

Mass media in New Zealand

CAII • THE CHURCHES' AGENCY ON INTERNATIONAL ISSUES: RESOURCING CHURCHES AND CONGREGATIONS ON GLOBAL CONCERNS



Introduction

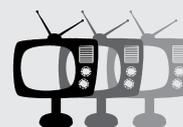
Deciding where to start a discussion on mass media is like asking a fish to talk about the sea.

Media pervade and shape our lives in ways we aren't even aware of, even in a small country like Aotearoa New Zealand. A population of less than 4.5 million is served by 8 free to air TV channels, 80 pay to view, 212 radio stations, 26 daily newspapers, 3,700 magazine titles, and 80% of us are home computer users online. That list doesn't include the hundreds of cinemas, big screens in clubs and bars, and recorded music pumped out 24/7 through big speakers and tiny ipods.

Media connect with us as mass audience segments rather than individuals. Treating

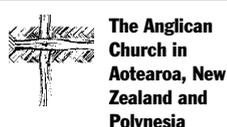
us collectively, they shape how we see and what we know about the world around us; the intellectual and even more importantly the emotional way we engage with it. They provide images and words that define the way we talk to each other, heroes and villains that we learn to love, and love to hate, myths that bend what we believe is good and bad or even worse unfashionable, beautiful, desirable and ugly or even worse unsexy.

The hardest challenge in dealing with the mass media industry is to stop being swamped by it, find some critical distance to let us start asking questions and start claiming some control over it. This discussion paper offers some tools for that task.



WHY IS THE MASS MEDIA A HOT TOPIC?

Media is ever present in today's society, driving so much of what we think and feel about the world. But as media outlets continue to expand, allowing anyone to self publish on the internet, and traditional media forms increasingly become owned by fewer and fewer global conglomerates, how do we know what we read, see and hear is credible?



Who controls the media?



This is the usual first question but it isn't necessarily the most important. Well over 90% of New Zealand media are foreign owned, and following legislation passed in 1994, there is nothing to prevent 100% offshore ownership. Chances of changing that in a country where everything is for sale to the highest bidder are remote right now.

“Increasingly, and ever more narrowly, the profit motive drives the media industry.”

Hot Topics

Writer: John Bluck in consultation with the CAII committee. John Bluck is a journalist and writer, author of 12 publications on media, culture and theology. He has served as the editor of the NZ Methodist newspaper, Communication Director of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, the Dean of Christchurch Cathedral, the Anglican Bishop of Waiapu and taught at Knox Theological Hall in Dunedin.

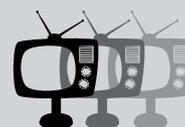
We're simply reflecting an international trend in all of this. More control in fewer hands.

The issue at stake is not simply who owns the outlet but whether there is room for alternative voices. Competition is always constrained (if it's allowed at all) by concentrating ownership and monopoly is the name of the media game in New Zealand. A duopoly of overseas corporates control print and radio, a monopoly operates with pay tv and each daily newspaper enjoys a virtual monopoly in its region.

What does that ownership pattern do to the quality of the media product? The last quarter century has seen huge technological advances that make the products easier to read, see and hear, clearer, more colourful and visually appealing, more accessible and available virtually on demand. But there has been a decline in the same period in standards of professional journalism especially of the investigative and well researched kind. Entertainment values and emotive appeal keep winning over respect for the intellect and intelligence of readers, listeners and viewers. The illusion of participation through email and text responses, poll driven programming and reader surveys does little to slow this shift. Audience feedback is framed to reinforce the status quo rather than invite substantial changes.

Increasingly, and ever more narrowly, the

profit motive drives the media industry. But it was ever so, and the contradictions of public service and lucrative business models don't change. They only become clearer, as we're seeing now in the demise of our state broadcasting system and the abandonment of its public charter.



“Four companies, all overseas owned, dominate the New Zealand news media. There is a near duopoly in two of the three main media – print and radio – a monopoly in pay television, and only three significant competitors in free-to-air television including the state-owned channels. Each daily newspaper has a near monopoly in its main circulation areas.” Bill Rosenberg, *News media ownership in New Zealand September 2008*. His full paper describes the ownership in each of these media, with a brief discussion of the internet, then backgrounds each of the four main owners, and finally discusses whether ownership of our news media matters. See <http://canterbury.cyberplace.org.nz/community/CAFCA/publications/Miscellaneous/mediaown.pdf>

Living creatively with what we've got

Constrained though the media industry is by these global forces of corporate ownership and profitability, there is still plenty of room for creativity within it, and even more importantly alongside it. But before we start weighing the strategies available to us, take a moment to reflect on how the media understands its role of bringing us all the news they see fit to print; all the information they consider we need to know.

Imagine this exercise, even if you never get round to trying it in practice. Ring up a friend in ten cities and towns around the country and ask them to list the most important things that are happening locally. Things that affect the quality of life in that place, achievements worth remembering, tragedy worth mourning. Then compare your collection of replies with what actually appears on the evening news on TV and next morning's headlines and radio debates. Chances are, many locally significant things that happened outside Auckland won't appear at all (the further south you go the less the chance of being noticed) and where local and regional events do get covered, the tragedies will outnumber achievements ten to one.

All of this is shaped by some technical issues of where the cameras and microphones are most readily available, the reporters are most plentiful, and potentially newsworthy events occur in relation to prime time slots. More importantly the decisions are made by reference to a blindingly simple check list that decides whether or not an event is news or not:

Proximity – how close is it to the target audience. South Auckland – yes. North Korea – probably not.

Timeliness – how long ago did it happen? Yesterday is never as important as an hour ago and breaking news is better still.

(Proximity plus Timeliness equals Immediacy which makes the news feel like its happening here and now. "Now –this" says Neil Postman, is the supreme formula for news without content, consequence or value.)

Conflict – there's nothing like blood to make an event into news. Violence is the aphrodisiac of the media industry and the promise of scenes that may disturb viewers and listeners doesn't turn us away but sends the ratings up.

Oddity – a taste for the bizarre and the



extraordinary is an essential ingredient of every news package. Funny peculiar is as popular as Funny ha ha.

These are the values that govern the choice of who, how, where, when and why.

For anyone interested in contributing to the well being of the world and promoting peace and justice, this standard media check list doesn't help much. It's liable to leave us ignorant, confused and misled about what's going on around us, drowned in a sea of bad news and despair. For people committed to the Christian gospel of Good News, this media distortion is especially serious. So we quickly need to find an another framework for discerning what's newsworthy and what's not. Here is a useful alternative:

Content – is it worth our attention? Paul's list in the letter to the Philippians gives us a startling contrast to the standard media measurements: "Whatever is honorable, just, pure, lovely, gracious, if there is any excellence, anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

Intention – who benefits from the story? Who is this news serving most? Who will profit and who and how many will suffer from making this news known?

Style – is it being told in a way that respects the culture and well being of those most affected. Does the form and process of news gathering and telling include or exclude, build community or alienate us further from each other?

Dialogue – is there room for reply and are responses taken seriously?

News measured by that scale would produce

very different headlines in tomorrow's newspaper. Don't hold your breath waiting to see it, but where you find hints and glimpses of journalism that is honourable, respectful, generous, self critical and responsive to its audience, support them and applaud them.

And there are places where you can find such glimpses. In terms of being self critical there are Radio New Zealand's Media Watch programme and TV 7's Media Seven hosted by Russell Brown who also produces a Public Address blogsite. A handful of magazines are owned by their readers (Consumer and AA Directions for example) and there are radio talk back hosts like Ewing Stevens who model a genuinely respectful dialogue with his audience, as do church based publications and websites like the Catholic Tui Motu and the Anglican Taonga.

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Strategies for Christian engagement with mass media



Do nothing

American critic Neil Postman portrays mass media as a contaminated industry bent on “amusing ourselves to death”. There are some media products so trivial and distorted that they are best treated like pornography and avoided. But a strategy that is more about insulating ourselves rather than trying to change the status quo is defeatist and finally selfish.



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Say no and create a better way

Evangelical groups have been most effective with this approach, creating channels like Radio Rhema, Grapevine and Challenge Weekly. In the Maori world, iwi based and owned radio stations and most recently Maori TV have made huge gains for their people in creating responsive, respectful and relevant media. Mainstream churches in New Zealand have never seriously engaged with this strategy, preferring instead to rely on secular mass media to tell their story (which hardly ever happens) and using their own channels for housekeeping information.

Move from mass to group media

This usually involves finding a new (or reviving an old) and less technology-dependent medium, such as live theatre, mime, puppetry, dance, clowning, role plays, house group discussion, pilgrimage and travelling roadshows. The form needs to be small scale, slow, mobile and localized enough to be personal, interactive and community based. It’s been used to great effect, especially in developing countries for raising political awareness, training

programmes to combat poverty and disease and educating communities and changing attitudes.

Add a little Christian yeast to the secular lump

This strategy persists with Bible verses in daily newspapers, a hymn or three on National Radio and even TV, if you’re awake early enough. The approach did better two decades ago when media establishments viewed the church more benevolently and devoted reasonable air time and column inch to the Christian cause. But that benevolence has all but disappeared, and the exceptions to that rule, created by the individual good will of editors and station managers, occur as often in the private media as they do in the publicly owned. And the problem always with this strategy is that it sets up a secular-sacred dualism, as if to say that God is only interested in the conspicuously religious segments of the schedule or the publication. What aimed to be the leaven in the lump often ends up as just another kind of lump.

Subversion from within

This strategy is driven by a theology that

affirms the world rather than recoiling from it, and a vision of the whole creation struggling toward fulfillment. Who knows, mass media might even be able to serve that vision through the best of what it does. The strategy tries to address both the content and even more importantly the forms of mass media, and take it seriously on its own terms before trying to change it. To quote Neil Postman again, speaking about television, "TV not only directs our knowledge of the world but also provides our ways of knowing the world.. how TV stages the world becomes the model for how the world is properly to be staged."

In other words media forms shape our ways of talking, seeing, even praying without our realizing. I've been fascinated for example, at how intercessory prayers in public worship start to resemble the shape of news broadcasts – lots of short, and disconnected pieces, long enough to impress but not often to understand. And youth services feel obliged to imitate the entertainment forms that mass media have decided are the proper form of discourse for our time. Even the notion of separate services only for "youth" is a concession to the way media have separated us all into market segments, each with its exclusive style of organizing experiences that were once shared and understood across the generations.

The subversion from within approach requires us to enter the media worlds as consumers and critics, the two roles always in close tandem, and expecting to hear, see and read, mixed in with all the junk and rubbish, a new word or two from the Lord, a passing glimpse of the incoming Kingdom of God no less.

From this internal vantage point, people of faith, seeking justice, can become catalysts for change. Because we are consumers of media we can hold our media to account as paying customers. This is the era of consumer power as much as it is corporate control. Welcome to the world of boycotters, lobbyists and networkers through email and Twitter links, Facebook and text messages, letter writing and petitions, street theatre and posters, under, over and above ground.

Even the smallest lobby group can send a shiver down the corporate spine. Media organizations might exude confidence from their glossy logos that roll down from blue heavens like some divine endowment. In reality they are amalgams of very diverse



people and companies, often hastily mixed and matched, desperate to make a profit on a massive investment, reliant on technology that goes out of date as soon as its bought, and watching audience ratings graphs with obsessive anxiety. The audiences they've segmented keep splintering beyond control.

What's more, in order to be popular, "mass" media have to be ever more conservative; following fashions rather than creating them, sticking to the familiarity of what we already know rather than the excitement of what we don't. It may be dressed up with a new paint job but behind all that its predictable stuff. Behind every mass media surprise is a great big yawn. The image is bold and bright. The truth is same old, same old.

The scope for organizing alternative media by church and community groups in New Zealand is enormous. While we have several well endowed charitable trusts working in social service areas, we have yet to see quality journalism as a not for profit asset, as they do in the U.K. through bodies like the Scott Trust that funds the Guardian and Observer newspapers and the Christian Century Foundation in the U.S. that funds the magazine of the same name. Imagine what a coalition of churches could do together with a well supported publication or radio network committed to good journalism in this country?

The challenge then for Christians and other advocates of justice and peace may

not be so impossible after all. The mass media that pervade our lives may be more vulnerable, pliable and open to change than we imagine. And the room for creating alternative structures and empowering alternative voices has never been bigger. New technologies of video, cell phone and Internet, with the capacity to store, edit and transmit information and images in vast quantities are more publicly available and affordable now than ever before.

The media industry is a tiger, no doubt. But we can if we're smart and organized enough catch this tiger by the tail.

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Understanding media priorities

Adapted from John Bluck, *Hidden Country – having faith in Aotearoa New Zealand 2010*. Available from Epworth Books, Wellington

Rarely does the media acknowledge how little interest it has in the world of faith and spirituality. But this experience made it very clear, during my time as Dean of Christchurch Cathedral.

Perhaps the most revealing encounter with a religiously indifferent media came in my dispute with the popular and highly regarded *Heartland* TV series, fronted by Gary McCormick and directed by Bruce Morrison.

They came to Christchurch to do a programme on the culture of the wealthy suburb of Fendalton. Christchurch Cathedral, though miles away and drawing a community from all over the city, had no special connection with the suburb which had its own thriving Anglican church. But the researchers for the programme knew better and wanted to film the cathedral as part of the Fendalton culture. I insisted that any coverage showed the breadth of our work and the diverse constituency we drew, specifically stating: “You will need to assure me before you film here that the cathedral and its choir is not used as a defining icon of the (Fendalton) culture. The cathedral is home to all sorts of people from street buskers to former Sunnyside patients, from



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every rich and poor corner of Christchurch. Our diversity is reflected in our liturgies from jazz to choral classics.” The terms were agreed to but twelve months later the programme went to air, confirming every stereotype about Fendalton and showing the cathedral as a centerpiece of its culture of privilege. I wrote to the director expressing my outrage at his breaches of promise. He replied with surprising honesty: “I filmed your interview in good faith and was interested in what you had to say... In the event however, it was a difficult concept to get across... and it was impossible to justify the time required to present the Cathedral’s changing image. To explain your aims in that regard... would have caused an unsightly bulge in the film. I realize that the whole question is not at all marginal to you, but my priorities are necessarily those of prime time television”.

Fifteen years on the world of faith is simply ignored as obsolete and quaint. The religious community, across all faiths and

spiritualities, is less and less represented and visible in the public face of Aotearoa New Zealand. The sad truth of this claim was reinforced for me most recently when I organized the media coverage of John Sentamu’s visit to New Zealand. As Archbishop of York he is among the Anglican Church’s best known figures, ranking only second to the Archbishop of Canterbury. We contacted all the major media outlets well before his arrival, offering background material and interview times. Only Maori TV and the Kim Hill Show responded to our invitation. The Zealand Herald didn’t bother to return our calls until the story started to be heard through the pages of the Taranaki Daily News. The producers of Campbell Live, to quote only one indifferent contact, thought there wasn’t anything worth bothering with. A simple Google search would have shown any of these outlets just how newsworthy Sentamu really was - a Ugandan High Court judge turned priest, tortured and exiled by Idi Amin, campaigner against Mugabe’s tyranny.



“We contacted all the major media outlets well before his [Archbishop Sentamus’] arrival, offering background material and interview times. Only Maori TV and the Kim Hill Show responded to our invitation.”

What is social media?

The New Zealand Government Web Standards site defines social media as: “Tools for sharing and discussing information among people. These include wikis, blogs, micro-blogging, video sharing, photo sharing, podcasts, social networking tools, and other “user-generated content”.” Wikipedia adds “They are relatively inexpensive and accessible to enable anyone (even private individuals) to publish or access information.”

The internet allows anyone to publish material including news, analysis and perspectives. The positives of this are access to a broader range of views than were often available in traditional media, subverting media censorship and up to the minute exchanges of information. In the case of the Haiti earthquake, in January 2010, while newspaper websites led with breaking news of the event, individuals were already using mobile phones to document damage and posting the images on a range of social networking sites. The concerns around the rise of social media as a source of news and information is the lack of checking systems that seek to maintain some integrity around “news”. The credibility of any site has to be carefully judged.

The variety of social media tools continues to evolve. Churches and Christian groups are finding them a necessary communication tool, especially for younger members.

Some common terms around social media are:

Blogs/blogging: A contraction of the word ‘web log’, a blog is a website or part of a website that lists regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. It is usually self-published by an individual and has the most recent item at the top of the page. Other people are able to leave comments. Blogs can operate as opinion columns, online journals/diaries or a collection of information on a particular issue. Blogging is the process of writing/

maintaining a blog. **Microblogging** is a new form of blogging. It requires much smaller entries (in terms of word length and file size). An example of a regular blog is from the Methodist Church Mission Resourcing staff: <http://missionresourcingcentre.blogspot.com/>

Forums: A website where people can post messages as part of an on-going discussion or conversation (called a **thread**). They differ from chat rooms as they are not real time. The website must be reloaded to access new messages. A chat room is a website or part of a site that is interactive allowing new messages to be instantly viewed.

Post: item or message on a blog or forum.

Feeds: allow you to see when new content has been added to websites. You must subscribe to a feed which may be summaries of new content with a website link. A **RSS** is a common type of feed.

Social networking: Social networks are sites or internet services that allow people to link up with each other through an online relationship exchanging information. They usually involve a person supplying a profile and a means to follow new posts, etc from other members. There is usually a web based way to communicate though email, etc. Common social networking sites/services are Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Flickr and blogspot.com.

Profile: The information that you provide about yourself when signing up for a social networking site. As well as a picture and basic information, this may include your personal and business interests and a “blurb” about yourself.

Wiki: Wikis are a type of website that allow for easy creation and editing of pages and information. Users are able to generate the content. Some Wiki services have rules on content and exercise editorial control (eg: the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia), others accept any content. An example is www.justice.net.nz/justwiki/

New Zealand and New Media

The internet has radically changed media and communication. The World Internet Project New Zealand (a biennial survey of internet use) says the internet is now “integral” to most New Zealanders. Two thirds of users say it is important to their everyday lives and think it would be a problem if they lost access. In 2009, two thirds of users rated the internet as an important source of information, ranking it higher than television, newspapers or other people.

- 83% of New Zealanders now use the internet (up from 79% in 2007)
- 63% use the internet at least weekly as a source of local, national and international news
- 19% use the internet at least weekly to read blogs
- 52% of users post messages
- 46% of users post images/video
- 10% of users post audio material

World Internet Project: The Internet in New Zealand 2009



Resources:

<http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/research-institutes/icdc/projects/world-internet-project>: to access reports on New Zealand internet use.

www.waccglobal.org World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) promotes communication for social change and believes communication is a basic human right. The site includes links to No Nonsense guides to media issues.

<http://www.oikoumene.org/programmes/communication.html> World Council of Churches communications programme, includes media tools.



Questions for reflection

What media do you watch/listen/access?

Who owns the media? Whose stories are we hearing? What stories are missing? Does foreign ownership make a difference?

What are the implications of most print media being owned by 2 or 3 corporations, especially for local news?

What is the role of a state broadcaster in today's society? How are TVNZ and Radio New Zealand fulfilling these roles? What happens if there is no state broadcaster?

How do the media shape our perceptions of world events? culture?

What do you think the roles of media are? How much should they entertain and how much should they inform us? How are changes in media affecting our thinking and culture? What is the role of alternative media?

Many people think there is a growing sense of 'dumbing down' in the media. Do you feel this is true? How does this affect critical thinking and images we have of ourselves?

What is the role of church media in today's society? Can the church use the media more effectively to tell its story?

Take action

Learn to 'read the news' so you don't just absorb what you are given but question why it is presented that way.

- **why is that headline chosen?**
- **what images are selected and why?**
- **whose voice isn't being heard?**
- **how does the story compare with other versions of the story in alternative media?**

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