

The Influence of the Infomercial in New Zealand

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New Zealand television networks introduced infomercials (30 minute advertisements designed to appear as if they are programmes) in late 1993. Although infomercials date from the 1950s in the USA, they were unknown in this country and quickly came to be seen as a peculiarly “intense” form of hyper-commercial broadcasting. This article aims to sketch out the cultural importance of the infomercial by analysing historical published primary sources (from the specialist and general press) as they reflect the views and opinions that resulted from the introduction of the infomercial. Specifically, it outlines the three main areas where that cultural importance was located. It concludes by analysing the significance of the cultural impact of the infomercial, both within broadcasting and within wider society.

INFOMERCIALS AND FREE TO AIR TELEVISION IN NEW ZEALAND

In the USA the infomercial form became widespread in the mid-1980s after the Federal Communication Commission removed the statutory maximum number of advertising minutes per hour of broadcast time.¹ Cable channels in particular required low-cost content to fill their schedules, and infomercials were attractive because they were delivered at no cost to the station. Typically, an infomercial promoted a product that was easily demonstrated, visually straightforward and relatively inexpensive.

In New Zealand the Fourth Labour Government deregulated broadcasting along very similar lines to the changes in the USA. In short, the end result was a system wherein the commercial nostrums of the market were raised to an unchallengeable dominance and public service ideals were sidelined or ignored. By the end of the 1980s New Zealand's was "one of the least regulated broadcasting environments in the world."² The result was a system where:

... 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".³

In practice, this meant that television networks were in the, perhaps enviable, position where the only practical limit on the amount of commercial material they could broadcast was the audience's willingness to continue watching. Here, it is important to note that infomercials were often found in the same timeslots across most, if not all, free-to-air channels. This makes perfect sense; infomercials were scheduled when audience numbers were too low to attract 'normal' commercial advertising – predominantly late nights and weekday mornings. Viewers were therefore not offered meaningful choice about what they could watch; if they wanted the television on during those times (for relaxation purposes perhaps), they had to watch the infomercial. Of course, it is also possible that (some) viewers chose to watch infomercials for their novelty or because they offered readily available solutions to everyday problems.

As with any new cultural product, the infomercial can be expected to have an influence within a local context (television, as

broadly understood) and a wider frame of reference (society as a whole). This influence and, specifically, how it manifests at the local and the wider level, can then be analysed and the significance of the infomercial "read back" into the context of the time.

In order to unpack the influence of the infomercial, it is necessary to outline the method through which data were collected. Two databases – *Newstext* and *Newsindex* – were searched for the term "infomercial" featuring in the text of the article (these databases covered New Zealand newspaper and magazine titles). Once the articles were identified, they were then accessed via the hard copy of each title. Duplicate articles were removed (duplicates were found because several newspapers might carry the same story). The search period was from 1993 to 2006.

Analysis of the articles showed that the influence of the infomercial manifested in three distinct areas. To some extent these areas overlapped chronologically; however, each began to be covered in the press at distinct times during the sample period.

CRITICISMS OF BROADCASTING

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the extent of broadcasting "reform" after 1988, the infomercial was used as a cultural reference to connote certain – usually negative – results of deregulated broadcasting. The initial outlet was reviews of the infomercial format itself, with its style and content being used as a marker of a peculiar kind of consumerist Americanism:

Here's great news for all trash TV addicts - trash TV can perform a valuable public service function. How? you may ask. Because it can tell you, through the Infomercial Hour, of many essential products you didn't know you needed until the TV told you.⁴

Then there are the infomercials already filling up "dead" time on TV One and TV3. From cursory - and not to be repeated - research, infomercials seem to be made in Californian malls, around Californian pools or on Californian beaches. They consist of male and female presenters with glazed eyes and perpetual grins atop tanned and perfectly toned bodies telling

audiences of unspontaneously enthusiastic Hollywood hopefuls down on their luck about an extraordinary range of chrome and leather contraptions to flatten tummies, sharpen pectorals, tighten bottoms, and add rippling muscles to the upper arms. The fact that Americans remain among the most obese people anywhere may not be good news for advertisers depending on an infomercial future.⁵

The majority of cultural references linking television and infomercials were similarly negative. For instance, in 1994 the *New Zealand Listener* annual reader's poll found that the least favourite TV commercials were "any containing the phrase "But Wait there's more!" (33%),"⁶ and one of the magazine's annual 'awards' – for most irritating show – was named 'The Suzanne Clip Award' after one of the first local products to be advertised on an infomercial.⁷ However, the term 'infomercial' was not only used with reference to the worst excesses of the new mediascape. It was also used when referring to examples of 'public service' television – or what passed for it in New Zealand in the 1990s. The most obvious example was in March 1994 when the production house Communicado made ten infomercials as part of a campaign against domestic violence (the infomercials supported an hour-long documentary which screened on TV One).⁸

Diana Wichtel – the *New Zealand Listener* television critic – probably offered the most consistent referencing of the infomercial with respect to the wider television system. In 1995 she explicitly linked the infomercial to the inability of New Zealand broadcasting to fulfil non-commercial objectives in her criticisms of the Auckland version of the short-lived Horizon network:

A commercial interlude? Ye Gods, what have we been watching, *Macbeth*? Although, when it comes to tales told by idiots full of sound and fury, signifying nothing, you can't go past the infomercial. They say regional television is the ideal vehicle for expressing a sense of local identity. After a few hours of watching the amazing Slice Buster slice, and muscle-bound goons demonstrating the incredible Gravity Edge with free padded V bar, the sense you get of the identity of the Greater Auckland region is that it is much like being trapped in K-Mart.⁹

Wichtel deployed a similar analysis when reviewing the TVNZ's flagship news programme, *One News*:

Then there are the teasers for the weather, sport, *Holmes*, *Sportsnight* ... The first few nights there was so much selling of product going on you half expected to see Richard and Judy come back after the break wearing blue blockers and demonstrating the amazing abdominiser.¹⁰

Of course, such sentiments are noticeable primarily because they were unusual given the pro-market climate in New Zealand in the early 1990s and it is reasonable to assume that the *New Zealand Listener* was the only mainstream publication where these views would be expected to feature (because this was the only publication that regularly featured points of view that were critical of the growing neo-liberal consensus).

Nonetheless, as that decade progressed other critical voices within the New Zealand media began to develop the idea that the infomercial form might typify major shortcomings of the broadcasting system. Freelance journalists like Tom Frewen (on radio) and Paul Smith (in print) tried to mount a sustained critique of the consequences of the infomercial within the public sphere. Initially, this critique continued the link between infomercials and the composition of New Zealand broadcasting; for instance, Smith introduced his commentary on the new report by the New Zealand Institute of Economic Affairs (commissioned by the Ministry of Commerce, which, tellingly, was the government department "responsible" for TVNZ at the time):

Eek! Another broadcasting review. Run for the hills. But wait, as they say in infomercials, there's more, much more. The latest review gives real value for money, especially if you're short of a laugh.¹¹

However, by the end of the 1990s, Smith was writing infomercial-themed criticisms that were explicitly linked to the deregulation of broadcasting and the infomercial was used as an example of the worst excesses of such policies.¹²

Other, less critical, voices aired more positive cultural references connecting the infomercial and the wider television system. In 2003 Julie Christie, founder of Touchdown Productions, identified the key 1990s trend as 'aspiration', which, again, implicitly links to the infomercial form, with its relentless focus on self-improvement.¹³ That same year the most well-known infomercial catchphrase – "But Wait! There's More!" – was named as the second 'best ever' advertisement tag line.¹⁴ And the infomercial continued to be a marker of "bad" television:

In the US or the UK, the late-night schedules offer edgy comedy, talkshows and comment. Here, we tend to get repeats of *Mercy Peak* and shows either too bad or too gay to play earlier. TV3 after midnight is just scary; Yea, though I walk through a valley of infomercials, I shall fear no evil, because some dotty televangelist will be along at dawn.¹⁵

The infomercial was also mobilised as a point of critique about the wider television system. For instance, the question of advertiser influence on TVNZ channels (largely played out as ‘the amount of advertising on television’) was satirised through using the most famous infomercial tagline ‘But Wait! There’s More!’:

Figure 1: Detail of ‘The Week’ cartoon, *New Zealand Herald*, February 18 2006.¹⁶



CONSUMER RIGHTS

After television (as broadly understood), the second major area in which infomercials came to be referenced within New Zealand culture in the 1990s was when the popular press publicised infomercials and / or infomercial companies as part of a consumer rights discourse (often in response to unethical or fraudulent business practices).¹⁷ In 1998 Prestige Marketing was criticised for radio advertisements that featured unsubstantiated promotion of two ranges of vitamin pills – Super Fruit Plex and Super Veggie Plex – as “an easier way to get the benefits of fresh fruit and vegetables than the health sector’s preferred five plus a day.”¹⁸ In 1999 one infomercial – for the *Taebo* martial arts workout – was so successful at entering the public consciousness that many fitness centres developed their own versions of the routine.¹⁹ Although Quantum Prestige (the rights holder of *Taebo*) attempted to stop non-licensed versions,²⁰ it became clear that the routines themselves were not subject to copyright (although the name was) and the infomercial business was, ironically, accusing mainstream operations of the kinds of business practices they pioneered (that is, marketing substantively the same product as a competitor by using a different frontperson and / or name).²¹

There were, however, a number of more serious complaints about infomercial practices involving members of the public. As the national daily press reported, in April 2001:

Television consumer programme Fair Go broadcast a complaint this month from a man with cerebral palsy who found Mega Memory ineffective, but could not get a refund. His money was refunded only after Fair Go pursued his complaint.²²

That same year a company part-owned by John Banks was reprimanded by the Advertising Standards Complaints Board (ASCB) for its claim that the “potentiated” bee pollen it marketed was superior to traditional rivals.²³ This is an interesting (and unusual) instance where infomercial jargon was found to be misleading. A year later Banks was censured by the ASCB for appearing in his own infomercial and posing as a satisfied customer without acknowledging that he owned fifty per cent of the company.²⁴

PARODY

The first parody of infomercial style advertising came in late 1995 when Saatchi & Saatchi promoted a variety of beer brands in commercials which featured “a stereotypical beer drinker using take-home packs of beer as exercise accessories.”²⁵ This was widely recognised as a creative and popular move within the advertising industry.²⁶ Light-hearted cultural visibility continued for the infomercial: in 1995 Prestige Marketing won the *Fair Go* worst advertisement award for the *Ab Isolator*,²⁷ in the 1996 general election campaign party political broadcasts were reviewed as “infomercials”,²⁸ and by 1997 commentators had begun to use the catchphrase “But Wait! There’s More!” to connote over-the-top products, services or events.²⁹ The important point here is that infomercial marketers and spokespeople exploited these opportunities (for instance, by accepting ‘worst advertisement’ awards) and promoted their business in a knowingly ironic manner.

By the later 1990s, however, this strategy seemed to have reached the end of its usefulness and cultural referencing of the infomercial became more hard-edged. In 1998 one of the few serious current events programmes on TV One – *Extreme Close Up* – was critiqued by one reviewer as ‘god’s infomercial’³⁰ and the nightly soap opera *Shortland Street* featured a storyline in which an infomercial was used to promote the hospital after a new ‘appearance medicine’ (i.e. plastic surgery) doctor joins the staff. Within the narrative of the show characters were unproblematically excited by the prospect of appearing in the infomercial.³¹ More mainstream uses of the infomercial as a marker of kitsch or parody continued throughout the 1990s. For instance, during the 1999 election campaign a journalist’s associating of the televised leaders’ debates with ‘infomercial’ seemed to be designed to refer to the innate untrustworthiness of politicians.³² Despite the growing negativity associated with the infomercial, at least one organisation decided to consciously associate itself with the format through parody.

The Mental Health Foundation launched the first of its themed awareness weeks in 2000. This was the *absolutely nothing* promotion, and the goal was to encourage people to take daily micro-breaks to reduce stress.³³ Two years later the campaign was augmented with a series of short infomercials that played on TVNZ (as part of its community support policy) and were also available via the World Wide Web.³⁴ At least three separate commercials were produced, each of

which parodied different aspects of the infomercial genre (for instance, one featured a doctor who woodenly recited the benefits of doing “absolutely nothing”). These commercials were a clear parody of the infomercial style and used a number of obvious “infomercial” features:

The grabber opening – “Are you stressed out?”

Solving the problem with the product – the “marvellous new system”

Commodifying well-being through use of the product – “make you look years younger”

Relatively unsophisticated on-screen graphics

Abrupt sound drop outs

An ‘ordinary’ person (who waves to the ‘audience’)

Picture-in-picture framing

Before and after photographs

Interestingly, the presenter (“Bob Byers”) was played by an actor who had fronted the local version of the infomercial for *Motor Up* (an engine oil additive).

Apart from the obvious point that using a parody of the infomercial form for a generalist, public service announcement indicates that the Mental Health Foundation thought that its target audience would ‘know’ infomercials sufficiently to receive the underlying message, the interesting issue for my purposes is that this was a particularly short-lived campaign. By the middle of 2003 the Mental Health Foundation had removed the commercials from its web site and had linked www.absolutelynothing.co.nz (which had been that the host page for the infomercials) back to the standard campaigns page on at web site (see Figure 2).

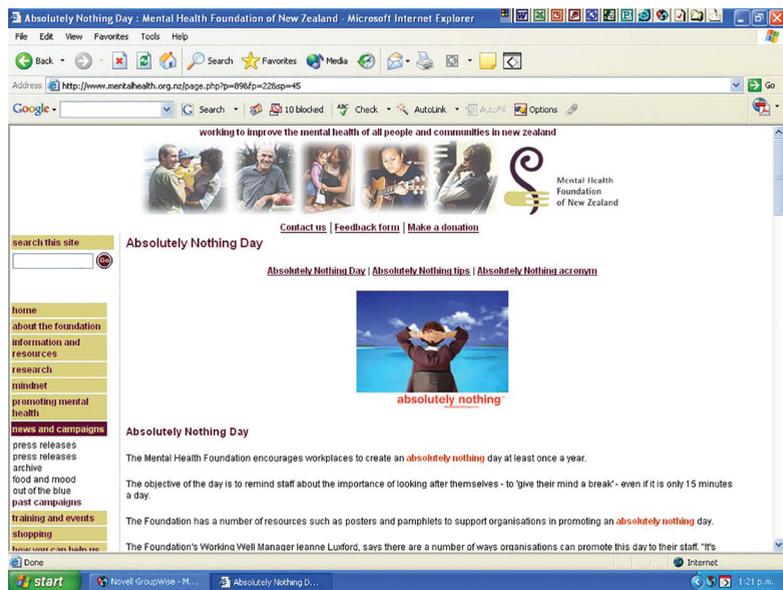


Figure 2: Absolutely Nothing webpage.³⁵

The Mental Health Foundation was not willing to participate in this research and it was clear that the organisation had no interest in discussing or justifying its decision to use an infomercial parody for this campaign.³⁶ It is almost certain that the decision to use a mock infomercial style for this advertising was not taken lightly; however, it is probable that the campaign was pulled because of growing negative reactions to the infomercial form.

DISCUSSION

On the surface the infomercial is an unlikely form of television to be particularly influential. It is generally cheaply made, tonally strident and qualitatively “low end”. Nonetheless, in New Zealand from late 1993 the infomercial became an important cultural marker both within television as broadly understood and within wider society. This is important for three reasons. First, in the arenas where the infomercial became deployed within criticisms of broadcasting, that deployment occurred on two distinct levels. On the one hand, the term itself became synonymous with particular, often cheaply made and / or overly enthusiastic, approaches to making programmes. On the other, however, it became possible to see the use of the term infomercial as

an attempt to begin and extend a line of argument about the wider broadcasting system. Here, one can point to those commentators and critics who tried to explicate the infomercial as symptomatic of the state of television in New Zealand after its deregulation. Given the general lack of wider public interest in such debates, this was perhaps a less successful or obvious influence of the infomercial; nevertheless, the critiques that did develop around it show some evidence of a rational argument being made within the public sphere.

Second, the practices of infomercial marketing companies necessitated some discussions about New Zealand’s consumer rights legislation and business practices within it. Here, there is a degree of hypocrisy (or at least double standards) in play. Infomercial marketing companies were very quick to resort to using the law to protect their interests and products when others sought to copy or adapt them (as in the *Taebo* case). Of course, this makes perfect sense; no business is likely to simply acquiesce when it is threatened by another. But the less than perfectly ethical practices of the infomercial marketing companies themselves (such as a business owner appearing in an advertisement for his own product) opened them up to considerable criticism. For this reason, the infomercial’s association with questionable or even illegal tactics and strategies manifested early in its history in New Zealand and this association remained and became more entrenched over time.

Third, the infomercial became sufficiently well known, perhaps even ubiquitous, that it could be used as the basis for parody and cultural appropriation. In the earlier 1990s this was limited to using the infomercial’s catchphrases and visual tropes within other forms of advertising, and to thereby play with genre expectations. By the later 1990s and into the 2000s, however, the parodic use of the infomercial had become more culturally important. Here, the Mental Health Foundation’s decision to base an entire public campaign on the infomercial form is particularly instructive. In seeking to use and build on infomercial structures and techniques the Mental Health Foundation, perhaps unwittingly, drew attention to the inherent contradiction with using such a marginal cultural form. Simply put, the potential benefits of referencing the infomercial form (such as its over-the-top style and relentlessly positive tone) were outweighed by its negative connotations.

Overall, therefore, the influence of the infomercial in New Zealand can be best described as negative. This is not to say that the infomercial was in itself a “bad thing”; rather, the cultural reactions to the form quickly coalesced around its undesirable and even deleterious

consequences. Although comparisons are beyond the scope of this article, the overall negativity attached to the infomercial in New Zealand was not unusual by international standards. What was unusual is the degree to which the infomercial became located within everyday discourses. Yet this is not surprising given the degree to which New Zealand broadcasting, and particularly television, was opened up to commercial logics during the 1990s. In an environment where there were (and continue to be) so few limits on the use of commercial speech the infomercial is, arguably, the most useful and the most honest metaphor for the mediascape as a whole.

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