

A content review of *New Zealand Listener* covers 2000-2005: A case of “we are what we see”?

Opting to study a general interest weekly magazine such as the *New Zealand Listener* (“the *Listener*”) - now into its 66th year of publication - presents a platform for any number of potential research angles relevant to New Zealand Studies.

To begin with, the *Listener*, born as an arm of the New Zealand Government’s public broadcasting service and today published by APN Specialist Publications NZ Ltd, occupies a special niche, maintained through the unusual smorgasbord-like range of its content and its continued success.

In its own publicity¹ the magazine states it is “the country’s only national, weekly current affairs and entertainment magazine”, covering “the political cultural and literary life of the country, as well as carrying television and radio programme listings”. It could, justifiably I think, go one step further and use the description ‘national icon’ - as Australia’s longest running magazine, *The Bulletin*, does². The fact that it doesn’t, seems somehow in keeping with a modest, understated presence in the market – a home grown characteristic.

In deciding to limit my research to a content review of *Listener* covers, I have taken the ethos of the broad cross-disciplinary approach that infuses the Master of New Zealand Studies programme³ and sought, in particular, to draw from Journalism and History rather than, say, Media Studies. For the most part that inclination is a “reflexive” choice, based on my experience in the profession of Journalism and a strong belief in the importance of exploring connections between Journalism and History.

THE FUNCTION OF MAGAZINE COVERS

As Managing Editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Cullen Murphy has provided some cogent points about magazine covers for the Magazine Publishers of America (MPA), the US industry association for consumer magazines⁴:

- the cover story is the engine. It is one of the most important parts of the magazine.
- there is no substitute for clarification. Information must be concise, accurate and educational.
- “To some readers, sometimes, Donald Rumsfeld can be as interesting as Britney Spears.”

Magazine publishers, editors, and circulation directors know the importance of the cover image as both a newsstand impulse buy and as a brand⁵. The cover

¹ Source: The Magazine’, at www.listener.co.nz

² Source: <http://www.bulletin.acp.com.au/Publication.aspx>

³ Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. See <http://www.vuw.ac.nz/stout-centre/>

⁴ Source: http://www.magazine.org/content/files/secure/2004_22_tuesday.html#4

⁵ Possibly the ‘longest and nearest surviving relative’ to the *New Zealand Listener* is the *Radio Times*, born in September 1923 and published by the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) as its premier guide to TV,

image and design reinforce the brand, an important identification factor because the average reader is likely to spend only three to five seconds scanning a magazine cover before deciding whether to buy that issue⁶.

In a discussion of the history of *Atlantic Monthly* covers, Murphy presented how they had changed since the magazine's inception in 1857. In the beginning the covers on *Atlantic Monthly* were dominant easy messages with simple bold graphics, then after a few decades covers were used to "show the readers what's inside of the magazine". Murphy described his readers as educated and involved, stating: "The cover doesn't really need to grab the attention of readers, like *Cosmopolitan* or *Newsweek*, as much as it needs to contain a decent amount of information that will draw people to read"⁷.

As observed by Dr Gerald Grow⁸, magazine covers have, over time, changed radically, and that change can be observed by "following how magazines used cover lines from early, bookish designs, through the emergence of the poster cover and its dominance, through the integration of type with art, to the proliferation of cover lines at the beginning of the 21st century".

In terms of the mechanics of the vast majority of magazine covers today, it should be sufficient to say that different magazines have their own kind of cover which "following the axes of the *ephemeral* and the *enduring* is both always different and changing (featuring new topics and new models etc) and yet always the same and regular (same layout, same overall look)... The cover works as a system of interacting visual and verbal codes, a model of interpretation, if you will, for the reader and how s/he is going to position her/himself in relation to the magazine as a whole. Of course, this is in a persuasive (rather than compulsory) sense. For, as much as the cover's function is to sell the magazine (primary advertisement) and position the reader positively towards its contents, it cannot dictate how the magazine is used"⁹.

MAGAZINE RESEARCH IS NOT DEAD

From a range of prior scans and reviews, particularly in the literature of Journalism as an academic discipline, it is apparent that while magazine research is not dead, research of magazine covers is relatively limited. Amongst this research the most relevant article I could locate was titled "The art and science of magazine cover research"¹⁰.

Film and Radio, in print and online. Primarily a broadcast listings vehicle, it has a weekly readership of some 3 million – ten times the *Listener's* weekly readership of 333,000 although the UK has a population 15 times greater. When market research⁵ was undertaken in 2002 to find the United Kingdom's most stable media brands the *Radio Times* came third behind *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*. In a question to identify the most "British" media brand, it finished ahead of all other magazines and newspapers, and behind three television programmes.

⁶ "What Sells, What Bombs: Magazine Cover Roulette," *Washington Journalism Review* (July/August 1988), 18.

⁷ Source: http://www.magazine.org/content/files/secure/2004_22_tuesday.html#4

⁸ Professor of Journalism, Florida A&M University. See: <http://aejcmagazine.bsu.edu/Testfolder/> - an online 'reprint' of an article in *Journal of Magazine and New Media Research*, 2002 titled "Magazine Covers and Cover Lines: An illustrated history".

⁹ Source: http://www.english.und.ac.za/English1B/cosmolecture_3.htm

¹⁰ Source: *Journal of Magazine and New Media Research* (Vol. 5, No. 1; Fall 2002); available online at http://aejcmagazine.bsu.edu/journal/archive/Fall_2002/sjohnson1.htm; see also <http://aejcmagazine.bsu.edu/Testfolder/>

Some well-stated, provocative observations made in the article include:

- Because covers are primarily art and not text, they can't be studied by content analysis as easily as text for 'positive,' 'negative,' or 'neutral' directional content.
- Editors and journalists assume that the cover is simply a way to sell the magazine¹¹. It never occurs to editors whether their covers are an accurate reflection of the demographics of society, of social trends, or whether they reflect any of their own political or ideological orientations.
- Magazine covers not only offer information about what's inside a particular issue, they also provide significant cultural cues about social, political, economic, and medical trends.
- As both historical artifacts and marketing tools, magazine covers deserve closer study. Unfortunately, the topic has not attracted many scholars.

Magazine cover research has tended to shed most light on questions of representation, covering issues such as gendered messages on magazine covers¹², teen culture, racial diversity¹³, and with a preponderance of attention given to covers of men's and women's magazines. Studying magazine covers has also been a staple of many media literacy classes and class exercises.

CONTENT ANALYSIS FOR JOURNALISM'S SAKE

Without having discovered a clear model among the great variety of largely atheoretical 'content analysis' techniques that might be open to classifying the content of magazine covers, it is interesting to note and briefly discuss the concept that content analysis is the mark of an "able editor or journalist"¹⁴.

This "action research" concept refers to a guiding principle that knowing and researching the content of a publication is a sound imperative to inform journalistic practice and decisions about such things as story ideas and angles and allows (this time more from an editorial management point of view) for the use of content analysis as both a measurement and a planning tool to ensure that a publication is focused on the topics that meet the goals of the publication and its publisher.

In the attempt that follows to review/survey *Listener* covers I have been conscious of the journalistic eye particular to print journalists; the traditional instinct to wonder what issues were pre-occupying people at a given time (their common denominators and their pay packets), the sub-editor's bent for puns and teasers and tabloid touches (from Exclusive to Gotcha!), the signs of a good story as well as a good headline, the exigencies of meeting weekly deadlines and

¹¹ I would suggest the sales imperative is equally for the benefit of the magazine's advertisers as much as readers.

¹² "Women and Weight: Gendered Messages on Magazine Covers," by Malkin A.R.; Wornian K.; Chrisler J.C. in *Sex Roles*, (Volume 40, Numbers 7-8, 20 April 1999, pp. 647-655); or website reference at <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/klu/sers/1999/00000040/F0020007/00292188>

¹³ "The Face on the Cover: Racial Diversity in Fashion Magazines 1996-2000" – Association for Women in Communications, Annual Professional Conference, October 2002. Source: <http://www.womcom.org/Johnson.doc>

¹⁴ As taught internationally in Journalism departments, for example: <http://www.najah.edu/english/Faculties/arts/Journalism.asp>

the predictability and ‘cyclical’ nature of issues. While not having worked on a commercial magazine I also expected to encounter a set of magazine conventions in play, such as the added texture in the layering of cover lines to seed curiosity in a possible reader, the use of a direct voice to identify with readers and the promotion of columnists adjudged useful to the magazine’s reputation.

I have made no assumptions or observations about editorial practice or market/readership decisions (such as those based on demographics or psychographics) or aspects of design or complex ‘decoding’.

In commencing this study my one definite starting point was an early decision to make the ‘sample’ large enough to generate a longitudinal aspect to any patterns that might emerge. To achieve this I have reviewed 300 covers, texts and images from the period January 2000 to September 2005.

My approach has been to seek out some neutral-factual ‘findings’ that can indicate whether there is a distinct ‘narrative’ that emerges by looking at the groupings of topics covered by the *Listener*, the occurrence of unmistakably ‘New Zealand’ names and topics and an analysis of other features or factors that could enrich further study or simply prove a worthy secondary source of information.

The preliminary findings arrived at here are based on a set of essentially descriptive lists I have created after a detailed ‘reading’ of each of the 300 covers (more than 200 sourced from a household collection). This collective ‘spreadsheet database’ of lists addressed:

- Who was pictured on covers;
- Descriptions of the key visual elements of each cover treatment or illustration;
- ‘Topic groups’ that the lead item or cover story on each cover could be assigned to;
- Lists of the key catchwords used in the title on the magazine below the masthead (using a basic rule of retail that the catchwords would be eye-catching and visible from some distance); and
- A partial analysis of key words found in cover lines apart from the major headline.

MIXING SIMPLER OBSERVATIONS WITH MORE AMBITIOUS QUESTIONS

What will follow then, is a topline summary of features of the *Listener*, based on the evidence of its covers, that will be a partial documentation of the ‘slices of history’ it has captured and presented for its New Zealand readership.

The first, simple question is what was (literally) covered, when and how and this can lead on quite quickly to observations about representation. The larger, harder question is what happens after the cover is ‘put to bed’?¹⁵ - at what point, if any, do Journalism and History become ‘bedmates’?

¹⁵ A respected old journalism term.

Professor David Abrahamson¹⁶ is a leading commentator on the antagonisms between the two disciplines of Journalism and History. Writing in the newsletter of the History Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC)¹⁷ he has stated¹⁸:

History is trying to relate the past to the present and journalism is trying to relate the present to the future. If this is true, it might also be true that similar contrasts can be found in the norms by which these two cultural products are valued. History, for example, has professional standards established and policed by peers of associations such as AEJMC and the scholarly press. Journalism largely relies on marked acceptance by the reading and viewing public... [yet] despite the contradictions, it is clear that not only do historians need journalism, but that journalism, if it is to fulfill its social mission at all, clearly has a desperate need for a sense of history.

Dr Carolyn Kitch, an Associate Professor in the Department of Journalism/Communication and Theater at Philadelphia's Temple University, has presented another view of this relationship. In her recent book *Pages from the Past: History and Memory in American Magazines*¹⁹ Kitch examines a process in American journalism she identifies whereby cultural narratives are constructed and reconstructed over time in ways that draw on the past to make sense of the present and future.

Kitch makes the reasonable proposition that magazines have become important social commentators of a nation's life, and that among all journalistic media, magazines have a special relationship with memory and perform "archival and touchstone functions" especially well.

Abrahamson has also argued that magazines have vital differences from other media forms by conceptualizing the distinctive place of magazines as 'magazine exceptionalism':

If one thinks even briefly about newspapers, one comes to the conclusion that they are almost all geographically bounded in some way. If one thinks about broadcast, it is generally agreed that the medium is largely derivative... My thesis is that what is unique to magazines... is that they not only reflect or are a product of the social reality of the times, but they also serve a larger and more pro-active function -- that they can also be a catalyst, shaping the very social reality of their moment²⁰.

¹⁶ Professor Abrahamson is currently the Charles Deering McCormick Professor of Teaching Excellence at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, Illinois, USA. He is the general editor of a multi-volume historical series, *Medill Visions of the American Press* (Northwestern University Press), and *American Magazine: Research Perspectives and Prospects* (Iowa State University Press, 1994), and the author of *Magazine-Made America: The Cultural Transformation of the Postwar Periodical* (Hampton Press, 1996).

¹⁷ *Clio*, Fall 2002: The Newsletter of the AEJMC History Division

¹⁸ Source: http://abrahamson.medill.northwestern.edu/WWW/Articles/Journ_v_Hist.txt

¹⁹ *Pages from the Past: History and Memory in American Magazines* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

²⁰ Source: http://aejmcjournal.bsu.edu/journal/archive/Spring_2002/Abrahamson%204-1.htm and also, <http://abrahamson.medill.northwestern.edu/WWW/Articles/MagExceptionalism.html> Here Abrahamson refers more to the rise of the special-interest magazine (relative to a decline in general interest magazines). He cites those magazines because they were not only a product of the fractionalization of culture that took place in the latter third of the 20th Century, but because they were also drivers of the transformation itself (akin to the influence of websites and the Internet).

Does the *New Zealand Listener* have a role in capturing or advancing the social reality of the times? Does it explain the meaning of New Zealand, to New Zealanders and others? Does it provide a time and place – a documentary tradition – where history and memory mingle in the story of ‘our’ own lives?

These are good ‘launchpad’ questions to keep in mind, but trailing any deeper afield, into a discussion of national identity and the role of popular culture for instance, would be well beyond the length and scope of this essay.

For the purposes of this essay my frame of reference is closer to the work done by Carolyn Kitch, cited earlier²¹. Kitch describes her book as an exploration of the role of journalism in creating and challenging public notions about race, gender and generation – and eventually the weaving of those particular concepts into a broader national ideal. Setting images in place and pushing boundaries.

Kitch openly adopts the view of historian Michael Kammen – made in regard to media in general – that magazines have taken on a large responsibility for explaining the nation that they help to imagine. Furthermore Kitch states that magazines have gained, by virtue of their strong identification with their readers, a special position of authority from which they participate in and build the life of both their real and imagined communities.

The first chapter of her book and its assessment of “newsmagazines’ self-appointed status as national leaders” support this view²². Then in subsequent chapters she surveys aspects of magazines in relation to the way:

- that they underpin the role of celebrity in culture in their tributes to and memorialisation of public figures.
- that they define populations and their own audiences in terms of generational identity, for example the Boomers and Generation X.
- that 30 national consumer magazines have, often through common editorial approaches, celebrated their own anniversaries in ways that have allowed them to speak not just for their own institutional histories but also on behalf of ‘society’.

RESULTS OF THE CONTENT REVIEW OF 300 LISTENER COVERS

1. Facing The Nation – “Gonna see my picture on the cover”

Being the featured person on the cover of any high-circulation national magazine – be it *Rolling Stone* or *Time* or the *Listener* – is an automatic entrée to a Warholian moment of fame. For as Malcolm Muggeridge once said the cover spot on a magazine like *Time* is “post-Christendom’s most notable stained-glass window.”²³ Taking Muggeridge literally, the regularity of appearances that Helen Clark, Prime Minister of New Zealand, has achieved on the *Listener* cover spot over the last 5-6 years would earn her a church.

²¹ *Pages from the Past: History and Memory in American Magazines* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Roy Paul Nelson, *Publication Design*, 5th ed. (Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1991), 173.

Helen Clark appeared in the leading cover image on 13 covers of the 300 reviewed, including two abstract graphic treatments – one where she was photo-shopped as the Statue of Liberty and the other in which she was depicted as a soldier in the style of a war comic. Clark was the sole public figure featured on the cover for 9 of these 13 cover appearances. One of her ‘shared’ appearances was in tandem with US President George W. Bush alone, one with Bush and Opposition leader Don Brash, and one each paired with politician Winston Peters (in a prescient mock wedding) and Don Brash.

Clark’s nearest rivals for greatest number of total appearances on the cover were a considerable way back: Opposition leader Don Brash (4), broadcaster Kim Hill (4), politician Winston Peters (3), TV3 personality John Campbell (3); and two appearances each for: Campbell’s TV3 partner Carol Hirschfeld, TV personality Jeremy Wells, Radio New Zealand host Linda Clark, broadcaster Paul Holmes, All Black rugby legend Colin Meads, and the most youthful face, actor Keisha Castle-Hughes, star of *Whale Rider*, the international movie hit and celebration of Maori culture.

Public figures²⁴ repeated on the cover of the *Listener*, January 2000-September 2005

--- for full source details see Appendix 1

Number of times public figures made an appearance as (or as part of) the primary (large) cover image	c.102
And from this 102:	
Public figures ‘world-famous in New Zealand’	87
Public figures from outside New Zealand	15
Overall number of males	66
Overall number of females	36
Maori and Polynesian appearances (including repeats)	14
Number of times public figures featured in secondary (smaller) images, montages, insets or cameo shots	c.100
And from this 100:	
Public figures ‘world-famous in New Zealand’	88
Public figures from outside New Zealand	12
Overall number of males	60
Overall number of females	40
Maori and Polynesian appearances (including repeats)	18

²⁴ The term ‘public figure’ defines people who could be fairly said to have widespread fame or celebrity in the eyes of a long-term New Zealand resident (namely myself); the expression ‘world-famous in New Zealand’ used in this table has ties to the New Zealand advertising industry (used for a soft drink) as a way to describe or evoke, often in a self-deprecating manner, a local sense of fame or celebrity – this expression has passed into everyday colloquial use. My use of ‘public figure’ excludes several *Listener* covers showing New Zealanders who would not be expected to appear in the public eye as a matter of celebrity or fame; these appearances were almost all related to some form of notoriety, scandal or law and order issue arising from a controversial ‘story of the week’ – including a male youth shot by Police, two convicted male murderers, two young female murder victims and two families affected by murders. In this sub-category of figures who gained ‘passing public attention’, exceptions to dire hard news images were few; with covers devoted to a fertility expert and a finance guru (both male; both in 2000) and a medical expert (male, 2004). I have included public servant Christine Rankin as a ‘public figure’ due to the length of time her ‘story’ was in the public eye and recurrence of images of her by the *Listener*.

Politicians, including the Prime Minister’s haul, accounted for 26 cover appearances, closely followed by being a ‘celebrity’ on the New Zealand media scene, which drew 22 appearances. A full breakdown of cover appearances and dedicated cover images, for New Zealanders identifiable with a particular source of fame, was:

	Number of appearances	Actual dedicated covers
<u>New Zealand</u>		
Politicians	26	21
Media ‘personalities’	22	18
Music industry	11	9
Sports figures	10	9
Actors, film	8	7
Writers	6	6
Fashion	1	1
Religion	1	1
Public servant	1	1
Business	1	1
	87	74
		= approx. 25% of 300 covers

Photographic images of familiar New Zealanders given secondary placement and much lesser size on *Listener* covers followed a similar mix, often reinforcing names and faces who had received prominent treatments. In this vein there were more shots of Helen Clark (4), John Campbell (4) and Carol Hirschfeld (2), New Zealand born actor Russell Crowe (3) and director Peter Jackson (3), politician Nandor Tanczos (2), as well as All Black Jonah Lomu (3), ex-pat satirist John Clarke (2), boxer David Tua (2) and writer Elizabeth Knox (2). [For full details see *Appendix 1*].

The international dimension of public figures featured prominently on *Listener* covers was topped by the frontline combinations of US president George W. Bush (5, always in tandem with another public figure), Osama bin Laden (1), Saddam Hussein (1) and presidential candidate John Kerry (1). (For comparison it is worth noting that in 2003, Iraq and the ‘war on terror’ was the most common cover story at all three major US news magazines. A study of 48 issues in that year found that *Time* put the war on the cover 15 times, *Newsweek* 14 times and *US News* 12)²⁵. International ‘stars’ who made the cover of the *Listener* was limited to two Hollywood stars who had been filming movies in New Zealand (Gwyneth Paltrow and Tom Cruise) and golfing phenomenon Tiger Woods on the eve of a golf tournament he was about to play in New Zealand. US singer Shania Twain made an appearance as part of a cover story titled “NZ For Sale”, keying off her investment in a property development in the high country of the South Island.

New Zealand’s postcolonial ties to the ‘mother country’, the United Kingdom, were all but invisible – one cover featuring chef Jamie Oliver and one cover each for the Queen Mother (cover title “Mother’s Day”) and an archival coronation photo of New Zealand’s constitutional monarch Queen Elizabeth II (cover title “Long To Reign Over Us”).

²⁵ Source: <http://www.stateofthemediamedia.com/2004/index.asp> *The State of the News Media* is a significant annual report on American journalism, first published online in 2004 under the auspices of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, an institute affiliated with Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. The report includes a substantial section on magazine journalism.

2. Filling Out The Picture

Moving on from the prominence of publicly known people on *Listener* covers (25+%), what of the remaining three quarters of visual images used to create the ‘*Listener* narrative’?

Well, 40+% of all covers were illustrated primarily with shots of models (unknown people) in studio or staged settings, typically with further design and image manipulation through use of software such as Photoshop. Approximately 94 covers or the remaining 31% of covers featured artwork²⁶ that consisted of photographic or graphic illustrations, almost all devoid of people.

Gender and Generation

Beginning with the 40+% of covers that featured the faces of ‘unknown people’, excluding the public figures already covered, the following tallies provide some gauge of representation by gender and generation (age)²⁷.

Gender occurrences featured on *Listener* covers, excluding ‘public figure’ data:

Male: approx. 60		<i>Examples of featured cover/ cover story...</i>
Boys	10	“In Harm’s Way”; “Homework Hell”; “Growing Up Too Fast”; “Answers Now Please”; “Is Your Child Getting Too Much Sex?”; “Milk Battles”.
Teenage boys	3	“Dumb And Dumber”, “Top Marks” “Golden Generation”.
Young men	25	“What Are The Best Jobs”; “Male Vanity”; “The Year Of The Raise”; “Virgin Territory”; “The New Conservatives”.
Older men	22	“The Good Life”; “Rich Dad, Poor Son”; “Show Me The Money”; “Can I Ever Afford To Retire?”; “Stayin’ Alive”.

Female: approx. 69

Girls	13	“Material Girl”; “Mind That Child”; “School Daze”; “Another Child Dead”; “Anorexia”.
Teenage girls	2	“Golden Generation”.
Young women	35	“Sex”; “Pill pushers”; “Shop till you drop”; “Toxic Shock”; “Women & Booze”; “Beyond Botox”; “Everyday Addictions”; Pilates Craze”; “Balancing Beauty”; “Truth & Lies About Exercise”.
Older women	19	“Lost Minds”; “Botox Fix”; “The Real Cost Of Living”; “HRT”; “When Too Much Ain’t Enough”, “The Rise Of The Older Worker”; “Beat Stress”.

... includes ...

Family groups	12	“The Parent Trap”; “Meet Mr and Mrs New Zealand”; “Up Too Late”; “Dear Dad”; “100 Secrets of Happy Families”; “Secrets Of The Fridge”; “The Push for Gay Parents”.
Babies	6	“The Mobile Generation”; “New Science”, “Born Bad”.
Couples	4	“Sex Files”; “Ageing Disgracefully”; “Sex & Romance At Work”; “Boomer’s Big OE”; “Bye Bye Baby”.

²⁶ Glossaries of publishing terms typically define artwork, or art, as being all elements of a publication other than editorial text. Includes drawings, photos, advertisements, etc.

²⁷ Some allowance is needed for unavoidable guesswork. This is particularly true for age – Young/Older is based on ‘under or over 35/40’ as an arbitrary dividing line.

Based on a total of the combined gender totals of ‘public figures’ and ‘non-public figures’ featured on *Listener* covers for 2000-2005, males outnumber females by approximately **41**, with 186 ‘places’ compared to 145.

Adjusting this data for prominent cover images the ‘gap’ closes to about **21** (the equivalent really of 21 weeks), with 126 male ‘places’ compared to 105 female. The basic variants are that men have a significant edge in the number of appearances they garner in the ‘public figure’ stakes²⁸, while women have an edge when it comes to cover appearances for staged/ studio cover shots, particularly covers that put a high focus on women in the 25-40 age group.

This review of *Listener* covers does not show deep signs that catering to generational identity is a major aspect of the ‘*Listener* narrative’. The Boomer generation receives two specific mentions: “Sex and the single baby boomer”, in November 2000, and “Boomers’ Big OE”, in June 2004. There are also cover treatments, such as “Ageing disgracefully”, October 2003, that actively depict an older generation in the guise of a regained, rebellious youth.

Ethnicity – at face value

More pointedly this large sample of *Listener* covers provides scant evidence that anyone new to New Zealand could on the basis of those covers, week on week, sense New Zealand as much more than a mono-cultural nation.

The Treaty of Waitangi made it on to the cover in October 2000 – along with the lead cover line “White Backlash”. Four months later the February 2001 lead cover story read “Learning to be Pakeha”, with the strong visual of a young blonde, blue-eyed male whose face had been painted with the New Zealand flag.

It was another two years before “We’re all New Zealanders”, September 2003, posited an identikit type montage of a mostly brown skinned ‘New Zealander’. It was only in March 2004 that a cover, “A People’s Progress”, put Maori front and center; the visual being a photo of a young Maori women, in black singlet wearing a pounamu pendant and serious expression, photographed in front of an oil painting of snow-capped mountains and bush. And it was only by May 2005 that the word Maori actually appeared in a prominent title, in a cover story “The Maori Party”, with new politician Pita Sharples sternly resplendent in tipare (headband), with taiaha and pounamu mere (traditional weapons) in hand.

The small saving grace in broadening this picture is that people of Maori descent, Maori faces and names, have held a place in cover images of ‘public figures’. Yet how could such a diverse group as Carol Hirschfeld, Anika Moa, Keisha-Castle Hughes, Carlos Spencer, Temuera Morrison, Witi Ihimaera, Brian Tamaki, Winston Peters, Pita Sharples, George Nepia (deceased), Billy T James (deceased), Rawiri Paratene, Cliff Curtis, Vicki Houghton, Michael Campbell and Kiri Te Kanawa even vaguely carry the idea of an indigenous presence or identity in New Zealand amidst so many other images and messages? First People or marginalised people?

²⁸ This factor might be even greater without the crop of prominent office-holders in New Zealand who are women.

Overall the exposure of multicultural faces on *Listener* covers was hardly positive.

Multicultural faces ²⁹

aside from 'public figures' *Examples of featured cover/ cover story:*

Pakeha	112	
Maori	6	"Family Trees"; "Violent Society"; "A Peoples' Progress"; "Daddy Cool"
Asian	5	"Asia Downunder"; "Asian Drivers"; "House Prices and Skills Supply"
Polynesian	3	"Paradise Lost", Suva gunman; "Drift Away", fishing scene; "Angry Society"
Indian	2	"Why Did She Die?", mother and daughter holding photo of sister in sari
Middle East	1	"Unholy Row", close-up shot of woman wearing a burqa

As with Maori, the Polynesian community could take some succor from a raised profile due to the achievements of a small Pacific wave generated by musicians King Kapisi and Scribe, and by sports stars David Tua and Jonah Lomu. New Zealand's resident communities with connections to China and India were effectively invisible.

Illustrations

Illustrated and abstract covers, primarily those covers that do not focus on images of people, have become less common on the *Listener* since 2004 – featuring just 14 times between January 2004 and close of September 2005 (16%), compared to some 81 times between January 2000 to December 2003 (38%). A review of this artwork reveals a high proportion of covers that presented a level of abstract treatment to illustrate the cover story particular to that edition. For example:

- Computer mice looped to form the shape of a heart – cover story "Love Online".
- Parliament's Beehive shaped into an electric plug – cover story "The Anatomy of Power".
- A graphic of a classic yellow diamond-shaped road sign split in the middle at the point where a mother and child are holding hands – cover story "School Zones".
- Close up of a body, half dressed as a businessman holding a cellphone and half dressed as a tradesperson with a wrench – cover story "Career Opportunities".
- Male hand with strings as per a puppet master descending into a shaded city skyline pastiche of Auckland's Sky Tower, Beehive etc– cover story "Who Controls NZ?"

Two significant 'themes' for illustrations relate to elements of the New Zealand Landscape and the theme of Property Ownership/ Money.

Classic New Zealand mountain-scapes, South Island lakes, beach scenes, coastlines, Milford Sound, Pohutukawa trees, rolling surf, holiday getaways, seaside holiday baches, and big blue skies³⁰ recur over a series of about 15 covers, about half timed for the traditional New Zealand holiday period of January. Covers that share the Property Ownership/ Money theme account for about 18 covers – basically a set of images that are, one way or another, a variation on a

²⁹ Ethnicity was noted at the same time as data for the gender and 'age' table on page 9. Pakeha = New Zealand European.

³⁰ Blue skies are a common motif or backdrop to a host of other *Listener* covers.

theme. ‘Property story’ images typically show miniature houses, usually two story buildings, one in a bubble, one floating on a cloud, one on a mouse trap, another riding the crest of a storm-driven wave while a house in the foreground sinks into the sea. These accompany cover text with leading titles of: *Open Home*, *Real Estate Mistakes*, *Real Estate Boom?*, *A Plague on all their houses*, *SOLD (Coastal Property)*, *Will The House Price Bubble Burst?*, *Sky High House Prices*, *House Traps*, *Property Storm* and *Headed For Heartbreak?*

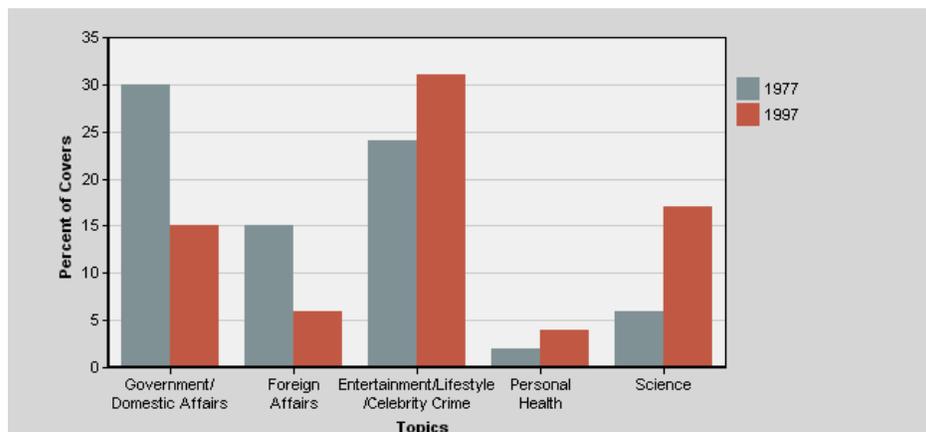
The ‘Money stories’ tend to involve the dollar sign as a visual cue, and as with the Property images seem equally skewed to developing an undercurrent of anxiety, be it through an illustration of a pipe letting off steam next to a gauge that has the words “Don’t Worry - Worry - Panic” on it, or a story about Property Rates illustrated with a Big Bomb heading towards a letterbox, complete with a label that reads “Final demand to the householder, Everytown, New Zealand”.

Illustrations and cliché are, not surprisingly, closely employed. A rare cover story on the environment – “Global Meltdown”, *Listener* 4/12/2004 – is illustrated by a photograph of a small iceberg on a still sea, engulfed in an aqua haze. And in covers allied to the topics of Health and Drugs – forming a total of 12 illustrated covers – designers have opted for such devices as:

- An anatomically-correct medical image of a red heart located against a blue body – repeated almost identically alongside titles of “Heart Attack” in both May 2002 and April 2004.
- A hand holding a joint with the smoke rising to form a questionmark – cover story “High Time”.
- Spelling out the word Drugs using a vial, pill, rolled \$20 bill and cannabis joint, joined by a line of cocaine – cover story “The lost war on Drugs”.

3. Topicality?

Studies of US news magazines have clearly shown that gradually, over time, “softer news areas like entertainment, personal health and science [have] received more cover play”³¹, as seen in this graph.



³¹ Source: http://www.stateofthemediamedia.com/2004/narrative_magazines_contentanalysis.asp?cat=2&media=7
 See <http://www.journalism.org/resources/research/reports/definitions/frontpage.asp> for more content analysis and information about changing definitions of news.

The *Listener* is not a news magazine. Yet, as per the comment at the start of this essay its special niche has a certain reliance and dependency on the unusual smorgasbord-like range of its content and there are parallels to the way that studies have shown the drift of US news magazines towards a 'general interest' emphasis.

Running a topic analysis ruler over *Listener* covers my findings were that its biggest cover topics were indeed Lifestyle/ Health and Celebrity – together representing slightly more than a third of covers.

Topics related to Property, Politics, and Personal Finances/ Economy all ran at about 7% of covers, followed by (tentative) topic headings for National Identity, Sports, Law & Order, Hard News, Family, International and Education – at between 3-5% of covers each – ahead of a swag of less frequently repeated 'single issue' topics such as Science, Drugs, Religion, Employment, Fertility, Privacy, Society and Business.

As noted in the *The State of the News Media 2004* lifestyle topics are often about how citizens behave e.g. "She works, he doesn't" (*Newsweek*) or "The Secrets of Eating Smarter"³².

Some equivalents in the *Listener* during the period under review have already been touched on above, and an indicative range includes: *Love Online*, *Depression*, *Lost Minds (Alzheimers)*, *Nature's Pharmacy*, *Botox*, *The Science Of Love*, *Male Vanity*, *Anti-Diet Revolution*, *Everyday Addictions*, *Fat or Fiction?*, *What's In Our Water*, *Pilates Craze*, *Health or Hoax?*, *Men's Health Special*, *EGO Maniacs*.

My observation about topics covered by *Listener* covers is that they have demonstrated wide diversity and that further analysis would doubtless draw out further patterns.

Within the limits of this essay, one pattern or set of topics that I believe it would be an omission not to point to is the way in which so many cover topics are framed in a textual/visual manner which seems set on either creating or raising an air of anxiety and mooted controversy, if not fear and paranoia.

To varying degrees this accusation is borne out across almost all topics, and the one that I'd choose to comment on briefly is the recurring anxiety surrounding the sale of "New Zealand".

³² Source: <http://www.stateofthemediamedia.com/2004/index.asp> The *State of the News 2005* Report also found it useful to examine news weeklies' content by looking at the 'trend' cover stories they run. The report's authors said that "such pieces, normally not connected to any particular news event, are occasional attempts by the magazines to set their own news agenda. The covers are generally focused on hot topics that they hope will bring large audiences - particularly newsstand buyers who might not subscribe to the magazine. Off-news covers are particularly interesting because they go to the heart of the news weeklies' content changes. When events do not force them to put news on the cover, *Time* and particularly *Newsweek*, which [has] had more off-news covers ... often opt for something else. It is one of the most telling signs of how these magazines are increasingly becoming general-interest titles with less and less of a tether to the news". See: www.stateofthemediamedia.org/2005/narrative_overview_intro.asp?cat=1&media=1)

This one topic has been a perennial in recent years and is regularly evoked with imagery that portrays ‘open land’ and hints, ironically, at the threat of ‘new settlers’:

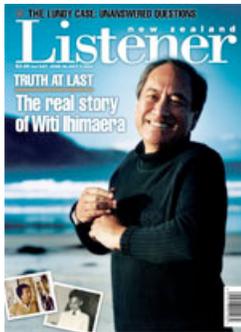
- March 2002 – Who Owns Our High Country?
- December 2002 – SOLD (Coastal Property)
- July 2003 – The New Land Wars
- August 2003 – A Line In The Sand³³
- October 2004 – NZ for Sale

4. “A decent amount of information that will draw people to read”.

Dr Gerald Grow has aptly described the proliferation of cover lines, the total text below the masthead, as a “forest of words”³⁴. For the practical purposes of manageability the textual references I have been making about *Listener* covers has stuck to the barest, largest headline catchwords and I have not touched on the extra ‘sub-text’ provided by cover lines.

Having counted the sheer number of words involved over the period of 2000-2005, I can accurately report and record that the extent of this complete text – excepting the words “New Zealand Listener” and explicit marketing promotions – runs to over 11,400 words. A truly dense forest. The variety and content of cover lines partially reflect changes to the *Listener*’s look over time. Up until 2004, the amount of text had been consistently high, with the average for each cover working out as follows: 2000 – 42.4; 2001 – 39.6; 2003 – 41.9; 2004 – 49.4.

*One of the last of the old mastheads;
June 2004*



*“In with the New” – large, red and
bold; 31 July 2004*



For 2004 this average fell dramatically to 25.5 words per cover, and the average for 2005 through to the close of September was 27.1.

Although reviewing, unravelling and yes, decoding, this huge amount of text would be a mammoth task, a thorough study of *Listener* covers would remain incomplete without completing such a task. As a nod in that direction I had considered and commenced screening words that could be said capable of calling to mind unmistakable historical, spatial or cultural ‘cues’ to New Zealand.

³³ Unlike the ‘foreign threat’ the import of this cover turned on the Seabed & Foreshore debate, complete with imagery of a huge piece of barbed wire atop a photo of a tranquil coastline and beach.

³⁴ Source: <http://aejmc magazine.bsu.edu/Testfolder/>

Touchstones to New Zealand's Brand?

Think New Zealand, and the conventional colloquial abbreviations NZ, NZer, Kiwi are likely to feature. Searching for these on *Listener* covers was one relatively quick and easy task in the search for 'cues'. And the results were:

- Other than the masthead use of New Zealand in full, cover lines that used "New Zealand" or "New Zealander" in full occurred about 46 times, or 15% of covers.
- Variations of NZ and NZer featured in cover lines 111 times.
- Kiwi/ Kiwis was used 40 times. Call it a verification of self-identification.

Another question that arose was the level to which mentions of the All Blacks/ Rugby was embedded into the sense of New Zealand expressed by the *Listener*. The quick answer to this was that the All Blacks were firmly entrenched in the fabric of both prominent cover appearances and in the subtext of cover lines.

In terms of cover images alone, individual All Blacks – players and coaches, current and former – rated 10 appearances. My trawl of the full text on *Listener* covers turned up a further 22 mentions of All Blacks and Rugby, and two items particular to the angle of sport and society: "1981 Revisited", July 2001, and "The All Browns – Polynesian-isation of NZ Sport", July 2002.

In contrast to the routine hagiography attached to Rugby I couldn't find one mention, anywhere, of Netball, for instance, despite its substantially equal mainstream status. A clear lack of core brand equity? Or of blinkers?

CONCLUSION

It has been the intention of this essay to firmly locate whether studying the *Listener* in terms of the frame of reference of magazine research and as a crossroads between Journalism and History has merit? In doing so there hasn't been any additional wish to measure the intrinsic merits of the *Listener* itself.

Listener journalist Denis Welch, writing in the 60th Anniversary edition of the *Listener*³⁵, did a very good job of appraisal for the latter, stating happily that:

"With no other purpose than to entertain, inform, and provoke, we seem to have attained an iconic status unmatched by any other publication in the country's history, with the possible exception of the *Weekly News*".

Despite beginning his article with the question "does a topical magazine want to draw attention to its age?", Welch says that the most striking outcome of looking through the files since 1939 is "the way in which the magazine has mirrored the times... Whatever the ethos of the age, you'd catch it in the *Listener*". Though not necessarily on the cover, for as Welch observes:

"For nearly half our history... it was not uncommon for the cover picture to have nothing to do with anything in the magazine. As late as 1980 we could go with a cover picture of nothing but surimi, knowing that 375,000 people with not the slightest interest in raw fish would still buy the mag"³⁶.

³⁵ *Listener*, 3 July 1999 – "Incidental Sauce," pages 32-38.

³⁶ *Listener*, 3 July 1999 – "Incidental Sauce," page 38.

In answer to my opening question about the context for this study, I do firmly believe that the characteristics of the *Listener* definitely belong to the field that scholars like Abrahamson and Kitch actively contribute research to.

I fully agree with Kitch's position and focus that the past permeates modern journalism – a counter-argument to those who would posit that journalism is ahistorical. She points out a truism that journalism preceded the first US history books as the first institution to create a public narrative about the nation's identity and that it is from the media that “we get many (perhaps most) of our notions about history as ‘heritage’”³⁷.

Kitch cites historians, anthropologists, semioticians and sociologists to demonstrate a growing body of scholarship that addresses the social function of journalism. Citing social historian John Bodnar, Kitch asserts that magazines belong within Bodnar's descriptions of the intersection between “vernacular culture” and “official culture”. And citing anthropologist Dr S. Elizabeth Bird, Kitch links the function of journalistic media to oral storytelling and the “ritual component of repetition”³⁸, a more or less constant retelling that is central to social identity formation and affirmation.

Related to Kitch's questions about whether journalistic media, particularly magazines, have a place on the terrain of public history I would argue that studying the *Listener* has direct tangible benefits to anyone undertaking 'New Zealand Studies' proper and all of the diversity implied in New Zealand Studies.

The *Listener* certainly exhibits the potential to fulfill several aspects that a national magazine might be expected to fulfill. It is certainly capable of celebrating its anniversaries in ways that go beyond speaking just for its own institutional history but also on behalf of a distinctly imagined community.

It has a special position of authority that it exercises through the way it underpins the role of celebrity and in its tributes at the time of passing of national figures such as Janet Frame and Michael King, as well as in its special editions (such as the “A Day In The Life Of” photography special, February 2000), nostalgic reflections (“25 Great Moments in NZ TV”, September 2004) and signposting of cultural and social milestones or pressure points (“NZ Music Explosion”, December 2001; “Class in NZ,” May 2005).

As to the social mission role of magazines like the *Listener* I'm not convinced that shaping the social reality³⁹ of the moment is as relevant as their role in ‘writing of the recent past’.

³⁷ Source: http://uncpress.unc.edu/chapters/kitch_pages.html

³⁸ Ibid. Kitch also notes that the greater physical permanence of magazines over newspapers or other media alone suit them more to being physically collected – valued as much as for their material culture as for their information and imagery. They become, for many people, treasured possessions that recall the owners' past, “the context of which they were once a part”.

³⁹ Abrahamson has written about the catalytic influence and rise of the special-interest magazine (relative to a decline in general interest magazines). He cites those magazines because they were not only a product of the fractionalization of culture that took place in the latter third of the 20th Century, but because they were

David Abrahamson does caution against overstating the effects that magazines have on society, given that “often the best evidence one can come up with for the effect of a certain media is manifestations in other media [and that] result is a form of circularity that is quite difficult to circumvent”. As he says: “Perhaps the heart of the matter is that in a media-saturated culture, it becomes ever more difficult to separate what the media is doing from what the culture is doing. In many ways, culture itself has become defined by its media”⁴⁰.

The *Listener* works best, as noted by Denis Welch, as “a national noticeboard”⁴¹. In my own life I regard it as one of my ‘distinctive moorings’ – a way of maintaining my public knowledge of New Zealand in breadth, as well as to a reasonable depth, a bedside hard copy substitute for a flimsy TVNZ Charter that through broadcasting ‘local content’ at irregular hours of the night fails me.

Future studies of the *Listener* have the advantage of access to comprehensive library and e-based indexing and to a fully functional website with a useful online archive to refer to.⁴² Such studies will have numerous avenues to explore, from questions of national identity to national ‘narratives’⁴³ to the *Listener*’s options for continuing to engage and build loyalty with its audience and survive as a commercial entity.

I have, as an unexpected reflexive conclusion, come to a view that the *Listener* risks treading ever shallower waters through the trend towards ‘softer’ covers. There is, I’d suggest, a danger in drifting too far off the identification of New Zealand topics or angles first and foremost and to any further narrowing of the magazine’s cultural window. Denis Welch again: “Covers do cumulatively contribute to a magazine’s ongoing image, and can never be taken lightly”⁴⁴.

The *Listener* has an ability to put images (and text) in place that amplify the boundaries around the statement ‘we are what we see’. Wielding a stronger sense of our multiple histories must surely be vital to the way it is perceived in the future – and the way that many New Zealanders – new and old – perceive themselves.

also drivers of the transformation itself (akin to the influence of websites and the Internet). Source: http://aejmc magazine.bsu.edu/journal/archive/Spring_2002/Abrahamson%204-1.htm and also, <http://abrahamson.medill.northwestern.edu/WWW/Articles/MagExceptionalism.html>

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ *Listener*, 3 July 1999 – “Incidental Sauce,” page 38.

⁴² See: www.listener.co.nz

⁴³ For instance, an excellent study of the sense in which websites operate like magazines and contribute to national identity is *NZEDGE.COM: Expressions of community and cultural identity in Cyberspace*, by Anna Tripp, Jocelyn Williams and Glenda Jacobs, UNITEC Institute of Technology, 2003. The conclusion to this study reads, in part: “NZEDGE provides a reference point for New Zealanders to connect to their history, to each other, and to their future. It captures its audience at an opportune time, communicating through an efficient medium, while encouraging interaction and feedback. Through our research, it is apparent that the website’s shared rhetoric collectively reinforces the meanings derived and constructed by the participants in this study, the interpretive community”.

⁴⁴ *Listener*, 3 July 1999 – “Incidental Sauce,” page 38.

REFERENCES TO FURTHER READING : MAPPING THE MAGAZINE

- *subject to further additions*

Books

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Brief definition of general interest magazines
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Folio: The Magazine for Magazine Management; How to play the cover game now! 1
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http://preview.foliomag.com/design/marketing_play_cover_game/
http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m3065/is_3_33/ai_n6079065

Time archive
<http://www.time.com/time/coversearch/>

Journalism Quarterly – index to Magazine Journalism
<http://www.aejmc.org/pubs/JMCQuarterlyindex/subject/subjectmagazine.html>

General site references

www.magazinestudies.com

www.magforum.com/cover_secrets2.htm

Appendix 1: People, People, People – Listener cover shots

- brackets indicate a shared appearance on the cover

Primary leading cover image	Secondary images, montages	/ Insets or cameo photos
<p>2000</p> <p>Brian Edwards Nandor Tanczos Helen Clark (Judy Bailey, Richard Long, Paul Holmes, John Campbell, Carol Hirschfeld) Jamie Oliver Stephen Tindall Queen Mother Todd Blackadder Rob Waddell Linda Clark Sam Neill Kim Hill Helen Clark</p> <p>2001</p> <p>Colin Meads Russel Crowe Greg Turner Helen Clark (Jeremy Wells, Mikey Havoc) Christine Rankin Lynley Dodd Roger Hall Kevin Smith (George W. Bush Osama bin Laden) John Banks (King Kapisi, Anika Moa, Shayne Carter)</p> <p>2002</p> <p>Tiger Woods Queen Elizabeth II Lucy Lawless Sir Peter Blake Peter Jackson (Helen Clark George W Bush) Kim Hill Bic Runga Trevor Mallard Helen Clark Helen Clark Winston Peters Alan Duff</p>	<p>2000</p> <p>(John Campbell, Judy Bailey) (John Walker, Peter Snell, Jack Lovelock, George Nepia, Susan Devoy, Yvette Williams, Richard Hadlee) (Margaret Wilson, Judith Cartwright, Sian Elias, Helen Clark, Jenny Shipley, Theresa Gattung, Christine Fletcher)</p> <p>2001</p> <p>(John Clarke/Fred Dagg, Billy T. James, Jonah Lomu, Lorraine Downes) (John Campbell, Anika Moa, Peter Jackson)</p> <p>2002</p> <p>(Charlotte Dawson, Paul Holmes, Rachel Hunter, Sally Ridge, Carol Hirschfeld, John Campbell, Nicky Watson) (Winston Peters, Saddam Hussein, Johnny Wilkinson, Russell Crowe)</p>	<p>2000</p> <p>Danielle Cormack John Lydon Nandor Tanczos Richard Prebble Daniel Radcliffe Mark Todd Princess Diana John Clarke Christine Rankin Robbie Williams Janet Frame Robert Muldoon Nandor Tanczos John Lennon Peter Jackson Liv Tyler Elijah Woods Neil Finn David Tua David Tua Linda Clark Todd Blackadder Carol Hirschfeld Rob Waddell</p> <p>2001</p> <p>Julia Deans Emmylou Harris Trevor Mallard Bob Dylan Elizabeth Knox Peter Sinclair Osama bin Laden Helen Clark Helen Clark Russell Crowe Jonah Lomu Mikey Havoc Christine Rankin Kim Hill</p> <p>2002</p> <p>Kevin Smith Peter Jackson Halle Berry Russell Crowe Tom Scott John Pilger Rod Donald Jeanette Fitzsimons Julie Christie Jonah Lomu</p>

Primary leading cover image	Secondary images, montages	<i>/ Insets or cameo photos</i>
<p>2003</p> <p>Helen Clark Tom Cruise Keisha Castle-Hughes (John Campbell, Carol Hirschfeld) Russell Coutts</p> <p>Helen Clark Kim Hill Mike Hoskings (Saddam Hussein, George W. Bush) Carlos Spencer Temuera Morrison/ Bill Ralston John Mitchell Scribe</p> <p>2004</p> <p>Gwyneth Paltrow Janet Frame Don Brash Michael King</p> <p>Helen Clark Witi Ihimaera (Keisha Castle-Hughes, Colin Meads) Steven Ferguson (Neil & Tim Finn) Brian Tamaki Paul Holmes Shania Twain David Lange (George W. Bush John Kerry) Jeremy Wells</p> <p>2005</p> <p>(Dave Dobbyn, Brooke Fraser) (Winston Peters, Helen Clark) Rove McManus John Campbell Trelise Cooper Ilona Rogers Pita Sharples Paul Ellis Winston Peters (Helen Clark, George W. Bush, Don Brash) Helen Clark Hayley Westenra (Don Brash, John Key) (Susan Wood, Linda Clark, Kim Hill) (Don Brash Helen Clark)</p>	<p>2003</p> <p>(Keisha Castle-Hughes, Rawiri Paratene, Cliff Curtis, Vicki Haughton)</p> <p>2005</p> <p>(Paul Holmes, Susan Wood)</p>	<p>2003</p> <p>Sir Edmund Hillary Michael Moore (USA) Jeremy Wells</p> <p>2004</p> <p>Michael Palin</p> <p>2005</p> <p>Joanne Black Brian Tamaki Helen Clark Alice Sebold Elizabeth Knox Sonja Davies Michael Campbell Kiri Te Kanawa Ian Grant David Lange Sean Plunket Mark Sainsbury John Campbell</p>