

The Role of Indigenous Media in Establishing National Identity

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This paper focuses on the importance of indigenous media and its impact on both Maori identity and New Zealand as a whole. It looks at the media's power to shape national identity and examines the emergence of indigenous media against the backdrop of Maori dissatisfaction at mainstream media. Underlying this is the theme of biculturalism and the hopeful possibility of a plural national identity in New Zealand. In the interest of clarity, from this point on "national identity" will refer to "the depiction of a country as a whole, encompassing its culture, traditions, language, and politics" (National identity, n.d.). Likewise, biculturalism will be defined as the mutual partnership between Maori and Pakeha, with both on equal footing (Stuart, 2003).

Maharey (1990) describes our nation as saturated with media content, unable to avoid the swirl of radio, television and film. Terzis (2000) claims this environment enables the rapid creation of national identity. He says that national broadcasting enables millions of individuals to interact with one another in a collective national life. However, Spoonley (1990) believes that New Zealand is in a confused stage of transition when it comes to national identity. He notes the distinct differences between how Maori and Pakeha envision themselves in a public arena. The majority of Pakeha consider the notion of biculturalism – a partnership between Maori and Pakeha – to be deeply threatening (Spoonley, 1990). To complicate matters, Pakeha tend to have difficulty in identifying the features that make them culturally distinctive. This is seen in the formation of the One New Zealand Foundation, which has "aggressively fought to deny minority ethnicity and to promote the myth of a 'one New Zealand' identity" (Spoonley, 1990, p. 30). This narrow conception of national identity is becoming increasingly popular and implies there is unity where none exists. New Zealand's national identity is in a divided state of confusion, fuelled partly by the media's negative and racist coverage (Spoonley, 1990).

Those who work in the media wield considerable power to shape and construct this identity (Maharey, 1990). Maharey reminds us that media workers "make use, consciously or unconsciously, of established codes to produce what we then read,

see or hear” (p. 18). This material is constructed, often unintentionally, to represent reality in a certain way. Maharey explains that while the media endeavour to portray a range of opinions, they direct discussion on what they perceive to be the most acceptable view, which tends to be that of the majority. Spoonley (1990) extends on this, saying the media’s power to “create facts and confirm values” (p. 31) makes them the utmost influence on public opinion. The media’s need to report news in a truncated form results in the portrayal of a distorted picture (Spoonley, 1990). This marginalises the views of minorities and defines how New Zealanders view the world and themselves – their national identity (Maharey, 1990).

The mass media is *not* culturally neutral (Stuart, 2007). In fact, Stuart (2007) says it “interacts with and changes the culture within which it is placed, and, by doing so, changes itself” (p. 20). This is in agreement with the idea that the media has the power to shape national identity and culture. Stuart argues that, as a country, we must move towards a bicultural national identity. He argues that the freedom to practise one’s own culture, without undue pressure, is a basic human right. Stuart also points to Article Two of the Treaty of Waitangi, which guarantees Maori the right to practise their own culture in New Zealand. He stresses that both Maori and Pakeha deserve this right.

However, Bell (1995, as cited in Addis et al., 2005) believes New Zealand’s market-driven broadcasting system directly impairs the development of a bicultural national identity. She examines the definition of national identity and culture in terms of the Broadcasting Act 1989:

She found that certain groups are named and treated as sociological minorities – women, children, people with disabilities, minorities. Maori language and culture are also named in the Act and by a process of elimination, Bell identifies the centre of society as occupied by those who are not named, that is, able-bodied Pakeha men (Addis et al., 2005, p. 44).

Bell (1995, as cited in Addis et al., 2005) argues that the Act endorses programming *about* marginal groups, rather than *for* them. She establishes that the market-driven system in New Zealand encourages the broadcasters to cater to the majority, rather than recognising the diversity of audience. This encourages the confused state of national identity in New Zealand (Spoonley, 1990).

Misa (as cited in Broadcasting Standards Authority, 2006) establishes that “there exists a deep dissatisfaction among many Maori with what is seen as mainstream media’s unfairly negative portrayal of Maori” (p.85). This dissatisfaction is backed by considerable research (Abel, 1996; Addis et al., 2005; Barclay & Liu, 2003; Broadcasting Standards Authority, 2006; Matheson, 2007; Wilson, 1990). The historical neglect and mistreatment by mainstream media has motivated Maori to establish their own media (Stuart, 2003).

In the late 1980s, experiments in Maori radio broadcasting led to the establishment of two radio stations - Te Upoko o te Ika and Radio Ngāti Porou (Maori Language Commission [MLC], n.d.). For the first time, Maori political leaders and thinkers were able to speak to Maori through their own channels (Stuart, 2003). In 1993, Te Mangai Paho, a Maori broadcasting funding agency, was established to promote Maori language and culture (MLC, n.d.). More than twenty Government-funded iwi radio stations began broadcasting around New Zealand. Five years later, the Government announced funding for a Maori television channel. This finally saw fruition on 28 March 2004 with the establishment of Maori Television (MLC, n.d.).

This advent of Maori media is exceedingly important to the construction of Maori national identity (Stuart, 2003). Maori previously had to rely on information filtered through Pakeha culture. Maori, conscious of this fact, rejected the media as biased, flawed and unhelpful (Stuart, 2003). This meant they had very little information to work with in order to formulate their own valid opinions. Maori media has changed this by exposing Maori to a whole array of opinions and information, presented in a culturally acceptable format (Stuart, 2003). Maori media has provided direct links with Maori communities, nurtured a sense of community and encouraged social justice and education (Stuart, 2003).

Maori media also enables Maori to redefine their national identity, free of Pakeha constraints (Stuart, 2003). Stuart (2003) argues that during the first half of the 20th century, Maori identity was constructed by Pakeha anthropologists, ethnographers, sociologists and historians. By the middle of the 20th century, the mass media had adopted these views and assumed the role of defining Maori cultural characteristics. Maori identity has traditionally been largely constructed by Pakeha colonisers. Stuart (2003) believes Maori media, particularly radio, has enabled Maori to unify and reconstruct their identity. Maori radio has been at the forefront of “articulating Maori political aspirations in a national public sphere” (Stuart, 2003, p. 52). Today there

are 21 recognised iwi radio stations in operation (Te Mangai Paho, 2008, p. 8). Stuart believes indigenous radio has been a powerful unifying force for Maori.

By providing Maori voices nationwide, disparate and dispersed groups were able to identify with the message of these politically active, culturally aware people. This unifying force is creating a Maori identity, constructed by Maori, instead of the previous Maori identity constructed by Pakeha (Stuart, 2003, p. 53).

Similarly, Smith and Abel (2008) view indigenous television as a powerful tool for naturalising and revitalising Maori culture. Smith and Abel, however, take it a step further, claiming that indigenous television can in fact contribute to New Zealand's national culture as a whole. They point to the emergence of Maori Television in 2004 as an example. The station's audience is expanding from its core audience of fluent Maori speakers. It is also becoming the channel that the public turns to for typically public service material. The popularity of the channel's all-day scheduled Anzac Day programming in 2006 is a prime example (Smith & Abel, 2008).

Nevertheless, Stuart (2003) describes Maori media as developmental because of its educatory role. Stuart says the *main* objective of Maori media is to educate people to guarantee the survival of their language and culture. It also "actively seeks to promote positive images of Maori and to provide a Maori view of events and news" (p. 46).

This is seen clearly in Maori Television's function of service, as laid out in section 8 of the Maori Television Service Act, 2003:

The principal function of the Service is to promote te reo Maori me nga tikanga Maori [Maori language and customs] through the provision of a high quality, cost effective Maori television service, in both Maori and English, that informs, educates, and entertains a broad viewing audience, and, in doing so, enriches New Zealand's society, culture, and heritage (Maori Television Service Act 2003, p. 10).

Smith and Abel (2008) extend on this, saying the most critical function of Maori Television is "to bring to light hither-to unseen visions of Aotearoa/NZ; to see with 'iwi eyes' the shape and contour of the nation's scape" (p. 10).

Stuart (2003) believes that through Maori media, Maori have created their own arenas where Maori have the authorisation to speak and define their own identity. Stuart is hopeful this Maori-created identity and dialogue may lead to a radical bicultural democracy in which plurality is valued and conflict is seen as a healthy part of democracy.

While this sounds hopeful, there are still a number of issues that must be considered. Whaanga (1990) raises the issue that the strong presence of Maori media may, in fact, lead to the mainstream media avoiding their obligation to represent indigenous concerns in a fair and balanced manner. This is of great concern: it is necessary for Maori to have a legitimate voice within mainstream media if they are to ensure that Maori have a role in public decision-making processes (Barclay & Liu, 2003). Barclay and Liu believe a segregated and independent Maori media will not be able to challenge and ultimately overthrow the symbolic power held by Pakeha society. For this reason, Maori culture and identity *must* be integrated into mainstream (Barclay & Liu, 2003).

Smith and Abel (2008) raise the concern that the success of Maori Television may in fact hinder Maori progress in the nation. They suggest that the Government may tout this success as incorporating Maori “into an otherwise beige nation state” (p.6), while avoiding further structural changes to existing forms of governance.

The channel's address to a broad array of viewers ... also runs the risk of the channel being co-opted by interests that do not advance the rights of Maori. One such interest could be a Government invested in supporting a world-class indigenous channel that can contribute to an affirmative and yet exclusively cosmetic bicultural brand both national and internationally (Smith & Abel, 2008, p. 12).

This raises the question: to what extent should Maori television conceal structural inequities, in order to foster a sense of bicultural national identity? (Smith & Abel, 2008).

These questions and issues must be considered as we move forward into the future. Indigenous media is flourishing and is consistently praised for its successes (Smith & Abel, 2008). It has enabled the development of true Maori identity, unimpaired by Pakeha constructs (Stuart, 2003). However, the question remains, what role does this identity play in the encompassing New Zealand culture? Stuart (2003) asks,

“How do two fully developed identities relate to each other within the same society?”(p.57). This is arguably the most important question for the future of New Zealand and one that must be considered seriously by the media, as it holds the key to shaping our national identity (Maharey, 1990; Spoonley, 1990; Stuart, 2003).

Note on the contributor

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