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Whose News?, Review of "Shaping the News: Waitangi Day on Television"

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Comments

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WHOSE NEWS?

SHAPING THE NEWS: WAITANGI DAY ON TELEVISION

SUE ABEL • AUCKLAND UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1997 • 196PP

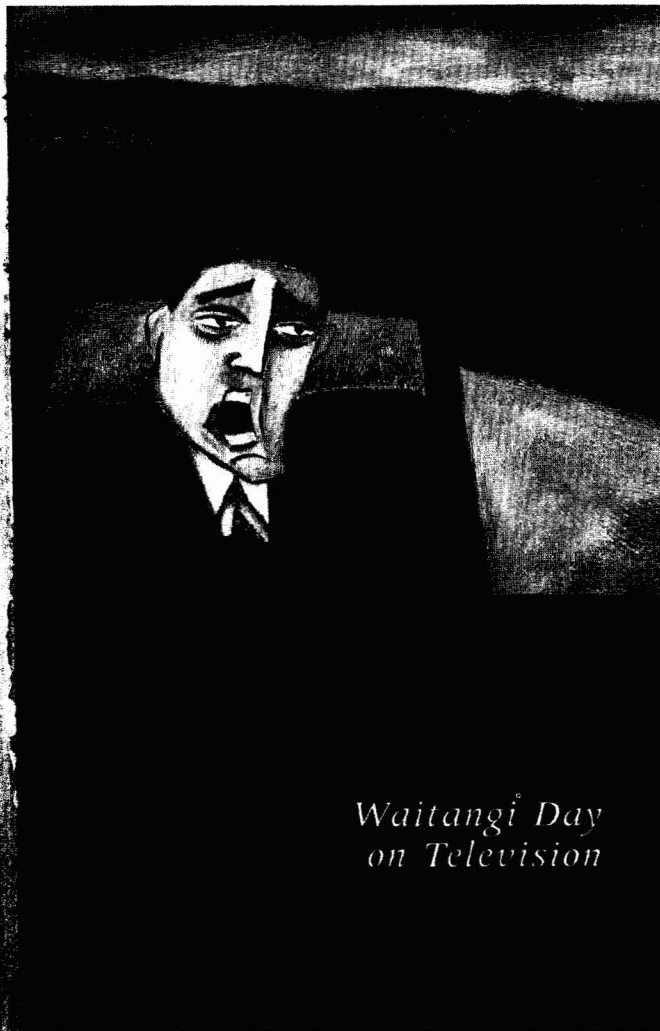
REVIEWED BY VICTORIA CARCHIDI

IN THIS INTERESTING and lively book, Sue Abel sets out to show the strategies by which television news reflects

dominant ideology in Aotearoa-New Zealand. At the book's heart is a case study of broadcast presentations of Waitangi Day events, primarily from 1990, the 150th anniversary of the Treaty's signing. Abel is clear and pointed in her analyses of these broadcasts, and even when readers might disagree, the result is provocative. On these grounds alone the book deserves a wide audience. It forces readers to look seriously at the assumptions of television news. At the same time—though this is not its intent—it demonstrates the banality of the news! To look back at television broadcasts of a complex moment in Aotearoa-New Zealand history is to be appalled. This well-written book provides a real service to Aotearoa-New Zealand television studies of news broadcasting.

Less successful is Abel's effort to bind her insights to the overarching argument that the television news serves Pakeha interests. Abel writes well - her approach to this topic is neither simplistic nor intending to cast blame. She acknowledges that "it is difficult to speak about the ideas and values of the [Pakeha] dominant group without making gross generalisations" (original brackets, p.19), for example. Instead, she looks at the "relatively easy" task of outlining "the ideas and values which serve the interests of the dominant [Pakeha] group." But I wonder whether that task is quite as easy as it looks. Further, I question whether the dominant group and Pakeha values can be so easily elided. In Appendix 2, Abel writes that the term's meaning is complex and contentious, and elsewhere recognizes that it is dangerous to identify a single Pakeha perspective (p.192).

And if Pakeha is complex, who defines Maori, especially if, as Abel allows, one aspect of Maori culture is that there is no single spokesperson or viewpoint?



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Further, if television news does run counter to Maori culture however defined, is one saying anything more than that views irrelevant or counter to corporate capitalism are given short shrift? Are Maori disadvantaged more or differently than women, or gays, or communists, or vegans? How is any form of dissent from what is considered 'the norm' by a consumer artifact accommodated by dominant modes of discourse constrained within that artifact? Recognition of complex viewpoints must go beyond mere courtesy.

When Abel comes to her final chapter, she argues that many in the news industry seem unaware that traditional news values "might reflect or promote a particularly Pakeha perspective" (p.185). They may well be "unaware": that television broadcasting actually reflects a cultural perspective, much less a Pakeha one, has not been argued; it is assumed. Abel does resist easy answers: she eschews a conspiracy theory, and by the end of the book she admits, "I am still not sure whether I feel optimistic or pessimistic about the possibility of change" (p.196). Nonetheless, an undertone of sorrowful criticism stands in for any articulation of the intersection of Pakeha and corporate interests in the 1990 Waitangi Day coverage.

From the first, Abel reports, problems at the Waitangi Day events resulted from "cultural differences." But the assumption that television should dominate the scene, and the desire to work to a tight time frame, might not be "just the ultimate in white man's thinking," as one source calls it. It might rather reflect a media-dominated, quantity-focused world view that goes far beyond "two cultures clashing" in Aotearoa-New Zealand. It embodies a technological perspective that I would not equate with Pakeha culture, or any other single country's dominant community.

Abel compellingly illustrates the role oppositional discourse played in the 1990 broadcasts. The news created a discourse of national unity predicated on a strategy of "us versus them." The focus on the pageantry associated with the Royal visit, for example, Abel convincingly suggests, positions the audience as "us," as Pakeha, and as loyal subjects. The framing of counter-narratives within a discourse of unity left little room for recognition of unhappiness with treaty implementation.

Abel outlines the ways Black Power was cast in several broadcasts as a threat to law and order, and how the police were implicated in that representation, even when they explicitly disavowed that concern. Further, Abel points out that even ostensibly value-neutral reports contribute to establishing a convergence in viewers' minds: protest linked with violence, and set against law and order. Such framing helps contain dissent and shapes how viewers read stories.

These points are trenchant and worth examining, albeit adequately explainable by standard models. They follow the news values of focusing on elite people, negativity, unambiguity and so forth. How such practices mirror uniquely Pakeha values remains unstated.

Another problem arises in Abel's commentary, one faced by many media studies practitioners—that of being snared by a matrix of media. Abel moves deftly and with a light touch but nonetheless is captured by these snarls - as when she contrasts television representations with an implicit 'reality'. In Chapter Five, we read a policeman's account of what he was trying to say, in contrast to the restricted and oppositional coding given his interview by the broadcast transcript. Elsewhere, the frustration of reporters who feel their visions of an event did not survive the editing and framing of their stories certainly supports a claim that television news presents a certain homogeneity.

But its form shapes each such statement as surely as the news is shaped. Abel "invites" her subjects to "confirm" her suppositions; they "agree" with her suggestions: interviews, letters, recollected memories, all have their own conventions of representations, not 'the real thing'. Even Abel acknowledges, by the use of quotation marks, the difficulties inherent in asking if "the coverage succeeded in conveying 'the real issues'" (p.154).

However, the problem of representation cannot be escaped by mere orthography. Abel constructs these broadcasts as fully as she argues they construct Waitangi Day. The television news creates an "us-them" dichotomy; so too does this narrative search for conflict and opposition. The television broadcasts exnominate Pakeha ethnicity (p.51); so too does Abel erase from her discourse the motivated decision-making of critical praxis.

Building on research she undertook for an MA degree, Abel centers her study on the 150th anniversary of the signing of the treaty in 1990, and to give historical depth and range, includes additional studies of the 1994 and 1995 events. Those years provide a particularly rich set of reactions. In 1994 Abel finds a shift away from oppositional 'Maori vs. Pakeha' framing and greater acknowledgment of Maori grievances. In 1995, the coverage reflects some very visible acts of civil disobedience, from the attempt to cut down the tree on Maungakiekie, One Tree Hill to spitting and other acts of contempt or revenge in marae coincident with the establishment of a fiscal envelope for settling Maori land claims. Yet Abel finds the Waitangi Day coverage accepts Maori anger, and implies that the factor causing a loss of equilibrium is New Zealanders' lack of knowledge of history (p.146). Were those years chosen to reflect these changes?

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Further, Abel leaves unexamined the limits of her study.

There is one reference to a random survey of news representation of Maori; which might seem a better test of biculturalism, but it is not elaborated upon (p.119). Later, the discussion of "Once were Radicals," a 60 Minutes story on some 1995 protests, nowhere acknowledges *Once Were Warriors*, and what that film might have done to raise the profile of Maori rights in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Surely the omission of these "salient" representations reflects ideology.

Not to disparage a serious book raising serious questions, this somewhat tongue-in-cheek application of Abel's approach to her own work means not to denigrate the book's achievements, but to indicate that gaps and omissions reflect the boundaries of any project, any effort, any-review! Abel herself acknowledges the constraints facing television news. Therefore, she sets a very high bar to clear to prove that her analysis reveals something uniquely kiwi, and uniquely hostile to biculturalism. That bar is not cleared to my satisfaction.

More compelling are the insights that emerge out of Abel's eponymous investigations into specific issues. For example, Chapter 8 demonstrates the broad point that framing and selection can prescribe the ways viewers receive a story. Abel chillingly depicts the steps that worked to divorce the church from any stance on social justice and political power sharing in the television news presentation of Bishop Vercoe's 1990 speech. This chapter alone makes Abel's work worth following: it is a careful and terrifying instance of the unacknowledged and unaccountable effects news values can have on shaping public perceptions of important democratic concerns.

The shaping of any broadcast is a nest of Chinese boxes, as Abel concedes in the structure of her book. There are, first, the limits of the medium of television itself, and how they shape a programme. Next is the genre of news broadcasting, and how its conventions shape the telling of a story. As Abel points out, the news in Aotearoa-New Zealand also has a profit motive, which raises questions of commercial shaping. Then there is the predominance of Pakeha in the media. Thus, when analysing any particular news programme, one must unpeel those levels. One must step back and assess whether the problem reflects a Pakeha perspective, commercial motives, the genre of the news, or the medium. The movement between Pakeha and large-scale television production values is rapid and unexamined here. Within that are embedded assumptions that are not, for me, commonsense.

Indeed, one could argue that even Pakeha New Zealand's interests are best served by a healthy discussion of biculturalism. Then, all the pressures that hampered the 1990 coverage - the need to cover a royal visit, the Commonwealth Games, the Whitbread race - actually worked against the best interest of an Aotearoa-New Zealand conceived of as one nation. (Abel does not address the role of sports in news coverage here, but this list is striking: does the sporting emphasis reflect an aspect of kiwi culture?) The Galtung and Ruge categories of news values* and other models which easily account for the omissions and deviations Abel documents do not add up to a Pakeha point of view. They add up to a corporate view, harmful to any culture, including Maori culture.

Abel concludes the book by looking to the future of television news in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Some change, such as the inclusion of more Maori reporters who move between Pakeha and Maori culture, and greater journalistic acceptance of biculturalism, is coming about already. A broader change would be for treaty issues to be acknowledged as part of the Aotearoa-New Zealand news world. Not through any 'bicultural audit' but through a revision of the straitjacket of news production, such a fundamental change in approach would improve not only Maori coverage, but all coverage on television news. If it were to come about, Aotearoa-New Zealand news would serve local communities, and provide a revolutionary model for news the world around. But as long as the government continues to follow doctrine that has proved its perniciousness in the US and the UK, the news in Aotearoa-New Zealand will not be bicultural, as Abel intelligently demonstrates. If it is monocultural, however, it ventriloquizes a 'culture' inhabited only by the legal and unliving persons of corporate jargon.

* Abel sets out Galtung and Ruge's categories of news values as a framework against which to test her observations. in Appendix 3. The other appendices define mono- and biculturalism; define "Pakeha"; list all television broadcasts on Waitangi Day for the three years discussed; reproduce Bishop Vercoe's speech of 7 February 1990; and provide a glossary of Maori words.