

Towards a world-class New Zealand Broadcasting Industry

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Imagine...

Imagine watching television and hearing consistent programme audio levels: as a viewer, you no longer need to adjust the volume for the loudness variances between channels, programmes, and commercials; there is no discernable audio difference between locally-produced content and programming produced in the U.S or Europe. New Zealand is recognised as an industry leader through technical and creative competence and the excellence of its content is reinforced by a quality mark - a standard.

Does it matter at all? Should we care? Is it easy? Yes, yes, yes. It matters for our economy. Measures can easily be introduced to encourage global connectedness and create a sustainable New Zealand television industry that promotes growth. The creation of a national Broadcast Audio Standard that controls broadcast audio levels will establish an internationally-recognised level of technical expertise, standardise and align New Zealand-produced content to the same criteria that top-level overseas television programmes are produced.

There are many examples where media content produced in New Zealand has failed to meet the expectations of US customers. Many NZ producers are not aware of the basic technical delivery requirements of US networks or the quality level they expect and many technical operators are unfamiliar with standard US operating procedures.

This standard will make our programmes internationally attractive and these will have the potential to be sold to overseas broadcasters and generate revenue for New Zealand. The standard will also improve the skill level of local technical operators, enforce technical quality control and even reduce post-production costs of making a TV show. It will help our international footprint.

Other nations are facing similar challenges. Australia and the U.K recognise that advances in digital television broadcasting require technical parameters to be redefined. The USA has already implemented new laws to govern loudness variances. New Zealand's small size makes it an ideal candidate to unify our own industry and enable us to collaborate with other countries to create ownership of an international Audio Broadcasting Standard.

This paper explains how New Zealand can lead the way, and benefit from it. It also explains why we should not hesitate, and just do it.

What is happening internationally?

Comparisons indicate that television shows created in the U.S look and sound different to those created in New Zealand. Varying technical specifications, enforcement of quality control procedures and socialisation of best practices contribute to these differences. Other than just being annoying, television viewing volume inconsistencies do have far reaching concerns. They affect the ability to maximise on the export earning potential of locally-produced content. Other countries have identified these same issues within their own broadcasting system.

Early discussions with the BBC and ABA (Australian Broadcasting Authority) have established their desire to collaborate with New Zealand to create an international standard that controls broadcast television programme audio levels.

A New Zealand Standard will meet national needs and shape international markets.

On 15 December 2009, the U.S House of Representatives passed H.R. 1084 the Commercial Advertisement Loudness Mitigation Act. (CALM Act). The Act *“requires the Federal Communications Commission to prescribe a standard to preclude commercials from being broadcast at louder volumes than the program material they accompany.”*

The USA has been progressive in its approach to dealing with the loudness of advertising content. The Calm Act can only be effective if television programming loudness levels are also regulated. At present there is no U.S federal law that mandates television programming volume levels. Controlling programme audio volume levels remains the responsibility of each broadcast network.

Why are there inconsistencies?

Volume inconsistencies exist when content is created using technical specifications that differ from the specifications issued by the network that airs the media. Or when broadcasting networks fail to police and enforce their own technical requirements.

Television broadcast networks individually create and publish technical specifications known as “Technical Delivery Requirements” or “Standards”. Those requirements are distributed to content providers (Producers) who then use those technical specifications to meet compliance. This is how the technical

quality of a television show is assessed and how programme audio volume levels are determined; in this regard, broadcast networks are self-governing.

Some networks have set a benchmark in broadcasting specifications

The U.S.-based “Discovery Networks” has become the recognised industry leader in the development and utilisation of Broadcast Technical Specifications. With innovations in digital technology and the way in which it was used, Discovery Networks was quick to understand that unless strict controls were implemented, its programming would suffer. Video specifications were easy to resolve, but interpretive audio was not. Its concerns addressed two main areas: intelligibility; and volume.

To achieve their objective, Discovery Networks eliminated their old analogue specifications and created new Technical Delivery Requirements. Viewers experienced improved intelligibility, consistent volume and 5.1 Surround Sound, even though the budget for the production of television shows had been considerably reduced.

Diminished production and post-production budgets meant that technical operators had to adapt to new operational procedures to meet compliance. They had to complete the work faster, to a higher and more exacting technical standard and make it affordable for the producers. The pressure was on the operators: Discovery had stringent quality control checks that did not allow for any deviance from their specifications, and they had no hesitation in rejecting a show that did not comply.

Technical operators, hired by producers to complete post-production of a television show, interpret technical specifications, and through process meet compliance and deliver a finished product. Generally, producers play little or no part in the process of meeting compliance and allow operators to perform that work unhindered.

Post-Production Sound Mixers had to adapt and provide quality programme sound Mixes and 5.1 Surround Sound at a much lower cost than they were previously used to. Programming had to be created cheaper and with a higher level of technical competence.

Other leading US Networks adopted the successful Discovery Networks approach to their “Technical Specifications” by modifying their own, and a determined adaptation by audio operators led to an overall across-the-board improvement in the sonic broadcast quality of U.S television shows on mainstream networks. Even networks that did not subscribe to this new method to mixing audio benefited. The change in operational procedures became

standard when working on Discovery Networks programming, and the viewer is enjoying this new change.

There are currently no transmission standards in New Zealand

As administrator of New Zealand's free to air digital broadcasts, Freeview has no standards of its own to oversee the technical quality of the content it broadcasts. Kordia, who is responsible for transmission in New Zealand, does not monitor the individual technical aspects of content it transmits. Both Freeview and Kordia rely on the content provider to ensure that programming meets the standards determined by the originating network. This accounts for any variances in perceived volume differences between channels and networks. The creation and implementation of a national Broadcast Audio Standard will not impact or impede the operation of both organisations, as long as the new technical specifications fall within the operating parameters of transmission equipment.

The positive impact of adopting international broadcasting practices in New Zealand

New Zealand's switch to digital broadcasting has seen technical improvements in the visual quality of the content it transmits. The creation of a broadcasting audio standard is a natural progression in support of our Digital Strategy and what the viewer is expecting to hear.

The quality of New Zealand-produced content is determined by the Technical Delivery Requirements issued by the broadcasting network. If these requirements were based on successful international broadcasting practices and adopted by all New Zealand broadcasting networks as a national Audio Broadcasting Standard, then this would positively impact New Zealand in the following ways:

- Provide consistent audio volume for the television viewer.
- Improve overall quality of NZ content
- Elevate technical competence of operators.
- Provide easier access to offshore markets as content would meet highest levels of technical compliance.
- Promote international growth and enable less reliance on local funding.
- Establish New Zealand internationally as an industry leader.
- "Quality" supported by national technical standard.

Broadcasting networks determine quality; our television listening and viewing experience is a direct result of each individual network's technical standards.

New Zealand producers, who create content only for local broadcast or for broadcast on lower tier international networks, are often unaware of the real technical issues surrounding Technical Delivery Requirements. When New Zealand technical operators adopt and apply best practices, aligned to a new national standard and accompanying guidelines, then even the lower budget content destined for alternative offshore markets will benefit.

Next Steps

There is growing broadcasting television and film industry support for a coherent, national Audio Broadcast Standard. Standards New Zealand (SNZ), as the national Standards body, has a proven track record in working with industry groups and is well placed to develop this standard using its robust, independent consensus building processes. Initial discussions with SNZ confirm that the following needs to happen to drive this work:

- solicit general support for a New Zealand "Broadcast Audio Technical Delivery Standard"
- secure funding for scoping phase coordinated by SNZ
- seek stakeholder participation for the project
- develop a New Zealand "Broadcast Audio Technical Delivery Standard" through SNZ where the excellence of New Zealand content is reinforced by a recognized quality mark
- collaborate in the creation of joint Standard with Australia, U.K and other interested countries.

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He is available to comment on this paper.

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