Editorial Elusive issues of identity

> The concept of the 'indigenous public sphere' is intended to describe the highly mediated public 'space' for developing notions of Indigeneity, and putting them to work organising and governing the unpredictable immediacy of everyday events (Hartley and McKee, *The Indigenous Public Sphere*, 2000, p. 3).

ONE OF the major conclusions of John Hartley and Alan McKee's study is that, in the Australian media, indigenous people are central to a drama about Australian national identity. Stars rather than victims, indigenous people are caught up in a media narrative over which 'they have little individual control, but which is nevertheless telling their story' (p. 7).

The statement that the media is 'nevertheless' telling the Aboriginal story will perhaps strike the reader as rather Panglossian, especially when set against the detailed evidence provided in the current edition of the struggles indigenous people have in using the media to tell their own stories. This tension develops at least in part from Hartley and McKee's propensity to see the media as *producing*, rather than in some sense reflecting, popular experience. For them the media act as machines for rendering what is inchoate and implicit in everyday life as popular expressions. This view leads them to the main finding of their book, which despite a very extensive and useful survey of the need for journalists to shoulder the ethical and political demands of 'development' journalism, is:

> the over-representation of Indigeneity in the media is evidence neither of racist media nor of unequal privilege for Aboriginal people compared to other demographic groups… but a direct result of the *unresolved national status of indigenous people*. (p12, italics in the original)

Such a status is set by the 'mediasphere', which in contrast to the grounded traditional practices of indigenous cultures, is conceptualised as the very

'medium' that connects the world of political and public dialogue with the larger universe of culture (or the 'semiosphere'). This raises some preliminary questions: doesn't the Russian doll metaphor – the semiosphere of culture contains the mediasphere which contains the public sphere – suggest that the outer layer determines the limits and the form of what it contains? Do indigenous people actually live in the same universe of culture? Again, some might argue that the unresolved national status of indigenous people is less of a cause than a direct effect of racism, including the patronising celebration of 'roots' by otherwise de-racinated White colonists.

For all that, Hartley and McKee do pose some of the questions that must be addressed in considering the indigenous public sphere. The first of these, obviously enough, concerns the relationship between their key terms – the indigenous public sphere, the mediasphere and the semiosphere.

As the contributors to this edition of *Pacific Journalism Review* point out, from a variety of divergent perspectives, the concept of the public sphere as developed by Jurgen Habermas is problematic when applied to the cultures of the South Pacific. Moreover, as the literature shows, even within the West the concept of the public sphere has been critiqued extensively. This debate is complex, but the general lines of criticism focus on the rationalist foundation of Habermas' conception, with its overvaluation of modes of discourse, rationality and reasoning that favour middle class males over forms of discourse and association associated with women, the working class and left wing forms of solidarity. Some theorists have questioned the historical validity of the concept and the tendency in Habermas' account to paint a pessimistic picture of decline and fall. Jim McGuigan, for example, has argued persuasively that a literary public sphere preceded the bourgeois public sphere. This literary public sphere emphasised alternative forms of interaction, based upon more 'horizontal' forms of association, and utilised discourses based on popular aesthetics and imagination as opposed to reasoning and rationality. For our current purposes, such criticisms can be reduced to two central questions raised by the various contributions which follow: is the formation of a public sphere necessarily predicated on rational modes of argumentation, face to face talk, consensus, equality and the bracketing out of power relations? And if it is, how is that necessity to be reconciled with cultures in which Westernised political values and modes of association constitute a threat to lifeways that precede the advent of colonisation, by hundreds if not thousands of years? The close address in this issue to the concepts of

community and dialogue found in Maori, Aboriginal and Pasifika practices reminds us that the past is very much part of the present.

In addition to matters of cultural heritage, the 'impact' of the media – in particular the impact of 'new' media such as the internet – must be factored into the current conjuncture. The internet, with its capacity to blend mass with person-to-person forms of interaction, acts to sustain a *series* of public spheres which do not necessarily extend, either in their modes of address or in their textual forms, beyond the cognitive horizons of particular, discrete subcultures. In such circumstances, the distinction in scale between the semiosphere, the mediasphere and the public sphere collapses into a diversified, mediated space of quasi-private interaction – a space that does not necessarily produce any *collective* sense of the real but which generates its own divergent forms of 'reality'. Such changes are politically significant. For example, the growth of virtual communities, and the return to specific forms of 'locality' they imply, are strategic to indigenous peoples' movements worldwide, standing in stark contrast to the efforts of global capital to colonise the internet. So, too, events such as the protests against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle suggest that new forms of struggle – that aim to capture media attention through staging events, rather than through rational political argumentation – are developing new forms of politics.

Such developments raise questions over whether or not the public sphere remains a pertinent concept. It is our view that it does. It has heuristic relevance and the capacity to throw into contrast the different ways in which people relate to, and communicate with, one another. Again, Habermas' concept provides a normative ideal against which processes of self-representation and democracy, even in an age of hypermediation and global communication flows, can be assessed. Utilising the public sphere as a conceptual starting point, the following contributions address issues such as the interface between indigenous cultures and old and new media, exploring concepts of identity and belonging in postcolonial diasporas, and evaluating the role of the state in attempting to colonise indigenous cultures with Western democratic forms of representation. Part analysis, part commentary and part reports of struggle, the contributions raise interesting issues for thinking through that elusive but insistent presence – the indigenous public sphere.

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