

# The Emergence of the Infomercial in New Zealand 1993–1997

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## Abstract

In December 1993 television viewers in New Zealand were presented with a novel form of television; the infomercial (a 30-minute advertisement designed to appear as if it were a program). While such broadcasting had been a regular feature of American television since the 1950s, and had become more prevalent after 1984, non-traditional forms of ‘hyper-commercial’ broadcasting were unusual in the local context. This article uses published primary sources (from the specialist and general press), a content analysis of television schedules and interviews with infomercial producers and regulators to trace the emergence of the infomercial in the early 1990s. Specifically, it outlines three key reasons why the emergent infomercial form quickly thrived to the point where it became a flourishing televisual form and revenue stream for advertisers and broadcasters alike. It concludes by demonstrating the susceptibility of broadcasting systems to novel methods of revenue raising, especially when the wider economy is contracting or in recession.

## Definition(s) of the Infomercial

The term ‘infomercial’ is definitionally problematic. Within marketing it is defined as a 28 ½ minute commercial designed to appear as if it is a program (Hawthorne, 1998, p. 49). However, this approach is understandably uncritical as marketers focus on *how* infomercials work. If a more systematic approach were adopted, an infomercial would also need to be defined in terms of its underlying purpose. On this reading an infomercial is:

an advertisement that is styled as a presentation of information for interest or entertainment. It may be unclear whether it is an advertisement or part of normal programming. (Wilson, Jeffrey, & Wood, 2002, p. 16)

Yet even this does not offer a complete definition. The infomercial also needs to be categorized with reference to the model of communication which it evinces. This is demonstrated by perhaps the most obvious characteristic of the infomercial—its constant reinforcing of the persuasive message. However, the infomercial must also be accessible to viewers. Ideally, there should be no elements which are complex or difficult to understand and the general tone ought to be as non-threatening as possible. Thus, in an intensification of standard commercial formats, the entertainment within the ‘program’ acts as the hook for the advertising message of *that same program*. This is the ‘infomercial model of communication’—editorial and advertising are unified into parts of a whole which serves commercial ends. By conflating editorial and advertising

together for commercial ends, infomercials not only remove the barrier separating commercial and non-commercial content, they recast information as a commodity like any other.

A full understanding of the infomercial, therefore, needs to include the marketing/functional perspective, the underlying commercial (and, arguably, deceptive) nature of its structure and the model of communication it represents. This is especially important because, although some early commentators noted the dangers inherent in the infomercial's integration of advertising and editorial functions (see Blake, 1996; Levine, 1993), the vast majority of infomercial-related literature has been written by practitioners, aficionados and evangelists. Despite their enthusiasm, it is clear that infomercials can have negative consequences—*The Economist* (1992) defined infomercials as 'paid-for bits of extended propaganda'.

In this light, a key issue for critics and scholars has been the degree to which the infomercial may be connected to—or conflated with—other forms of non-traditional advertising. Examples here include: product placement, product tie-ins and masked spokesperson messages (Balasubramanian, 1994, p. 29). Of course, on one level of analysis, the infomercial fits within the same broad category as these forms of promotion or publicity. Thus, in 1994 Siva Balasubramanian could develop a typology of 'hybrid messages', including the infomercial. Ten years later, Brennan Wood (2004) could deploy the infomercial as an all-encompassing term to describe the hybridity that developed as hyper-commercial messages infiltrated mainstream New Zealand television (for another perspective on these developments see Johnson 2011a).

From here, it is relatively obvious that the main area where one must distinguish the infomercial from other forms of non-traditional advertising is with respect to 'branded content'. Over a period that is, broadly, coeval with the modern reintroduction of the infomercial (that is from the early 1990s until the present), branded content (or equivalents such as 'branded entertainment') has developed as a novel category. Here, analysis has focused upon areas such as intensification of product placement techniques (Hudson & Hudson, 2006), opportunities to promote messages via mobile technology (Grainge, 2011), and methods of subverting regulations on advertising to children (Harris et al., 2012). From a current (i.e., 2013) perspective, then, one could argue that the infomercial belongs within the meta-category of 'branded content', as there are many similarities between it and other forms of advertising that fall within that rubric (not least the inherent deception in their formats).

This article, however, is based on data collected contemporaneously in the five years following the arrival of the infomercial on New Zealand screens in 1993. From that historical perspective, it would be an error to proceed towards a later conclusion or resolution; it is with hindsight that branded content has developed its relevance. Further, although some authors place the infomercial within 'branded content', that location may be contestable. It is beyond the scope of this article to develop this position further but I would argue that the infomercial may be distinctive within that category because of its complex formulation and relatively long history. Nevertheless, if one adopts a phenomenological perspective, it is possible to argue that the infomercial, especially as it developed in early 1990s New Zealand, is best conceptualized using the logic of the television networks themselves. For a network, 'infomercial' describes a category of content where the advertiser has purchased the entire 30 or 60 minute timeslot, in which they are free to broadcast any content that is legal and within community standards of taste and decency. Because there are no magazine advertising breaks to sell (as the entire slot has been purchased), there is a tendency to employ direct response techniques (such as direct exhortations to buy the featured product and a toll free number to contact the advertiser) within the broadcast. On this reading, the infomercial as

introduced to New Zealand in the early 1990s is best analyzed in its own terms, and any comparisons with other forms of non-traditional advertising on television fall outside the scope of this article.

## **New Zealand Television in the early 1990s**

In order to understand the background to the introduction of the infomercial on New Zealand screens in 1993, it is vital to appreciate that commercial speech—has been a feature of local broadcasting since its inception in the late 1920s. Despite the tendency of successive governments to treat the national broadcaster as if it were any other government department (Gregory, 1985), advertising has always operated as a central problematic within the system. For instance, private radio operators in the 1920s used their broadcasts as a means to sell sets and promote firms which loaned them music (Day, 1994, pp. 46–47). And, as Laurence Simmons (2004, p. 52) argues, it was clear to politicians, civil servants and the public at large that television, although primarily developed for informative and educational purposes, needed to be partially funded by advertising, even if commercial speech was a ‘necessary evil’ to be controlled.

Accordingly, regulation was strict and functioned to fully separate advertising and editorial content. Television originally screened every night for four hours and Mondays, Fridays, Sundays and half of Wednesdays were commercial free (Smith, 2002). By 1963, New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation (NZBC) television was reaching approximately 300,000 viewers (one-eighth of the population) and by the 1970s, 95 percent of New Zealand homes had at least one television set (Boyd-Bell, 1985). Perhaps as a result, broadcaster and advertiser pressure led to an increase in maximum advertising minutes per hour—9 minutes in 1977 (Smith, 2002, pp. 233–234). That year also saw the institution of five day-a-week advertising (with Fridays and Sundays remaining commercial free), which increased revenue for TV1 by NZ\$3 million in the next financial year (Day, 1994). Importantly, in the late 1970s Treasury officials became uneasy about the state broadcaster having a monopoly on advertising revenue and they began to agitate in favor of reforms to increase competition (Spicer, Powell, & Emanuel, 1996). The most important decision affecting television advertising, however, was the government’s choice not to increase the broadcasting fee during the high inflation period of the late 1970s. This greatly reduced the state broadcaster’s revenue in real terms and increased its reliance on advertising funding. In 1974, the license fee had provided 43 percent of total income. Ten years later, the figure was only 18 percent (Day, 1994, p. 228). This had wide-ranging effects. As Nick Perry (2004) has argued:

The correlate was, of course, not just a continual expansion in the frequency and duration of commercial breaks. This was accompanied by a normalisation of the notion of advertisers as television’s primary clients—a process with far-reaching implications for both program content and program scheduling. (p. 85)

In turn, such developments decreased broadcaster resistance to the integration of advertising and editorial content.

Television advertising continued to grow. In 1980, advertising was permitted until 6am on Sundays, in 1983 all radio and television broadcasters were in favor of instituting seven-day advertising, and in early 1985 commercials were permitted on Fridays (leaving Sundays as the only advertising-free day). After 1986, discussions about the role of advertising on television became enmeshed within the wider issue of broadcasting deregulation. A number of factors underpinned

this issue; by the mid-1980s four long-term trends had greatly increased tensions within the television industry. First, there was a widespread belief that rapid technological change would prove to be extremely expensive. Second, newspaper group-led private sector interest in television increased pressure for regulatory change. Third, a sizeable number of independent professionals who had previously operated on a market basis were demanding access to the state system (Farnsworth, 2002). Finally, there was a belief that Television New Zealand (TVNZ) was too concerned with the needs of producers and dismissive of its audience and commercial realities (Spicer et al., 1996).

Of course, none of these factors could have underpinned the process of deregulation had the Fourth Labour government not been predisposed to such developments. The Minister of Broadcasting responsible for introducing the initial stages of the reforms—Jonathan Hunt, was quite clear about the need to rationalize broadcasting along more market lines, given a general (neo-liberal) climate in which accountability for public monies was crucial (Hunt, 1990). The government's ethos was articulated in unashamedly populist terms—Hunt's successor as Minister of Broadcasting Richard Prebble (1998) argued that after the 'reforms':

Broadcasting will be much better placed to respond to what New Zealanders really want to see and hear, rather than providing programmes that someone else believes they should receive.

This discourse became dominant within broadcasting debates, and is important because it shows the weakness of any non-commercial normative basis for broadcasting policy. It is possible to argue that even at the time of writing there is no workable alternative to the 'free market/paternalistic government' dichotomy in New Zealand (see Thompson, 2011).

The re-orientation of New Zealand television towards market imperatives radically altered traditional understandings of the underlying systems involved. Such developments are not surprising—as Roger Horrocks (2004a) argues, it is reasonable to think that the new elite which dominated New Zealand society after 1984 would seek to alter broadcasting so that their neo-liberal ideology became dominant. There was an immediate impact upon program genres, with documentary being an instructive example. Documentary production moved from an in-house model at TVNZ to one which favored small and medium sized production houses. Subject matter was also affected, political topics were avoided and any 'public service project' focus was actively discouraged (Debrett, 2004).

The neo-liberal framework for broadcasting became entrenched after 1990 under the newly-elected fourth National administration. In a departure from the pattern whereby the major parties restructured broadcasting on assuming power, National continued to view broadcasting as an economic matter. This was partly forced upon the new government, as the initial TV3 operation was forced into bankruptcy in 1991 (largely as a result of TVNZ's ultra-competitive behavior). The only serious option for rescuing private television was to allow foreign companies to own as much of any New Zealand broadcaster as they wished, creating "one of the least regulated broadcasting environments in the world" (Horrocks, 2004b, p. 30).

In summary, therefore, New Zealand television was fundamentally altered after 1989. As Avril Bell (1995) put it:

... there is no local content quota, or requirement to broadcast news or any other "informative" or "educative" programmes. Broadcasters may broadcast anything, as long as it does not contravene the broadcast standards or the censorship laws, and

adheres to the notion of “balance” [set out in section four of The Broadcasting Act 1989]. (p. 186)

Such developments were accepted as necessary and welcome, as John Farnsworth’s (1998) reflection demonstrates:

Even now, in looking back over a decade of change, it is hard to recall just how great the differences were to contemporary circumstances. In television, the Broadcasting Corporation of New Zealand maintained a monopoly on television broadcasting with just two channels ... [b]oth radio and television were characterised by heavy regulation which included not only tightly limited access to the frequency spectrum but restrictions on advertising and broadcasting hours. (p. 7)

In this environment there were few, if any, normative positions from which a critical viewpoint opposed to increasing commercial speech might develop. In fact, within television broadcasting in particular, the late 1980s/early 1990s was characterized by a remarkable acceptance and welcoming of ‘innovative’ methods to use the medium to speak to its viewers as individuated consumers. To understand the specific background to this mindset I now turn to the regulatory environment that pertained in the period.

## **The Regulatory Environment**

There is general agreement that by the early 1990s television in New Zealand was resolutely shaped towards market norms (Bell, 1995; Debrett, 2004; Horrocks, 2004a; Horrocks, 2004b; Hope, 1996; Johnson, 2011a; Johnson & Hope 2001; Johnson & Hope 2004; Perry, 2004; Thompson, 2011). This is not to say, however, that broadcasting issues were apolitical—indeed during the 1990s they remained an important arena within which political and economic debates could be fought. For instance, in 1996 the appointment of the neo-liberal Maurice Williamson to the position of Minister of Communications was welcomed by the advertising industry as a counterweight to ‘interventionist’ New Zealand First’s broadcasting policy.<sup>1</sup> One admiring commentator reviewed Williamson’s input to a TVNZ current affairs debate on the issues:

The present system was working just fine, [Williamson] said. While advocates of public service television talked of public television’s role to inform and entertain, the Minister of Communications said television was simply a product like baked beans. You want public service television? The public was clearly being served by commercial television since, by definition, it delivered programmes that people wanted to watch, he said. (AdMedia, 1997, p. 50)

As Paul Smith, one of the few contemporary specialist ‘media’ journalists observed, “the market rules—even if it embarrasses those in power from time to time” (1993, p. 52).

Such a system also benefited state-owned television, at least financially. In 1996, TVNZ posted an after-tax profit of NZ\$60.56 million and paid government a dividend of NZ\$62.4 million, including “a special payment of \$20 million” (Espiner, 1997). The government could therefore rightly be accused of having “milked TVNZ to pay off overseas debt” (Drinnan, 1996, p. 9). TVNZ variously promoted commercialism as beneficial for themselves, the only practical formula for funding the majority of local programs and as a significant earner for the government. However, TVNZ could not be accused of being value-neutral in this debate. As the chief executive argued in 1997:

The debate over advertising on television must be put into perspective. On the one hand we have the proponents of non-commercial television who conveniently ignore how such a model will be funded from a population of 3.6 million people. On the other we have the vast majority of people who enjoy the wide range of programming offered by commercial television, warts and all. Nobody pretends it is perfect but this model is clearly the most effective and efficient for today's high-cost broadcasting as it is the dominant model worldwide. (Anderson, 1997, p. 17)

Clearly, there was a significant degree of ideological cross-pollination between government and TVNZ management.

CanWest (the Canadian owners of the TV3 network) also benefited from market regulation. Not only was the company able to purchase the TV3 operation from the receivers in 1991, it could use the commercial climate to turn the business around. In 1992, CanWest lost NZ\$35.1 million; the next year they made a small profit of NZ\$1.2 million. In 1994, this had increased to NZ\$4.1 million (Holm, 1995, p. 30). CanWest's New Zealand managing director Gerry Noble explicitly linked this to better relationships with advertisers:

People could commit their advertising budgets to TV3 and know it was not going to disappear within six months ... that was a major reason for the quick turnaround. (quoted in Holm, 1995, p. 30)

Both major networks were therefore highly supportive of 'deregulated' broadcasting in order to maximize revenue and profits. Naturally, this led to a dependence on ratings data, which, at the time, was a particularly blunt tool. This is encapsulated by the problems with one household in Northland that led to wildly incorrect figures (including spectacular ratings for infomercials on TV3) being recorded (AdMedia, 1998).<sup>2</sup> In effect, a ratings system that prioritized gathering information for advertisers was the only substantive measuring tool for the 'popularity' and 'worth'; of a program on both networks (see Lealand, 1997).

The overall policy and regulatory climate of the post 1989 era is perhaps best illustrated by the report of an advisory group on Maori television.<sup>3</sup> The committee believed that the new station could be established with a very small initial grant of NZ\$11 million and annual funding of NZ\$19 million. Astoundingly, it argued that the new channel should aim to become 'financially self-sustaining' and infomercials were the first option mentioned to achieve this (Robertson, 1998). Favoring 'the market' remains the standard industry position. For, instance, the body which speaks for the television industry as a whole—the New Zealand Television Broadcasters' Council (NZTBC) is resolutely in favor of market-regulation (see, for instance its defense of property rights in New Zealand Television Broadcasters' Council, 2004c). Here, the key point is the degree to which the underlying commercial ethos can be determined from the stress on the importance of advertising:

Television advertising is without question the most influential and compelling form of commercial communication available to advertisers on both a national and regional basis ... Advertisers choose TV as their medium of choice for a host of compelling communication reasons. Unlike other mediums in New Zealand, television possesses a multitude of strengths and benefits that set it apart as the most persuasive communication vehicle available. (New Zealand Television Broadcasters' Council, 2004a, pp. 1–2)

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the television networks strongly favored this system and during the 1990s TVNZ and CanWest remained opposed to legislators ‘encroaching’ on their in-house decisions:

There was quite a bit of, a reasonable amount of, latitude in the market here. We’re pretty much self-regulating as a network, or as an industry really. (CanWest spokesperson, personal communication, January 2004)

We tend to be self-regulators and we tend to be very credible in self-regulating. (TVNZ spokesperson, personal communication, November 2003)

Similarly, advertiser groups were resolutely in favor of the ‘hands-off’ model. There is an almost evangelical quality to some of the justifications of the status quo (which of course, fits in with the fervent nature of much neo-liberal belief). As one advertiser representative stated:

One thing you should look at is the Advertising Standards Authority model here, which in my view is the best model in the world. It’s totally industry funded; it’s an excellent model of self-regulation because all the media support the concept of self-regulation. And I believe that the standards are socially and morally acceptable, and it’s based on common-sense moving standards, which you can never achieve with legislation. (...) We are less legislated and better self-regulated. Now, it’s probably easier here; I mean the model is easier to operate because it’s a small country, three major centres, all the media people are in constant contact with one another so it’s much easier to run a total-industry body. I think we’re in step with the rest of the world; in some ways we’re more advanced, in privacy legislation for instance—we were one of the first countries in the world to have a full-blown privacy act, which isn’t a privacy act, incidentally, it’s a privacy of information act—nothing to do with acts, it’s all to do with data, its use. And we were one of the early countries to introduce a suite of human rights legislation. But, from an advertiser’s point of view, we are remarkably legislation free. We are one of the two countries in the world that can advertise direct-to-consumer prescription pharmaceuticals. (...) And as long as we manage that freedom carefully, it keeps a good environment. There’s a good balance of what is socially and morally acceptable and what is commercially desirable. (New Zealand Direct Marketers’ Association spokesperson, personal communication, November 2003)

This highlights the underlying ethos of New Zealand broadcasting in the 1990s—reliance upon ‘common sense’ and ‘credibility’. However, it also illustrates the degree to which a pro-advertiser model is seen as the norm in contradistinction to official external regulators of any kind.

The concept of ‘self-regulation’ was extended to cover infomercials. Of course, there were some specific codes and regulations which applied to the infomercial. These ranged from the professional organizational requirements of the New Zealand Direct Marketing Association (NZDMA), to general industry-wide bodies such as the Broadcasting Standards Authority (BSA) and the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), to the more specific requirements of the Television Commercials Approvals Bureau (TVCAB). However, in every case, the regulations were designed such that the interests of the infomercial marketers were paramount and their business model was respected.

Interestingly, however, the NZDMA (2000) code of practice implicitly recognizes that infomercials have the potential to be deceptive. Principle 2 that “offers will be clear and truthful and not present a product, service or offer in a way that could mislead the consumer” (p. 6), includes guidance specifically relating to infomercials. Sub-principle 2(n) states that

“advertorials/infomercials must be clearly identified as such” (NZDMA, 2000, p. 11). This approach was actively promoted as the optimum situation in opposition to approaches based on more overt legislation. In effect, the viewer was being offered the minimum protection possible, with few, if any, impositions placed on infomercial marketers.

In the 1990s, New Zealanders wishing to complain about a radio or television broadcast were required to contact the broadcaster in the first instance.<sup>4</sup> Then, if they believed the response to be unsatisfactory, they had the right to complain to the BSA, which adjudicated with reference to the original complaint, the broadcaster’s response and the viewer’s submission concerning the inadequacy of the response. It could be argued that this system was biased in the favor of the broadcasters, especially given the fact that “[a] programme which does not adhere to the letter of a particular guideline may not be in breach, depending on the programme’s overall compliance with the Standards” (NZTBC, 2004b, p. 1).

Importantly, the BSA had “no jurisdiction over advertisements” (BSA, 2001, p. 2). However, guideline 8a of the Free-To-Air TV Code stated that “broadcasters should ensure that programme material and advertising material are clearly distinguishable” (BSA, 2001, p. 7). By contrast, the (commercial) Radio Code contains specific reference to infomercials—guideline 7f states that “advertising and infomercials shall be clearly distinguishable from other programme material” (BSA, 2004, p. 13). Infomercials are included in the Radio Code because it has a principle relating to ‘social responsibility’. The Free-To-Air TV Code has no such principle.

In this period, advertisements on commercial radio and television both fell under the jurisdiction of the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and its adjudicating body, the Advertising Standards Complaints Board (ASCB).<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the ASA and ASCB were the only agents that had any effective jurisdiction over complaints regarding infomercial broadcasts (Advertising Standards Authority Inc./Advertising Standards Complaints Board, 2003). Tellingly, the ASA saw no reason to differentiate between infomercials and other forms of advertising:

Infomercials are advertisements and therefore they must comply with the codes [that apply to any advertisement]. (...) In other words, we don’t look at the length of the advertisement, we just look at whether it’s an ad or not and some of the new ads are down to five seconds. Because one of the issues, as no doubt you’ve found out, is that in New Zealand there’s no restriction on the length of an ad—only that there should be no more than sixty minutes in the hour. (Glen Wiggs, Executive Director, Advertising Standards Authority, personal communication, December 2003)

In effect, most complaints to the ASA referred to specific claims concerning the promotion of alcohol or therapeutic (i.e., medicinal) products (Advertising Standards Authority Inc./Advertising Standards Complaints Board, 2003, pp. 15–18, 37–40). Specific codes which needed to be adhered to in every instance applied for all products in these categories. In 1994, a Canterbury TV infomercial *Welcome to Canterbury* was investigated by the ASCB to determine if its features of alcohol-related tourist attractions breached the liquor code (The Independent, 1994b). Interestingly, the ASCB held a special meeting before judging the case because, “the rules weren’t framed for these sorts of ads” (Glenn Wiggs quoted in The Independent, 1994b, p. 13). The solution was to prohibit “advertorial for bars or wine bars (where drinking is the primary activity). However, they ruled that an advertorial piece on a hotel or restaurant (where people go to sleep or eat, and alcohol is drunk only as a secondary activity) was not a liquor ad, and so could be run in the morning slot”



(The Independent, 1994a). The following year the ASCB rejected a complaint about the *Ab Isolator* infomercial and justified its decision according to its view of prevailing general attitudes:

The chairman was of the opinion that the complainant was entitled to his opinion regarding the style of presentation, but that there was nothing in the advertisement which would be considered offensive to a significant section of the community. (Petard, 1995, p. 17)

The last form of regulation to which infomercials could be subjected was the TVCAB. This was not an autonomous body but was established by the main broadcasters to provide a quasi-independent service. The TVCAB vetted all advertisements before they could be accepted by a station and charged the advertiser a fee to do so. It was not necessarily seen as a particularly useful service:

New Zealand has a station-granted monopoly to a company in Auckland who act as chief censor and bottle washer. (Infomercial company CEO, personal communication, September 2003)

Importantly, TVCAB was almost invariably the last step in the compliance process:

We would check whatever pertained to the product (...) Electrical ones were really hard because you had lots of checks for electrical products. When I'd do anything with the skincare or the cosmetics there was lots chemical things to make sure that applied to all the rules, and especially I'd think about if I was going to sell it in Australia as well and I'd want to cover all them at the same time. (...) Just from the media's point of view, all the team, all the marketers knew [the] Fair Trading Act, that kind of stuff so when we put it together we knew what we could and couldn't say. And then we had to go through TVCAB and they gave the final "Yes we will/no we won't put it on air" (...) We would negotiate sometimes—could we substantiate that, yes we can, (...) and we'd show them (...) or why are you saying this (...) hardly ever you got an outright "no you can't". Infomercial company marketing manager, personal communication, November 2003

TVCAB approval often had implications for the infomercial broadcast itself. On one level, this related to specific concerns with the therapeutic or alcohol codes so that, for instance, alcohol stains on carpet needed to come from a glass, not a bottle (Infomercial company CEO, personal communication, September 2003). On another, however, it concerned finer points about the transition from the American to the New Zealand environment and was part of the local identity of the infomercial (and the product):

We cut out of the American voice saying 'Wow, how fantastic!' into 'and if you call right now...' and it cuts into a Kiwi accent and we'd finish off the end of the ad and put a Kiwi price on it and Kiwi graphics. I'd also have to put New Zealand legals over it, so, if they were talking about pounds I'd put 'a pound is .453 kilos'. (Infomercial company video editor, personal communication, September 2003)

There was also an awful lot of re-editing done of fitness and weight loss products because of the difference between the New Zealand law on advertising weight loss and fitness products and the US regulations on it (...) it's the cross-over between what's therapeutic and what isn't. (Infomercial company CEO, personal communication, September 2003)

On occasions, this would mean that some infomercials could not be broadcast; some shows were ‘gutted because of the claims that couldn’t be made’ (Infomercial company CEO, personal communication, September 2003). Overall, however, the TVCAB was not designed to overly impede the infomercial industry. The approval process was flexible, and infomercial companies were able to evolve strategies that could work the system to their advantage (Infomercial company product manager, personal communication, September 2003).<sup>6</sup>

In general, therefore, although there were several stages through which an infomercial needed to pass before it could be broadcast, and a process through which misleading advertising could be dealt with, the regulatory environment in New Zealand in the 1990s was particularly well suited to the growth of the infomercial as a form of broadcasting. There was no substantive mechanism to critique such broadcasting and very few, if any, specific regulations that applied. Additionally, developments within the television system itself worked to favor the introduction of the infomercial.

## Preconditions for the Infomercial

It would be unrealistic to expect that the infomercial form (or, indeed, any novel form of television) would emerge without any pre-existing supportive factors.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, two important issues stand out. First, there was the ever-increasing willingness of the networks to search for program sponsorship to augment spot advertising. Second, there was a nascent direct response television industry, which, although it initially focused on short-form television commercials, was ideally placed to develop the longer infomercial form.

### *Program Sponsorship on Television*

In the 1970s and 1980s private television pioneers had attempted to introduce a more commercial basis for programming and these attempts bear some relation to the infomercial. In 1982, Northern Television broadcast a program called *Good Morning!* during airtime they had leased from TVNZ. This was deliberately designed to subvert advertising regulations through a system of subcontracting (Cocker, 1996, p. 139). Self-funding television was not received favorably, however, and much of the adverse comment centered on the blurring of advertising and editorial content. As one critic argued:

It’s when Northern Television starts pulling out the plugs that the show really goes down the drain. A host of products, services and entities were quite shamelessly plugged on *Good Morning!*—and some tied in surprisingly well with legitimate ads during the commercial breaks. (Clifton, 1982, p. 33)

*Good Morning!* did not fulfill the expectations of its advertisers, who believed regulation was ‘restrictive’ and therefore that broadcasting deregulation was necessary (Infomercial company CEO, personal communication, September 2003). It is also very clear that *Good Morning!* did not offer the main advantages of an infomercial: near-instant information on commercial effectiveness and near-total control over the advertising message. Importantly, two underlying technology-related factors needed for infomercial broadcasting—widespread credit card use and the ability to assign different telephone numbers to specific commercials were not in evidence in 1982.

Broadcasting deregulation was expressly designed to increase commercial logics within Television New Zealand. In the early 1990s TVNZ attempted to develop an advertorial style of

programming with *New Zealand Today*, a mid-morning magazine show. This was textually similar to advertorial journalism—companies provided ‘consideration’ for access to the show. However, *New Zealand Today* did not feature direct response elements (either within the “program” or via the sales of advertorial slots to infomercial marketing companies). This had two consequences. First, the producers did not have a pre-existing commercial ‘partner’ that could underwrite a proportion of production costs. Second, the wider televisual environment was one in which the infomercial had not influenced viewer perceptions and expectations. Put simply, *New Zealand Today* was too different from the accepted standards of mainstream ‘television’. Unsurprisingly, then, the program was neither a critical nor a ratings success, a fact that one of the presenters attributed to the program’s advertorial basis (see Holgate, 1999). *New Zealand Today* could therefore be seen as reflecting an idea whose time had not yet come.

This did not mean, however, that broadcasters were unable to increase commercial forms of broadcasting. The preferred mode was to build upon pre-existing models and ‘relationships’. In the first instance, TVNZ looked to increase sponsorship and established a unit to manage such deals. As part of this drive TVNZ produced a booklet and video called ‘Television sponsorship—the Ultimate Guide’ for prospective companies and advertising agencies (Teutenberg, 1994). This was remarkably successful. In 1992, sponsorship revenue for TVNZ had doubled and approached the global average of 4% of total revenue for the channel (Teutenberg, 1994, p. 14). In 1996, the ASB Bank paid TVNZ NZ\$ 2.5 million to sponsor the evening news updates on TV1 for twenty months. This deal is important for two reasons. First, it allowed the ASB spokesperson to be directly linked to the news (AdMedia, 1996). Second, this single deal is equivalent to 4.128 percent of TVNZ’s 1996 after-tax profit.

Given the figures involved, there is no doubt that such developments were motivated by commercial considerations. Equally, it is clear that the emergence of TV3 was pivotal in normalizing increasing sponsor involvement. Although TVNZ had welcomed sponsorship, the private network was the main innovator in the generation of sponsor-driven revenue:

What happened in the early days was TV3 had an independent outsourcing budget of (...) three hundred and thirty thousand New Zealand dollars for the entire year. Now, what we did—that was one series we could make—we made six series in the first year and we did that by making shows called *Fresh Up In The Deep End* [laughs].<sup>8</sup> And every show we made, basically what we did is we tipped in, say twenty grand per ep—which is bugger all money when you write this – but we got twenty grand an ep out of the sponsor. We made a sports show by getting thirty thousand an episode out of Mobil and we called it *Mobil Sport* and we had a sports show. That to a certain extent was because of necessity—if we wanted to make shows, we didn’t have money—same thing happened at TV2 in the early days. (Independent producer, personal communication, November 2003)

Travel shows were at the forefront of the integration of sponsors’ commercial messages and editorial programming. For instance, tourist groups were able to gain editorial coverage in *Air New Zealand Holiday* on TV1 for NZ\$5000 (see Fountain, 1995). On TV3 *Ansett Time of Your Life* was saturated with sponsored items and plugs and Geoff Steven, TV3 production chief, was reported as saying that his network had no set standards for determining where the line between editorial and advertising should be drawn.<sup>9</sup> The only consideration he raised was the potential for viewers to object (Marketing, 1996). Another executive was reported as saying that saturation or overkill

would only be reached when viewers stopped watching as a result of too much sponsorship (Teutenberg, 1994).

By the mid-1990s, therefore, sponsorship had become a common feature of New Zealand television and was evident across all genres. In April 1998 Nissan started sponsorship of *Holmes*, the main current affairs show on TV1 (Heeringa, 1998). Magazine-style current affairs shows such as *Sixty Minutes* and *20/20* were also sponsored and Telstra (a telecommunications company) sponsored the early morning business news on TV1 from August 1997 (Gordon, 1997a). The networks believed that, although there was an obvious commercial benefit for themselves and the sponsor, these developments were able to be organized such that viewers' interests remained paramount:

Sponsorship in its purest form should not happen unless it maintains the integrity for the viewer of what they are watching (...) Our philosophy has started from deriving revenue, trying to keep viewer satisfaction, to trying to add value or enhance viewer value. (TVNZ spokesperson, personal communication, November 2003)

It is impossible to quantify the exact extent of sponsorship on New Zealand television because of the paucity of archival material (and because of the reluctance of the networks to reveal their commercial practices). However, it is possible to determine the degree to which named sponsored programs became popularized throughout the 1990s by examining the schedule pages of the *New Zealand Listener*.

Named sponsored programs are those that are structured around normal spot advertising breaks *and* have sufficient input from a sponsor to be branded as belonging to that sponsor. Such programs include sport (live broadcasts and magazine shows), light entertainment, travel shows, children's programming, lifestyle shows and home improvement programs. However, broadly speaking, named sponsored programs fall into two main categories. First, broadcasters can directly derive extra revenue from associating their program with a named sponsor. The sponsorship deal is therefore within the purview of the broadcaster's sales and marketing operation. An example would be *Montana Sunday Theatre*, which screened on TV1 in the early 1990s and was the vehicle through which 'quality' shows could be delivered without a decrease in commercial income. Second, broadcasters can receive subsidized programming at a substantially reduced cost because its producers have organized commercial support. The sponsorship deal is therefore only partially within the purview of the network.<sup>10</sup> An example would be *Fresh Up In The Deep End*, which, as shown previously, was a vehicle through which CanWest could effectively subcontract part of its local programming remit. Other programs, such as *Nissan Gone Fishin'*,<sup>11</sup> were sponsored to such a degree that they were delivered free of charge to the network. In these cases, broadcasters were doubly advantaged; not only did they receive free programming, they also enjoyed the opportunity cost of not 'spending' a portion of their program quota on the timeslots.

Of course, there were some programs that blurred the slightly artificial distinction made here. However, the salient point is that in any case the broadcaster was deriving specific economic benefits from named sponsorship which were greater than those derived from 'normal' sponsorship deals—most obviously they could generate extra revenue from the sale of naming rights. This shows the degree to which market logics permeated New Zealand television in the early 1990s; virtually nothing was permitted to interfere with the networks' property right to generate income from their main asset (the schedule). However, the popularity of named sponsored programs also points to the dilemma faced by the broadcasters. They were cognizant of the need to screen (some)

‘quality’ shows which would not be sufficiently supported by mainstream advertising and of the need to increase levels of local content.

Figures 1 and 2 show the cyclical nature of such programming. The figures here also illustrate the general acceptance of such programming and its importance across the television industry. The most obvious feature here is the degree to which the summer sport season (December to February/March) was dominated by named sponsored programs. In practice, this was mainly due to live cricket coverage, although significant motor racing coverage also features.<sup>12</sup>

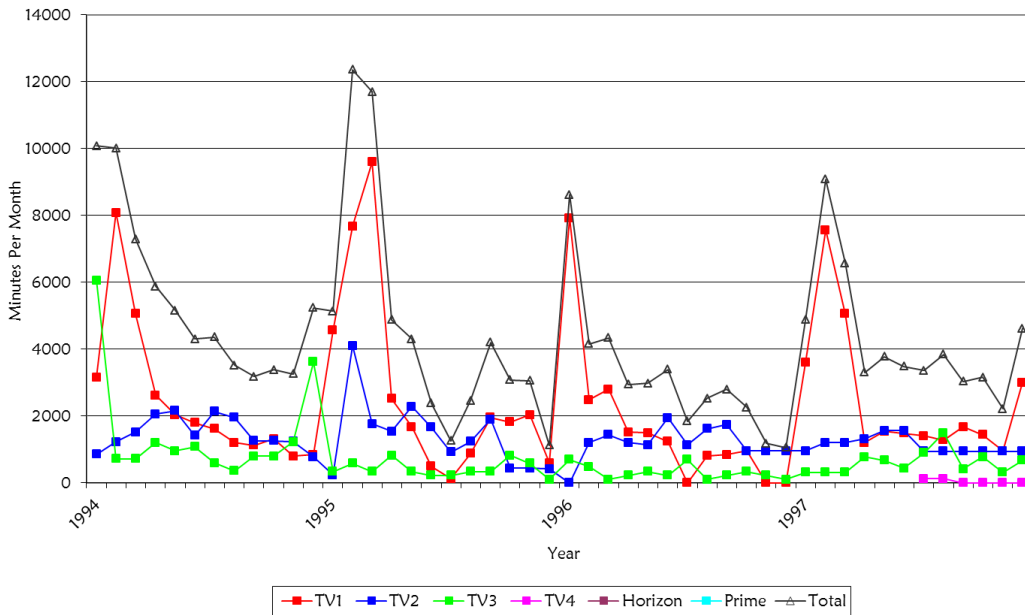


Figure 1. Named Sponsored Programs 1994–1997: Minutes per month by channel

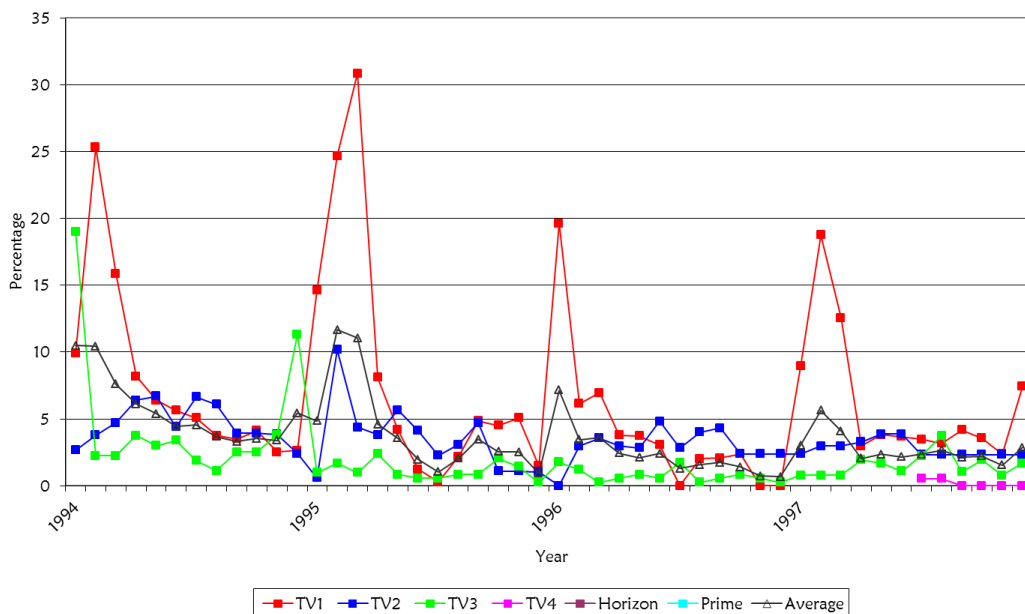
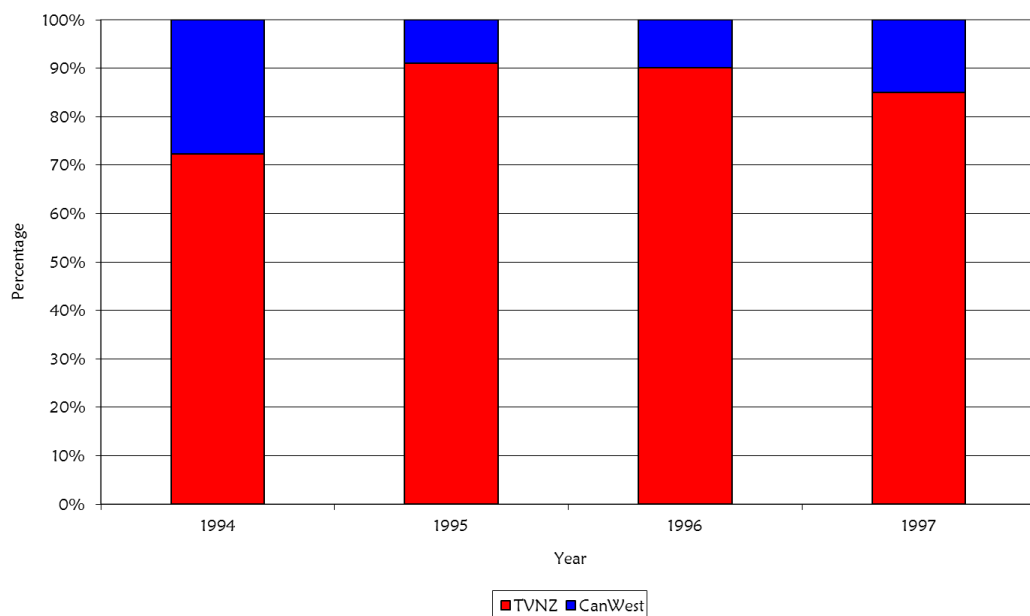


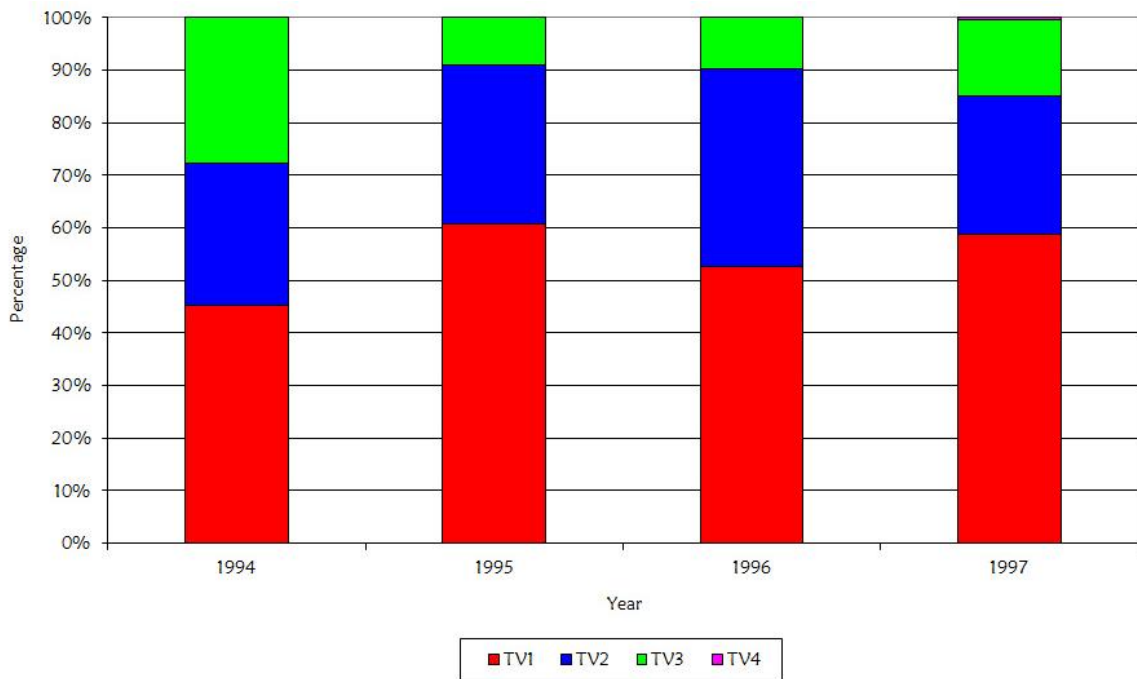
Figure 2. Named Sponsored Programs 1994–1997: Percentage of total broadcast time per month by channel

The most important fact here is the skew towards TVNZ. As Figure 3 below shows, TVNZ regularly enjoyed over 80 percent of the total amount of named sponsorship revenue. Despite the dominance of sport, which itself is due to the length of cricket coverage (at least 9 hours on a full day's play), it is obvious from Figures 3 and 4 that TV1 and TV2 were the preferred destination for sponsors seeking naming rights to programs.<sup>13</sup> Of course, the dominance of TVNZ channels is also reflected in the fact that there were significantly more named sponsored programs on TV1 and TV2 than on TV3 or TV4; TV1 was by far the dominant channel.<sup>14</sup> Figure 4 below shows the extent of the skew towards TV1.

The dominance of TVNZ and TV1 in particular highlights two vital factors when considering the emergence of the infomercial. First, by 1994 TVNZ had established almost total supremacy in the advertising market in New Zealand.<sup>15</sup> Second, TVNZ was prepared to include broadcasting which was funded via non-spot revenues on both its channels. In fact, the skew towards TV1, with its target of older, more affluent audiences, shows the degree to which advertising logics had penetrated TVNZ. By highlighting named sponsored programming on its flagship channel TVNZ was implicitly agreeing with the advertising industry evaluation of its audiences. TV2 viewers were responding adequately to spot advertising; TV1 viewers required additional 'help' (in the form of named sponsored programs) when responding to commercial messages. This is further evidence of the extent to which market logics dominated TVNZ in the 1990s as it strove to generate profits for its 'shareholder', the government. This focus, coupled with the need for TV3 revenue by CanWest, was highly important for the nascent direct response television industry.



**Figure 3.** Named Sponsored Programs 1994–1997: Percentage of total by network



**Figure 4.** Named Sponsored Programs 1994–1997: Percentage of total by channel

### *The Nascent Direct Response Television Industry*

Analysis of the infomercial industry in New Zealand is hampered by two issues. First, it is a very small part of the overall retail sector. Accordingly, there is little hard data on the precise nature of the industry. This is a continuation of the situation with regard to direct marketing and catalogue sales:

It's partly to do with the size of the market. Because if we all put our numbers in, we could then sit there and say "Well hang on, I know that there's only three people advertising this product category in New Zealand in mail order and I know that's my chunk so ...". (Infomercial company CEO, personal communication, September 2003)

Second, as in the USA, there is the issue of fraud. In the early 1990s there were several unethical operations that used direct response advertising but were unable to establish their businesses, ironically, because of the size of New Zealand:

We had some cowboys come in and try it but because of the smallness of the market they generally got burned off pretty quick and disappeared. (Infomercial company CEO, personal communication, September 2003)

Overall, therefore, an analysis of the direct response television industry necessarily starts with that of the most successful local firm. This was Prestige Marketing and the two main players were Susan Barnes<sup>16</sup> and Paul Meier.

In a parallel with the American Direct Response Television industry (which grew, in large part, from demonstration-oriented selling), Barnes and Meier began by selling their first products (massage pillows and *Natural Glow* face powder) at shopping malls in the early 1990s. They then filmed their first commercial for *Natural Glow* and ran the operation from home. Two commercials followed—for the *Massage Pillow* and the *Suzanne Clip*, before the business was established 'properly' (Hansen, 1996, pp. 54–55). Both had previous experience as product demonstrators, with Barnes spending 17 years in that industry in the UK before her emigration to New Zealand (Gregg,

1996, p. 3). Meier provided the majority of the business—he owned 80 percent of Prestige Marketing, and Barnes was the spokes model and company ‘face’ (Sunday Star Times, 1996). Originally, commentators believed infomercials would not feature prominently in New Zealand:

New Zealand, which despite deregulation still has a limited number of channels, has been slow to step on the infomercial bandwagon. Despite pressure from marketing companies, TVNZ and TV3 are very reluctant to introduce infomercials onto their channels, fearing the bastardisation of their own programming (The Independent, 1993, p. 32).

Nonetheless, infomercials began to become legitimate topics of business/media/advertising concern by the middle of 1993 (Brettkelly, 1993), and CanWest first screened infomercials later that year (New Zealand Herald, 1993). This was almost certainly an experiment designed to determine if audiences would accept such broadcasting and was motivated by the need for revenue. Accordingly, infomercials were broadcast in TV3’s ‘traditional advertising down-time between 9.30am and 10.30am and after midnight on Tuesdays and Fridays’ (Portanger, 1993, p. 46).

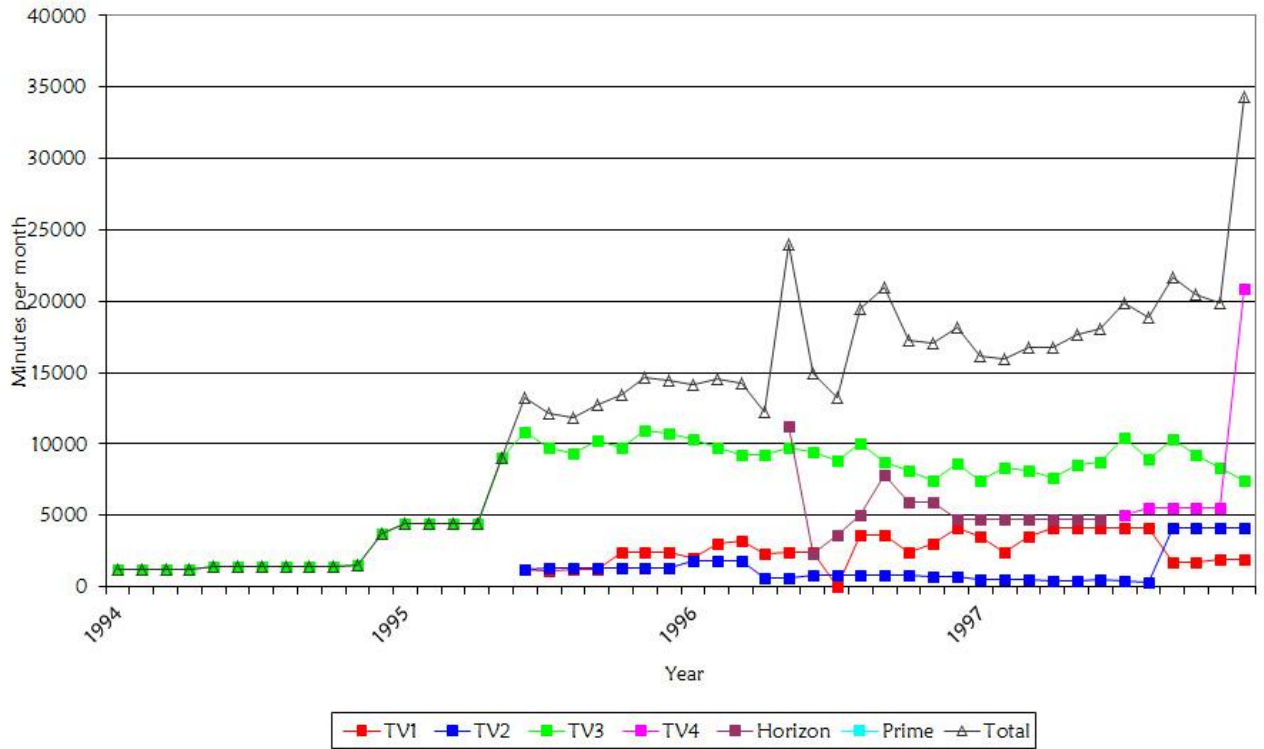
The first local infomercial—Prestige Marketing’s Natural Glow, screened in July 1994 (Marketing Magazine, 1994). Although one reason to produce local infomercials was to offset the lack of American ‘product’ (Brettkelly, 1994), there was considerable interest in New Zealand-made infomercials (New Zealand Herald, 1994). The growing cachet of the infomercial was sealed in 1994 when the country’s leading business newspaper explicitly endorsed direct marketing as a part of the commercial mainstream (National Business Review, 1994, p. 39). The next year a mainstream advertising company—Pearson Davis, announced that it was establishing a division to specifically focus on infomercial business (Madow, 1995). In late 1995, Prestige Marketing’s main competitor Global Direct Sales went bankrupt, and Prestige moved to buy out their licenses and obligations (Riordan, 1995). This was seen as a key business decision and Prestige Marketing’s overall operation grew to include a separate Australian company—Suzanne Paul, and franchises in countries around the Pacific Rim (Gregg, 1996, Ninness, 1996).

As in the USA, the infomercial model was hyped to a certain degree by New Zealand marketers, (see Madow, 1994) in part due to perceptions about the reaction of ‘Generation X’ to brand advertising (Hillgrove, 1995). Some television industry insiders even believed infomercials would completely replace traditional advertising and “become programming” (Mike Hutcheson quoted in Frewen, 1996, p. 23). Although this could be interpreted as typical marketing evangelism, the early trends of infomercial broadcast levels show that such a view was not necessarily fanciful. As Figures 5 and 6 show, TV3 was scheduling 4,440 minutes (or 74 hours) per month of infomercial time by January 1995, and this accounted for 12.89 percent of the total broadcasting output of the channel. TVNZ channels were also attractive to infomercial marketing companies. By December 1995, TV1 was screening 2400 minutes (40 hours) per month of infomercial time and TV2 was screening 1300 minutes (21 hours and 40 minutes). This accounted for 5.95 percent and 3.22 percent of the total broadcasting output of each channel respectively.

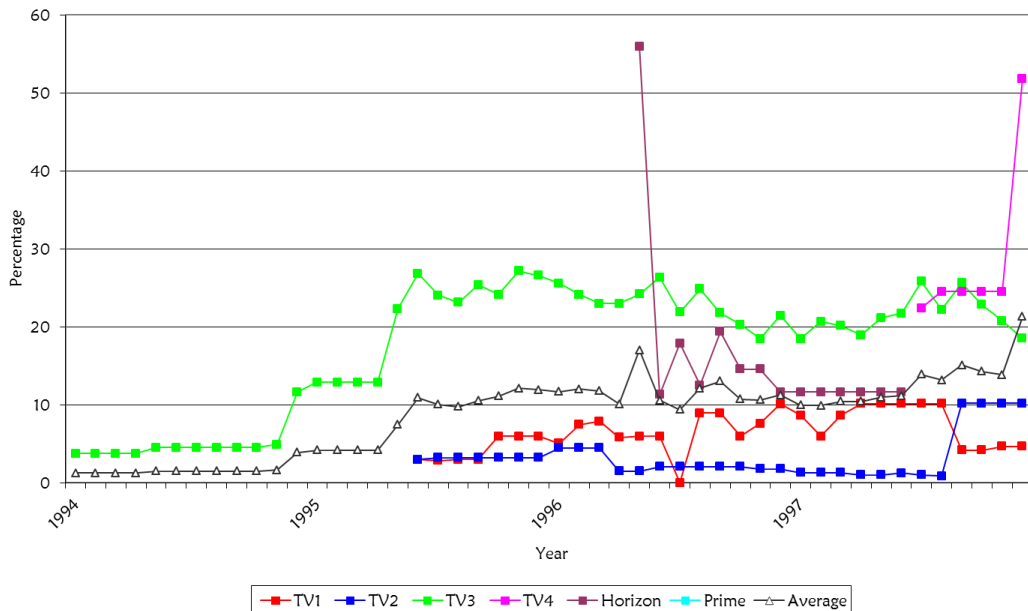
Newer channels featured even higher levels of infomercial penetration. In 1996, on Horizon after an initial high of 11280 minutes (188 hours) per month or 55.95 percent of total broadcasting, infomercials came to occupy 4680 minutes (78 hours) per month or 11.61 percent of total broadcasting time. By December 1997, TV4 was broadcasting 20900 minutes (348 hours and 20 minutes) of infomercial per month. This amounted to 51.84 percent of total broadcasting time.



Overall, the entry of TV4 meant that infomercials averaged 21.29 percent of total broadcasting time on all free-to-air channels by December 1997.<sup>17</sup>



**Figure 5.** Infomercial Broadcast Levels 1994–1997: Minutes per month by channel

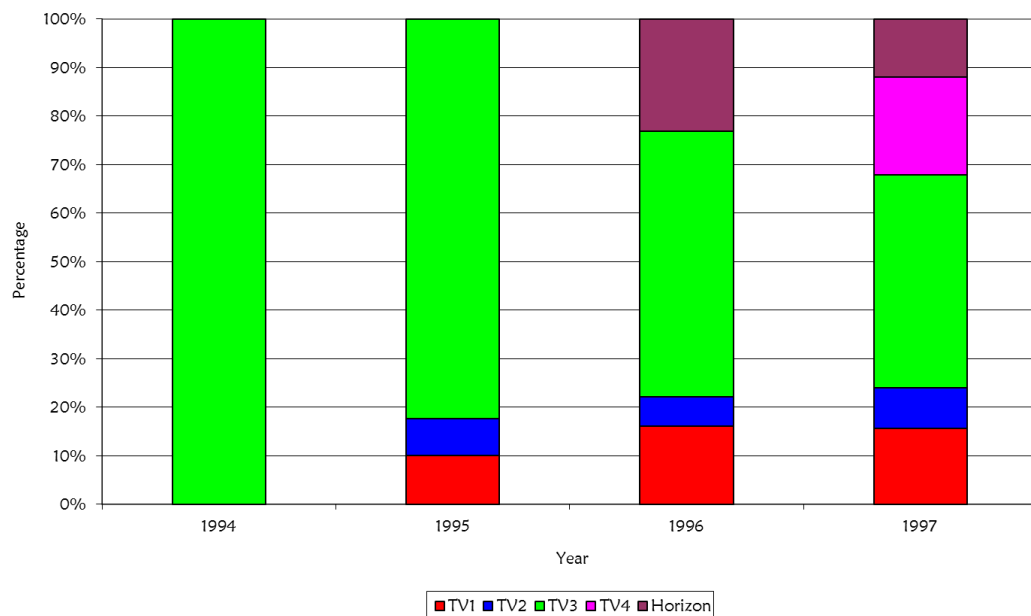


**Figure 6.** Infomercial Broadcast Levels 1994–1997: Percentage of total broadcast time per month by channel

As Figure 7 shows, newer channels clearly dominated infomercial bookings.<sup>18</sup> This is almost certainly because they were less likely to attract sufficient audiences to make spot advertising more attractive than infomercial ‘programming’. Similarly, newer channels would charge lower rates for

infomercial time than more established operators. This is because the residual audiences (i.e., those watching out of habit) on TVNZ, for example, would be greater than on the CanWest or Horizon stations.

Taken together, Figures 5, 6 and 7 highlight the view that television in New Zealand was ‘over-subscribed’ in the early 1990s. If infomercial bookings do generate more income than spot advertising during similar slots, it is reasonable to suppose, from the data represented here, that there was insufficient mainstream advertising to support all of the channels that the networks wanted to operate. The motivating factors for every network to screen infomercials were closely related to their position within the television ‘market’—TVNZ was motivated by the need to generate as much revenue as possible; CanWest to become profitable; and Horizon to establish a sustainable business model for a regional network. The cumulative effect was that television in New Zealand was systemically predisposed to infomercials across all networks (whatever their official designation or ownership model). This predisposition, of course, would mean little if viewers were not willing to purchase the goods advertised.



**Figure 7.** Infomercials 1994–1997: Percentage of total by channel

## Initial Attractions of the Infomercial Form

One key factor was necessary to confirm the emergence of the infomercial—audience members had to order the advertised product in sufficient numbers for the infomercial to be economically viable for both advertiser and broadcaster. Here, the most obvious, and often overlooked, reason why infomercials were successful initially is that they were an unusual means of participating in consumer society. As one industry insider argued:

It was new—it was something that New Zealanders hadn’t been exposed to before, so it was a new way of shopping and New Zealanders traditionally are good consumers—we like to shop, that’s our good pastime,—so to be able to shop in the comfort of your home was a novel way of shopping. (Infomercial company marketing executive, personal communication, October 2003)

Similarly, when compared to citizens of other developed nations, New Zealanders were relatively comfortable when ordering products by distance. Although there is little hard data (due to the size of the New Zealand market and the general lack of research about DRTV), direct marketing professionals believe that in the 1990s 'New Zealand response rates tended to be higher than their American or UK counterparts' (NZDMA spokesperson, personal communication, November 2003).

As mentioned previously, the ability to 'respond' is based upon two technological 'advances'. First, credit cards enable infomercial marketing companies to streamline and rationalize their business. Second, telephone technology needs to be sufficiently complex to allow a variety of distinct numbers to be used in specific infomercials (or commercials) and to allow for a call center to be established. With respect to credit cards, New Zealanders increasingly favored credit-based consumption patterns over the 1990s (see Kearns, Murphy, & Friesen, 2001). There is no evidence that such increases are linked to the infomercial; however, credit cards were vital for infomercial marketing companies, largely because they are the most cost-effective option and, crucially, the only realistic device for instituting time payments.<sup>19</sup>

With respect to call centers, increasing computer use (and decreasing costs) in the early 1990s meant that marketing departments were able to perform database and call center operations in-house. This forced external companies to offer consultancy services instead of controlling the entire operation themselves (Marketing Magazine, 1993). In Europe, this meant that by 1995 a single company could operate a multi-national free phone number, with multi-lingual call center staff (Marketing Magazine, 1995b). That same year a New Zealand company—VisionNet, launched with promises that technological advances would allow over 10,000 calls per hour to be processed (Marketing Magazine, 1995a). Crucially, VisionNet was directly targeting the DRTV business (McVey, 1995). Choosing to use in-house call centers was standard in the infomercial industry and was directly related to sales; in December 1995 the major international home shopping network QVC tripled the size of its call center as a result of increasing orders (Marketing Magazine, 1995c). The growing acceptance of call centers was also demonstrated by the NZDMA decision to offer a certified course in 'call center management' (Marketing Magazine, 1996, p. 43). In terms of technology, call centers were seen as a prime opportunity for telecommunications companies to attract lucrative business contracts, (Miller, 1996)<sup>20</sup>. By October 1996, Telecom was promoting its ability to offer 'computer telephony integration' to businesses searching for lower overheads and increased customer satisfaction (Harrison, 1996). Finally, the NZDMA included specific information about establishing a call center as part of its 'How to Guide to Direct Marketing' in April 1997 (Gordon, 1997b).

Overall, the degree to which infomercials came to represent certain sub-cultural tropes is remarkable:

It hit our screens and we were kind of transfixed by infomercials a little bit and maybe a little bit obsessed with them—these new gadgets coming in that perhaps we'd never seen prior to that and especially from America (...) the excitement of the newness of it got us all; I mean even [husband's name] bought things—in 94 I think he bought me a Christmas present off an infomercial and I got it and just went 'Ooh you're so sad'. (Infomercial company product manager, personal communication, September 2003)

Although this comment pre-figures the importance of the infomercial in a cultural sense (most notably as a marker of an unsophisticated consumer), it also shows how even middle income professionals could be attracted to infomercial-advertised products. This may appear counter-

intuitive; infomercials are generally assumed to be aimed at the lower end of the market (as its role as a parodic device implicitly shows). However, the presence of an apparently endless array of relatively cheap consumer goods on television screens seems to have been attractive to many members of New Zealand society in the mid-1990s.

## Conclusion

The main reasons for the emergence of the infomercial in New Zealand in the mid-1990s are political and economic and three key factors were apparent. First, the regulatory environment was such that there were no substantive barriers to introducing novel forms of commercial speech. Second, industry preconditions for infomercial production were in place and the appeal of the infomercial for the networks was easily grasped. Third, infomercials could offer a range of novel products via a relatively new ‘shopping’ method. The result was that infomercials met surprisingly little opposition and quickly flourished as an advertising strategy and, more importantly, as a form of television. This is especially important given that previous attempts to introduce infomercial-style broadcasting had been unsuccessful. Of course, none of these developments were inevitable; it cannot be argued that the infomercial was ‘destined’ to appear on New Zealand screens or, more importantly, that it would ‘naturally’ become so central.

On one level, the reasons behind the acceptance and popularity of the infomercial with marketers, broadcasters and, even, viewers are easily explained. Drawing on the work of Atkinson (1994), Kelsey (1995a, 1995b, 1999) and Jesson (1999), it could be argued that the infomercial marks a particular nadir in New Zealand society’s inability to resist a key ideological precept of neo-liberal capitalism, the individuated consumer as the primary unit of society. Here, one can posit the lack of critical resistance to infomercial broadcasting as a consequence of the general inadequacy of wider public debate concerning arts, culture and intellectual life. Without a normative standpoint to oppose hyper-commercial broadcasting from a non-elitist position, opponents of infomercials simply could not mobilize a nuanced critique. For instance, it would have been relatively easy to counter the argument that, since infomercials did attract (some) viewers, they must meet some ‘need’ of the audience. Given the fact, for instance, that three, four or even five channels programmed infomercials in the same timeslots during the 1990s, any person who wanted their television on for companionship, diversion or distraction had no choice but to ‘rationally consume’ their message.

Extending this point and related arguments would develop a standard critical position where the infomercial and its underlying logics are understood as signifiers of a media system that has been completely infiltrated by neo-liberal beliefs and practices. And, in large part, that position is correct—without the institutional opportunities brought about by the neo-liberal deregulation of broadcasting, infomercials could not have screened in New Zealand, nor would broadcasters have had the need to augment traditional revenue streams by selling otherwise uneconomic timeslots.

On another level, however, the emergence of the infomercial also marks a significant point in New Zealand’s televisual history. Here, the underlying purpose of the infomercial—to unify advertising and editorial content for commercial ends is crucial (see Johnson & Hope, 2004, Johnson, 2011). Structurally, infomercial broadcasting is based on complete blocks of 30 or 60 minutes in which the advertiser has complete control over information, entertainment and commercial messages (within the law and in compliance with any regulations that might apply). The standard pattern of commercial television, whereby 8 to 12 minute blocks of information and/or

entertainment (the programs) are interrupted by commercial messages (the advertising) is, of course, significantly different. Not only does that standard model functionally separate different types of television content, it positions the viewer within a discourse where that separation is normatively correct. The emergence of the infomercial marked an opportunity to recast that positioning, with the focus on integration, not separation, on synthesis, not disconnection. The ideal viewer could then be constructed as one who welcomed, and even enjoyed, the ever-increasing blurring between commercial and non-commercial speech. Opportunities to move the logics of the infomercial into mainstream broadcasting soon followed. Rather than an experimental and unusual form of broadcasting, the infomercial acted as a precursor of ever-more 'innovative' television, where the power of advertisers and sponsors increased (with the connivance or encouragement of the broadcaster), and the viewer could only engage with the messages on her screens as an active, individuated consumer. On this reading of New Zealand television history, December 1993 can be seen as a significant pivot point: once the infomercial had emerged and been accepted its logics were unassailable. Further, without the political and economic will to reintroduce legislative and regulatory barriers on advertising, those logics will remain central.

## Endnotes

1. New Zealand First is a populist center-right party that advocated a number of initiatives that would have ‘intervened’ within the broadcasting market (such as anti-siphoning regulations concerning sport on pay television). The National and New Zealand First parties constituted the first coalition government under proportional representation after the change of electoral system in 1996.
2. There was some confusion over whether the problem was technical (a miswired Peoplemeter), organizational (misaligned rabbit ears) or demographic (children using the main television in the household).
3. This was in response to the realization that the Maori language needed to be promoted via broadcasting as part of the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi.
4. The only exception is if the complaint involves a breach of privacy.
5. Accordingly, the exclusion of a social responsibility principle in relation to free-to-air television is not only particularly revealing about the norms of television culture in New Zealand, it also deliberately excludes any possibility of controlling infomercial or advertorial messages on terrestrial stations. In effect, the only real regulator was the ASA.
6. The most obvious of these was to get ‘pre-approval’ of all scripts and tweak the final edited product a little.
7. Of course, it is not the case that such factors inevitably led to the introduction of the infomercial in New Zealand. Rather, they point to the potential for this to occur, especially when the overall regulatory climate is also considered.
8. This was a magazine show in which two sports stars encountered a variety of unusual or interesting situations by being thrown ‘in the deep end’. The ‘entertainment’ was largely derived from their ineptitude and ‘blokey’ humor.
9. The blurring of advertising and editorial was exacerbated by the fact that one of the show’s presenters featured in commercials for Ansett airlines.
10. Although, in practice the network would retain ultimate decision-making control over whether a particular series was broadcast.
11. This was a very cheap program in which an avid fisherman visited a succession of sites where he enjoined locals to help him catch the region’s native fish. The program was saturated with sponsor’s logos, prizes and verbal references.
12. Sport was included in this analysis for two reasons. First, it was the main mechanism through which named sponsorships were introduced and normalized in New Zealand television. Second, the penetration of commercial logics within such broadcasting was remarkable. In the case of live cricket, successive sponsors (the Bank of New Zealand and the National Bank) thoroughly permeated successive channels (TV1 and TV3). Presenters constantly referred to ‘the BNZ/National Bank series, wore branded clothing, and were forbidden from mentioning competing brands. Each bank employed a former great as its ‘ambassador’ as part of the commentary team and was able to sponsor awards and prizes. Sponsors’ logos were included in almost every shot of the coverage, both as part of the advertising at the ground and through the use of on-screen graphics. Additionally, every advertising break featured commercials for the named sponsor. Finally, the schedule pages of the New Zealand Listener referred to ‘The BNZ Series’ as the main title. Given this degree of sponsor input, it is clearly necessary to include sports programming in this analysis.

13. These figures show the proportions of the total amount of named sponsored programs that were screened on every network and channel respectively.
14. As explained previously, TV3 pioneered the local generation of such programming. However, TVNZ was significantly more adept at extracting sponsor revenue and delivering target audience niches.
15. In fact, the aggression with which TVNZ sought to dominate its rival was a major factor explaining the failure of the initial TV3 venture and the difficulties CanWest encountered in re-establishing the network.
16. Barnes is the original name of Suzanne Paul, which, confusingly, was the initial “brand” identity of Prestige Marketing. Barnes became identified as Suzanne Paul via the company’s initial commercials and adopted the moniker as her professional name. In mid-1996, she changed her personal name to Suzanne and remains ‘Suzanne Paul’ in New Zealand.
17. Infomercials first accounted for more than one tenth of all broadcasting time when they averaged 10.93 percent of the total broadcasting on all free-to-air channels in June 1995—when TVNZ began screening them.
18. These figures show the proportions of the total amount of infomercials that were screened on every network and channel respectively.
19. These allow for the true cost of a product to be spread over as many as twelve months and are very important for infomercial marketing companies; they work to lower the apparent cost and allow people from lower socio-economic groups to enter into the consumption experience of the infomercial.
20. In June 1996, Telstra NZ chief executive Peter Williamson was reported as saying that “The options are endless ... I don’t think there is anything we cannot offer” (quoted in Miller 1996, p. 35). In New Zealand a range of factors ensure that domestic (local) telephone services are practically free. Telecommunications companies therefore focused upon business customers and data services to generate revenues.

## **Author Bio**

Rosser Johnson is Chair of the University Ethics Committee and Associate Dean Postgraduate in the Faculty of Design & Creative Technologies at AUT University. He holds a PhD from the University of Westminster and is currently the Television Area Chair for the Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand. His research interests include promotional culture, media and religion and media depictions of mental ill-health.

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