The New National Frontier: 
New Zealand Identity and American Television, 1960-65

As New Zealanders considered the introduction of television in the 1950s, the dominant cultural mood was one of ambivalence about the medium's potential effect on the national culture and "way of life." The very act of watching TV seemed to be at odds with New Zealanders' outdoorsy lifestyle, and the potential predominance of American programs posed a threat to New Zealand's still Anglo-centric culture. This ambivalence helped to delay television's New Zealand debut until 1960, more than a decade later than the United States and Britain and years after many other countries. {SLIDE 1} This lack of enthusiasm appeared to continue into the television era, which commenced on the first of June, 1960. Six months later, the new television column in the populist tabloid Truth claimed that "New Zealand is on her own—she is probably the first country in the world to adopt television in which the sales of sets haven't boomed by the first six months after transmissions are started."¹

Some critics thought that the poor quality of early television programming was the main deterrent for New Zealand audiences. One wrote that: "High-powered salesmanship in countries where television had developed at...terric speed" had led to some "hair-raising trash [being dumped] into the laps of unsuspecting and unprepared officials" in New Zealand. As a result of New Zealand's position as a small late-comer to the burgeoning global television economy, the country's few TV viewers were confronted with a program schedule that was perceived as "most discouraging." {SLIDE 2} American
programs like *Oh Susanna, Susie, Life with Riley,* and *I Love Lucy* were considered the prime culprits in television's trashy beginning.

But despite the slow start and critical derision, television was eventually embraced by New Zealanders with set ownership levels after five years similar to those in the United States.\(^2\) Despite this contradiction, the process of integrating TV into New Zealand society was not a simple matter of highbrow disdain or mass embrace. Rather than being either completely “Americanized” or not at all, New Zealanders integrated television and a heavy diet of American programming into their national way of life at the same time as they continued to subscribe to existing cultural attitudes about the value and relevance of American culture. From examining early TV in historical context, it is also clear that the presence of American television provoked reactions that were rooted in concerns about New Zealand national identity.

Today I will examine, first, the ways in which official and critical responses to American programming in the early years of New Zealand television were also echoed by members of the New Zealand TV audience who aligned themselves with existing views about the importance of broadcasting in building a national community. The resulting focus on building a transmission infrastructure allowed New Zealand's mainstream cultural conversation to link television, despite the paucity of local content, with cherished myths of New Zealand identity—qualities like technical ingenuity, a rugged pioneering spirit, and a commitment to egalitarianism and fairness.\(^3\)

Second, using the example of the television western, I will consider some of the ways in which New Zealanders reacted to American television programs when they weren’t denying their importance altogether. How did New Zealanders consume such an
identifiably American cultural form as the western? To what extent did the western myth of the American frontier speak to New Zealand's own pioneering mythology? I will suggest that New Zealand audiences "used" television westerns to differentiate their national history and way of life from that of America's.

**Coverage and the Production of a Television Nation**

Both before and after the introduction of television, it was a frequent refrain that New Zealand would not have the funds, production facilities, technical expertise or local "talent" to produce enough programming to show New Zealanders their way of life on screen.\(^4\) Along with the threat to New Zealand's Anglo-centric culture posed by the unprecedented predominance of American programming, the very nature of television as a passive, domestic medium was at odds with central tenets of New Zealand identity, specifically its emphasis on rugged masculinity and an enduring connection to nature and rural life. One strategy that the state broadcaster, the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation, used to counter this cultural threat was to emphasize the monumental task of providing transmission coverage for New Zealand's widely dispersed population. Stories of technical ingenuity and frontiersman-like triumph over the rugged landscape went some way toward filling the void left by the lack of local programming. By linking television to the masculinist New Zealand way of life, the cultural dialogue was directed away from the problematic nature of foreign programming.

{SLIDE 3} Accounts of the early years of television frequently emphasized the lengths to which the NZBC went to bring television to the masses, as in a 1964 publication which noted that:
As television coverage is extended over larger areas of New Zealand, repeater and relay stations have to be constructed, often in inaccessible and mountainous country. Much test equipment has had to be transported by air, and especially by helicopter.\textsuperscript{5}

Accompanying pictures of men laboring in unforgiving and remote locations and climbing hundreds of feet up strategically-located transmitters further emphasized the brawn, courage, and technical ingenuity required to bring New Zealanders television. As one commentator noted, "We are near enough to a pioneering nation to enjoy the tough job of transmitter installation."\textsuperscript{6}

Such images and stories seem to have resonated with "ordinary" New Zealanders—as is evidenced by the fact that the obsession with coverage was not just expressed by the NZBC, but by private citizens as well. One such individual was Dennis Cobbe who in 1962, in the spirit of New Zealand's early radio pioneers, taught himself how to construct a translator which picked up the Auckland television signal and broadcast it to the town of Rotorua a hundred miles away. \{SLIDE 4\} When accused of breaking licensing regulations, Cobbe presented himself as a blameless tinkerer working in the time-honored tradition of resourceful New Zealanders who would make use of what they had to provide for themselves. "It started as an experiment to amuse myself," he explained. "It proves that I could walk up a hill and throw a switch and we would have television."\textsuperscript{7} Another amateur enthusiast, Graham Bryce, was so convinced of the justice of the effort to bring television to the provinces that he promised passive resistance to any attempt to confiscate his equipment and he compared his efforts to other heroic acts of resistance and nation-building in New Zealand's history:

We are not proud in the issue of breaking the law, but we did feel that like many other milestones in human progress, such as the right of our womenfolk to vote, for instance, certain people had to disobey the law to get recognition. Backed by enthusiastic members of our society,
we defied the authorities—in fact, I was prepared to go to jail.\textsuperscript{8}

The complete absence of references to specific programs or even watching television in these and other television pioneer stories suggests that these transmission amateurs were not necessarily expressing a deep need to watch television per se. Nor were they endorsing the predominance of either American or British programming on New Zealand airwaves. Rather, they were insisting on their inclusion in the new television nation, and making sure that rural and provincial New Zealand, so important in the mythology of national identity, were not left out of the story of the new medium, or any cultural realignment which it might bring.

In the absence of the ability to produce any significant amount of local content and thus "see themselves" on television, New Zealanders looked to these accounts to link the medium with established verities of mainstream New Zealand culture. In a sense, the amateur television viewers' societies were literally "producing" television, and the publicity of their activities in the news media and by the NZBC allowed New Zealanders to watch this local "production" of television without even having to turn their sets on.

\textit{Television Westerns and the New Zealand Audience}

Despite the official and popular focus on transmission coverage as a way of ignoring the lack of actual production of local television, New Zealanders did actually watch television in large and growing numbers. \textit{\{SLIDE 5\}} In their viewership, they became part of what Erik Barnouw, called the "\textit{Bonanza} globe." In this formulation American TV, and westerns in particular, exerted an almost primal hold over foreign audiences, perhaps
because they contained a kernel of hope about the promise of the American dream. As Barnouw put it:

In thatched huts and villas men watched cattle stampedes and gunfights, amid the clatter of hoofs and the ricochet of bullets. Precisely what it all meant to them, no one could be sure. Perhaps they had a sense of sharing a destiny with a breed of men who could make decisions and make them stick.9

Most New Zealanders were not, of course, watching TV from "thatched huts." But if they did not, as an audience, quite meet a fetishized ideal of unspoiled primitivism, we can still hazard a guess as to "what it all meant to them."

If popularity is anything to go by, then narratives of frontier violence and nationalism in the television western do appear to have resonated on some level with New Zealand audiences. By July 1961, there were four westerns on New Zealand screens—*Laramie, The Deputy, The Westerner*, and *The Californians*. And, as the television audience grew in New Zealand, so did the number of westerns they could watch.10 Between 1960 and 1965, about 20% of all adult series on the New Zealand TV schedule were westerns. According to a 1962 NZBC survey, 90-100% of New Zealand viewers had watched some portion of every western series on television.

Although such surveys tell us that westerns were quantitatively "popular" in that they commanded a large audience, they do not tell us why New Zealanders watched westerns or what pleasure they derived from the genre. In fact, viewers' ratings of their enjoyment of particular programs suggest that their high familiarity with westerns bred mixed feelings, if not outright contempt. A 1964 study of the TV audience's program preferences suggested that New Zealanders were not uncritical fans of whatever they watched. Westerns in particular elicited a significant amount of criticism, topping the list of programs that viewers would be most likely to avoid. Two-thirds of viewers thought
there should be fewer westerns on New Zealand television, while only 6 per cent asked for more. Westerns featured prominently among programs criticized by viewers for their "lack of realism," and for their portrayals of "violence and cruelty" and "depressing emphasis on hatred and suffering."\textsuperscript{11}

Clearly, the idea that westerns ran roughshod across national borders to hypnotize global audiences en masse is too simplistic. It glosses over not only differences between why some audiences appeared to respond more to some examples of the genre than others but also the question of what particular qualities made any westerns popular in particular national contexts.\textsuperscript{12} In trying to understand the reception of westerns in New Zealand—and elsewhere—we need to separate the ideas of what we might call \textit{viewership}, as measured by raw ratings or survey data, from \textit{popularity}—as suggested by the qualitative categories in viewer surveys, and in other cultural forums like newspaper reviews and magazine articles. We also need to think about the \textit{pleasure} that audiences may have derived in taking oppositional positions to certain programs. The seeming disjuncture between the high viewership for westerns in New Zealand and the low qualitative popularity of the genre can perhaps be explained in terms of the pleasure and satisfaction that New Zealanders may have experienced by overtly rejecting some tenets of the western mythology that their American counterparts found so appealing.

Of course, while the myth of the frontier may sometimes not have translated well for European audiences because of its New World origins, it did have resonance for New Zealand audiences insofar as they had at the core of their shared national ideology the "hardworking, independent and virtuous pioneer farmer." This figure bore more than a passing resemblance to the Jeffersonian small farmer which was central to the "populist"
version of the American frontier myth. In the decades prior to the introduction of television, the similarities between the United States frontier and New Zealand's agrarian Arcadia had been remarked upon by some of the most prominent mass culture mythmakers of the American West. \{SLIDE 6\} For example, best-selling western novelist Zane Grey remarked at length on New Zealand's various rugged attributes in his account of a 1926 fishing trip there. When they met him in person, some of his New Zealand fans were reportedly disappointed that he was not wearing a "sombrero, chaps, spurs and guns," but generally Grey was greeted with hospitality and excitement as he traveled around the country. For his part, Grey raved about the unspoiled quality of the New Zealand landscape: “Land of mountains, ferns and crystal streams!” he wrote. “Maori land, wild as any desert, verdant as any tropic jungle!” The western mythmaker Grey gave New Zealanders an image of their country as a unspoiled corner of the new New World where rugged man-against-nature fantasies could be made real, and arguably gave them a lens through which to view the western genre as a representation of a pioneer project which had supposedly been perfected in their own country.

In the era of the television western, however, the compatibility between New Zealanders sense of themselves and their history and the core myths of the western genre was not seamless. One of the key differences between New Zealand and American myths of frontier was that violence was not acknowledged or glorified as a central element in the making of New Zealand as a pioneer nation. While warfare with the original inhabitants of the "virgin" land characterized the nineteenth century settlement of New Zealand just as it did the American West, twentieth century New Zealanders preferred to concentrate on their own myth of New Zealand as a paradise of racial
harmony. This was based on the supposed assimilation of Maori into mainstream New Zealand society and an adoption by white New Zealanders of some aspects and symbols of Maori culture. Critiques of violence in television westerns by New Zealanders often mentioned the mistreatment of Indians, and made explicit the American-ness—and non-New Zealand-ness—of such violence. One "Disgusted Viewer" wrote to a newspaper that "To my way of thinking, the title [of the Lone Ranger] should be changed to the Lone Sadist" and cited a particular incident where "An Indian tied against a wall and whipped about the face till he is cut and bleeding" as particularly abhorrent.16 Reports in the Listener about westerns reminded viewers that "...with the advent of television in New Zealand the Western mythos—which tacitly praises irresponsible freedom and salutes violence as a method of resolving differences—is extending its ground...." and took the opportunity to highlight the unjust depredations visited on the Indians in the "real" history of the "savage frontier."17

This reaction to westerns suggested that the genre failed to represent the type of fair interaction between pioneer settlers and original inhabitants of the land that supposedly appealed to the "average" New Zealander. At the same time, critiques of race in westerns deflected attention away from the relative absence of Maori culture on New Zealand television. Some viewers thought the correct response to the proliferation of television westerns and their "creation of a false image of the United States" was not to provide some counterbalancing televisual "truth" but to "correspond with and replace westerns" with series about Maori.18 In the context of the dominant ideology of racial integration, New Zealand viewers were not as concerned about westerns' misrepresentations of American history as they were with making sure that New
Zealand's own frontier history was differentiated from it and, in particular, that New Zealand's supposedly proud history of exemplary race relations was emphasized on television. {SLIDE 7} In the absence of locally-produced television programs that affirmed their own sense of national identity and history, many New Zealanders watched westerns (but claimed to dislike them) and took pleasure in rejecting the historical picture of the United States depicted in the genre, while comparing favorably their own myths of New Zealand frontier history and race relations with that image.

Conclusion

Early predictions of the irrelevance to New Zealanders of a TV schedule stuffed with foreign—and, particularly, American—programming turned out to underestimate New Zealanders' abiding belief that their national community could be bound tighter through the new medium. But doubts remained about the place of television in New Zealand life. Some New Zealanders continued to insist, that even though they were every bit as avid television watchers as Americans, "the effect on them of television had been 'nil'." Others thought that New Zealand was in danger of "turning into a nation of Bonanza watchers." This may have been quantitatively true but that did not mean that they instantly became part of an undifferentiated global television audience. New Zealanders had integrated television into their way of life without giving up their allegiance to central ideas about what it meant to be a New Zealander or embracing foreign programming uncritically. But in watching Bonanza and other imported television shows, they were also forced to fit these new cultural products into their existing sense of who they were as a people. {SLIDE 8} In looking at this history, we can see the roots of debates that continue to this day—about the effect of foreign cultural products on New
Zealand's culture and identity, and of the best way for a small “Western” nation to be part of the modern world, but at the same time, hold on to its sense of uniqueness.
NOTES:


2 The number of New Zealand households with a television license numbered a scant 4,080 in 1961, but five years later it had swelled to over 430,000, representing over 60 per cent of New Zealand households. Robert Boyd-Bell, New Zealand Television: The First 25 Years (Auckland: Reed Methuen, 1985), pp. 10-29. Lynn Spigel, Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 32.


4 See, for example, Minister of Broadcasting Kinsella's explanation of both the difficulty of constructing adequate production facilities, and of television's "voracious" consumption of talent, which, in a small country like New Zealand made it "impossible" to supply enough local programming. “New Zealand Parliamentary Debates,” (1962), p. 1930.


6 NZBC, Compass: First Five Years of Television.


8 NZBC, Compass: First Five Years of Television.


10 “No Empty Saddles in TV's Corral,” New Zealand Listener, July 7, 1961, p. 3.


15 Ibid., pp. 208-09.


17 “Malignant Dynasty,” New Zealand Listener, June 15 1962, p. 3.


19 Ibid., p. 94

20 NZBC, Compass: First Five Years of Television