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Non-Māori Viewing of Māori Television:
An Empirical Analysis of the New Zealand Broadcast System

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
Media Studies

at Massey University, Albany,
New Zealand.

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2011

ABSTRACT

Since its launch in March 2004, Māori Television has been redefining broadcasting standards and operational ethics in the New Zealand mediasphere. The channel's overall viewership has increased on a yearly basis, growing to over two million unique viewers by 2010, 83% of which is made up of non-Māori viewers. It is to the issues raised by this unusual situation that this thesis directs itself. Why do non-Māori watch Māori Television? What shows are they watching? What messages to they derive from their viewing habits? And how is the channel, as an indigenous broadcaster, affecting notions of narrative, identity, and nationhood in New Zealand society? These questions are addressed through a qualitative analysis of data collected from focus groups, questionnaires, and one-on-one interviews with non-Māori viewers of the Māori Television channel.

The thesis begins by exploring the broadcasting system in which Māori Television is positioned, outlining the legislative processes and media systems non-Māori are shifting from. It then describes the Māori social and communications paradigms which ultimately resulted in the channel's emergence on the nation's airwaves. This is followed by a description and justification of the research methodology.

The ensuing analysis of the viewpoints and assertions made by the research participants indicates that there are significant patterns in non-Māori perceptions of Māori Television and its evolving role in New Zealand culture. These perceptions include: a) an acknowledgement of Māori Television's contribution in filling a perceived void in New Zealand public service broadcasting; b) an appreciation of the quality of its broadcasts, often described as providing a compelling, inclusive, ethical, and professional service to their audience; c) a belief that the channel is facilitating a reconceptualisation of bicultural politics in New Zealand and nurturing the development of a better understanding of post-colonial cultural identity. The thesis argues that the Māori Television channel provides non-Māori a 'third space' for a re-negotiation of non-Māori identity in New Zealand, offering them a reconciliation with Aotearoa. In this sense, the channel is argued to challenge bifurcated cultural practices by presenting counter-narratives of nationhood and of the national imaginary which move beyond traditional notions of 'settler identity'.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It would not have been possible to write this thesis without the support and generosity of people around me, only some of whom it is possible to mention in these acknowledgements.

Above all, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my principal supervisor Dr. Joe Grixti and co-supervisor Professor Michael Belgrave who with their encouragements, guidance, support and patience enabled me to develop an understanding of the complexities of the subject material. I am indebted to them and the support of the Massey University teaching and technical staff who greatly aided the development and implementation of the thesis. Special acknowledgements are reserved for Leanne Menzies, Barbie Yerkovich, and Dr. Sue Abel for their individual support at various stages of the research.

This thesis would not have been possible without financial support from the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan, the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee and Massey University in offering placement on a Commonwealth Scholarship programme. To all those involved I express my sincere gratitude.

I would also like to express my appreciation to those outside the University for their generous support and assistance. Special thanks go to Vanessa Horan and the team at Māori Television for providing the initial contacts for the research project, as well as Elizabeth Binning from the New Zealand Herald for running the story in her newspaper column. I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to all the research participants without whose involvement this thesis wouldn't have been accomplished. Their generosity in giving up their free time to assist with this research is gratifying.

Special acknowledgement goes to my family in the United Kingdom who greatly assisted me with their timeless support and patience. I would also like to thank my fellow masters and postgraduate students for providing a stimulating and supportive social environment to work in. And finally, special thanks to my partner Stephanie who provided insurmountable support during the past year.

To all those who supported me in this thesis I express my sincere gratitude and appreciation for your assistance.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	i
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: The New Zealand Mediascape and Māori Television: A Review of the Literature	9
2.1 Introduction	9
2.2 Broadcasting NZ: The New Zealand Experiment and Public Service Broadcasting.....	11
2.3 A Return to Reithian Values? The Television New Zealand Charter	17
2.4 Māori Television Service Act: Establishing a National Indigenous Broadcaster	19
2.5 History of Tino Rangatiratanga, Te Mana Te Kawanatanga, the Waitangi Tribunal and the emergence of Māori Media	20
2.6 Māori Representation in New Zealand Broadcasting: Continuations of Institutionalised Racism and Pākehā Hegemony	24
2.7 New Platforms for Korero	27
2.8 Māori Television: Futures of Biculturalism	30
2.9 Current issues of Māori Representation in Mainstream Media	38
2.10 Broadcasting Futures: Public Service Broadcasting and the End of the Charter	41
2.11 Pākehā Identity Performance: Questions of Culture and Biculturalism and Hybridity	44
2.12 Conclusions	47
Chapter 3: Research Methodology	50
3.1 Introduction	50
3.2 Methodology and Theoretical Perspectives	51
3.3 Qualitative Research Methods: Methodological Triangulation.....	53
3.4 Participant Recruitment Process.....	56
3.4.1 Recruitment Process One: Cold Asking and ‘Snowballing’	56
3.4.2 Recruitment Process Two: Māori Television	57
3.4.3 Recruitment Process Three: The Print Media.....	58

3.5 Implementing the Qualitative Research and Participant Demographics.....	59
3.6 Conducting the Research: Organising the Focus Groups, Interviews and Questionnaires	61
3.7 Conclusion	65
Chapter 4: Introduction to the Data Analysis.....	66
4.1 Introduction and Direction of the Data Analysis.....	66
4.2 Outlining Terminology and Demographics	67
4.3 Non-Māori Perceptions of Māori Television	67
4.4 Popular Programming Among Non-Māori	73
4.5 The Te Reo debate	73
4.6 Common Themes, Words and Phrases	75
Chapter 5: A Post Reithian Broadcaster? Māori Television as New Zealand’s Public Service Broadcaster.....	79
5.1 Introductions:.....	79
5.2 Non-Māori Attitudes to Films and Documentaries	88
5.3 Kai Time.....	91
5.4 Non-Māori Attitudes to Sport	92
5.5 The Appeal of Māori Television.....	94
5.6 Futures of Public Service Broadcasting and Conclusions.....	96
Chapter 6: Operational and Journalistic Ethics: Setting Standards in New Zealand Broadcasting	98
6.1 Introduction	98
6.2 Ethics and Professionalism: News and Current Affairs: Māori Television Setting industry Standards	102
6.3 Standards of Journalism: Presenters and Interviews.....	105
6.4 Operational Values.....	110
6.5 Conclusions	112
Chapter 7: Reconnecting Pākehā with Aotearoa: Futures of Biculturalism, the National Imaginary, and Pākehā Performance Identity: .	115
7.1 Introduction: The Māori Perspective	115
7.2 Māori Television: An Aotearoan Counter Narrative	117
7.3 Māori Television: Anzac Day Coverage	121

7.4 Conclusions	123
Chapter 8: Conclusions	125
BIBLIOGRAPHY	131
APPENDIX A.....	151
APPENDIX B.....	154