

The Maori public sphere

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AT THIS moment in New Zealand's history there is a need for healthy political debate on a range of issues. Specifically, the foreshore and seabed issue has created division and fears between Maori and Pakeha and brought the Treaty of Waitangi to the fore again. As well, settlements of historic grievances with Maori have added to growing Pakeha unease. In this climate there is a need for wide-ranging public discussion of these issues, and the news media seem the obvious site for those discussions. But how well are the New Zealand news media fulfilling that role? This commentary takes the public sphere to be the sum total of all visible decision-making processes within a culture and uses this concept as an analytical tool to examine aspects of the health of New Zealand's democracy. It uses discourse analysis approaches to show how the mainstream media are in fact isolating Maori from the general public sphere and, after outlining some general aspects of the Maori public sphere, argues that the news media's methodologies, grounded in European-based techniques and approaches, are incapable of interacting with the Maori public sphere. I am arguing that while there is an appearance of an increased awareness and discussion of cultural issues, the mainstream media are, in reality, sidelining Maori voices and controlling the political discussion in favour of the dominant culture. They are therefore not fulfilling their self-assigned role of providing information for people to function within our democracy.

The public sphere

The public sphere, as described by Habermas (1962), developed from a unique combination of circumstances: the growth in Europe of a literate middle class fuelled by capitalism and increasing education; and the consequently increasing awareness of politics, fuelled by the circulation of pamphlets and literary

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material critical of the political decisions of the time. The public sphere developed as a space between the private sphere and the sphere of state authority (Habermas, 1962, p. 30). It was a social space in which private actors came together as a 'public' to discuss and comment on political issues. Challenges from this middle-class public sphere to the power of state authority forced changes in the political situation and allowed the development of democracy as we know it today. Habermas argued that the public sphere had disappeared as a forum for political discussion because those with power learnt to use the mass media to generate consensus from the top down. However, the concept of the public sphere remains today as a useful analytical tool.

This commentary takes the public sphere to be the social space of public decision-making. The democratic ideal is that within this public sphere the elected authorities are given the authority to make political decisions, while the news media place the decision-makers on the public stage, publicise their decisions, comment on and discuss those decisions, as well as allowing private individuals a platform to comment on those decisions. This publicity and commentary allow all those within this democracy to participate in the decision-making process.

This means the public sphere is, in essence, a political sphere, and as Habermas states in the preface to his 1961 work, the public sphere 'must be investigated within the broad field formerly reflected in the perspective of the traditional science of "politics"' (Habermas, 1962, p. xvii). This commentary takes a political approach to explore issues of the mainstream media, the indigenous public sphere, and draws some conclusions about the health of New Zealand's democracy at this moment in history. As Dahlgren states:

How well the public sphere functions becomes a concrete manifestation of society's democratic character and thus in a sense the most immediate visible indicator of our admittedly imperfect democracies. (Dahlgren and Sparks, 1991, p. 2)

In this conception the public sphere is pre-existing, and comprises the social groups for which the news media write their stories. Ewart (2000), however, sees the public sphere as having a constructive role. The group of people is not pre-existing, but is brought together by individuals reading the stories and identifying with the people in them. This identification also leads mem-

bers of the reading public to think and act in accordance with the position put forward in the news story. Ewart argues that the news media do this by including some groups within its sphere, and, excluding others. They also present their 'norms', values and behaviour patterns of those included within their sphere.

By repeatedly laying out expectations the media hold for the public, or more simply, by telling individuals how they are expected to act and think as a public, the media create the conditions whereby consensus amongst individuals about the desirability of particular values can be reached. In other words, the public is not an already-formed reality to which the media respond. Rather, the public is brought into existence when individual readers come to recognize themselves in media stories and images, and consequently seek to possess the values and characteristics portrayed therein as a mark of their belonging to a 'public' (Ewart, 2000 p. 2).

In the light of these basic considerations, the question arises: what is the nature of the general public sphere in New Zealand? Such a public sphere as apparently constructed by the mainstream news media rests on the exclusion of Maori. This has major implications for the future of this country as Maori and Pakeha need to listen to each other and not face each other as enemies. The question can also be asked: How do the two cultures speak to each other when the mainstream media construct a public sphere with Maori as an excluded 'them'?

'Maori' as a marginalised person

The primary mechanism of exclusion is in the news media's use of the word 'Maori' as a catch-all, third person. An example of this occurred in *Hawke's Bay Today*, with the headline MAORI WANT FEE FOR LAKE TAUPO AIRSPACE (NZPA/NZ Herald, 2004), with the first sentence: 'Maori want to charge for the use of air space above Lake Taupo in a move that would cover floatplane landings, bungy jumping and bridges over rivers.' The second sentence makes it clear that the story is not about all Maori, as the introduction suggests, but is about Ngati Tuwharetoa, a particular group of Maori.

However the headline and first sentence have already linked this claim for airspace with 'all Maori'. This creates the impression in the minds of the readers that Maori people share a common opinion and the same desire to own the airspace. (While it may be argued that this is an attempt to create

panic among other, mostly Pakeha, New Zealanders, as a former journalist who wrote stories which could be deemed sensationalist, I believe the processes are more subtle than this. It is the news processes themselves which allow this to occur and journalists are caught up in the techniques of 'news' in the way Ellul describes in *The Technological Society* [Ellul, 1964]. This is an important point, as it is the techniques of Western news gathering which are discussed in future sections of this commentary, and how those techniques interact with Maori processes and techniques.)

Reporting that 'Maori want fee for Lake Taupo airspace' creates a false impression of a unified Maori opinion. In reality, there is just as wide a range of opinion on this topic of treaty rights among Maori as among the rest of New Zealand. In fact Maori opinions exhibit the same range on any topic as Pakeha opinions. Although only one example is offered here, this style of reporting is symptomatic of a widespread practice which is easy to see, so it is not the intention here to list a number of examples. (Reading many stories on Maori claims, Maori rights, even the use of the words in this sentence, will provide examples.) It is also common practice in the mainstream news media, especially evident during recorded interviews, for interviewers to ask 'What do Maori think?'. This practice of clumping Maori together in a unifying category insinuates that one Maori automatically speaks for all, suggesting a common world view and ideology. In a sense, this denial of a plurality of views in Maoridom is also a denial of expertism. No-one expects that one person can speak for all Pakeha.

Here, the position Pakeha is normal and need not be named, but the position Maori is marked as "outside" normal society. Given the prevalence of this naming strategy, it is difficult to suggest alternative ways to write about these issues.

Voices from 'them'

Having created a group outside the general public sphere, the new media then ensure that Maori voices who reach the public stage are clearly placed within this marginalised sector. News writers do this by using 'Maori' as a general adjective whether the appellation is appropriate for the person's role, or not. This is clearly evident in the commonly used constructions 'Maori leaders' 'Maori activists' and 'Maori MPs'. Having constructed Maori as a 'them' outside the public sphere, the media then use such appellations to ensure that Maori who are allowed to speak in the news media are firmly identified as

members of this ‘other’ group. The news media never use the descriptive labels ‘Pakeha leaders’, ‘Pakeha activists’ or ‘Pakeha MPs’.

In the specific instance of ‘Maori MPs’ it may be argued that the term is an acceptable descriptive appellation because they hold seats in Maori electorates instead of in mainstream electorates. But during her first term in Parliament Labour’s Tariana Turia was consistently referred to as a ‘Maori MP’ even though she held a list seat. And National’s Georgina Te Heu Heu is labeled a ‘Maori MP’ even though she holds a list seat as well. See, for instance, the *Weekend Herald* story headlined MAVERICK MAORI MP TOLD: FIT IN OR BE FIRED (Young and Berry, 2004). Turia’s and Ms Te Heuheu’s membership of the group ‘Maori’ is more important than their membership of opposing political parties (Labour in the case of the former and National in the case of the latter) and their differing political ideologies.

The continued use of the third person ‘Maori’ conglomerates the indigenous people of Aotearoa/New Zealand into a single category, which the news media then separate from the rest of the community. They do this by constructing Maori in the position of a ‘them’, while Pakeha readers remain an ‘us’, part of the wider community. Maori, therefore, can not ‘recognise themselves in media stories and images, and consequently seek to possess the values and characteristics portrayed therein as a mark of their belonging to a “public”’ (Ewart, 2000, p. 2). And Pakeha New Zealand does not recognise the ‘them’ of Maori as part of the public sphere, as part of ‘our’ community. Thus, the Maori are excluded from the realm of the generalised public sphere of national decision-making processes and constructed as a separated group within but not ‘of’ New Zealand society.

Maori are well aware of these practices, at least unconsciously, and are annoyed by them. When discussing these concepts with the students of my Maori Media Studies class, one commented that it made him feel ‘like an abstract’. Another said: ‘They talk about us as if we were things’. In classes on Treaty and cultural issues, which are usually of a diverse ethnic make-up, Pakeha students will talk about Maori as if they are not present, a consequence of the practice of clumping Maori as one and treating them as an excluded third person. These same students will react negatively if I talk to the Maori students about Pakeha as if they are not in the room.

Outlining New Zealand’s indigenous public sphere

Turning to the indigenous public sphere in New Zealand, it is important to

trace its general shape as a realm constrained within a culturally different and dominant framework. To accomplish this, it is first necessary to consider some of the conceptual features of the public sphere. Firstly it is important to recognise that the concept of the public sphere emerged at a particular time in European history, driven by the rise of capitalism, increasing literacy rates and an increasingly wide distribution of printed material critiquing and discussing a range of aspects of society and its organisation (Habermas, 1962). The public sphere developed as a social space between the private sphere (home and family) and the official sphere of state authority – a space where private people came together to develop a political discourse based on their common experiences and life chances. It was from a new sense of people as a public, and the discourse within a space that was critical of state power, that the modern democracy developed. While Habermas believed the public sphere had disintegrated as the mass media became the tool for generating legitimation and consensus from the top down, the public sphere, as a concept, has come to mean the sphere in which political and social discussions are held and decisions reached, at least in appearance. As a concept the public sphere is, therefore, placed firmly in the development of Western, European-based culture and its forms and expressions of power. New Zealand's public sphere can be seen as forming part of the decision-making processes of New Zealand's dominant culture. As the following outline will show, the Maori public sphere, if it can be construed as such, has a significantly different form and different processes.

Before outlining the shape of the Maori public sphere it is also important to recognise that, following Habermas' example, the Western model of the public sphere is a cultural ideal, perhaps rarely realised in practice. For Habermas, the public sphere and its model of rational political discourse is a norm to be striven for, rather than practised reality. However, in the Maori context the ideals are closer to the reality, and people model their behavior on the ideals because of the strong desire to hold onto Maori culture in the face of the overwhelming dominant majority. The ideals are taught in Maori schools and wananga and are held up in discussion as the models for behavior patterns to a much greater extent than the ideals of western-based culture. The real force of Maori ideals stems from the situation of the colonised. In thinking about a Maori public sphere, it is important to recognise that Maori have struggled to hold on to their culture in the face of colonisation and subse-

quent pressures to assimilate to the dominant Pakeha culture in New Zealand. In so doing Maori have been compelled to protect traditional forms, including traditional relationships of power and cultural expressions from erosion.

The third factor which must be borne in mind is that pre-European Maori groups displayed a wide variation in social practices and organisation. This means that generalising about Maori customs, lifestyles and social organisation is hugely problematic, as, once a statement on tikanga Maori is made, it is relatively easy to find groups who do not follow that particular tikanga.

Finally, the following is not intended as a detailed examination of the Maori public sphere. Rather, it is an outline intended for analytical purposes, to look at how the mainstream news media may, or may not, interact with such a public sphere. Many studies and introductions to Maori culture detail the processes of hui and other occasions, as well as the social processes outside formal events. For instance see the classic *Hui* (Salmond, 1975) or the more recent *Ki Te Whaiao: An Introduction to Maori Culture and Society* (Ka'ai et al., 2004). Most of these works can be read as detailing the processes of a Maori public sphere.

To outline the Maori public sphere it is important to return to Habermas' base concepts and trace Maori development from that point. Habermas initially works with 'publicity' as the observed face of power shown to the citizenry in the rituals of power – the sphere of publicity was originally the place in which state authority figures displayed their status as representatives of the establishment. The growth of a bourgeois public sphere challenged the power of 'representative publicity' through struggles that forced the development of the participatory democracy we have today. From this conception it can be seen that the Maori public sphere still retains the 'publicity' of its leaders, not through the news media, but in the truly 'public' arena, face-to-face with their people, on the marae during formal proceedings, in hui and in informal gatherings in and around marae. It is here that Maori figures present themselves within the rituals of power.

Historically, pre-European Maori lived in small, relatively independent villages. There was no over-arching and controlling public authority as European societies had developed. There was no 'state' outside the hapu, which was usually focused on one village, and therefore little social space outside the village life. The marae was the centre of village life, and constituted the 'public' space. In this context the division between public authority and pri-

vate people is less clear, in fact it is nearly continuous, allowing no social space 'between' for a public sphere to develop. Nor is one needed, as people are able to air their concerns and discuss issues with the whole social group. This is in contrast to Habermas' conception of the 'town' life as the centre of civil society in contrast to the 'court' life. There was no 'court' in Maori society and therefore no separate town life. People easily discussed issues in and around group work areas as well as in groups at mealtimes and when there was no work. In village life, there would be infrequent need for a formally constituted gathering.

On formal occasions the *marae* was certainly the domain of the group leaders, who appeared for 'representative publicity' in Habermas' meaning, when there was need for formal constitution of a group, such as when there were visitors to recognise and greet. Leaders appeared in formal public display, backed by the power of their people; the *mana*, the *ihi* and the *wehi* of their *roopu tautoko* (supporting group). In well-organised groups led by *Ariki*, this 'publicity' was most evident, and it remains today with the Kingitanga in Tainui, led by Te Arikiniui Dame Te Atarangikahu, and in Tuwharetoa, where the Te Heuheu family retains its ariki status. Here *mana* through *whakapapa*, backed by *mana* invested from the group, gave the leaders their authority. It was a highly-visible, ritualised public event. However, in small communities living in small isolated *kainga*, this 'publicity' of leadership was only occasionally on show. Such groups were usually less structured, with leaders holding their position by virtue of their ability to hold the group together by force of personality rather than force of arms, and by their ability to provide for their people, in terms of food, shelter and resources.

The changes to Maori life of the past 200 years have changed the function of the *marae*, and allowed it to become not only the physical space of 'publicity' but the social space of a public sphere as well. Following the urban migrations of the 20th century, very few Maori live in small villages centred around a *marae*, instead travelling from towns and cities to their *marae* on special occasions. This, in itself, has changed the role of the *marae* in Maori life. Instead of the centre of a village the *marae* is a delineated formal space centred on a *whareniui*, with a *marae atea* as the formal space for speeches, a *wharekai* and various other permanent structures. In this sense, the *marae* is the arena in which private people come together as a social group, a *hapu*, and *iwi*, a true public, to discuss issues and make decisions, It is the

primary forum for Maori political processes. But it remains a public sphere functioning within a different culture, and therefore of a different nature, with different rules, norms and social expectations. The efforts by Maori to hold onto their culture have also seen a strengthening of Maori tikanga, in effect a strengthening of the norms and expectations' force for modifying behavior. This in turn has led to changes on the marae processes, where more formality is observed than may have been present in the past.

In the ideal situation, decisions were made on the marae, by the leaders, after public discussion and argument in which all members present had the right to speak, uninterrupted. The marae atea is the domain of Tumatauenga, the atua of conflict (warfare is only a small part of conflict) and therefore the atua of conflict resolution. Within the tapu space of the marae all grievances are aired, heard and responded to. All conflict is resolved under the tapu of Tumatauenga. Then the tapu is lifted to end the hui. This means that all matters have been resolved – and it is breach of tikanga and kawa (custom and practice) to continue the discussion outside the hui. Even discussions held within whareniui, the domain of Rongomai Tane, the atua of peace, carry this concept. Once the discussion is finished and the decision made, the rules determine that it can not be revisited outside that context.

Mainstream media interaction

This situation makes many Maori uneasy about allowing the news media to cover hui, because its practices of reporting all discussion, especially conflicts, leading up to the decisions, takes that conflict outside the tapu space of the marae and allows argument, discussion and conflict to continue past the social timeframe in which it should have been resolved. Coupled with Maori suspicions of the mainstream news media, this unease adds to Maori reluctance to interact with the mainstream media, which reached its most public peak when representatives of mainstream media organisations were banned from the lower marae at Waitangi in 2004, the physical space where discussions in the Maori public sphere took place.

It could be argued that because the procedures of the marae are an expression of community ideals, these ideals are often compromised in practice or should be adapted to fit the circumstances – such as media interest in Maori affairs. But this is not the Maori view. Maori decision-making is guided by the values presented by tikanga and kawa, tempered only slightly by prac-

tical realities. It is the values that people look to first. This presents a major problem for the mainstream media, as their structure and forms have developed in response to the Western democratic decision-making process. Therefore, the media have not been able to interact to any large degree with the Maori public sphere primarily because they have developed in a perpetual interaction with the ideals of parliamentary democracy and the traditions of partisan debate and interest group politics. A news medium which has developed to function in this Pakeha type of public sphere is culturally incapable of interacting with a Maori public sphere unless it modifies its approaches and methodologies developed in European-influenced cultures.

The Maori media, including the news media, on the other hand, are staffed by many Maori who implicitly understand the Maori public sphere and are capable of interacting with it to provide news and information. While the Maori media are still developing their own methodologies, it is possible to see Maori reporters who do not report all discussion at a hui, but report the final decision and, more importantly, ask for people's reactions to the decision, rather than commenting on the decision itself. This means that any conflict, which should have been resolved, remains within the tapu social and physical space of the marae. This is not necessarily the dominant practice, or even a cultural practice, but it presents a style of reporting on Maori decisions which does not transgress the ideals of the culture.

Outside the social space of the marae the Maori media are acting more like the mainstream media in that they run public debates, reporters challenge and question leaders and hold up some decisions and ideas to public scrutiny. However this is still tempered by Maori approaches to conflict and discussion, which remain different to, though not uninfluenced by, mainstream media and Pakeha cultural approaches. Some of these differences reflect the different approaches and cultural basis of power, which is linked to whakapapa and mana as much as by force of personality backed by political parties.

However the current Maori media are relatively young in terms of social and cultural developments, and are still in the process of working out their own approaches and methodologies.

New Zealand democracy

The mainstream media's use of the word 'Maori' as a catch-all label in the third person, with its consequent separation of a group of citizens from the

public sphere, has serious consequences for this country's democracy. Quite clearly there is a need for wide public discussion on Treaty of Waitangi issues, inter-cultural issues, for a shared vision of the future of New Zealand, and an examination of the frequency of Maori-related stories in the mainstream news media might show that such discussions are taking place.

However, the use of discourse analysis approaches shows that the mainstream news media, while appearing to be an objective forum for discussion, are actually another mechanism by which Maori are pushed to the margins of society, pushed to the margins of the debate, and written about as if they are a group separate from citizens. It is a subtle instrument of alienation and continued colonisation.

Taking Ewart's point, that the news media create the public sphere by telling people how to think and act, New Zealand's mainstream news media create a public sphere made up of Pakeha New Zealanders. It is a public sphere which excludes Maori (and other ethnicities as further analysis could show) and in which Maori are spoken about, but seldom spoken to. When they are spoken to, their comments are frequently taken into other forums where commentators, politicians and others, speak about them and their comments, without direct referral back to the Maori speaker.

The news media are only giving the appearance of two cultures talking to each other. The reality is somewhat different. Maori voices are presented to Pakeha audiences, but they are presented as 'other' – not a part of society, and certainly not a part which needs to be listened to.

This has serious consequences for the state of our democracy, in that one of its primary mechanisms, the third estate, is divisive, and marginalises Maori in their own country. Despite many years of supposed awareness of such issues, and attempts to address them, the mainstream news media are still far from fulfilling their claimed role of giving people the information they need to function in a democracy.

Glossary of Maori words

ariki	Aristocracy (inherited through birth/whakapapa).
hapu	Sub-tribe (division of iwi, members linked by whakapapa).
iwi	Tribe (members linked by whakapapa, often to one ancestor).
kainga	Village, often Home Village. Different from a fortified village.
marae/marae atea	Area in front of a meeting house where public speeches are made.
Tumatauenga	Divine being whose area of concern is conflict. Often referred to as the God of War, but war is only one part of conflict.
whakapapa	The story of descent from the creation to today. Most usually expressed as a genealogy.
wharekai	Dining room.

Explanations of Maori words

The following words are difficult to translate because they are about concepts, for which there are no direct equivalents in English. Therefore, a brief explanation is offered for each. Barlow's *Tikanga Whakaaro* (Barlow, 1991) is recommended for more in-depth explanations. It is also important to understand that the period in the development of European thought known as The Enlightenment did not happen in Maori thought, so the separation between the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the temporal does not exist.

Tikanga: This word can mean culture as in 'Tikanga Maori' – Maori culture. It can also be used to mean a specific culturally based action which is performed by all Maori, such as not sitting on tables.

Kawa: The formal processes used in social occasions. These vary from marae to marae, each having its own processes.

Mana: Spiritual power inherited through whakapapa. Mana can be increased or decreased during a person's lifetime, depending on their actions. People with mana were spiritual and/or temporal leaders. Mana can also belong to a group of people and can be displayed during formal occasions. Being a spiritual power it can be used to help or harm people. Ihi and wehi are related to mana

Ihi: Power, or level of excellence. The English word awe-full has similar connotations, where something of awe could be overwhelming in a positive and negative sense at the same time. Ihi can be seen in the actions of a person or a group of people. Warriors with ihi were to be feared.

Wehi: Awe and respect. Barlow describes wehi as the effect that one person's and influence has on another. (Barlow, 1991) A person's mana and ihi generates wehi.

Tapu: All things in the world are driven by mauri (life force/organising force) which originates from the prime mover in the creation, and by mana. Both mauri and mana must be protected. People, objects and places with active mauri and/or mana are tapu – spiritually active – and people need to be aware of this and treat people,

objects and places with care. There are varying degrees of tapu, from low level, to completely forbidden. The related term, noa, means the object or place is spiritually safe.

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