

Public Broadcasting in New Zealand

Public broadcasting in New Zealand: is state media inclusive media?

Donald Reid

Abstract

In New Zealand the state has always been a dominant actor in the ownership and governance of broadcasting, and the orthodox tropes perpetuated by public service broadcasting have reflected the state's role in society. Since the establishment of television in 1960, to the de-regulation of broadcasting in 1989, the state held a monopoly over New Zealand terrestrial television. Despite a commercial imperative within the governance structure of the state broadcaster, television's initial period was typified by a paternalistic ethos, with educative and high culture values being significant in programming and scheduling decisions.

From the 1980s the paternalism that typified New Zealand broadcasting has gradually given way to production modes and programming that represents diversity and social inclusion, thanks, in part, to new gatekeeping and funding mechanisms created when the industry was de-regulated in 1989. However, given these mechanisms remain part of the state media structure, the programming produced still must comply with a predetermined set of criteria – this includes not only form and subject matter, but also elements inherent the broadcast and reception of terrestrial commercial media: schedule constraints and the necessity to provide ratings-friendly programming.

In this paper I examine the state media gatekeeping systems - and the texts those systems produce - as a particular form of governmentality. I argue that multicultural representation (as part of the contemporary ethos of public broadcasting in New Zealand) equates to a set of discursive guidelines that reduce cultural difference into a singular national narrative.

Key Words: Governmentality, multiculturalism, neoliberalism, New Zealand, public broadcasting, representation

In New Zealand the relationship between the state and the broadcasting industries has always been a close one, with various

configurations of government ownership and gatekeeping mechanism featuring prominently in the country's media history. The government de-regulated broadcasting in 1989 and with that the state's monopoly over the control of television ended, with Television New Zealand (the free-to air, two channel state network) becoming just another player in a competitive broadcasting environment that included free-to-air and subscriber-based channels. However, within the 1989 Broadcasting Act (the enabling legislation for the broadcasting de-regulation) there were some provisions acknowledging the role of TVNZ in the perpetuation and articulation of New Zealand cultural identity, the most significant being the establishment of the Broadcasting Commission: a statutory but non-governmental body charged with allocating public monies to fund local programming. The Commission (renamed in 1991 as New Zealand on Air) operated via a particular set of guidelines with its primary function, according to the Act, being to:

“reflect and develop New Zealand identity and culture by (i) promoting programmes about New Zealand and New Zealand interests; and (ii) promote Maori language and Maori culture...” and “to ensure that a range of programming is available to provide for the interests of (i) women; and (ii) youth; and (iii) children; and (iv) persons with disabilities; and (v) minorities in the community including ethnic minorities; and to encourage a range of broadcasting that reflects the diverse religious and ethical beliefs of New Zealanders...”¹

In the discussion surrounding New Zealand media in the wake of de-regulation, including academic writing and media criticism and commentary, there has emerged a general endorsement of the principles of New Zealand on Air (NZOA). The main perspective perpetuated in this endorsement is that by facilitating both local content and public broadcasting NZOA provides a balance to the highly commercial, ratings-driven media environment and counteracts the particular economies of scale operating in New Zealand: the high cost of television production versus the relatively low rate of taxation revenue (due to the country's low population).

In this paper I argue that rather than being a benign or neutral facilitator of local content and public broadcasting, NZOA functions as a specific form of state governance, with the structure of NZOA, and the texts being produced, perpetuating the institutions and ethos of the dominant culture, including the broader tenants of neoliberal economics. My specific area of interest here is the way NZOA circulates and encourages multicultural representation, and that this state-sanctioned version of cultural inclusion

Donald Reid

serves to create and intensify a particular form of cultural commonality determined by, and to the service of, the dominant culture.

1. The Problem of Multicultural Representation

A common theme running through New Zealand's media studies archive is the notion of cultural inclusion. Multicultural inclusion, however, is defined predominantly in terms of visual representation of ethnic characters within programme content, with specific interest in the quantity of that representation. Theorist of multiculturalism, Tariq Modood argues that the contemporary discussion surrounding multiculturalism should not end with the emphasis on the boosterist celebration of cultural difference (as occurs in the discussion surrounding representation) but rather examine the consequences of a continual intensification of commonality (Modood, 2007: 123). Modood makes the argument that the application of multiculturalism within state policy (as NZOA is evidence of) equates to a political ordering of society and the establishment of a normalizing regime that subsumes the representation of difference within acceptable perimeters devised and beneficial to society's dominant sector.

Modood's view is reiterated by Vijay Mishra, who, in his paper 'What is Multiculturalism?' argues that the multicultural agenda is never set by the minority groups for whom the surrounding policies and legislation impact on the most, but by the dominant culture primary as a tool of cultural management, or as Mishra quotes Angela Davis "diversity management" (Mishra, 2005: 6). Thus multicultural society (in its liberal western definition) is not one where every community holds an equal share of power, but is stratified with those who control the polity able to regulate and permit degrees of inclusion, self-determination and cultural citizenship. So to be included in New Zealand's wider multicultural rubric means, firstly, to acquiesce to the legitimacy of the nation state, and, secondly, to accept the state's beliefs, practices and ideals. With regards to media policy in New Zealand, the articulation of the multicultural society is accentuated through the normalizing processes of NZOA (as the primary mechanism for the delivery of multicultural programming) that regulate both content and production of texts. Furthermore, the broader tenants of neoliberalism can be identified within the nationalist discourse that underpins those multicultural texts: notably the advantaging of free market principles; the favouring of individualism over collective-ism; and the over-arching significance of economic matters with regards the social and cultural well-being of the nation.

New Zealand on Air can, to some extent, be viewed as analogous with the broader model of New Zealand television as a combination of commercial and public service ideals. Thus NZOA funds both high-rating locally made prime time series (often expensively produced drama and comedy series) made for a general audience, and often including a multicultural cast, and low rating (often because of being situated in unfavourable time slots) magazine programming that directly target specific minority audiences. But as Mishra argues, despite their claim to diversity, these texts reduce the complexities of ethnic difference into a framework and language that is easily digestible for the dominant culture. Therefore, the representation of multiculturalism, as it is depicted in texts sanctioned by NZOA, tend to subsume cultural difference into a benign collection of ideas and motifs that serve only to enhance the dominant culture by perpetuating a veneer of a tolerant and inclusive society. Mainstream texts such as the primetime animated comedy *Bro'town* and the domestic drama *Outrageous Fortune*² both have multicultural casts, but this representation of multiculturalism is diffused through broad stereotype and base humour; representations of difference refracted into a common and popular televisual language. Thus issues such as urban poverty, institutional racism, the impact of colonialism and tension of the working class family due to the operations of modern capitalism become reduced to a general milieu of television 'issues' that are resolved, made light of or left unproblematized, but are never addressed to any significant degree. In low-rating, minority-interest programming, for example specifically targeted magazine shows such as *Asia Down Under* and *Tangata Pasifika* the representation of difference is also reduced to those elements that fit into what is acceptable for the dominant culture. Thus the mediated version of multiculturalism becomes a benign representation of difference and drained of political meaning. As Mishra notes in evaluating *Asia Down Under* as a multicultural text: "It has been said that *Asia Down Under* is attractive to mainstream (white) New Zealanders because of its weekly food component. What the attraction reinforces is food one of the seemingly benign representation systems of multicultural difference as the positive face of multiculturalism" (Mishra, 2005: 5).

The version of multiculturalism sanctioned by New Zealand on Air functions in the service of the state. Therefore instead of viewing NZOA as a facilitator of neutral, multicultural representation (as has been the tendency by a number of New Zealand media theorists), an argument can be made that NZOA functions as governmentality, or as modern form of power that extends a sovereign jurisdiction through a diverse range of tactics and bodies to ultimately become manifest in the practices and beliefs of individual subjectivities. Thus modern methods of governance – from institutional and

Donald Reid

educational techniques to the increased bureaucratization of society – function not only to shift power away from a sovereign leader (or, in contemporary terms, the centralized and party-political based state), but also to make the application of power more efficient, individualized and democratic.

Michel Foucault argues that the process of governmentality, or in his own description the “conduct of conduct” (Foucault, 1978: 92) has been apparent in regimes and systems of power for the past three hundred years, as the governance of subjects becomes diffused through bureaucratic bodies, private sector and/or corporate interests and institutions charged with public health and education. The rise of neoliberal states in the second half of the twentieth century is governmentality’s contemporary manifestation, albeit in differing forms depending on the social and political history of individual nation states. In New Zealand, the 1984-7 Labour government’s embrace of market-led economic policies - the material end-product of the neoliberal agenda devised by a number of leading Treasury officials since the late 1970s - is widely acknowledged as constituting significant philosophical departure from the heavily protectionist and state-dominated system that typified this country’s governance since the 1930s. The transition between these governance cultures has resulted in a state and policy schema that affirms the ethos of a small, non-interventionist state, while producing and supporting a myriad of statutory but non-governmental bodies and practices, each with their own set of regulations and supported by a particular bureaucratic infrastructure. With regards the example of New Zealand’s public broadcasting mechanisms, and their role in perpetuating the ideals associated with neoliberalism, I agree with the argument put forward by Malaysian scholar Aihwa Ong as she inverts the notion that neoliberalism is positioned in a negative relationship to orthodox state power. Ong argues instead that the neoliberalism can be perceived as a series of mechanisms that re-articulate government practices as “non-political and non-ideological problems”(Ong, 2005: 3), thus draining the orthodox ‘politics’ from any practice or activities to be re-constituted as an issue concerning, for example, the economy, the public good or the national interest.

New Zealand on Air, as a particular funding and gatekeeping model, represents this re-articulation of government practices. As a body that is a product of, and administered by, the state, but is comprised of industry representative and covers a multi-network jurisdiction, NZOA signals a retreat from party political governance. However the texts produced by NZOA must comply with a series of guidelines and the subjective view of the body’s members thus constituting a normalizing framework for local content. The texts produced by NZOA’s statutory requirements function to promote a

version of New Zealand cultural identity that replicates the general power relations of the status quo, one that condones multicultural inclusion within accepted limits of debate and aesthetics. In this respect the form and practice of NZOA functions in accordance with Aihwa Ong's definition of a state-centric neoliberalism where agencies external to the state produce a normalizing influence over potentially disruptive subjects and thus promoting the status quo.

In conclusion rather than a neutral gatekeeping mechanisms, NZOA represents a contemporary mode of governmentality: a function NZOA's model and the particular texts produced by that model. The promotion of multiculturalism (as is mandated through the 1989 Broadcasting Act and the guidelines of NZOA) is based on the representation of difference rather than on equality – either of modes of production or within the political economy of the national media. This mediated version of multiculturalism reduces difference to what Vijay Mishra describes as “a series of benign representations”, rendering the possibility for a disharmonious minority voice to come through the free-to-air networks essentially impossible. The national culture, therefore, becomes one that celebrates multiculturalism, however this version of multiculturalism is one that is sanctioned and guided by the dominant culture (with a vested interest in docile populace) thus the celebration of difference becomes subsumed into a singular national narrative.

Notes

¹ "Broadcasting Act (1989)." Ed. Ministry of Broadcasting: New Zealand Government, 1989.

² A significant proportion of the budgets for both of these series is derived from NZOA funding. *Bro'town* received between NZ\$1.5 million and NZ\$2 million funding each year since 2004 and *Outrageous Fortune* has received between NZ\$8 million and NZ\$9 million each year since 2005.

Donald Reid

Bibliography

"Broadcasting Act (1989)." Ed. Ministry of Broadcasting:
New Zealand Government, 1989.

Foucault, Michel. "Governmentality ", *The Foucault Effect: Studies
in Governmentality*, Colin Gordon Graham Burchill, Peter Miller (eds),
Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Mishra, Vijay. "What Is Multiculturalism?" *Portal Journal of
Multidisciplinary International Studies*, vol. 2.2 (2005), pp. 1-47

Modood, Tariq. *Multiculturalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.

Ong, Aihwa. *Neoliberalism as Exception Mutations in Citizenship and
Sovereignty*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2006.

Donald Reid is a PhD candidate at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. His work involves an historical analysis of public broadcasting and the relationship between public broadcasting and state power.