Duane Varan, 'Television, culture and state: new forums for negotiating identity in the Pacific'

For over two decades many societies throughout the Pacific resisted the introduction of broadcast television fearing its negative cultural influences. Such fears were often prompted by the experience of American and French territories where television was introduced in the mid-1960s. To some, the advent of television in these territories was seen as a new tool of colonialism - a tool intended to assimilate islanders to American and French values and lifestyles. To others, television represented an icon of the modern world - one which threatened to challenge the very foundation of the traditional social structures by introducing new beliefs and modern values. As a result of such fears, most Pacific island states lacking television actively resisted its introduction throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Two factors, however, worked to overcome the resistance to broadcast television. First, the rapid and wide spread diffusion of VCRs in the 1980s - which island leaders soon discovered they had little control over - made the cultural impact question somewhat moot. With or without broadcast television, the programming they feared had arrived on their shores. Introducing a broadcast system could do no worse. At least with television some element of control could be exercised. Resisting television on cultural grounds no longer provided the protection from foreign images which policy-makers had hoped for.

Second, with the dramatic emergence of new island nations throughout the 1980s, an increasing number of emerging states faced challenges in articulating and developing a distinct national identity. Seen from this perspective, television provided an innovative tool on the pathway to national development. Television came to be viewed as part of an infrastructure which could serve to unify the nation - one which could help facilitate the process of forging a new national identity.

It was largely for such reasons that a number of island states recently decided to introduce television. Those heralding the advent of television include Papua New Guinea (1987), Niue (1988), the Cook Islands (1989), Nauru (1991), Fiji (1991) and Western Samoa (1993) while other island states throughout the region are actively debating the question with respect to their societies. This study explores the relationship between television, culture and state in such societies by relying upon qualitative and quantitative research conducted by the author over a four year period in the Cook Islands where television was introduced as a "gift" from the nation's Prime Minister for Christmas of 1989.

Historical Context

To better understand the context in which television was introduced in the Cook Islands, it is important to first consider the role which communication technologies have traditionally played in the development and preservation of existing social systems there. As Gilson demonstrates, legends, myths and traditions played an active role in shaping the social systems of the Cook Islands prior to their European contact. Such communication acted as a charter which "codified and justified" a chiefly system where special *mana* (power) helped preserve social order. There were different types of *mana*. The *mana* of an *ariki* (chief), for example, was often inherited at birth 1 whereas the mana of

a priest was based on ritual, and that of a craftsman or warrior was a result of having found the favour of the gods. As Gilson notes, the *mana* was reinforced by a *tapu* (taboo) system which threatened to sanction violations of the order with 'automatic supernatural punishment' (13). In this manner, traditional forms of communication played an important role in legitimising and reinforcing the existing social order.

With European contact, missionaries incorporated both the existing belief system 2 and new (Christian) legends and rituals in persuading inhabitants to adopt certain features of the church order. Such communication helped legitimise church control over the islands for most of the 19th century. This order was soon replaced by colonial administrators who relied upon both police power and economic incentive to secure their rule in the islands. To a large extent, such administrators relied upon a system of education which sought to help Cook Islanders assimilate under colonial rule.

Following the Second World War and the Decolonialisation Movement which ensued, the Cook Islands initiated a "free association" status with New Zealand (its former coloniser) which guaranteed it self rule. Since 1965, the administrations of various Prime Ministers have actively sought to bring the Cook Islands into the community of independent and modern states. It was within this context that broadcast television services were inaugurated.

National Legitimisation

The Cook Islands is made up of 15 islands spread out over an area of ocean larger than the Northern Territory (Australia). Commercial activity is dominated by Rarotonga, the island with the largest population and the seat of the national government. Part of the challenge for the national government is to reinforce and legitimise its influence and control over all 15 islands despite the great distances which separate them. Central to such ambitions is the need to more directly influence the social systems of the outer islands.

The current social systems in the outer islands have evolved from a heritage including traditional, missionary, colonial and modern state influences. Authority in these islands is very much the result of a process of "negotiation" which occurs between various actors including traditional leaders, religious leaders, the Chief Administrative Officer (appointed by the central government), elected local officials, representatives to Parliament, and others. Despite the fact that all share a common law and constitution (on paper at least), there are vast difference in the authority and influence which each of these actors commands among their own island population.

This highlights the extent to which the legitimacy of a particular order cannot be maintained purely through the articulation of a set of laws and policies. The island social systems are engaged in a dynamic process through which reality is constantly being created, recreated, transformed and maintained (Carey). In the midst of this negotiation process, the national government must legitimise its authority. To achieve this the government relies on a variety of vehicles including police power, formal education, economic incentives, visits from representatives of the national government and a wide array of other means.

It is within this context that television has the potential to play an active role in further reinforcing the legitimacy of the modern state. The "symbols" conveyed through the new medium act as a vehicle through which to share new legends - demonstrating how those who deviate from the order are punished - how those who support it rewarded. In this way, television is part of a complex nexus through which the central government attempts to reinforce its legitimacy in authority.

It is all too tempting to over simplify this process. Clearly, not all images act to reinforce the national order. Television programming includes modern day legends which challenge the state order. Moreover, the process of negotiating such authority occurs over a long period of time - sometimes across generations. What is clear, however, is that with its introduction, television increasingly acts as a forum through which much of the process of such negotiation is facilitated.

In introducing television, of course, policy-makers hope this forum will increase awareness of "national issues". In practical terms, this means generating greater awareness of those issues which the national government is trying to promote. One member of Cabinet indicated this was the primary reason why the government did not privatise television - it felt the need to insure an effective vehicle for promoting its agenda. 3

In the Cook Islands, television has served as a powerful means towards increasing awareness of such issues. Reports on the local television news are further reinforced through interpersonal conversations - many of which occur at work. However, the author's 1992 research (Varan "The Costs and Benefits") has demonstrated that in many ways, awareness of local community events has declined since the introduction of television particularly as residents have come to rely on television for their news and as television programming helps set the agenda for the "coconut wireless".

The forum which television creates, therefore, is one often dominated by the interests of the government in the name of national unification. Central to the promotion of national unity is a belief that such unity results from "shared experiences". The Broadcast Act specifies part of the television network's central function as 'contributing to the development of national unity'. 4 The Cook Islands Broadcast Corporation's (CIBC) response has focused on coverage of local dance contests, the investiture of traditional leaders, the Constitution celebrations, sporting competitions and the like. Such symbols, the state hopes, will help create a "shared experience" for the diverse islands - one which is difficult to create through interpersonal links given the vast distances which separate the islands. If, indeed, nations are 'imagined political communities' as Benedict Anderson maintains, such "shared experiences" may help shape the continuing evolution of a national identity. But the process of shaping such identity is one which the government hopes to control and influence.

Consequently, not everyone has equal access to this forum. Economic, technical and political constraints limit the extent to which a wide spectrum of Cook Islands society can directly participate in the creation and distribution of the "shared experiences" of the new medium. The voices of those in the outer islands remain largely silent in this forum - economic considerations have resulted in little coverage of outer island activity. Moreover, although a number of local groups and residents have produced programmes, they have been largely discouraged from such activity by relatively high access fees which Cook Islands Television (CITV) charges to air such material. Thus, although a new forum has emerged in the Cook Islands for the negotiation of cultural identity, it is one with limited access - a forum mostly dominated by programming distributed from a center to periphery island societies.

To a large extent, therefore, television provides a forum dominated by new elites of the modern state - elites who seek to shape national identity by recreating particular facets of the past (typically those that best serve their interests). Forging a national identity, of course, often requires a link between the past and present resulting in the recreation of particular aspects of a culture. But it also requires articulating a sense of vision for the future - a theme which has been central to the Prime Minister's ambitions in introducing television. As one policymaker illustrates: 'people in the outer islands have viewpoints which are not always conducive to development'. 5 As in other societies throughout the world, Cook Islanders struggle between essentialism and epochalism (Geertz). It is within this context that government hopes that television might serve as a bridge to the future by promoting "modern" values - values more consistent with its vision for the future. Thus television not only reinforces the legitimacy of existing elites of the state in the present tense, but also potentially extends this legitimacy into the future.

Foreign Participants

The forum which television has created is not one limited to elite participants within the Cook Islands. The limited economies of scale make it difficult to rely exclusively upon programming produced within the Cook Islands. Consequently, CITV relies extensively on programming leased to it through Television New Zealand (TVNZ) for most of its programming (only about 12% of weekly programming is produced locally). TVNZ, in turn, acquires the rights to lease such programming from a variety of distributors. In 1993, for example, almost 48% of the programmes airing on CITV were produced in the US, 25% were produced in New Zealand, with 15% produced in the UK. Thus the availability of foreign programming extends this forum to include participants from abroad. But just as it is local elites who largely determine the terms for local access to the forum, it is TVNZ who is most influential in determining the terms for foreign access.

While it is the CIBC Board of Directors (comprised of both islanders and expatriates appointed by the government elite) who have the final say in what foreign programming is aired over their broadcast system, the range of alternatives available to them is almost entirely determined by TVNZ. That this is the case is no accident. As I have documented elsewhere, CITV's dependency relationship has resulted from deliberate strategies employed by TVNZ to

monopolise foreign programming access (Varan "Television's Impact on Migration").

Attempts by CITV to find alternative suppliers of programming have almost always been impaired by TVNZ. This is best illustrated by efforts on the part of CITV to secure programming through TV3 (TVNZ's rival) at rates well below those of TVNZ. Although CITV managed to negotiate such rates and actually began airing programming supplied through TV3, this relationship was severed once TVNZ became aware of the relationship which had emerged. Instead a "newer" relationship developed - one which saw TV3 provide its programming to its rival (TVNZ) which then made it available to CITV. CITV had no voice in the new terms. As Tim Arnold, then chair of the CIBC Board of Directors noted: 'We were left with the impression that these were two large players who were deciding how the two of them were going to deal with us'. TVNZ benefited through preserving its monopoly - TV3 through greater opportunity to provide its programming to other TVNZ Pacific clients.

In the wake of this episode, TVNZ introduced a new clause in its contract with CITV requiring that 95% of all CITV foreign programming be purchased through TVNZ. In this way, it has effectively monopolised foreign access to the Cook Islands television market. And although CITV chooses programming made available to it through TVNZ, it is TVNZ who provides them with the range of programs which they can choose from.

I have elsewhere explored the economic consequences associated with this dependency relationship (Varan "The Costs and Benefits") including both direct and indirect costs highlighting the extent to which the introduction of television in the Cook Islands has further widened international inequities. Beyond questions related to such economic considerations and to the terms under which foreign access to the new forum operate, there remains important questions related to the potential cultural influences of such foreign programming. This provides the focus for the remainder of this article.

Cultural Erosion

The debate over television's role as an agent of "cultural imperialism" has characterised much of the research on television's effects in the Third World. Although studies highlight an imbalanced flow through which Western television programs have permeated most of the world (Varis), there is less of a consensus regarding the impact of such content on audiences. At one extreme are scholars who continue to insist on the hegemonic domination of Third World cultures by neo-colonial powers (Schiller, Hamelink). Other scholars, however, question the extent to which audiences act as passive receivers and highlight the extent to which audiences "negotiate" their own meanings from television programs (Hall, Katz and Liebes). Tracey (50) posits that the main influence of such content is not its 'capacity to shape minds and cultures, but in their influence on the development of communication policies by nation states'.

When it comes to such cultural issues, therefore, policy-makers are often influenced by fears of cultural domination. In the Cook Islands, for example, a number of policy-makers express the fear that television may contribute to a larger trend resulting in the erosion of particular facets of local culture. It is in this context that the fears of Cook Islanders seem less about "cultural imperialism" than about "cultural erosion" - not about cultural conquest by foreign nations, but about a gradual displacement of particular facets of local culture.

Those Cook Islanders who expressed concern over such potential cultural erosion did not believe television was part of a larger "conspiracy" to subvert the island nation. Generally, such citizens recognised a "pull" nature to the influence - people in the Cook Islands want and enjoy much of the programming they receive. Their concern, however, is that television - by its very nature - is seductive. As people come to enjoy television, the demand for Western programming increases. As such programming comes to dominate peoples lives, they become increasingly influenced by the values woven in the fabric of the shows. Through this process, Western values replace local ones.

Implicit in this view is the assumption that viewers decode programming in the manner intended by its source. Yet as Hall illustrates, meaning is often structured by a variety of influences - texts can be read in different ways. Thus it is difficult to assess the extent to which exposure to outside influences necessarily results in adoption of foreign values. This is clearly apparent in conflicting expectations by policy-makers in the Cook Islands who, while concerned about foreign cultural domination, also express the hope that exposure to foreign content will act to discourage the adoption

of foreign values.

Being a Cook Islander means, in part, knowing what you are not. Although there are substantial differences between the various population groups spread across a vast ocean territory, such populations are more similar to each other than different. Without a comparative base, however, the basis for such similarities is often lost. Thus, policy-makers hope that exposure to such "foreign" symbols will further reinforce perceptions that see Cook Islanders as being separate from the world out there. A sense of unity, they hope, will emerge through the contrast of comparison.

Here, then, lies a contradiction in expectations. On the one hand, policymakers fear television's foreign cultural influences. On the other, they hope it might provide a comparative basis through which a stronger sense of national identity may emerge. This highlights the extent to which television is seen as neither "good" nor "bad" but rather as *both* good and bad. As I discuss elsewhere, it is in this context that the main challenge in introducing television is maximisation of social benefits while minimising social and economic costs (Varan "Refining Development Communication Theory").

Video

In exploring questions related to the cultural impact of foreign television programming, however, it is essential to recognise that prior to the inauguration of broadcasting services videos were widely diffused - by 1988 over 40% of all households on Rarotonga were equipped with at least one VCR. 6 Indeed, the influence of videos was seen as being so strong that a 1990 national enquiry of educational reform concluded:

> The influence of video was felt to be the single most important influence today upon a Rarotonga child's life in terms of forming attitudes and dictating daily behavioural rhythms. It was widely alleged that it had been, on Rarotonga, more influential than the church, the family and the school put together and was in the process of redefining the habits, customs, attitudes, values and lifestyle of Rarotonga youth. (Ministerial Task Force 43)

Thus with or without broadcast television, foreign televisual programming permeated Cook Islands society. Perhaps the central question, therefore, is whether television contributes to the potential erosion of local culture at a higher level than was already occurring prior to its introduction. This has been the focus of over four years of research by the author. Although findings from this research are reported in greater detail elsewhere and remains ongoing (see "Television's Impact on Migration", "Refining Development Communication Theory", "Introducing Television", "The Costs and Benefits of Television"), the evidence to date suggests that broadcast television differs little from video in terms of its perceived direct content effects. In studies comparing islands that had broadcast television to those without (i.e. video only) and in a pre-post test quasi-experimental study, findings demonstrate that for the most part, there was no statistically significant variance between television's perceived impact and that of video on a range of variables associated with such cultural issues (Varan "Introducing Television"). This is not to suggest that television or video have no direct cultural effects (findings suggest they do), but rather, that on the whole such effects do not seem to be much worse with television than they already were through video. The findings do, however, suggest that there are two major areas of difference between television and video: consumerism and time displacement.

Consumerism

In order to remain financially viable, CITV programming includes advertising largely intended to increase consumption of foreign products. As a result of this advertising, demand for such products increases. Some may question the extent to which television is directly associated with increasing demand for such products - while there are examples of television ad campaigns that had little impact, there are also many illustrations of dramatic increases in sales resulting from such campaigns. Following a series of Coca-Cola commercials, for example, demand for Coke expanded dramatically. But what was most interesting about the boom in sales was that purchasers began demanding Coke in bottles - like the ones they saw on TV. Within a year, the local distributor introduced Coke bottled in "buddy bottles" - just like the ones on TV.

Or consider a locally produced campaign promoting a brand of pig food imported from New Zealand. The commercial

featured a pig walking into a store, buying pig food, and driving a truck home. Clearly, it was one of the most popular ads on television. It also resulted in a dramatic increase in local sales of the pig food - indeed, immediately following the campaign import of the product increased from one to four shipping containers per month. 7

The preceding examples highlight the ways in which such expanded sales indirectly effect Cook Islanders' lifestyles. Because consumption of such products is tied to cash, traditional lifestyles give way to commercial ones. Rather than feed pigs locally grown produce (as has traditionally been the case), residents rely on commercial pig food. Because such pig food (and the other new necessities of life) costs money, increasing importance is placed on the value of earning dollars. In this way, traditional lifestyles change to better accommodate the need for cash. Likewise, such consumption further widens an international trade gap which continues to escalate rapidly. 8 This trend potentially increases the extent to which emerging lifestyles develop a dependency on foreign products. Television is neither the only nor the dominant variable contributing to this trend. But it is a part of a larger process reinforcing such change.

Time Displacement

Another distinction between the impact of television and that of video concerns time displacement effects. Increasingly, families stay home to watch TV rather than engage in other activities such as visiting friends and relatives. This is best illustrated in the following comment by Dorice Reed, a village sub-chief (*mataipo*):

> Families are now spending more time sitting in front of the box instead of communicating with each other at the family home situation. And there is less communication at the community level...Whereas before at the end of the day you might go over to a friends house after work and have a good old chat - or go down the road and see a friend, now there's none of that because you're sitting home watching television.

Figure 1 provides a breakdown of the average percentage of residents on Rarotonga who watch television at the specified hours. These estimates are based on findings from a viewer survey conducted by the author in December, 1990 in collaboration with CITV. Based on these estimates, it is clear that television viewing constitutes a major source of evening activity with almost 50% of the island population viewing after 7 pm (and close to 40% viewing after 6 pm).

[Insert figure here.] *Figure 1: CITV Average Daily Viewing (by hour)*

Clearly much of the displacement effect was already in place prior to television's introduction through the widespread popularity of video. But there are differences between the displacement impact of television and that of video. Video viewing tended to be more collective with people visiting each other while watching tapes. In some ways, video actually increased visiting - often friends and family gathered together to watch a tape that someone in the group owned or had rented. With such visits interpersonal links remained strong. Moreover, because viewers choose when to watch tapes, they could schedule viewing around community activities - participation at local events remained actively supported.

With television, in contrast, programming is similar between households, therefore largely discouraging such collective viewing. And although time shifting is possible, viewers often schedule evening activity around the television schedule resulting in less support for local community-based events. In this way television indirectly contributes to potential cultural erosion - particularly as the forum which television creates displaces other traditional forums which have long played an active role in shaping local cultural identities. Although this is an area demanding further research, it highlights television's potential to indirectly weaken local traditional structures by competing for time with other indigenous forums for communication.

Conclusions

The experience of the Cook Islands is but one of many throughout the Pacific who have introduced television despite earlier fears of cultural domination. The advent of television in these islands occurs in the midst of a complex process through which traditional, religious and political actors compete in shaping and influencing local and national cultural identity. It is in this context that television has become a new forum through which such identity is actively negotiated.

Not all voices in these islands share access to the new forum. Television was introduced primarily as a tool for national unification - a vehicle through which to reinforce the national government's legitimacy and promote modern values at the heart of national development objectives. Economic, technical and political constraints limit access to periphery participants while further empowering the voices of modern state elites. Moreover, the forum extends abroad to faraway shores including distant voices from overseas.

Although there are many contradictions in the expectations resulting from such foreign contact, there remains a fear of cultural erosion as the values woven in Western programming replace particular facets of local culture. Of course, such voices were already widespread prior to the introduction of broadcast television as a result of the rapid diffusion of VCR's in the 1980s. Although there is little difference in the content-related cultural impact of television as compared to video, television has indirectly contributed to such cultural erosion through promotion of consumer lifestyles and in displacing more traditional forums where cultural identity has actively been negotiated.

The experience of the Cook Islands in introducing television provides a fascinating site through which to explore the cultural impact of television. This experience highlights the extent to which debates over the impact of television cannot be limited to technical and economic considerations. Social, political and cultural questions cannot be ignored. Clearly questions related to the cultural impact of television remain complex and are filled with contradictions. What does seem clear, however, is that whatever its impact, it is domestic and regional elites who determine the terms of access to the new forum. Thus, although audiences can negotiate their own meaning from the programming they read, what they read to begin with is often largely determined by such elites. In this way, it seems, television's primary impact in shaping cultural and national identities is more immediately associated with shaping the forums where such identities are negotiated.

Notes

1. The degree of *mana* often depended on the genealogy and how direct the line of succession was with certain gods. Thus sub-chiefs (*mataipo*) often had less direct links and were consequently not as close to the gods as an *ariki* might be.

2. When a significant portion of the population died from various diseases introduced by European contact, for example, missionaries used the traditional belief system to their advantage by claiming that their Christian God was punishing the population for failing to convert.

3. Interview by the author with Tiki Matapo, Minister of Broadcasting.

4. Cook Islands Broadcast Act, Section 7-1c.

5. Interview by the author with Stuart Davis, Director of Cook Islands Telecom.

6. This estimate is based on a diffusion study conducted by the author in 1991 using a random survey of 300 households on Rarotonga (approximately 13% all households).

7. Reported to the author by the account's representative, Poata Enerua.

8. Figures available through the Cook Islands statistics office indicate that the trade deficit has risen from NZ$20 million in 1982 to over NZ$70 million by 1990.

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.

Carey, James W. *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

Gilson, R.P. *The Cook Islands: 1820-1930*. Wellington, NZ: Victoria U P, 1977.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural studies: Two Paradigms". *Media, Culture and Society* 2 (1980): 57-72.

Hamelink, C. *Cultural Autonomy in Global Communications*. New York: Longman, 1983.

Katz, E. & Liebes, T. "Once upon a Time, in Dallas". *Intermedia* 12:3 (1984): 28-32.

Ministerial Taskforce Review of Cook Islands National Education. *Polynesia Way: Observations and Perceptions - Conclusions and Proposals*. Rarotonga, Cook Islands: Government of the Cook Islands, 1990.

Schiller, Herbert. "Electronic Information Flows: New Basis for Global Domination". Paper presented at the Institute of Education, London, July 1984.

Tracey, Michael. "The Poisoned Chalice". 114:4 (1985): 17-56.

Varan, Duane. "Television's Impact on Migration: The Polynesian Experiment". Paper presented at the 44th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, Sydney, Australia, 1994.

_____. "Refining Development Communication Theory: A Polynesian Experience". Paper presented at the 43rd Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, Washington, DC. 1993.

_____. "Introducing Television: Seven Lessons from the Cook Islands". *Pacific Islands Journal of Communication* 16:1 (1993): 29-61.

_____. "The Costs and Benefits of Television: Applying the Emerging Paradigms of Development Communication to the Cook Islands Experience". Dissertation defended at the University of Texas in Austin, 1992.

Varis, Tapio. "The International Flow of Television Programs". *Journal of Communication* 34:1 (1984): 147-51.