria University of Wellington
Dr. Kevin Glynn	Associate Professor and Programme Coordinator of Cultural Studies	University of Canterbury
Dr. Annie Goldson	Professor, Department of Film, Television and Media Studies	University of Auckland
Dr. Ian Goodwin	Senior Lecturer in Media Studies	Massey University, Wellington
Dr. Joe Grixti	Lecturer, School of English and Media Studies	Massey University, Albany
Margaret Henley	Associate Dean (Equity) Faculty of Arts, Department of Film, Television and Media Studies	University of Auckland
Dr. Minette Hillyer	Lecturer in Media Studies	Victoria University of Wellington
Dr. Martin Hirst	Associate Professor, Curriculum Leader Journalism, School of Communication Studies	AUT University
James Hollings	Lecturer, School of Communication, Journalism and Marketing	Massey University, Wellington
Dr. Wayne Hope	Associate Professor, School of Communication Studies	AUT University

Dr. Roger Horrocks	Emeritus Professor and Foundation Head of the Department of Film, TV and Media Studies	University of Auckland
Dr. Thierry Jutel	Senior Lecturer and Programme Director, Media Studies	Victoria University of Wellington
Dr. Misha Kavka	Senior Lecturer, Department of Film, Television and Media Studies	University of Auckland
Dr. Geoff Lealand	Associate Professor, Screen and Media Studies	University of Waikato
Dr. Cluny MacPherson	Professor, College of Humanities and Social Sciences	Massey University
Dr. Nikki Mandow	Lecturer, School of Communication Studies	AUT University
Tim Marshall	Lecturer, Department of Communication Studies	Unitec Institute of Technology
Dr. Donald Matheson	Lecturer, School of Social and Political Sciences	University of Canterbury
Dr. Sharon Mazer	Associate Professor in Theatre and Film Studies	University of Canterbury
Dr. Isabel Michell	Lecturer, School of English and Media Studies	Massey University, Albany
Dr. Kate McMillan	Senior Lecturer in Political Science	Victoria University of Wellington
Dr. Matt Mollgaard	Curriculum Leader, Radio, School of Communication Studies	AUT University
Danni Mulrennan	Lecturer in Journalism, School of Communication Studies	AUT University
Diane Musgrave	Senior Lecturer and Curriculum Leader Television, School of Communication Studies	AUT University
Dr. Brett Nicholls	Senior Lecturer, Department of Media, Film and Communication	University of Otago
Paul Norris	Founding Head of School, New Zealand School of Broadcasting	Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology
Thomas Owen	Tutor, School of Communication, Journalism and Marketing	Massey University, Wellington
Dr. Evangelia Papoutsaki	Associate Professor, Department of Communication Studies	Unitec Institute of Technology
Dr. Brian Pauling	Principal Academic Staff Member, New Zealand School of Broadcasting	Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology
Dr. Robin Peace	Associate Professor, College of Humanities and Social Sciences	Massey University, Wellington
Dr. Nick Perry	Professor, Head of Department, Film, Television and Media Studies	University of Auckland
Dr. Sean Phelan	Senior Lecturer, School of Communication, Journalism and Marketing	Massey University, Wellington
Dr. David Robie	Associate Professor and Director of the Pacific Media Centre	AUT University
Deborah Rolland	Senior Lecturer, Department of Communication Studies	Unitec Institute of Technology
Dr. Roy Shuker	Associate Professor in Media Studies	Victoria University of Wellington
Dr Simon Sigley	Lecturer, School of English and Media Studies	Massey University, Albany
Dr. Laurence Simmons	Associate Professor, Head of Department, Film, Television and Media Studies	University of Auckland
Dr. Jo Smith	Senior Lecturer in Media Studies	Victoria University of Wellington
Dr. Liz Smith	Tutor, New Zealand School of Broadcasting	Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology
Dr. Geoff Stahl	Lecturer in Media Studies	Victoria University of Wellington

Dr. Peter Thompson	Senior Lecturer in Media Studies	Victoria University of Wellington
Dr. Davinia Thornley	Senior Lecturer, Department of Media, Film and Communication	University of Otago
Gilly Tyler	Lecturer in Television, School of Communication Studies	AUT University
Jenni Watts	School of Communication Studies	AUT University
Dr. Amy West	Contract Lecturer, Department of Film, Television and Media Studies	University of Auckland
Paul White	Programme Leader in Advertising Creativity School of Communication Studies	AUT University
Dr. Jocelyn Williams	Head of Department, Communication Studies	Unitec Institute of Technology
Dr. Bevin Yeatman	Senior Lecturer, Screen and Media Studies	University of Waikato
Dr. Ruth Zanker	Head of Research, New Zealand School of Broadcasting	Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology