

A question of balance

Dr Sue Abel's lecture notes for the University of Auckland Winter Lectures 2010 'The End(s) of Journalism?' [*]

3 August 2010

Today I am addressing the issue of balance in television news, and the relative lack of Maori voices in mainstream news bulletins. I need here to explain my use of the term "mainstream". I have been uneasy about this term ever since Don Brash used it in his speech to the Orewa Rotary Club in January 2004 in a way which meant that anything or anyone outside the mainstream was suspect, and then got himself into trouble when asked to define the term more precisely. When I write I put quotation marks around the word "mainstream", so you need to imagine these everytime I use it.

In the publicity for this lecture I said that I would address the absence of Maori voices in mainstream news on three levels.

1) The first is the dearth of stories about the Maori world in "mainstream" news - stories which are presented as an intrinsic part of New Zealand and therefore of interest to all New Zealanders.

2) The second is the absence of Maori as sources. This can be at the level of vox pops and bystanders, or in stories that are about Treaty issues - and the other side of this is the relative predominance of Pakeha as sources in Maori stories.

3) At a third level, when Maori do speak as sources, they do not necessarily get the chance to articulate a distinctively indigenous worldview. By this I mean two things:

- firstly a Maori voice which is informed by a distinctively Maori worldview - a different way of knowing things, with different cultural values and priorities to those of the Western world.

- I am also using the term "indigenous voice" to refer to a Maori voice informed by the processes of colonisation and their aftermath, including the relevant history which is important to an understanding of the issue at stake.

I acknowledge that I am using the term 'indigenous' in a way that is not common, and some may find such a use invalid - but I need a term which separates out the specific voice of Maori as colonised as distinct from that of, say, a Maori scientist in a news item about wind farms, and I have not yet thought of a better one.

I now want to add to these absences one other - the absence of historical context. I'll talk more about that later.

I've structured my lecture in the following way. I'm going to start by looking quickly at the BSA and the notion of balance, and secondly, what they have done on how this relates to Maori. Then I'm going to sketch out some of the scholarship about negative representations of Maori, and the implications of this, before I work my way through three case studies: Waitang Day; the police raid on Ruatoki, and John Key's decision to remove Te Urewera from the negotiations between the Crown and Tuhoe. Finally, I'm going to pull all these threads together.

Balance

The issue of 'balance' is one that is difficult to pin down, and I could spend my whole hour outlining the debates about what balance actually means. For the purposes of this lecture I am going to consider only the criteria that our Broadcasting Standards Authority uses. The relevant standard until recently was Standard 4 Balance. This standard was amended in 2009 for reasons that have nothing to do with the issues I'm discussing in an attempt to clarify its purpose. So at present it reads:

Standard 4 Controversial Issues - Viewpoints

When discussing **controversial issues** of public importance in news, current affairs or factual programmes, broadcasters should make reasonable efforts, or give reasonable opportunities, **to present significant points of view** either in the same programme or in other programmes within the period of current interest.

I have highlighted two phrases here. One is the term 'controversial' because it seems to me that an item of public importance might not seem to newsmakers to be controversial, yet may exclude important Maori perspectives that, if included, might change to some extent or other public understandings of the issue at stake. I need to make it clear here that I am not assuming that there is always one homogenous Maori perspective - that there may, for example, be iwi perspectives.

The second highlighted phrase is that of "significant points of view". The big question that I ask in this lecture is why Maori are not seen as having a significant point of view to contribute to the public sphere in this country.

While there have been very few complaints to the BSA about coverage of Maori issues, the BSA have for some time been aware of concerns that Maori are not being presented fairly in broadcast news. For me, the question is wider. I am concerned, as I will discuss shortly, about negative and unfair treatment of Maori, te ao Maori and Treaty issues in mainstream media. But I am also concerned at the stories and voices that are not broadcast, and this absence is itself absent from the legislation that the BSA works under.

The BSA have taken steps to explore the issue of broadcasting coverage of Maori. In 2003 they commissioned the Media Research Team from Te Kawa a Maui at Victoria University to research the issue. The research team focused their research on the broadcasting coverage of the foreshore and seabed issue. In their conclusion they said:

"The broadcasting standards were generally met, but this research project raises the view that the standards as currently framed do not adequately reflect Maori realities, concerns and interests".

In other words, the ways in which the standard of balance was currently applied might not in themselves be fair to Maori.

In May 2006 the BSA convened a symposium to discuss the balance standard with many of New Zealand's leading broadcast news executives, media academics, and programme makers. The proceedings of this symposium are available on the BSA's website as *Significant Viewpoints: Broadcasters Discuss Balance*.

One session at the *Significant Viewpoints* symposium was called "Maori programming: is 'balance' a Pakeha concept". In this session Claudette Hauiti argued that "we need to move on to develop more robust and sustainable standards. Standards that are built on shared and internalised views where Maori and Pakeha commonalities are built upon, and differences are examined rather than eradicated. The broadcast standards should reflect a world view that mirrors both Maori and Pakeha realities. But today of course they do not" (BSA, 2006, p.87).

To talk of "Maori realities" and "Pakeha realities" is of course to speak in generalisations. But given that proviso, Hauiti encapsulates here where I believe our news should be heading. One of the arguments of this lecture is that we are being denied knowledge of what Hauiti calls "Maori realities" in our mainstream news, and that this has implications for all of us.

After the report from the Media Research Team at Victoria University and the Significant Views symposium, the BSA produced a discussion paper called *"Maori Worldviews and Broadcasting Standards: What Should be the Relationship?"* This arose from their concern to explore the relationship between the broadcasting standards that it enforces and the standards of behaviour that derive from tikanga and Maori interests more generally. They point out, however, that "the BSA has no mandate to promote or protect Maori culture and worldviews."

If you are at all interested in this issue, can I urge you to read the paper and respond to it. It is at the moment off the website, but should be back again in a couple of weeks.

Negative representations of Maori

I am going to start this discussion with a Finnish scholar Sari Pietikäinen - and apologies to any Scandinavian people here for my pronunciation of her name. Pietikainen researches and writes about the Sami people and the media - and for those of you unfamiliar with the term Sami, you may have grown up, like me, knowing them as the Lapps. But Pietikainen has also completed a very large research project in which she surveyed all the research written over a period of many years about the representation of minority ethnic groups in the news media of the dominant culture. She found that, regardless of when and where this research had been completed, minority groups uniformly represented within a context of problems, crime and disturbance. So this means that across time and across space, minority ethnic

groups have only featured negatively. There is now an established body of academic work in New Zealand which documents the continued marginalisation of Maori in the news, and the predominance of negative imagery, so I take this as a given and am not setting out to prove it.

Two Canadian news scholars Terri Thompson and Charles Ungerleider have argued that the way that social problems are defined by news media is a strong influence on how both the public and policy-makers understand and act on these issues. I see this as having implications in New Zealand on at least two levels:

One is that the appearance of Maori on the negative side of social indicators such as crime (high) and education (low) lacks any historical-social context which might, for example, consider the impacts of colonisation. Instead, such social issues are too often defined as Maori "needing to pull their socks up".

The second is that whenever there is social disruption on a controversial Treaty issue or similar, Maori are usually cast as the antagonists, those who have caused the trouble, rather than as those reacting to a previous problem. Community psychologist Darrin Hodgetts provides us with an example of this. In an analysis of the Maori voice present in a documentary about the Foreshore and Seabed hikoi, he argues that what this documentary does is **reframe** protestors, so that instead of being represented as 'just stirrers', they are seen as *'active citizens seeking to be heard from the street and through the media at a national level'*, and as *'reasoned citizens seeking equitable solutions to problems caused by colonisation, rather than as ill-informed and antagonistic radicals'*.

When I first read this I had one of those "ah-ha" moments, because although I have spent much of my academic life researching and teaching about Maori and media, I still at times find it hard to work out how something might be reworded. This, I think, is not so much a comment on my own intellect, but on the sheer power and longevity of the dominant media's way of framing issues and events. This can be so powerful that it becomes commonsense, and it is hard for those of us not actually involved in the event to frame it any other way.

Having said that, I do, however, want to make it absolutely clear here that I am not saying that this is a deliberate action on the part of those who work in the news media. Pietikainen made, I think, a very good point when she said that if minority groups have been presented negatively over so many years and in so many countries, we cannot say that this is because journalists are racist. In this country Judy McGregor, an ex-journalist who is currently the Equal Opportunities Commissioner with the Human Rights Commission, has acknowledged that 'there is goodwill among journalists in New Zealand towards Maori news coverage' but, she goes on to say, "the coverage produced is grounded in Pakeha news values, and most journalists are Pakeha.' A prominent British news scholar, Stuart Allen, points out the implications of this when he says:

"The intricate, often subtle ways in which white perspectives shape the framing of news reports concerning race-related issues can have a profound effect on public attitudes to racial discrimination (as well as on those of government policy makers), an effect which an otherwise conscientious white newsworker might never have intended"

Here Allen echoes the point made by Thompson and Ungerleider: the public policy implications of news framed from a white, or Pakeha perspective.

The continued marginalisation of Maori in the news, demonisation of Maori activism and a predominance of negative imagery may not be intentional, but it is of real concern for two reasons:

Firstly, it has been recognised internationally that continued negative images of minorities, compounded by a lack of any positive images, have negative impacts on that group's health, in the widest sense of the word. For that reason, the Health Research Council has funded a group of Maori and Pacific researchers, of which I am one, to analyse the representations of Maori across print, television and radio news. I would like to note here that, with a couple of exceptions, media practitioners have been very happy to talk with us.

The second reason, I would argue, is that real equality for Maori, and the development of an authentically bi-cultural society in New Zealand (which will bring benefits for Maori and non-Maori), needs Government action and legislation. But Pakeha are the very dominant majority in New Zealand, not only in terms of economic resources and social resources such as cultural capital, but also in terms of voting power, and any Government needs to have both the political will and the backing of a significant number of the Pakeha population if they are going to pursue policies that aim at redressing the effects on Maori of colonization, of compensating for breaches of the Treaty, and of honouring Maori culture and tikanga. The mainstream media play a key role here because a large number of the non-Maori population have little or no personal experience of Maori people and Maori culture, and have little knowledge or understanding of our colonial history. In situations like this people draw on the media for their information. But this media selects and frames its stories from the point of view of the dominant culture, without any recognition that this is the case. So we have the dangerous position where many viewers must think they are getting all the information they need to come to a decision about where they stand on issues to do with Maori, or with the Treaty. Television news does not come with an opening piece which says: "Warning: the following programme is bad for Maori".

Absences

I'm now going to turn to the other side of the equation and look at the absence of Maori stories and Maori voices.

I said earlier that the first level of absence is the dearth of stories about the Maori world in "mainstream" news - stories which are presented as an intrinsic part of New Zealand and therefore of interest to all New Zealanders. In our current research we took a random sample of 21 days of television news. 2% of the total number of stories were Maori stories, and this included different versions of the verdict in the shooting of Jhia Te Tua, of Chris Kahui being denied bail, and of a rally against child abuse.

The second level is about Maori as sources in what might be called "Maori stories" or stories in which Maori might be expected to have a say. Research in 1995, 1997, 2004 and 2007 has shown that in the news stories analysed nearly half, and often more than half, the

sources are Pakeha. It also shows that Maori are often framed as presenting an oppositional voice, in a way that Pakeha are not.

I'm going to play TV3's coverage of the ceremonies at Te Tii Waitangi marae on Feb 6 2005. (For those of you who don't know, the marae at Te Tii is a Ngapuhi marae, sometimes called the Lower marae because it is down the hill from the Waitangi Treaty Grounds.) This takes about 6 minutes.

There are several things that strike me (and probably you too) about this coverage.

- * The first, and most obvious, is the insertion of a Maori voice, giving not only a perspective of what is important at Te Tii on that day, but also the history which explains its importance.

- * The second is how rare this is. I haven't seen this type of reporting, which includes a Maori reporter telling a Maori story about Te Tii, before or since. There have been Maori reporters filing their own stories up at Waitangi for the "mainstream" channels, but not so clearly telling what you might call a "counter-narrative".

- * The third is how, within the programme, this "counter-narrative" is still positioned as an alternative voice to the "real story". Mereana does her thing, as it were, and then the presenter is very quick to take us back to Stephen Parker who continues with the "real" story of Te Tii.

- * The fourth is that, apart from Mereana Hond's story, this coverage is part of an established trend of "mainstream" channels sending up their political reporters, who follow the Prime Minister around. This is politics with a capital P, governmental politics, but not the wider politics of Waitangi. Waitangi Day is about the commemoration of the Treaty which, according to last year's Human Rights Commission poll, the majority of New Zealanders now recognise as the founding document of Aotearoa/New Zealand. This Treaty was signed by two peoples, and set out certain obligations for the Crown. Yet coverage of Waitangi is overwhelmingly by and about only one of these signatories, and there is little news about progress in the past year towards meeting these obligations.

- * There is more I could say about this coverage, but I will only point out Stephen Parker's error in insinuating that Ngapuhi's protocol of only having men in the front row demeans Tariana Turia. This is a simplistic understanding of Ngapuhi tikanga, and the editor of the programme should not have let this through.

I need of course to acknowledge the amount of time it takes in a limited news bulletin to tell a story with two different reporters framing a story in different ways - but nevertheless I would argue that this particular example provides a model that provokes us to think about ways in which Maori realities might be an intrinsic part of news stories. This example also demonstrates that what we usually get in mainstream coverage of Waitangi is an emphasis on any conflict that might happen, and the absence of a Maori voice, a Maori story, and of the history of Treaty issues since the Treaty was signed. It is this absence of history that I'm going to turn to next.

The absence of history

To fully understand many issues to do with the interaction between Maori and Pakeha, (and indeed between any indigenous group and their colonisers) an understanding of the colonial and more recent past is required. This absence of historical context feeds into ideas of "Maori privilege", a lack of any understanding for the reasons so many Maori are on the negative side of our social indicators (as indeed, are indigenous people around the world), and the lack of any understanding of Treaty settlements as just some small recompense for what iwi have lost in the last 170 years.

But, even if the newsmakers are aware of this, television news finds it hard to give such history: both because of the limited time within a news item, and because it is so reliant on moving visuals (in both senses of the word). It is much easier to broadcast images of present day protest action, with its potential for great visuals and potential drama and action, than it is to broadcast images of past Treaty violations.

There are also **cultural issues** at stake here. For Maori, as with many others of the world's indigenous peoples, the past has traditionally been more important than it has to Western people. Speaking very generally, for Maori the past is an intrinsic part of the present and the future, while for Pakeha the past is out of sight, behind us. Where Maori say "Titiro ki muri kia whakatika a mua" - look to the past to proceed into the future - you often hear Pakeha saying "That was in the past - can't we just move on". This focus on the present both results in and is reinforced by the news value of what academics call 'frequency', which is very common in Western media. This refers to the fact that those events which become news stories are of about the same frequency as particular news media. For daily news, this means that what happened today is what is important. Those things that happened in the past, or over a longer time frame, are much less likely to make it into the news.

This has its consequences, as we shall see. Before I look at the Tuhoe stories, I need to summarise very briefly some of the history between Tuhoe and the State:

1866 Tuhoe were unjustly condemned as being anti-Crown collaborators. Thousands of hectares of Tuhoe land was confiscated, depriving the iwi of most of its arable land and access to the coast. The Crown's scorched-earth tactics left one in eight Tuhoe dead and devastated crops and homes.

1916 Tuhoe tohunga and prophet Rua Kenana had established a community of followers on Maungapohatu - Tuhoe's sacred mountain. In April seventy armed police raided the settlement. Rua's son and another resident were killed.

Then in October 2007 the armed offenders squad raided Ruatoki. I analysed the stories on the day of the police raids on *ONE News*, *3News*, *Te Kaea*, which runs on *Maori Television*, and *Te Karere*, the Maori language bulletin on *TV One*, and am going to talk about a brief section of that analysis today. This comes from a chapter in an anthology of essays about the raids, called, appropriately, *Terror in our midst*. I argued in my contribution that though mass media television coverage of the first day of the "terror" raids would, on the whole,

have met the Broadcasting Standards Authority's standards for balance, fairness and accuracy, it did not reflect Maori realities.

I'm taking one image from the television news coverage to illustrate two different realities of the police raid on Ruatoki. The same image was used as an opening shot by both *Te Karere* and *One News*. It is a shot of a police officer in armed offenders' uniform, carrying a gun across his/her body. But the bulletins used the image differently. Here's *One News*. This shot actually started without the head in range and then panned up quickly to hold on the face. The words broadcast over this image read: "Tonight: What's triggered nationwide police raids? A suggestion that napalm was being used in terror training camps". Although the image of a member of armed offenders squad looks frightening, a potential justification for this intimidating symbol is given to us. Perhaps we may be surprised, even shocked, but we are not necessarily invited to take offence. Such a positioning is further anchored by a subsequent image of an indeterminate war zone with a helicopter overhead and a sound track which suggests bombs have just been dropped.

Te Karere use the same image, but most of the shot leaves the head out of frame, increasing the focus on the weapon and intensifying a sense of intimidation. In its subtitled bulletin, the image is accompanied by the text "Fear gripped the people of Ruatoki today". These words anchor a meaning that puts us in the position of the people of Ruatoki.

Apart from *One News*'s rather "shock, horror, gasp" headline, both *One* and *3* ran stories that seemed to be models of balance and impartiality. The words "terror" or "terrorist" were always in quotes, and information from the police was identified as such. Stories contained both the police voice, and voices from people who were identified as "Ruatoki residents". They expressed views such as:

Vivienne Heurea, Ruatoki resident: *Sort of makes us as if we're criminals or something.*

Unnamed male Ruatoki resident (has last words in news item): *We're builders, we're building up the valley. Today we're meant to be working - here we are locked out of our valley, eh.*

This picture of Ruatoki and its people is very different to that of "dole bludging, dope growing criminals" described by some of the Pakeha population in the nearby town of Whakatane. I grew up in this area, and my parents lived there until 10 years ago, so I am well aware of some of the attitudes to those who live up in Ruatoki. It's also a story that, to a large number of viewers would seem balanced. Maori had, after all, been given a voice, and presented very positively.

Te Karere and *Te Kaea*, however, told a different story. Mere McLean, reporting for *Te Kaea*, made continual reference to past land confiscations by the Crown, and to previous incidents like this. It also made the point that one of the four road blocks set up by the police was on the boundary that marks the land confiscated from Tuhoe by the Crown.

Te Karere ran two separate stories about the events of the day. One made explicit reference to one of the police blockades being positioned on the confiscation line:

Vivienne Heurea, Tuhoe: *"Just before 7am, when we regularly go to do the bus run from Ruatoki to Whakatane, we were stopped on the confiscation line."*

One News selected two soundbites from Heurea, but neither of these mentioned the confiscation line. Yet here it is in what seems to be her daily vocabulary, as something she is always aware of. Both mainstream bulletins described her as Resident of Ruatoki, rather than Tuhoe.

So while *TV One* and *TV3* presented the opinions of residents of Ruatoki who just happened to be Maori, what we get on Maori language news was a story about Tuhoe once again being the subject of violent State intrusion, informed by the history of Tuhoe's contact with the State over decades. There is no such history in mainstream television's coverage.

What we have here, then, is an example of the absence of an indigenous voice from mainstream news. In this instance it was probably as a result of ignorance on the part of mainstream news workers. At other times this indigenous voice is suppressed because it is marginalised or painted as intrinsically antagonistic - and the example I have given from Darrin Hodgetts work is just one of many.

Some more Tuhoe history now- this time, that of the ownership of Te Urewera, or the Urewera National Park:

1896 The Urewera District Native Reserve Act created a 265,000ha reserve as an "involute protectorate" within Tuhoe. A council, Te Whitu Tekau, was to manage Tuhoe's affairs.

The Crown soon undermined the [legislation], imposing 7,000 pound costs on the iwi for title determination, and buying up pieces of land to clear this supposed debt.

The Crown, as the monopoly buyer, fixed low prices. Under the legislation this was illegal but the Government passed a law in 1916 to retrospectively validate its actions.

It also charged enormous survey costs and a special £20,000 fee towards building roads through Te Urewera, which were never built.

In other words, Tuhoe were supposed to keep what was left of their land in 1896 as a self-governing reserve. However, it lost the land through a series of unjust and often illegal Government tactics over the next few decades.

Jump to June 2010. Tuhoe have been in negotiations with the Govt over their Treaty claim for 18 months. They understand that the return of Te Urewera will be part of the settlement, which is to be signed on June 14th in Waimana. Three days before, John Key unilaterally pre-empts this with his public announcement, without consultation with Tuhoe or the Crown negotiators.

The only media coverage of Key's statement that day that gave any of the historical background to the issue came from the print media, and was a column in the *Herald* by Maori historian Paul Moon. This was not a report - it was a column, that is, someone's

opinion. Nevertheless, the feedback to Moon's column on the *Herald* website overwhelmingly thanked him for providing a history that people had been unaware of.

Colin Peacock in *Mediawatch* criticised news coverage of the issue, saying that, with a couple of exceptions, the history behind the issue came too little and too late.

One of these exceptions was Yvonne Tahana, another print journalist, who wrote an article for the *Saturday Herald* which set out the history of Te Urewera. In this she wrote:

"Iwi leaders hope that if the history of their claim is better understood, Prime Minister John Key might be persuaded to change his mind and put the park - a place the iwi knows as its homeland - back on the Treaty settlement negotiation table".

But, as *Mediawatch* commented, this wasn't about justice, it was about politics, about National not losing large numbers of its Pakeha support. I return then to my earlier statements and argue that the reason that many of these Pakeha would not support the return of Te Urewera was threefold. One is that they have received so many negative images of Maori from media. This has been compounded by the absence of stories and Maori voices that feature Maori as citizens of New Zealand and Maori life as an intrinsic part of New Zealand . And finally, they lack knowledge of the very important history behind this claim or indeed of any other.

Conclusions

Many of the changes I have implied need to be made in our mainstream news are probably absolute anathema to those who work there, likely to be seen as the ideas of an ivory tower academic who knows nothing about the practicalities of journalism. Ingrained Western news values and the demands of commercialisation are hard task masters.

But I think the stakes are too high to ignore this challenge. History can be inserted into news stories if its importance is recognised. There is a plethora of interesting stories about Maori, as a few nights watching *Te Kaea* and *Te Karere* demonstrates, and it is not good enough to say they are not interesting to "our audience". We need to hear from Maori at all levels of the news, whether it is just as a bystander, or as an expert, or as someone speaking from a position informed by a particularly Maori worldview, or someone speaking about the experiences of colonisation. These viewpoints are significant viewpoints. To exclude them is not balanced journalism.

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Link back to the indigenous peoples' rights page -
<http://www.converge.org.nz/pma/indig.htm>