

DR JANET BEDGGOOD

Senior lecturer in communication studies at Auckland University of Technology

Important media issues raised but a patchy probe

Whose News?, documentary by Aotearoa Independent Media Centre, screened on Triangle Television, 2004. 27 minutes.

THIS SHORT documentary raises some serious issues about the quality of news in New Zealand media. Leading with the statement that NZ has the 'most deregulated, commercialised media market in the world', it examines private ownership and the drive for profits with the implication they both have a profound effect on news content.

Bill Rosenburg, of the Campaign Against Foreign Control of Aotearoa (CAFCA), sets out patterns of ownership in the press, radio and television (see also Rosenburg, 2002). His argument is that not only do foreign owners dominate the media market, but they influence media content. His



mapping of the structure of ownership in the overseas companies that control NZ media, is incontrovertible. The commentary points to NZ having no restrictions on foreign ownership nor cross media ownership to prevent monopolies. But although the question of influence by these foreign owners is raised, the film gives only one example. In 2001, as part of a campaign in the *New Zealand Herald* promoting NAFTA, the *Herald* owner Tony O'Reilly brought Brian Mulroney, a former Canadian Prime Minister, to NZ to advocate for international trade agreements. At the same time, the anti-free trade lobby brought

Naomi Klein to speak. Thousands attended her public meetings. The *Herald* covered Mulroney extensively, while Klein was soft news on the features page.

Rosenberg suggests that Rupert Murdoch papers supported the war in Iraq but gives no evidence. *The Guardian* ran a story claiming that the Murdoch press editors world-wide followed their boss's pro-war line (Greenslade, 2003). Wellington's *Dominion Post* was included. The *Dominion Post* carried editorials and stories by Robert Fisk opposing the war and the NZ Government had popular support for refusing to join President Bush's rush to war, so this claim that their editorial line supported the US invasion of Iraq would be worth investigating.

To follow the logic of Rosenberg's argument that foreign owners subvert content, the documentary makers should look at the only remaining locally owned metropolitan daily in NZ, the *Otago Daily Times*, and compare its content with the other metropolitan dailies to see if the stories are substantially different in emphasis and quality. As the press has always been a commercial enterprise, it is likely that NZ capitalist owners operate their papers as businesses like their overseas counterparts.

One section of the documentary

looks at the dismissal of *Herald* cartoonist, Malcolm Evans, in terms of the censorship of political views. Evan's commentary in this edition of *PJR* (pp 71-80) puts his perspective of events and the documentary takes his position. His cartoons on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict drew complaints; Evans says they were from Zionists. He was asked by the editor not to submit work on the subject. Evans says he was employed on the basis of editorial independence and refused this directive.

Evans seems naive in expecting cartoonists to have an absolute right to freedom of expression or otherwise the news is 'manipulated' – as if news items were not selected and framed in particular ways every day. I think the question of censorship is more complex than Evans allows.

The cartoon at the centre of the controversy substituted a Star of David for the second 'a' in the word 'apartheid' on a wall in a Palestinian area. Evans quotes at length from Avraham Burg, an Israeli who objects his Government's policy on Palestine, to support his own position. But the Star of David associates all Jewish Israelis with their Government's treatment of Palestinians, including the Jews who object.

In a *Mediawatch* interview (2003) Russell Brown reminded Evans that

the *Herald* defended its publication of a story on a thesis that denied the holocaust but Evans had never made any 'distinction' between that and his own cartoons. Rather, he makes the connection with cartoonist Tony Auth whose cartoon in the *Philadelphia Enquirer* showed Arabs herded into jail-like sections of the Star of David. Lobby groups protested strongly but Auth's editor defended him publicly.

For the claim that commercial pressures undermine the quality of news, the documentary presents convincing evidence from Joe Atkinson, of Auckland University, on the deterioration of state television news since the push for deregulation in the 1980s when TVNZ was made a state-owned enterprise. The commentary says it is 'too soon' to test whether the new TVNZ charter with its public service goals, has made any impact on news and news programmes. This reluctance to inquire leaves another important comparison unexplored.

When Bill Ralston became TVNZ's first head of news and current affairs under the charter, he came with a reputation as a good investigative journalist. But Ralston declared he wanted no more 'boring' stories. *Mediawatch* (2004) has tracked the shedding of experienced journalists and the demise of the weekly documentary programme *Assignment*, leaving *Sunday* to cover current af-

fairs with stories that lack depth and context. Colin Peacock's comments imply it takes a tabloid approach:

Most often...*Sunday's* stories simply aren't newsworthy enough. Take last weekend - the Maori Party was registered, ACT got a new leader - but *Sunday* chose to trail this [trailer for a story on infidelity]: 'Are you being cheated on? Are you cheating? - It's our nature, women get away with affairs far more than guys do. Convinced it will never happen to you?' (*Mediawatch*, 2004).

However, *Whose News?* concludes by suggesting public broadcasting as a solution, not part of the problem of the inferior news standards.

By pointing to problems the documentary makes a good start. We need a follow-up to investigate more thoroughly the issues it raises.

References

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