

Image, Identity and the Media

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The question has been asked: "How do minorities locate themselves within national media discourse?" My answer would be, "with great difficulty". The representation of minority culture and minority issues in the mainstream media is a very low priority, if it's even a priority at all. When it does appear, it is - very occasionally - because of the presence of a sympathetic and single-minded individual within the system, but more often it is either because of an official mandate to do so, or because of an angle that is newsworthy or sensational.

I know that without the statutory requirement upon NZ On Air to fund minority programmes, I would not have made my documentary on Chinese immigrants, and neither would the other directors of that series have been able to make theirs. Yet this was a programme that rated 19 (Shortland St averaged just under 21 that week), was viewed by well over half a million people, and was among the top 10 documentaries for that year.

I know that TVNZ screens Asia Dynamic under sufferance, burying it at 9.30 on a Saturday morning, when everyone, Asians and others alike, are out doing Saturday morning things. This is even worse than its original slot at 8.30 on a Sunday morning. On the other hand, there seems to have been no problem getting programmes accepted that reinforce the majority culture's simplistic, populist, or negative perceptions of a particular ethnic group - the peculiar behaviour of new immigrants, for instance, or the burgeoning threat of Triad recruitment. (I should say here that when I refer to "minorities", my comments relate only to the Chinese or Asian experience - I cannot speak for other groups. But I suspect their experiences are similar, and perhaps even worse.)

I understand a network's preference for the more emotive kind of material, and I'm not advocating an innocuous and falsely positive depiction either, where "culture" is reduced to food and festivals and funny customs. But there is a reluctance, even a resistance, to broaden this seriously limited spectrum - in the quantum of programmes made, in the stereotypical perceptions presented, and in the times they can be viewed.

Yet we ought not to be surprised by this. Firstly, Western media treatment of Asian peoples has been predominantly derogatory at worst,

non-existent at best. I don't propose to give you the history of media treatment in this country since the beginning of Chinese settlement here, but perhaps I can give you some idea of it in two headlines: the first from a self-proclaimed "unprejudiced monthly magazine" called "Fair Play" - "THE CHINKEY INVASION"; the second from a local suburban newspaper, the Eastern Courier - the very catchy "THE INV-ASIAN". The first headline was in 1894, the second in 1993.

Nor are we immune from stereotypes in the supposedly liberal world of film. Of the 8 or so characters in six NZ films made in the 80s and 90s, one was a drug courier, one was an opium den hostess, one was a sexy siren who was the only woman in the film who got to take her clothes off, one was a restaurant owner, two were searching for a marriage of convenience, one was a young man being preyed on by the Triads.

The second reason we shouldn't be surprised by this treatment is that, as a minority, we have not stood up and made our objections known. As a minority, we have chosen to stay invisible, because (a) it's safer to do that given the history of prejudice, and (b) Asians aren't very good at shouting out loud and making the kinds of public demands that would make us visible.

There are three things happening in this country at the moment that suggest that this state of, in effect, powerlessness, has a chance of changing.

The first is the renaissance among Maori, which has increased Pakeha sensitivity to cultural matters, and by extension cultural diversity, so that there is a slowly widening window of tolerance and even desire for cultural expressions other than the majority's. This has had the effect of encouraging minority cultures to examine their own identities.

Second, the numbers of Asians migrating here in the last decade have exposed local-born Asians to their ancestral cultures perhaps for the first time. This, too, has led them to look objectively at themselves and so raise questions about their identities.

Third, there is now a young generation of local-born Asians who are moving beyond the traditionally expected professional occupations and exploring, among other things, the arts and media. Some will have no interest in how their identity relates to their work, but others will. There is a curiosity there that is almost inevitable.

These three trends, I believe, will eventually put pressure on the media to respond, to make room for another set of perspectives, not just as cultural curiosities, but as another set of voices to be included in the conversation about national identity. To exclude them would be to ignore the reality of contemporary and future New Zealand.

Two key things, though - they cannot be token inclusions, a sort of grace-and-favour deal, and Asians must be encouraged into driving them - making, producing, writing, directing, not just consulting and advising. Because, frankly, sometimes I think consulting and advising is just so much bullshit. In the end, the maker from the majority culture is going to make the programme they have in their head - and so they should - but it will still be from the perspective of an outsider; and secondly, you cannot expect any one Asian consultant to speak for everyone in their community. The range of opinions about anything is the same as with any community. There is no neat and tidy "Asian view".

I am not saying that only Asians can make programmes about Asian subjects, but I am saying that they should be encouraged to start. Because someone who knows the culture intimately has a greater chance of coming up with ideas and creative choices beyond the square, beyond the stereotype, to give a fresh - and more authentic - angle.

So as far as the current arguments for local content are concerned, yes, I see this as the only way minorities are likely to keep their toe-hold in an increasingly commercial media. But it's a precarious toe-hold, and unless we build our talent and our profile, we may just end up falling off the edge.

ENDS