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**Are New Zealander's filthy over *Filthy Rich*? A thematic analysis of viewer attitudes to the television serial *Filthy Rich***

**ABSTRACT**

*Craik and Hesmondhalgh argue that the objective of cultural policy is to promote the production of "ordinary" culture and, in doing so, ensure that any "art" that is produced with public money is accessible to the widest possible range of citizens in diverse societies. In New Zealand, the role of meeting these policy aspirations is fulfilled by governing bodies such as New Zealand On Air, whose stated aim is to fund media content that caters to the tastes and needs of diverse New Zealand audiences. In 2014, New Zealand On Air (NZOA) assigned more than \$8m to Filthy Productions to create twenty episodes of the television program Filthy Rich, because the stated intention of the makers was to express New Zealand stories in New Zealand voices. According to Craik, creative work that is funded by public money is particularly held to account by its target audiences. Filthy Rich was panned by critics, but received favourable ratings from viewers. Our purpose in this paper is first, to use thematic analysis to interrogate comments in The New Zealand Herald, Stuff.co.nz and the show's Facebook page to establish the attitudes of New Zealanders towards the show, and second, to determine from the analysis whether the show matched NZOA's criteria for public funding.*

**KEYWORDS**

television  
local content  
New Zealand  
cultural policy  
filthy rich  
national identity

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to interrogate comments in *The New Zealand Herald*, *Stuff.co.nz* and their accompanying Facebook pages to, first, determine the attitudes of New Zealanders towards *Filthy Rich* and second, whether the show matched criteria for receiving public funding. Various agencies operating on behalf of the New Zealand government provide funds to underwrite the production of local creative expression, partly in response to the criticism that New Zealand broadcast content is increasingly Americanised, and partly to promote cultural well-being and national identity.<sup>1</sup> In essence, the New Zealand government supports and promotes “ordinary” culture that resonates with the taste and needs of diverse groups of citizens.<sup>2</sup> In short, the government attempts to ensure that audiences have ample access to and understanding of the arts and therefore to the stories the arts tell about what it means to be a New Zealander.<sup>3</sup>

All forms of support offered to the arts, whether financial or otherwise, are presented in terms of the government’s investment in the arts, with a concomitant expectation of a satisfactory return on that investment.<sup>4</sup> This conceptualisation of funding-as-investment brings ‘greater efficiency, transparency and accountability to bear on public spending of public funds.’<sup>5</sup> In a patron model<sup>6</sup> of funding administration, the ‘greater efficiency, transparency and accountability’<sup>7</sup> that are desired become the responsibility of organisations such as New Zealand on Air (NZOA), which is charged with ensuring that government funds are distributed in ways that encourage diversity, unification, and economic returns.<sup>8</sup>

## NEW ZEALAND ON AIR & *FILTHY RICH*

Since its establishment in 1989, NZOA’s espoused aim has been to foster the development of ‘great New Zealand content’ that can be ‘valued and enjoyed by many New Zealand audiences’; content that, furthermore, ‘reflects and develops New Zealand identity and culture’.<sup>9</sup> To realise these aspirations, NZOA ‘invests in quality, diverse, and discoverable content’ by valuing innovation, diversity and skilful investment.<sup>10</sup> *Filthy Rich* aligned with NZOA’s aims on a number of counts: the show is ‘a strong local drama presence for a slightly younger audience on TV2’, it fills the empty slot for a prime-time serial, it screens twice a week, offering audiences a heightening of reality rather than the naturalism of other shows, and (perhaps most importantly) it emphasises ‘our stories and our voices.’<sup>11</sup>

## METHOD

Using thematic analysis,<sup>12</sup> we analysed more than 600 comments and posts that members of the viewing public made about *Filthy Rich* between 2015 – 2017. The material was all available in the public domain. The comments we analysed were Facebook responses to three articles from the New Zealand Herald and four from Stuff.co.nz and posts from the Facebook Pages of these organisations and Spinoff and TVNZ 2.<sup>13</sup>

Once we had established our corpus of raw data, we analysed the texts to uncover recurring patterns, because, as Boyatzis<sup>14</sup> points out, at the very least, patterns allow researchers to classify observed phenomena. Braun and Clarke<sup>15</sup> go so far as to say that the location of patterns begins the process of interpreting the multiple layers of reality extant in the data. Accordingly, we began our thematic analysis by reading and re-reading the texts to identify trends, key words and ideas<sup>16</sup> before establishing some basic codes.<sup>17</sup> The codes functioned for us as the first organising principles around which recurring ideas could be broadly grouped. These emergent key understandings, what Braun and Clarke call ‘interesting features’ were then subjected to rigorous comparison, both within and across each group until it was clear that the codes were valid.<sup>18</sup> At that point, compatible codes were grouped into the themes that follow.

Two clearly delineated, opposing themes emerged from the coding. The first theme was not difficult to name: we called it “Love It!”, and although the raw data quite naturally showed different levels of critique and articulation, the opinions in “Love It!” were largely homogenous in their approval of this home-grown drama. Naming the second theme as “Waste of Money” was a little more difficult, because it comprises four overlapping sub-themes: “Poor Production”, “Nothing Like its Rivals”, “Caricature of New Zealand”, and “Money Well Spent? Yeah, nah!” In the end, we decided that most of the points in the sub-themes alluded, one way or another, to a sense that the money spent on producing *Filthy Rich* was money wasted, and we decided that the second theme should reflect that as the main idea. For ease of reading, we have referred to different commenters as viewers 1, 2, 3 and so forth (please see note 20 for the texts that these comments pertain).

### **THEME 1: “LOVE IT!”**

Not unexpectedly, some New Zealanders enjoyed the show, although the least effusive commenters made it seem that watching *Filthy Rich* was, perhaps, the lesser of two evils. This attitude was typified by Viewer 1 who remarked that s/he would ‘...rather watch home-grown series... than watch the overseas-based mind numbing reality television on offer’. The approval in this remark is, perhaps, only tepid, but the point about ‘home-grown’ is

interesting in that it seems that the “local flavour” might outweigh perceived shortcomings in artistic merit. Johnson<sup>19</sup> posited that quality television should explore ‘contemporary anxieties’, and it is possible Viewer 1’s slightly grudging approval derives from the way that *Filthy Rich* depicts certain recognisable social issues in New Zealand. For instance, Blackstock<sup>20</sup> identified a widening gap between rich and poor in New Zealand, a topic drives a lot of the storylines in the show. Viewer 2 also fell into the category of loving the show less because of its intrinsic worth, and more because other available viewing was less appealing: ‘My god I am sick of police 10 /7 border control police dogs police woman serious crashes and the like! Forced me into Netflix! I want to watch TV shows!’

Viewer 3 was also gratified that *Filthy Rich* presented viewers with a change of subject: ‘Great to have a programme that isn't funded to fix up houses cook or sing. Just love that we can give great actors work. Well done!’ Here, however, the viewer moves beyond simple appreciation of the show as a viewing alternative, into a more abstract approval of the social good of providing work for ‘great actors’. Viewer 3 appears to be aware that many New Zealand actors give up the struggle to find work here and seek employment overseas,<sup>21</sup> and this comment is a positive reception of the show on several levels.

While Viewers 1 and 2 praised the show almost in the negative, and Viewer 3 looked beyond the show itself to a wider issue of employment for actors, some viewers explicitly praised particular features of the show, commending, for example, the quality of its production values and its interesting characterisation, both of which, according to Cardwell<sup>22</sup> and Fuller and Driscoll<sup>23</sup>, are markers of good television. Viewer 4, for instance, noted the ‘good camera work’, and Viewer 5 wrote, ‘I thought it was actually pretty good. The programme looked well spent on and the actors were captivating...I'm definitely watching it again. Plus it's better than fucking Shortland Street.’ Obviously, the comment ‘...well spent on’ is ambiguous: it might mean that NZOA made a sound decision in funding the show, but equally it might mean that the show has spent the money well in achieving high technical and artistic standards. In fact, there was quite a lot of clear approval of the standards the show attained. Viewer 6 excitedly exclaimed, ‘Ooooo, the twists and turns...’; and Viewer 7 wrote, ‘Its unpredictable’, while Viewer 8 remarked, ‘Good to see more shows on TV!! This looks good. Love the writers 😊’. Viewer 9 said, ‘I enjoyed it. It kept me hooked and didn't get bored, will be watching again.’ All these viewers are voicing positive comments about the quality of the acting and the writing.

The “Love it!” theme also contained general approbation that a show made in New Zealand was getting air time. Viewer 10 wrote, ‘The show is good kiwi fodder’, a comment that

seems to approve the cultural capital in *Filthy Rich*, and Viewer 11 wrote, ‘We have to start giving NZ made shows the love we so readily give to overseas, mass produced, over done, dribble.’ Whether or not the show meets Johnson’s<sup>24</sup> standards of ‘good’ television, that is, programmes of ‘complex multi-layered narratives and visually expressive cinematography’, for Viewers 10 and 11, *Filthy Rich* is important primarily because it is home grown. An objective measure of the show may determine that it is ‘mass produced, overdone, dribble’, which is Viewer 11’s opinion of much imported entertainment, but it is redeemed, perhaps, by being our overdone dribble.

## **THEME 2: WASTE OF MONEY**

The first sub-theme under Theme 2 is “Poor Production”. This sub-theme consists of negative opinions directed at the scriptwriting, acting and directing, which was generally considered unoriginal and dated. Viewer 12, for instance, wrote, ‘Writing is dated’; and this was echoed by Viewer 13, who found that *Filthy Rich* was simply a ‘Re-write of *Gloss*’ which was last aired in 1990.<sup>25</sup> This opinion was expanded by Viewer 14 who wrote, ‘The writing is just so sloppy and lazy, it’s painful to sit through’. Viewer 15 was even more condemnatory: in his/her opinion, the show is simply ‘Garbage!’ In fact, Viewer 15 summed up the opinions in this sub-theme was typified by comments such as ‘trash television’ and ‘cheap and trashy’. Perhaps the most telling comment in this sub-theme came from Viewer 16, who, thinking that *Filthy Rich* was meant to be a drama, criticized it for being ‘just like a Soap Opera’.

Despite the opinions of Viewers 12 – 16, there is no doubting the popularity of soap operas and “trash television”:<sup>26</sup> they achieve strong audience ratings, earn revenue, and are therefore “bankable”. Caust<sup>27</sup> asserts that funded work is prevented from taking artistic risks, and it could be that *Filthy Rich* has followed a “tried and true” formula, bound to win the marketplace. However, it may also be that these four viewers are reacting to a degree of over-exposure to the ‘signature style’<sup>28</sup> of Rachel Lang and Gavin Strawhan, who have been the show runners on many New Zealand television productions (for example *Go Girls*, *The Almighty Johnson*, *Nothing Trivial*).<sup>29</sup> Scott<sup>30</sup> points out that when a production team has a track record of meeting the criteria by which success is measured, their ideas are nearly always given preferential treatment. Certainly, Viewer 17 seemed to be thinking this when s/he wrote, ‘Funding goes to a tiny number of people’s hands’. Viewer 18 was also unequivocal in summing up the reasons that the show seemed unoriginal: ‘A few people get to make what feels like variations on the same solid-yet-unspectacular drama, over and over

again'. The implied criticism here is that the *Filthy Rich* is the same as other shows, or, as Viewer 19 said, 'Nothing out of the box'.

The second sub-theme is "Nothing like its rivals". In short, *Filthy Rich* was considered inferior to overseas content: it was, according to Viewer 20, 'Another American offshoot' and for Viewer 21, a sign that '[NZ TV] going the way of Hollywood movies-predictable, conservative, humourless and dull'. Viewer 22 sought, '... a good NZ drama with something a bit more real!' and other viewers felt that *Filthy Rich* is a 'Kiwi American show'; a 'wannabe American Empire TV show', and finally, 'cringe-worthy'.

Inasmuch as these viewers found much to criticise in *Filthy Rich*, this theme is also evidence of the viewers' own cultural cringe and their struggle to see any value in local content<sup>31</sup>. On the other hand, there is a well-established argument that funded shows should offset cultural imperialism,<sup>32</sup> and it seems that the show simply does not resonate with large portions of the audience. Viewer 23 summed up this sub-theme with the comment that *Filthy Rich* is 'Not speaking to the wants of the New Zealand public'.

The third sub-theme, "Caricature of New Zealand" relates to and aligns with sub-theme two, expressing the general feeling that the show did not offer a realistic representation of New Zealand or the New Zealand way of life. Audiences accept content when they find it personally relevant,<sup>33</sup> but some viewers found nothing familiar in *Filthy Rich*. Viewer 24's evaluation of *Filthy Rich* is that the characters are not 'real New Zealanders' and that it is 'targeted at the entitled youth', while Viewer 26 wonders a little plaintively, 'How might poorer NZer's respond to the show?' Viewer 27 wants 'NZ shows that aren't about criminals and the rich'. These viewers are disappointed that a locally-made show does such a poor job at representing the whole country, when in fact, they watch local content for confirmation that 'we' in the imagined community are all similar.<sup>34</sup> The viewers are not alone in this opinion: Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge argue that local media should promote the development of cultural identity<sup>35</sup> and Pakulski thought that content should lead to 'unhindered and dignified representation, as well as to the maintenance and propagation of distinct cultural identities and lifestyles.'<sup>36</sup>

The fourth sub-theme, "Money well spent? Yeah, Nah!" revolved around the idea that the money given to *Filthy Rich* could be spent on more worthy areas of society. Viewers 28 and 29 were probably the most forthright of all who expressed the idea that 'worthier' areas of society were being deprived. Their comments were, respectively, 'The health department is being fleeced of money' and 'Could have used the money for housing and education'. There were many other posts from viewers who believed the show was not good value for the

money that was spent on it. Viewer 30 said, ‘Out of all the things to spend \$8.2million on? WTF? Might as well grab money and set fire to it!’ and Viewer 31 uttered the perennial cry of indignant taxpayers everywhere: ‘This is where my hard-earned money goes!’

This sub-theme expresses the ongoing contest between money and cultural relevance<sup>37</sup>. On the one hand, there are viewer’s strong opinions that the show is sub-standard and a waste of money: on the other, there are equally strong opinions from NZoA that *Filthy Rich* is ‘... a groundbreaking series... [proving] again that compelling stories with engaging characters can win the loyalty of the audience.’<sup>38</sup> In fact, ‘official’ support goes even further than approval of the show’s artistic qualities: Jane Wrightson, CEO of NZ On Air, said

We know that New Zealand makes world- quality dramas. While NZ On Air’s focus is on serving local audiences, we are always delighted when funded content succeeds internationally. It takes New Zealand to the world and brings in international revenue.<sup>39</sup>

This tends to bear out Caust’s assertion that ‘...the arts, like most other government-subsidised areas, has had to provide economic reasons for continuing its government involvement<sup>40</sup>.’ More particularly, what is evident here is a shift in the way success is measured<sup>41</sup>: majority opinion of a show’s cultural worth might be low, but the decision to spend tax money on funding it can be legitimized when, as Wrightson pointed out, a funded show ‘succeeds internationally’ and (perhaps even more importantly), ‘takes New Zealand to the world and brings in international revenue.’<sup>42</sup>

## CONCLUSION

That *Filthy Rich* engendered polarised responses from the New Zealand public should not necessarily surprise: all creative work is experienced according to the resources of the audience and therefore earns, as Caves pointed out, a ‘subjective reaction.’<sup>43</sup> In this case, however, although the bulk of the public’s expressed responses were negative, and often fiercely so, the show received funding for a second season, because the ratings and streaming numbers were adequate. It is possible to argue, then, that despite meeting the criteria for public funding, the show failed symbolically, and to conclude that the criteria are not concerned with accurate representation of New Zealand life or reflecting “us” to posterity.

A counter-argument, of course, is that any television show is a fiction that draws on selected elements of an ‘imagined community,’<sup>44</sup> and being unable to represent the whole,

will inevitably receive oppositional readings from those citizens who do not recognise the nation's life as depicted. Such oppositional readings can in themselves achieve what a show cannot: they become a commentary that New Zealand life was *not* as shown; that the people are not universally young, beautiful, rich, conflicted and confused. At the end of the day such objections carry much weight in reflecting 'us' to posterity: they say to the future that *Filthy Rich* is an imagining, just as (for instance) John Clarke's *Fred Dagg* was 45 years ago.<sup>45</sup> In terms of showing New Zealand to New Zealand and to the world, there is not much to choose between *Filthy Rich* and *Fred Dagg*: both creative expressions are simultaneously gross caricatures of New Zealand, yet also tell a truth, not that their representations are accurate or complete (neither show had such a goal), but that what they say are *possibilities* for a time, a people and a place.

The final truth told of New Zealand by *Filthy Rich* (or any other funded show) may well not be the plots or the acting or the settings, but rather, the policy story: that the show took a semblance of New Zealand to the world and earned international revenue.

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<sup>5</sup> Skilling, “Trajectories of Arts”, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Craik, *Re-visioning Arts and Cultural Policy*.

<sup>7</sup> Skilling, “Trajectories of Arts”, 16.

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<sup>40</sup> Caust, "Putting the 'art,'" 52.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> Scoop Independent News, "Kiwi Drama".

<sup>43</sup> Richard Caves, *Creative Industries: Contracts between art and commerce* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>44</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

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<sup>45</sup> Les Cleveland, “Images of National Identity in the New Zealand Mass Media,” *Journal of Sociology* 14, no. 3 (1978): 304-308. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/144078337801400322>.

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