Conversing About Diversity

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ABSTRACT

In this article Professor Spoonley examines the role of mass and minority media in the process of public debate. As audiences become increasingly fragmented, it is all the more difficult to conduct discussions about national identity in an inclusive manner. With the resurgence of nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiments in many parts of the world, forums for meaningful exchange about cultural diversity are of the utmost importance.

John Ralston Saul has noted that nationalism has "made a remarkable and unexpected recovery" with mainstream parties seeking to capitalize on the nationalist vote.[1] In many western countries, this heralds the reassertion of majoritarian and dominant interests and the dismissal of critical and progressive expressions of cultural pluralism. Narrowly-defined 'needs' replace more inclusive, as well as group specific, 'rights' as the basis for social and economic policy and the attribution of political entitlement. Anti-immigration sentiments expand from the extremes of the political spectrum and appear in mainstream political agendas to attract the attention of centrist parties, including those of a social democratic persuasion. In this environment, conducting informed conversations about the issues and possibilities gains new importance. The question is, what forums exist for public discussions about identity (national or local) and the implications for particular constituencies of cultural diversity?

In the classic as well as more recent immigrant receiving societies, national education systems provide one obvious mechanism for contributing to an understanding of the issues and for conducting public discussions. Another important opportunity for collective discussion has been the mass media. There is a literature dating from the Frankfurt School and the use of the mass media by fascists in the 1930s which has asked some fundamental questions of its role in contributing to private understandings and public discussions. These questions deserve to be repeated because the mass media in all its diverse forms – print, radio, television, electronic – remain a key institution in the distribution of images and messages. Will the mass media continue to largely reflect the interests and values of dominant groups and cultures, thereby contributing to majority nation-building projects? At the same time, by misrepresenting and marginalizing minority groups, they are a key institution in the process of 'minority nation-destroying'.[2] But the media landscape has seen some important shifts in terms of participants and practice. The era which was dominated by state-sponsored mass media and certain corporate interests, especially in relation to television, has been transformed by new information and electronic technologies. This is especially important for indigenous communities, ethnic minorities and immigrant groups. There are diverse alternatives to the mass media for these communities, as transborder media develop and provide linkages to immigrant 'homes', alongside local minority (narrowcast) media which speak directly to immigrant and minority communities. If local media have privileged some voices and the nation-building of dominant groups, do these new media fragment audiences and preclude shared discussions about the nature of diversity and the implications for contemporary states

Diversity and the Mass Media

As various states have entered a new phase of immigrant-derived cultural diversity, concern continues to be expressed about the contribution of the mass media to democratic debate and a constructive understanding of the issues.[3] Since the 1970s, the mass media have tended to provide negative images, have misrepresented the issues or racialized particular groups, and have been reluctant to include minority representatives as key industry players. Moreover, the media have played an important role in the regular moral panics that have, in different periods, been focussed on urban decay and the involvement of minority ethnic and immigrant groups in inner city disorder, the fears of 'being swamped' by culturally different others and, more recently, with concerns about the arrival of refugees and asylum seekers.[4] As one of the most significant contributors to an understanding of the mass media and racialization has argued, the media have played a key role as an elite institution in their own right as well as "shaping and changing the social mind."[5] The discourse analysis provided by Van Dijk and others has provided compelling evidence of the racial text and subtexts of media portrayals of immigration, immigrants and cultural diversity, ranging from an explicit threat value through to the privileging of some groups at the expense of others. Inevitably, questions have been raised about what the racializing and misrepresentation of immigrant and ethnic groups means for public conversations about the desirability of diversity and the establishment of inclusive national communities. Alongside these research and policy concerns have been those which raise additional

questions about the representativenss of the mass media workforce, about the culture of media organizations and their control. Concerns about the role of the mass media in culturally diverse democracies have been paralleled by criticism of the operations of media institutions, and their lack of cultural inclusivity.

If the Anglo-conformity of the mass media in countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and the accompanying misrepresentation and under-representation of particular communities remain continuing issues, there have been some indications of change. The development of state-funded minority interest media organizations, the establishment of regulatory bodies to ensure cultural inclusiveness, the funding of immigrant and ethnic programming, a greater awareness and sensitivity of some media workers and organizations to cultural diversity and assertive minority representatives have all contributed to shifts in the mass media over the last two decades. Yet there remain obvious differences between various media organizations, and within them. One contrast is often between news reporting, which tends to reflect explicit and narrow 'news' values, and the features or documentary programs/articles which have provided more nuanced and sympathetic information on diversity.

What is less obvious is how various communities as audiences select, filter and react to the mass media. The media interpret the social world for us, the audience, but then so do audiences actively interpret the media. Audiences are seldom passive recipients of media information and world views. But what is less well understood is how different communities react to the media's views of other groups and intergroup relations. Our research on audiences indicates that this is rather more sophisticated and informed for both majority and minority communities than we give them credit for.[6] For example, different ethnic groups in New Zealand, including those from the dominant Pakeha (European-descent) group, were aware of media agendas which meant that what they read, listened to or watched did not treat ethnic groups equitably, that there was an emphasis on simplifying issues, and that entertainment and commercial values took precedence over information. Minority ethnic and immigrant groups were particularly sensitive to misrepresentation and they were frustrated at their inability to influence or respond to negative images and messages. But that frustration was widely shared, even if it varied in intensity, and others recognized that some groups might have more reason to feel aggrieved at the way in which they were treated by the mass media. Research which does not pay adequate attention to diverse audiences is limited in what it can say about impact.

These interests in media performance and influence reflect well-established and relatively orthodox research and policy interests. What has received less attention is the proliferation of minority ethnic media, and the implications for the engagement of various communities in discussions on what diversity might mean.

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Minority Media

There are now a variety of media sources, both from the country of origin and from within immigrant and ethnic communities, which rely on conventional and new electronic technologies. Cottle[7] lists these as "international communications, audio and visual cassettes, mobile phones, mobile music systems, the Internet and email, digital cameras, photocopiers and fax machines, camcorders, and home-based computerized music recording and productions systems." They provide an increasingly diverse, often cheap, real time alternative to the mass media and they speak directly to the experiences of being an immigrant or a member of an ethnic minority.

There are two different types of media: those which operate locally to meet immigrant and ethnic community needs in their country of residence, and those which provide transnational links back to a country of origin or amongst a diaspora. Often, the media are a mixture of these two as homeland media products are interspersed with a local immigrant focus. New technologies such as global satellite broadcasting systems, the circulation of images and information on CDs, videos and discs, and the Internet have greatly enhanced the ability of communities to maintain trans-border networks. The reach and involvement of communities in these forms of media should not be underestimated.

Tongans represent a total global population of approximately 150,000, both in Tonga and as part of a diasporic population resident in the Pacific rim, especially New Zealand. Telephone densities, and therefore the Internet, is limited in Tonga with only 10% of the population having access to a phone. But a New York-based Tongan, Taholo Kami, established a website in the 1990s, the Kava Bowl. It provided an opportunity for Tongans to discuss matters of cultural, political or personal significance, and at its height, the website saw 600,000 hits per month. Kami saw potential in that political debate in cyberspace was unhampered by traditional cultural practices.[8] Tongans, as long as they had access to the Internet, could have their say on practically anything, without restrictions imposed by cultural elites and gatekeepers, or by the filtering and restrictive practices of the mass media. While this might be liberating, there was concern that it also had a corrosive impact on traditions.[9] It has raised some interesting questions about the significance of electronic-based cultural activity (being a cyberTongan) amongst a diasporic community who had already begun to shift in their cultural practices and identities by virtue of their migration.

In Australia, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) has provided a compromise in that a state-funded television

channel provides minority groups with an opportunity to watch programs that represent them and their interests. The quality has been such that a wide range of audiences have been regularly attracted to 'minority' programs over the last two decades. In New Zealand, a mix of community and state initiatives has provided media that reflect the interests of the indigenous Maori. The Maori print media began in the mid-1800s, and continue, largely funded by Maori organizations and communities. Maori radio programs were confined to small segments on the state-funded network until the 1970s when state and iwi (tribes) established an extensive radio network. MaiFM, an Auckland-based radio station which was aimed at urban Maori and Pacific youth, combined Maori content and language with hip-hop and rap. By 2002, it had the largest audience share of any radio station. In 2004, a state-funded television Maori channel was launched. By the mid-1980s, Maori had gained significant concessions from the state in terms of cultural and linguistic recognition, reparations for historical grievances and the establishment of bicultural government services. The various media reflected these political concerns and added to the problematization of a majoritarian nationalism as well as providing alternative renderings of citizenship and a New Zealand identity. This is available to non-Maori and is an interesting contrast to the messages of an orthodox mass media.

However, state involvement is often minimal and more significant are the initiatives which have been taken by individuals and communities to establish alternative minority interest media. Opportunities are being utilized wherever migrants and ethnic communities reside for a variety of reasons: establishing new networks or retaining old ones, participating in economic activities locally and internationally, cultural and language maintenance, help in the adjustment process post-migration, and the provision of information that is not available from the mass media or other host institutions. There are many new transmission and reception options and the costs have been significantly reduced. There is an opportunity to speak directly to a particular community without being mindful of moderating the message for a non-minority audience or of having the information generated and filtered through a mass media lens. Trans-border media, aided by satellite relay systems, helps maintain contact with a homeland and encourage the maintenance of sidestream languages and cultural behaviours in new ways. While these media are typically linguistically and culturally-specific, they are supplemented by other trans-border media which reflect global media systems, such as CNN. Relatively little is known about minority media, especially in terms of the implications for national debates and understanding about diversity.

There are many positive aspects to the activities of minority media but they seldom deliver to a mass audience. They can inform and encourage a particular community to consider questions of identity and diversity, yet by their very nature they do not typically speak to other communities. Perhaps they should not be expected to because it might undermine their role as a safe environment for communities that feel unsafe in terms of the mass media. But their role in broad civic debates is not clear.

Debating Diversity

Whatever the limitations of the mass media, they provided and continue to provide an opportunity for a discussion about nationality, citizenship and cultural diversity. Concerns remain about how well they do this, and whether they can respect the integrity of immigrant and other minority communities, especially if they normalize majority institutions and values. But they provide an opportunity to reach many communities about matters of importance. However, if many of the conversations are being held within media which are specific to a particular community and often in a language not shared by others, has the opportunity for holding an inclusive discussion about diversity been eroded? Do immigrant and minority media constitute an important factor in maintaining the cultural well-being of the community in question, or do they act as an impediment to successful settlement by virtue of the fact that audience is confined to a specific cultural or linguistic group? The media might provide a "safe place for ethnic cultures to thrive… [and] an entree for newly arrived immigrants who wish to adapt to their new environment"[10] but are broader questions of societal integration and understanding being omitted because they encourage introspection?[11] There are many positive aspects to the activities of minority media but they seldom deliver to a mass audience. They can inform and encourage a particular community to consider questions of identity and diversity, yet by their very nature they do not typically speak to other communities. Perhaps they should not be expected to because it might undermine their role as a safe environment for communities that feel unsafe in terms of the mass media. But their role in broad civic debates is not clear. Alongside questions about the mass media, other and sometimes similar questions need to be raised about the role minority media play in the processes of public and inclusive debates.

Conclusion

Two broad issues remain. The first is the need to understand the nature and impacts of the media that serve minority

communities. The mass media remain important vehicles for the generation of images and messages with considerable influence; but to consider such mass media without also understanding the media now available to any community is misplaced. In any country, electronic media, with their reduced costs and transmission options, have provided opportunities which have been extensively utilized by minority communities. The layers of media now apparent, from intimate and confined systems through to extensive trans-border networks, have been a significant development and deserve much greater attention. The second issue is what this means for national conversations about a common future.

The paradox is that while the mass media may have provided little "conversational equality"[12], the minority media do not necessarily provide an adequate alternative. The proliferation of media of all forms has fragmented audiences. The opportunity for minority groups to control the media, media organizations and the messages they generate has improved. But it makes the process of discussing matters of national significance that much more problematic. Their own well-being as immigrant and minority communities might be enhanced by minority media, but the opportunities for discussing broad political issues with other minorities and majority groups is often constrained. Creative ways need to be found to conduct such dialogues in the minority media without compromising their positive functions as safe vehicles for these communities. If Saul is correct in his concern that a narrow and exclusive nationalism has returned (if it ever left), forums must be found to conduct a well-informed and inclusive debate about diversity.

Notes

1 Saul, J.R. "The End of Globalism." *Australian Financial Review,* 20 February, 2004.

2 Kymlicka, W. *The Politics in the Vernacular. Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Citizenship.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. p. 231.

3 Mahtani, M. "Representing Minorities: Canadian Media and Minority Identities." *Canadian Ethnic Studies,* XXXIII (3): 99-133; Fleras, A. & Kunz, J.L. *Media and Minorities: Representing Diversity in a Multicultural Canada.* Thompson Educational, Toronto, 2001.

4 Cottle, S. "Introduction. Media Research and Ethnic Minorities: Mapping the Field." *Ethnic Minorities and the Media – Changing Cultural Boundaries.* Ed. S. Cottle. Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000.

5 Van Dijk, T. *Elite Discourse and Racism.* London: Sage, 1993. p. 279.

6 Spoonley, P. & A.D. Trlin. *Immigration, Immigrants and the Media. Making Sense of Multicultural New Zealand?* New Settlers Programme, Massey University, Palmerston North, 2004.

7 Cottle, 2000, p. 3.

8 Vui-Talitu, S. "Tapping into Technology." *Achievers 2000.* 1999: p. 38-39; Spoonley, P. "Transnational Pacific Communities: Transforming the Politics of Place and Identity." *Tangata O Te Moana Nui. The Evolving Identity of Pacific Peoples in Aotearoa/New Zealand.* Eds. C . Macpherson, P. Spoonley & M.Anae. Palmerston: Dunmore Press, 2001.

9 Howard, A. "Pacific-Based Virtual Communities: Rotuma on the World Wide Web." *The Contemporary Pacific,* (11)(1) (1999): 160-175.

10 Mahtani, 2001, p. 114.

11 Mahtani, 2001.

12 Barker,C. *Television, Globalisation and Cultural Identities.* Buckingham: Open University Press, 1991. p. 153.

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