

Post-colonial options in media conversations

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FOR THOSE of us who might be interested in re-conceptualising the way in which New Zealand might become Aotearoa, one of the ongoing frustrations is the limitations of the media in relation to post-colonial discussions. The 1980s were characterised by a contradictory set of changes in the remaking of New Zealand. The conservatism of economic deregulation and then re-regulation was accompanied by a significant re-ordering of identity. A particularly significant debate concerned national and indigenous identity and an emergent post-colonialism, or in During (1985) terms, coming to know New Zealand in our terms, not those which originated with a colonial power. At the core of this readjustment was the re-emergence of Maori as tangata whenua and the clearly stated, and politically challenging option, of tino rangatiratanga. That there should be a sovereignty that was not automatically attached to the nation-state, that might be in conflict with a state-associated sovereignty, and that it reflected Maori ambitions, was – and remains – a radical option. But it was a an interesting moment, including for those who wished to explore a more culturally and politically appropriate form of Pakeha identity (Spoonley, 1995). But in this exploration of what post-colonialism might mean in New Zealand, the mass media remained impervious to the opportunities, with some important exceptions.

If anything, through this period, there were even more examples of the media continuing a level of antagonism towards things Maori ('Kill a White',

'White Flight', 'Race Riots Likely', 'Maori Loans Affair'). The then Race Relations Conciliator, Wally Hirsh, was very concerned at the media's role and approach, and was involved in setting up a meeting at Te Herenga Waka Marae in 1988 to discuss the media's performance. There was considerable concern and anger, and a book emerged (Spoonley and Hirsh, 1990). Those contributing challenged the media in a number of areas, and offered options. It was scarcely the only challenge at the time and a book is seldom going to change media practices. But what was interesting was the reaction of those in the media, especially the print media, once the book was released. Responses were divided into two camps: Maori, Pacific peoples and liberal Pakeha who welcomed it, and those in the media who used editorials and book reviews to argue that those contributing to the book were misinformed, were exaggerating or were politically motivated. The late Ernie Leonard, on his television programme concerned with the media, made the point forcefully that it was exactly these attitudes inside the media which justified the book in the first place. What it demonstrated for me was the reluctance of the media, as embodied in certain values and practices, to critically evaluate their own practices or to be open to the criticisms offered by those most affected. Given the concentration of media ownership and its concern with commercial imperatives since 1990, there is room for some pessimism that things might have changed little. But in 1990, a number of things either did not exist or were little understood.

The first is the development and impact of new technologies, not the least the web. In recent research, the question of what constitutes public space and how minority (both ethnic and indigenous) groups use and are affected by the web deserves much more attention. Recent work has suggested that the use of the web is both more extensive and more complex in its impacts than many would realise. In looking at diasporic Pacific communities (see Spoonley, 2001), computer mediated communication (and other electronic technologies) play a major role in sustaining the dense informational networks amongst geographically disparate groups. A now defunct Tongan website (Kava Bowl) received about 600,000 hits per month as a number of community and personal activities took place, cultural, political and social. As one academic who had played a key role in establishing a Pacific website (Rotumanet) noted, information technologies could 'play a corrosive role in island societies' or they could help preserve cultural communities in new

ways (Howard, 1999, p. 461-62). What cyberspace means for indigenous and ethnic communities is a moot question. More recently, in research on immigrant communities in New Zealand (Spoonley and Trlin, 2004), what is interesting is the proliferation of sites for sharing information within and between various communities. These technology-based options have expanded very significantly and circumvent the strangle hold of the mass media. This does not mean that these indigenous and ethnic sources are free of their own orthodoxies or limitations. But they do provide a powerful alternative to the mass media with their own (often 'small world') commercial and cultural imperatives. In interviewing members of the Korean and South African immigrant communities about the performance of the New Zealand media, two things are worth emphasising. The first is that both immigrant communities were highly critical of the New Zealand media, in terms of how their own communities were portrayed but also on behalf of the mis- or under-reporting of other immigrant communities. The second is that electronic media provide these communities with an alternative which allows them to access information without the same filtering and construction process apparent in the mass media. It is important not to idealise these options, but it is equally important to note that the mass media have direct competitors. The public space for media information and entertainment is being redefined in ways that might create an opportunity for minority control and information sharing. The difficulty is that the media, like a nationally constructed education or justice system, provide an important element in understanding the indigenous or ethnic 'other' and a platform for shared debate about political options. In a fragmented media world, those discussions might be equally fragmented and confined to 'small world' networks.

One other aspect of the changes since 1990 worth introducing is the changing demography of New Zealand. The increasingly urbanised Maori and Pacific populations, their relatively youthful profile compared with Pakeha and their growing dominance of those institutions that cater for younger New Zealanders (eg education) will inevitably change the shape of the media. The growth of the audience share of MaiFM and more recent additions to the Auckland radio market has signalled important shifts in the nature of audiences. It has been accompanied by a much more visible and self-confident presence in terms of the music, fashion, politics and language of urban Maori and Pacific peoples. In both populations, the numbers of urban-born and edu-

cated began to outnumber those who had been born in rural/provincial New Zealand or the islands, in the 1980s. How these new generations will interact with the media, and how the media will change in response, are interesting questions. What needs to be added to the mix is the culturally diverse immigrant flows since 1986. This will contribute to another wave of cultural change that will occur through the early decades of the 21st century which will make the situation even more complex. The question of what exactly constitutes indigeneity given hybrid identities and transnational linkages, both in terms of identity and the media that will be used, is a difficult issue to answer at this point. In a media marketplace that is increasingly fragmented, and in relation to identities and communities that are themselves changing, there are interesting possibilities – and dangers.

If our experience in producing *Between the Lines: Racism and the New Zealand Media* in 1990 was anything to go by, there had to be changes in the institutional culture and practices of the New Zealand media. But the development of post-colonial identity options in the 1980s, and the proliferation of media technologies and urban identities in the 1990s, have both liberated and fragmented the opportunities to have public discussion about issues of common purpose and collective interests. There still remains few opportunities for ‘conversational equality’ (see Barker, 1999) in terms of access to and representation in the mass media for minority indigenous and ethnic communities, even if they have recourse to information-sharing options that did not previously exist in such cheap and easily distributed forms.

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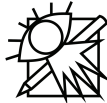
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