

The Dominion Post
5 January 2005

"TVNZ unit screens five minutes in five months"
by Kelly Andrew

Television New Zealand has spent more than \$200,000 on its news and current affairs investigation unit, which has screened just one five-minute item since it launched last July.

In the five months to the end of November, the state broadcaster's investigative unit cost \$208,853.

But, so far only one story produced by the unit, about an alleged Gisborne pornographer, has aired on One News.

Television New Zealand has told Parliament's finance and expenditure select committee that the unit had also completed two longer stories -- one half-hour item, and one of an hour -- and these were waiting for "an opportune time" to screen.

Seven other stories were being investigated and filmed and should air in the first three months of this year.

The unit is headed by executive producer Chris Harrington. Reporters Phil Kitchin, Jodi Ihaka and Brent Fraser, and two part-time researchers, work on material for One News, Close Up @ 7, and documentary specials.

When it was first set up, TVNZ news boss Bill Ralston said the unit would uncover secrets and take a watchdog role on behalf of the public.

National MP Murray McCully said that, judging by its work so far, the unit did not seem like a "flash idea".

"Obviously we're going to be asking some further questions. On the face of it, it looks like a highly questionable investment of taxpayers' money. Maybe they've just had a slow start but I think they owe us an explanation."

Last month, there was public outrage over TVNZ news anchor Judy Bailey's \$800,000 pay deal.

Days later, a report by the finance and expenditure committee revealed TVNZ had paid staff more than \$4 million in bonuses and incentives in 18 months, despite the state broadcaster's insistence there was no "culture of extravagance".

TVNZ spokeswoman Avon Adams said the broadcaster had no concerns about the productivity or cost of the investigative unit, which had completed five stories.

"The whole point of the unit is to take time to investigate, to dig deeper, and to break new stories about new issues. Some stories may take three weeks to produce, others may take over a year to research and complete.

"But at the same time the reporters will be working on other stories for news and current affairs generally."

Though only one story had screened so far, there were four more "in the can" that would air after the summer holidays, she said. The unit operated within TVNZ's news budget, which was "continually managed".

As well as information about the investigative unit, TVNZ's answers to MPs' questions reveal restructuring of the broadcaster's news and current affairs department cost \$1.2 million, and five personal grievance claims were settled by the broadcaster in the year to June 2004 at a total cost of \$120,000.