

# Maximising Quality Programming

**Jane Wrightson, Chief Executive, NZ on Air**

Malo e lelei, kia ora tatou

The concept of quality in broadcasting has exercised finer minds than mine since the beginning of the medium. It's a marvelous debate to start around a dinner table but only if you want your guests to be at war by the time coffee is served.

We have an hour to discuss this – my panelists were originally threatened by Elizabeth wanting them to talk about copyright and piracy. But I'm not sure this is going to be any easier.

What we'll do is that I will provide a few observations up front from an NZ perspective, invite my colleagues to do the same, then we'll hopefully start a bit of a conversation with you from the floor. Even though this is the last day, and nearly the last session, I'm hopeful you'll all still be fired up from this great conference to want to contribute some ideas to debate.

First I should tell you a little about NZ On Air, legal name the Broadcasting Commission. We were created in 1989 as part of a deregulation of broadcasting that remains one of the most radical in the world. It's fashionable in some quarters in NZ to criticise that deregulation. But, as a small country with a limited taxation and investment pool, that has only ever had a national non-commercial radio public broadcaster, and where the main television public broadcaster has always had to primarily survive on advertising revenue, deregulation has largely served us well.

NZ On Air is the independent funding intervention in that system. We're funded by Government to support production and broadcast of local content – New Zealand stories, songs and perspectives. We allocate around \$130 million each year to support a fully non commercial Radio NZ, various community radio stations, archiving, NZ music and a range of television programme funding that is mostly contestable. Namely, the best idea wins. And hard genres like drama and documentary, and programmes for minority audiences, are protected.

Our Board of six members makes the funding decisions. While they are appointed by the Minister of Broadcasting, they are independent from Government. Thus the accountability of broadcasters and programme makers for the use of, and output from public funding, is well separated from central Government. That editorial insulation from Government is vital and protects both Minister and broadcaster.

So, much of our work centres around identifying gaps in the programme schedules. We support genres that are rarely viable commercially – and seek broadcast proposals for funding or from institutions that need a public subsidy to exist.

This is a unique response to a quality issue. When faced with cheap imported programmes or cheap-ish local fare, usually of the popular factual or vox-pop type, compared to expensive production like drama or investigative documentary, where both are likely to have similar commercial value in terms of audience share, it's usually economically irrational for a broadcaster to invest more than the minimum for the same financial return.

Some countries can afford a large non-commercial public broadcaster that offers different fare in a vibrant commercial marketplace. As everyone in this room knows, smaller countries have more complex issues around achieving diversity - or even existence - of local content.

New Zealand's answer - a funding pool using both ring-fenced and contestable practices - charges a single agency to look at range and quality of programming across the whole broadcast spectrum, and apply funding to the gaps.

There's never enough funding of course. But to give you an idea of the effectiveness, in the year before NZ On Air began there was less than 2,000 hours of local content on our TV screens. Last year there was around 11,000 hours. NZ On Air certainly doesn't take credit for all those hours - but it does take credit for ensuring quality local content has been placed, and remains high on, the agenda of broadcasting issues.

We're going digital as well. Along with other online and mobile possibilities we have funded a major archival content website which enables people all over the world (with broadband) to stream NZ programmes. Check out [www.nzonscreen.com](http://www.nzonscreen.com)

In considering which ideas - and broadcasters - may be worthy funding recipients, the notion of quality is always high on the criteria list, along with audience and diversity. But the definition of quality is rarely agreed.

In 2007 NZ On Air commissioned an academic from Unitec in Auckland, Peter Thompson, to tell us how quality measures might be developed. He needed to take nearly 200 pages to tell us. A short summary of the report is on our website <http://www.nzonair.govt.nz/research.php>.

What is useful here, perhaps, are the author's findings from an extensive international literature review. The review revealed that thinking on broadcast quality tends to fall into six dimensions:

- quality in **media institutions** - ownership, regulatory and legislative intervention and frameworks, value to citizens and consumers

- quality in **production** – production capacity, technical standards, craft and artistic skills, general professionalism
- quality in **content** – programming content, range of genres and perspectives
- quality in **distribution** – technical signal quality, range and accessibility
- quality in **audience** – share, ratings, reach and demographic segmentation
- quality in **reception** – audience response and appreciation, its engagement, empowerment, cultural and democratic enhancement

So depending on whether you are an engineer, a programmer, a programme maker, a marketer, a bureaucrat or an audience researcher, at least one of these dimensions will exercise your thinking.

As a content person, I'm interested in quality of programme making, of content and in its reception by the audience. I'm not remotely interested in a definition of quality that, for example, only concentrates on highbrow programmes or content that is meant to be 'good for you' or those with budgets the size of Ben Hur. I may personally loathe a programme we decide to fund, but if it is loved by an audience and is made with care and appropriate skill, that's good enough for me.

I'm much more interested in assessing the mix of output, in a diversity of output that provides for a range of audiences – young and old, fashionable and square, indigenous and immigrant, information-seekers and entertainment junkies. In smaller countries the main step will be establishing and maintaining a good local news service.

So my definition of programme quality is that it should be **fit for purpose**. Namely there are different expectations for a costume drama and a soap, for investigative current affairs and popular factual programmes, for independent local news from small communities. But they should all aspire to be **good of their type** and to be **well received** by their target audience. And on a really good day they will stretch us, by showing some technical or artistic innovation, or cultural or political or intellectual challenge.