



New Zealand's TV revolution

Paul Smith, *Revolution in the Air!* Addison Wesley Longman, Auckland, 1996, 170pp.

Paul Smith began writing a column called 'Media Watch' for New Zealand's National Business Review in 1988, the same year the New Zealand Cabinet decided to overhaul the regulation of its broadcasting industry.

The previous year, the Broadcasting Tribunal had awarded a licence to operate New Zealand's first privately-owned television station, to a company called TV3. It proved to be one of the Tribunal's last major acts. A month after TV3 went to air late in 1989, there was no Broadcasting Tribunal.

Smith has been writing about New Zealand's media ever since, although his column has now moved to the Listener. *Revolution in the Air!* is his account of the transformation of New Zealand's electronic media, from the institutional shuffling of the 1970s, through the deregulation of the late 1980s to the relative stability of the mid-1990s.

It's an invaluable policy history, the kind that could only be written by someone who has lived through it. He has the Cabinet documents, the committee reports, the submissions and the personal interviews with key players.

Smith is generous where he finds individuals and organisations deserving of praise - for instance, Julian Mounter, the Chief Executive of TVNZ from 1986, under whom the organisation 'confronted and finally profited from change'. But overall, the book finds the results of New Zealand's reforms troubling.

Central amongst Smith's concerns is the overwhelming com-

mercialisation of the country's broadcast media. It is a twin paradox: in the world's most liberal broadcasting market, three-quarters of the prime time audience typically watches state-owned television channels. But this is state television with a difference, with 11-14 minutes per hour of advertising in prime time (Australia's FACTS Code permits an average of 13 minutes per hour, up to a maximum of 15 minutes in any one hour).

Decisions with lasting effects are often made in response to particular policy crises

Smith is particularly worried about the impact this commercialisation has had on the news media. The volume of current affairs has grown, but 'a jaundiced attitude towards the unconventional and the alternative remain[s] ... [J]ournalism is a deeply conservative profession in New Zealand'. He cites research from Auckland University lecturer Joe Atkinson, that shows the average length of soundbites in TVNZ's news reduced from 15.5 seconds in 1988 to less than 8 seconds in 1993, and the average length of news items was reduced by 40 seconds (although he acknowledges this trend occurred overseas also).

These are no small matters of style. The media, Smith argues, were implicated in the political and economic transformation of New Zealand from the mid-1980s. 'New Zealand's increasingly limp news media not only supported, but helped promote ideologically driven reforms. The fact that their architects came in suits rather than cloth caps was no excuse, but it helped illustrate how big business

could sit comfortably with a commercialised media's aims'.

New Zealand's reforms show that although the rhetoric of market-based reforms is often about what new players will be empowered to do, the treatment of existing players can be at least as significant. New Zealand's industry might now be very different if TVNZ's two channels had been separated into competing state-owned enterprises in 1988.

Decisions with lasting effects are often made in response to particular policy crises. The removal of foreign ownership restrictions was argued to be essential if TV3 was to be recapitalised and thus continue to provide effective competition in New Zealand television (it was acquired by the Canadian Canwest in 1991). The foreign partners who also came into the pay TV operation, Sky, says Smith, were central to its capacity to acquire rights to the All Black tour of South Africa in 1992 - the first, politically-sensitive breach in the free availability of the country's national sporting religion to TV viewers.

The book sets out useful tables of key milestones in the development of policy and the industry. One criticism is that it is very television-centred - it would have been interesting to read more of the story of New Zealand radio.

But that would be another book. At a time when Australians are having to re-examine their broadcasting structures - the ABC, media ownership and control - *Revolution in the Air!* is an excellent, readable and timely account of the way they've done it on the other side of the Tasman. □

Jock Given