In January 2003, the New York Times feted New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark’s staunch support of her country’s art and culture, and made favorable comparisons between the level of arts funding provided by her government and the monies provided to American arts and culture through the National Endowment for the Arts. Clark was pictured on the set of Lord of the Rings, the phenomenally successful American-funded film trilogy produced in New Zealand. The New Zealand government had used the Lord of the Rings success to encourage tourism and to sell New Zealand as a location for foreign film production, but Clark emphasized that she was committed to supporting truly local film-makers, too, pointing to the establishment of a new Film Production Fund. While the Prime Minister’s commitment to “promoting and exporting” New Zealand culture through “both the indigenous culture and the contemporary performing and visual arts” in conjunction with the financial resources her government had devoted to this goal seemed to bode well for New Zealand’s sense of cultural identity, another newspaper report a few days later presented a completely contradictory view. An article in the French daily Libération detailing French concerns about the effect of the free trade agreement on their cinema and television industries cited New Zealand as the worst-case scenario for what could happen if cultural “markets” were deregulated. According to a spokesperson for a group advocating protection of French cinema and broadcasting, New Zealand’s television industry had been “destroyed” by the influx of American productions, and current efforts to repair the damage were too late.

These differing accounts of the role of film and television in New Zealand speak to the drastic economic and social changes that have been wrought in New Zealand in the past two decades. New Zealand is singled out as an apocalyptic example by groups campaigning against the “free market” deregulation of national cinema and television industries because of its whole-hearted, decade-long embrace, starting in 1984, of neo-liberal free market economic policies in almost every aspect of its economy, including its cultural industries. In television, these policies had caused a “revolution” in which the two state-owned channels had been forced to compete against new, mostly foreign-owned outlets, including a third national network, a subscription network owned by Rupert Murdoch, and a proliferation of cable and UHF channels.

Critics argue that this new regime has led to a hyper-commercialized television environment with unheard of levels of advertising, and no commitment to public service broadcasting from even the state-owned channels. On the other hand, Helen Clark’s account of her government’s investment in local New Zealand culture reflects not necessarily a retreat from this brave new free-market world, but a belief that the government could assist in mitigating the less desirable aspects of deregulation and help local culture flourish in its new global context. While it is common for analysis of New Zealand’s broadcasting landscape to go back to the 1980s when broadcasting was first deregulated, the roots of debates about broad-
casting and New Zealand cultural identity go far deeper. To understand these debates it is instructive to understand that they are continuing cultural conversations, which speak not just to questions of government policy or broadcasting structure, but also to broad ideas of national identity.

In the case of television, these debates actually predated the introduction of the medium. Ambivalence about the potential effect on the national “way of life”—especially if dominated by American programs—delayed television’s New Zealand debut until 1960, more than a decade after the United States and Britain and years after many other countries. This lack of enthusiasm appeared to carry over into the new era of official television transmission, which commenced in the Auckland area on the evening of June 1, 1960. Six months later, the new television column in the populist tabloid Truth claimed that “New Zealand is on her own—she is probably the first country in the world to adopt television in which the sales of sets haven’t boomed by the first six months after transmissions are started.”

Television reviewer Gabriella MacLeod was also sure that the new medium was a flop, with only 5,000 households buying the relatively expensive sets by early 1961—less than a third of the sales that had been predicted for the first year.

MacLeod thought that the poor quality of early television programming would be a deterrent to early audiences. New Zealand’s late-coming to television, which had, before the medium’s introduction, been promoted as a virtue that would enable New Zealand to install television when it was technologically “mature,” seemed, in retrospect, to be detrimental to the possibility of high-quality programming. “High-powered salesmanship in countries where television had developed at...terrific speed” had led to some “hair-raising trash [being dumped] into the laps of unsuspecting and unprepared officials” in New Zealand, wrote MacLeod. As a result, New Zealand’s few television viewers were confronted with a program schedule that was “most discouraging.”

Each Monday the viewer knew...the box would come alive with William Tell, a ‘historical’ series of half-hour programmes stockpiled by its makers to last years; followed by a ‘funny’ like Oh Susanna (American), or Susie (American), or Life with Riley (American), or lately I Love Lucy, also American. The only exception is the vigorous Army Game which is English.

Apart from William Tell, which was British, MacLeod’s distaste focused on American programs. The damning designation “American” implied a certain lack of quality, leaving little doubt that these American products constituted the “hair-raising trash” that seemed to have kept New Zealanders away from television.

But despite the slow start and unfavorable critical appraisal—especially of American programs—television was actually embraced quite rapidly by New Zealanders with set ownership levels after five years similar to those in the United States. This seeming contradiction cannot be explained by simply positing opposition between elite criticisms
of American products versus the irresistible attraction of American television programs for the masses. Undoubtedly, dismissals of television, and particularly American programs, from critics in the print media like MacLeod were, in some respects, a familiar expression of the “official” culture’s distrust of a powerful mass medium like television that offered “low-brow” entertainment. But we should not assume that the countervailing “truth” about television was that “ordinary” New Zealanders simply embraced it unproblematically. I will suggest that New Zealanders integrated television and a heavy diet of American programming into their national way of life at the same time as they continued to subscribe to existing cultural attitudes about the relative value of American and British culture and, moreover, that the cultural presence of American television provoked reactions rooted in concerns about New Zealand national identity.

This article will address the ways in which official and critical responses to the somewhat unanticipated volume of American programming in the early years of New Zealand television were also echoed by members of the New Zealand television audience who aligned themselves with existing views about New Zealand national identity. In contrast with earlier pronouncements about television’s irrelevance to New Zealanders and their way of life, a 1965 television documentary about the first five years of television presented the medium as having had a profound impact. The program’s presenter, Dr. Reg Harrison presented an almost frightening view: “Television invades the home. It commands the lounge. Its great hypnotic, sightless eye extends into coffee bars and pubs. Television has changed the pattern of our social life.” Harrison’s views on television programming in 1965 harked back to critic Gabriella MacLeod’s doubts about the content of early television:

The imported series is the staple diet—the staff—of TV life. In fact, they occupy about half of the viewing time. They have the highest audience rating, but in my view, when you lump them together they have the same deadening effect on the mind as an unrelieved diet of porridge would have on the stomach.

Harrison did not go so far as to name the specific programs that constituted this “porridge” but in case the viewers were in any doubt as to what he was talking about, his commentary was immediately followed by a montage of clips from various imported shows, most of them American, including The Munsters, a black and white minstrel show, and a domestic comedy. In the interest of
balance. Harrison admitted that there were “a few exceptions ... Maigret, Planemakers, one or two of the Z-Car pieces—some of the imported programs do widen our horizons.” In contrast with the “porridge” programs, all these “quality” programs were British. Harrison's critique of television programming was surprisingly frank, considering the documentary was produced and broadcast by the state-owned entity, the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation (NZBC), but in some ways his remarks simply expressed what had been implicit in official and critical attitudes towards television in New Zealand since its beginning, that is, the idea of American programs as an undifferentiated “rubbish” which was best ignored in favor of quality British programs.

This bias against American programs, however, conflicted with the NZBC’s initial policy of concentrating their resources on constructing a national television infrastructure rather than on programming. The NZBC was quick to establish favorable pricing deals with both the BBC and American suppliers, guaranteeing a cheap long-term source of foreign television programs. In 1960, even before most of these purchasing agreements were finalized, foreign programming, much of it American, dominated the schedules for the relatively brief periods of transmission. Many of the American programs that played during one week in the first couple of months of transmission in 1960, for example, would most likely have been derided by critics as “trash” or televisual “porridge.” They included the comedies Susie, Halls of Ivy and Oh! Susanna, and the “family drama” Lassie.

Broadcasting officials and politicians alike tried to ignore the uncomfortable fact that their focus on economy meant that American programs were a staple on New Zealand screens from the start by claiming—sometimes in direct contradiction of the facts—that New Zealand television was based primarily on British programs. They emphasized that only the best of the available programs were purchased and broadcast for the New Zealand public. In early 1961, explaining how foreign programs were selected to be broadcast in New Zealand, a broadcasting official said that over half of all television programs submitted were not bought, and that American programs were rejected more often than British:

Because they produce more, we get more shows from America than we do from Britain, and because of cultural and language differences we reject a higher proportion. So far we have rejected twenty-six per cent of the small number of British shows we’ve seen and fifty-eight per cent of the very much larger number of American ones.

Similarly, the Minister of Broadcasting Arthur Kinsella underlined in 1963 that an important part of maintaining a high level of quality was to avoid most American programming—he claimed that “80 per cent of American television programmes ... were rejected because...their poor quality [is] unacceptable for New Zealand audiences.” NZBC Director-General Stringer later claimed that this rigorous selection process meant that New Zealand’s “standard of television was as high as anywhere in the world.” While the importance of American programming on New Zealand screens was downplayed, the role of British offerings was accentuated. Given the esteem in which the BBC was held, the argument for the high quality of New Zealand television was emphasized by the NZBC’s frequent claim that it was “the biggest” or “one of the biggest” purchasers of BBC material.

Criticism of specific programs on New Zealand screens also seemed to be underpinned by ideas of the lowbrow and frivolous nature of American shows when compared to British. Of course, not all critics consistently reviewed all British programs favorably or panned everything from the United States, but while British shows were usually taken on their merits, and often assessed from a starting-point that assumed a certain level of quality and intelligence, a poor or lukewarm review of an American program often ended with an indictment of American programming in general. For example, according to one reviewer, an episode of the drama anthology series Crisis—not by any means the typical American
“froth” that tended to be the easiest target for criticism—fell victim to the essential lack of authenticity of American television drama: “The sentiment of the play was indubitably worthy. The Americans are strong on worthy sentiments. The sad irony of it is that they are so utterly hammy in getting them across.” A letter from a television viewer in the NZBC’s official publication, the New Zealand Listener offering an “amateur” review of Perry Mason followed a similar structure:

When I first bought a TV set 18 months ago, Perry Mason was my favorite programme—and that of many other people judging by comments heard at that time. But now as we are (I hope) nearing the end of our second series the old magic is wearing decidedly thin. How this series has lasted seven years in America is a mystery to me....

The writer went on to critique the bad acting of the cast and the “unvarying,” “inevitable,” and unconvincing features of the series’ plots. Both professional and amateur reviewer regarded American television as somewhat entertaining, but lacking in sophistication, worth watching, perhaps, for its initial novelty value, but lacking the realism to continue holding the viewers’ imagination. For Americans to have watched the decline of Perry Mason for a full seven years said, to McInnes, at least, volumes about the different needs and expectations of New Zealand audiences. Given the low opinion of American television held by critics and at least some viewers, it seemed only reasonable that the NZBC would keep a tight rein on American shows while buying all the programs they could from the BBC. Indeed, in the NZBC’s official history of its first twenty-five years, Robert Boyd-Bell writes that in 1963, New Zealand was the BBC’s biggest customer, and British programs continued to be the “dominant fare” on New Zealand screens.

In fact, though the NZBC was loathe to let it be known, by the time all four major urban areas in New Zealand had television in 1962, British programs did not make up the majority of programming on New Zealand television. Minister of Broadcasting Kinsella admitted in Parliament that, “At the moment the British content of programmes ranged from 40 per cent to 45 per cent, and the American content from 55 per cent to 60 per cent, depending on the availability of programmes.” A perusal of the television schedule published in the Listener confirms that American programs did indeed comprise over half of all programs, and that British programs made up even less than 40 per cent. From 1962 to 1965 American programs continued to make up well over half the television schedule, while British programs accounted for less than a third. What is more, the NZBC’s own surveys suggested that New Zealand television owners watched and enjoyed American as much or more than British programs. On the face of it, the anonymous New Zealand television audience was far less concerned than critics and broadcasting officials about the low quality of American television programs and their possibly deleterious effects on the New Zealand way of life.

Such figures would seem to discredit the views of those who thought that television was incompatible with the love of the out-
doors and rugged physical activity that was supposedly deeply rooted in the New Zealand way of life, and that New Zealanders would be moderate in their use of the new medium, especially if it was dominated by American programs. It would not, however, be accurate to assume that critics and broadcasting officials were completely out of tune with the New Zealand public’s tastes and desires. If we look beyond the simple idea that New Zealanders—like other national audiences—simply enjoyed American television, we can see that critics and “ordinary” New Zealanders alike tended to draw from the same well of ideas about what New Zealand-ness entailed as they tried to integrate television—and American programs in particular—into their national way of life. There were significant similarities between the strategies that officials used to avoid or deny the preponderance of American television programs and those that viewers used to justify their television watching in terms that did not threaten their sense of national identity, suggesting that there was not a straightforward official or elite disdain for American programs or a popular embrace of them. Instead, New Zealand audiences shared the official obsession with transmission coverage as a way to claim television as their own.

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

It was a frequent refrain, both before and after the introduction of television, that in the early years New Zealand would not have the funds, production facilities, technical expertise or local “talent” to produce enough programming to show New Zealanders their way of life as a small but growing number of commentators demanded. Along with the threat to New Zealand’s Anglo-centric culture posed by the unprecedented predominance of American programming on New Zealand screens, the very nature of television as a passive, domestic medium was at odds with central tenets of New Zealand identity, based as it was on rugged masculinity and an enduring connection to nature and rural life. NZBC’s focus on coverage, with its attendant stories of technical ingenuity and frontiersman-like triumph over the wild landscape went some way toward filling the void left by the lack of local programming by linking television to the masculinist New Zealand way of life, and shifted the cultural dialogue away from the problematic nature of foreign programming.

The NZBC’s focus on expanding television transmission to cover as much of the country as possible was such that the 1960s have been described as the “engineer’s decade.”

Accounts of the early years of television in New Zealand detailed the difficulties that had to be overcome to install a transmission infrastructure across New Zealand’s mountainous and rugged terrain to tie the country’s dispersed population together into one national viewing audience. The NZBC frequently emphasized the lengths they went to bring television to the masses, as in a 1964 publication which noted that:

As television coverage is extended over larger areas of New Zealand, repeater and relay stations have to be constructed, often in inaccessible and mountainous country. Much test equipment has had to be transported by air, and especially by helicopter.

Accompanying pictures of men laboring in unforgiving and remote locations and climbing hundreds of feet up strategically-located transmitters further emphasized the brawn, courage, and technical ingenuity required to bring New Zealanders television, as did Reg Harrison’s comment that “We are near enough to a pioneering nation to enjoy the tough job of transmitter installation.”

Such images and stories seem to have resonated with “ordinary” New Zealanders—as is evidenced by the fact that the obsession with coverage was not just expressed by the NZBC, but by private citizens as well. One such individual was Rotorua resident Dennis Cobbe who in 1962, in the spirit of New Zealand’s early radio pioneers, taught himself how to construct a translator which picked up the Auckland television signal and broadcast it to Rotorua. Cobbe hit the headlines when he ran afoul of government
officials who claimed that the demonstrations of television that had been drawing hundreds of people to a local television-equipped store broke licensing regulations. Cobbe presented himself as a blameless tinkerer working in the time-honored tradition of resourceful New Zealanders who, if the government could not provide them with a service, would make use of what they had to provide it for themselves: “It started as an experiment to amuse myself,” Cobbe explained. “It proves that I could walk up a hill and throw a switch and we would have television.” Cobbe worked with another amateur enthusiast, Graham Bryce, who also refused to buckle to government pressure to dismantle illegal translator masts. Bryce was so convinced that he and his Whakatane Televiewers’ Association were on the side of the angels in trying to bring television to the provinces that he promised passive resistance to any attempt to confiscate his equipment. Later, he compared his efforts to other heroic acts of resistance and nation-building in New Zealand’s history:

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

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

The integration of television into New Zealand life so that it could be regarded as in some sense an indigenous medium rather than, as one scholar put it, “a foreign egg in our nest,” relied to a large extent on these stories of pioneering pluck, of the bravery and technical mastery of NZBC testing teams and the versatility and perseverance of small groups of rural New Zealanders who refused to be left out of participating in the new medium of national cohesion. The historiography of New Zealand television, far from voluminous, is nevertheless studded with anecdotes about these hardy television pioneers, and amateur histories celebrating their achievements, with such triumphant titles as Wairoa Would Not Wait. In the absence of the ability to produce any significant amount of local content and thus “see themselves” on television, New Zealanders looked to these accounts to link the medium with established verities of mainstream New Zealand culture. In a sense, the television viewers’ societies were literally “producing” television, and the publicity of their activities in the news media and by the NZBC allowed New Zealanders to watch this local “production” of television without even having to turn their sets on.

Television Westerns and the New Zealand Audience

Despite the official and popular focus on coverage as a way of ignoring the lack of actual production of local television, New Zealanders did actually watch television in large and growing numbers. In their viewership, they became part of what seminal American television historian, Erik Barnouw, called the “Bonanza globe’ in which American television, and westerns in particular, seemed to exert an almost primal hold over foreigners of all stripes, perhaps because they contained a kernel of hope about the promise of the American dream:

In thatched huts and villas men watched cattle stampedes and gunfights, amid the clatter of hoofs and the ricochet of bullets. Precisely what it all meant to them, no one could be sure. Perhaps they had a sense of sharing a destiny with
a breed of men who could make decisions and make them stick.\textsuperscript{31}

Most New Zealanders were not, of course, watching television westerns from “thatched huts,” and while this distance from fetishized primitivism may have rendered them either more resistant to the supposed lure of the western, or simply made them as an audience less compelling to study, we can at least hazard a guess as to “what it all meant to them.”

It was not just their ubiquity nor popularity that made westerns so symbolic of American television, both at home and abroad.\textsuperscript{32} The western genre expresses what Richard Slotkin calls the “Myth of the Frontier” giving it an important place in the continuing construction of American identity. The western addressed the central issue of “regeneration through violence” in American history—in particular, the conflict between Indians and White settlers, which was linked in the continuum of the historical imagination first to the subjugation of African Americans and later to conflicts between Old Europe and New America.\textsuperscript{33} While Slotkin regards films as the most important myth-making vehicle in the western genre, the popularity of television westerns can also be understood in terms of their symbolic resonance.

If popularity is anything to go by, then narratives of frontier violence and nationalism in the television western appear to have resonated with New Zealand audiences, too. By July 1961, there were four “horse operas” on New Zealand screens—\textit{Laramie}, \textit{The Deputy}, \textit{The Westerner}, and \textit{The Californians}. The Listener noted that this paled in comparison to the forty that appeared on American television in any given week, but as the television audience grew in New Zealand, so did the number of westerns they could watch.\textsuperscript{34} Out of a sample of one hundred American series for adults screened on New Zealand television between 1960 and 1965, nineteen were westerns.\textsuperscript{35} Westerns were an important part of the New Zealand television schedule and were broadly watched by the early television audience. Of five westerns (\textit{Wagon Train}, \textit{Tales of Wells Fargo}, \textit{The Deputy}, \textit{Maverick}, \textit{Laramie}, and \textit{The Californians}) seen by viewers in an NZBC survey in 1962, all had been watched by at least 90 per cent of regional viewers and \textit{Wagon Train} was one of the few non-news programs to be seen by a full 100 per cent of Auckland viewers.\textsuperscript{36}

Although the NZBC’s survey tells us that television westerns were quantitatively “popular” in that they commanded a large audience in the early period of New Zealand television, this data does not necessarily tell us why New Zealanders watched westerns, what pleasure they derived from the genre, or how they regarded westerns in comparison to other television programs. In fact, viewers’ ratings of their enjoyment of particular programs suggest that their high familiarity with westerns bred mixed feelings, if not unmitigated contempt. Among the three regional audiences surveyed by the NZBC, of the five television westerns on their screens, only \textit{Wagon Train} ranked as one of the ten most enjoyed programs—not exactly demonstrating the kind of visceral identification with the genre that Barnouw suggested existed amongst global audiences. A 1964 study of television viewers’ program preferences by New Zealand’s Consumer Institute confirmed that New Zealand viewers’ propensity to watch television did not necessarily make them uncritical fans of whatever they watched. Westerns in particular elicited a significant amount of criticism, topping the list of programs that respondents to the 1964 survey would be most likely to avoid. Two-thirds of viewers thought there should be fewer westerns on New Zealand television, with only six per cent asking for more. Westerns featured prominently among those kinds of programs criticized by viewers for their “lack of realism,” and for their portrayals of “violence and cruelty” and “depressing emphasis on hatred and suffering.”\textsuperscript{37}

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

Of course, while the myth of the frontier may sometimes have “clinked” for European audiences because of its foreign New World origins, it did have resonance for New Zealand audiences insofar as they had at the core of their shared national ideology the “hard-working, independent and virtuous pioneer farmer” who bore more than a passing resemblance to the Jeffersonian small farmer, central to the “populist” version of the American frontier myth. Prior to the introduction of television, the similarities between the United States frontier and New Zealand’s agrarian Arcadia had been remarked upon by some of the most prominent mass culture mythmakers of the American West. For example, best-selling western novelist Zane Grey remarked at length on New Zealand’s various rugged attributes in his account of a 1926 fishing trip in *Tales of the Angler’s Eldorado New Zealand*. Some of his New Zealand fans were reportedly disappointed when they met him in person that he was not wearing “sombrero, chaps, spurs and guns,” but generally Grey was greeted with hospitality and excitement as he traveled around the country. For his part, Grey appreciated New Zealanders’ avid readership of his western tales, which he reported seeing in every house that he entered—“even in the remote Maori homes, far out in the bush; and I found them read to tatters”—and he raved about the unspoiled quality of the New Zealand landscape: “Land of mountains, ferns and crystal streams! Maori land, wild as any desert, verdant as any tropic jungle!” The western mythmaker Grey gave New Zealanders an image of their country as an unspoiled corner of the new New World where rugged man-against-nature fantasies could be made real, and arguably gave them a lens through which to view the western genre as a representation of a pioneer project which had, in fact, been perfected in their own country.

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

This reaction to westerns suggested that the genre failed to represent the type of fair interaction between pioneer settlers and original inhabitants of the land that supposedly appealed to the “average” New Zealander, while also evading the fact of the lack of any representation of Maori culture on New Zealand television. Maori were not completely “invisible” on New Zealand screens in the early years of television as some have claimed, but they were acceptable only as actors in the great myth of New Zealand racial integration. This was illustrated perfectly by one of the NZBC’s very first live broadcasts in 1960 which featured popular Maori singer Howard Morrison and his Quartet dressed in suits and performing, of all things, The White Cliffs of Dover—a colonial integrationist fantasy, to be sure! Some viewers thought the correct response to the proliferation of television westerns and their “creation of a false image of the United States” was not to rectify this image with some televisial “truth” but to “correspond with and replace westerns” with series about Maori. In the context of the dominant ideology of racial integration, this proposal, by several respondents to the Consumer Institute’s television survey, suggests that New Zealand viewers were not as concerned about westerns’ misrepresentations of American history as they were with making sure that New Zealand’s own frontier history was differentiated from it and, in particular, that New Zealand’s supposedly proud history of exemplary race relations was emphasized on television. In the absence of locally-produced television programs that affirmed their own sense of national identity and history, many Pakeha New Zealanders watched westerns (but claimed to dislike them) and took pleasure in rejecting the historical picture of the United States depicted in the genre, while comparing favorably their own myths of New Zealand frontier history and race relations with that image.

Conclusion

Early predictions about the irrelevance of a television schedule packed with foreign—and, particularly, American—programming to New Zealanders turned out to underestimate an abiding belief that a national community could be bound tighter through the new medium. From broadcasters to consumers, New Zealanders used a number of strategies to integrate television into their daily lives and national culture, from denying the reality of
the predominance of American programs and emphasizing “quality” British programming, to focusing on coverage of official and local efforts to build a national transmission network, to watching westerns in droves while taking every available opportunity to point out differences between New Zealand and American frontier myth.

New Zealanders continued to insist that even though they were every bit as avid viewers as Americans, “the effect on them of television had been ‘nil’.” Arguing for a second channel to give New Zealanders more program choice, one commentator suggested that New Zealand was in danger of “turning into a nation of Bonanza watchers.” This may have been quantitatively true—New Zealanders were indeed watching Bonanza and its brethren in great numbers—but that did not mean that they instantly became part of an undifferentiated global television audience. New Zealanders had integrated television into their way of life without giving up their allegiance to central ideas about what it meant to be a New Zealander. But in watching shows like Bonanza, they were also forced to fit these new cultural products into their existing framework of who they were as a people.

More recently, calls for more local production have resulted in additional support from the New Zealand government for arts and culture. This can be seen as a generally positive development for the local economy and local artists, although it has also been accompanied by the tendency to regard New Zealand as a “brand” to “promote” to interested international audiences—a commodification of culture which should make New Zealanders wary. But perhaps the biggest change in debates about New Zealand nation and identity since the early 1960s is the visibility of Maori in the conversation, and the idea that Maori culture is, or should be, a central part of official New Zealand identity. As we have seen, early debates about television and New Zealand culture did not feature calls for a more “multicultural”—or even “bicultural”—New Zealand. Maori were hardly visible on New Zealand television screens, and largely absent from the mainstream debate about television and New Zealand identity. But even at a time when the myth of integrationism still held sway, the search for a unique New Zealand cultural identity did at least suggest—if usually in the most patronizing way—that Maori might be part of that uniqueness. Maori activists and artists a decade later would find creative ways to use this Pakeha desire for distinctiveness to their own political and cultural advantage in quickening debates about New Zealand-ness and media access. In the meantime, the debates continue, and concerns similar to those that shaped early TV discourse—about the effect of foreign cultural products on New Zealand’s culture and identity, the place of Maori in that culture, and about the best way for a small “western” nation to be part of the modern world, but at the same time, hold on to its sense of uniqueness—persist to this day.
NOTES
6 Ibid.
7 The number of New Zealand households with a television license numbered a scant 4,080 in 1961, but five years later it had swelled to over 430,000, representing over 60 per cent of New Zealand households. Robert Boyd-Bell, New Zealand Television: The First 25 Years, Auckland: Reed, Methuen, 1985, pp. 10-29. Lynn Spigel, Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, p. 32.
8 The idea that the almost primal allure of American culture is a universal phenomenon that cuts across cultures underlies both the—now mostly derided—“cultural imperialism” thesis, and studies that reject pessimism about the effects of American culture and argue, instead, that American television is pleasurable, but its impact on local cultures is natural and of little concern. For an example of the latter view applied to the New Zealand case, see, for example, Geoffrey Lealand, A Foreign Egg in Our Nest? : American Popular Culture in New Zealand, (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1988).
10 NZBC, Compass: First Five Years of Television, NZBC Television Program, 1965, New Zealand Television Archive, Wellington, New Zealand.
12 “Private View,” New Zealand Listener, February 17, 1961, (p. 3).
17 “Perry Mason,” New Zealand Listener, May 1 1964, (p. 9).
18 Boyd-Bell, (p. 87).
20 Of 116 programs broadcast in the periods February 12-18 and August 6-12, 1962, 58, or 50 per cent, were from the United States, and 28 (24 per cent) were from Britain. There were also 21 (18 per cent of all programs) New Zealand programs, although many of these were news reports which mainly comprised material of British origin. (There were seven programs whose origin I could not identify, and one program each from Canada and France.) New Zealand Listener, 1962.
21 In two weeks sampled for 1963, 49 per cent of the programs broadcast were American and 30 per cent were British. In 1964, 52 per cent of programs were American, and 18 per cent were British. In 1965, 47 per cent of programs were American, and 25 per cent were British. New Zealand Listener, 1963-64.
22 Audience Research Section, New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation, Television Audience Survey, 1962, New Zealand National Archives, Dunedin Regional Office.
23 See, for example, Minister of Broadcasting Kinsella’s explanation of both the difficulty of constructing adequate production facilities, and of television’s “voracious” consumption of talent, which, in a small country like New Zealand made it “impossible” to supply enough local programming. “New Zealand Parliamentary Debates,” 1962, (p. 1930).
26 NZBC, Compass: First Five Years of Television.
28 NZBC, Compass: First Five Years of Television.
29 Lealand, A Foreign Egg in Our Nest?
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32 For a description of the global trade in westerns and their international popularity, see Barnouw, (pp. 229-38).
33 Ibid., pp. 5-14.
34 “No Empty Saddles in TV’s Corral,” New Zealand Listener, July 7, 1961, (p. 3).
35 New Zealand Listener, 1960-65.
36 NZBC, Television Audience Survey.
37 Programmes,” Consumer, no. 20 1964, (pp. 92-3).
41 Ibid., (pp. 208-09).
42 “Viewers’ Views ... ‘Lone Ranger’ is Under Fire,” Evening Post, July 15, 1965, (p. 16).
43 “Malignant Dynasty,” New Zealand Listener, June 15 1962, (p. 3).
45 “Programmes,” Consumer, no. 20 1964 (pp. 94-7).
46 Ibid., (p. 94).
47 NZBC, Compass: First Five Years of Television.