

Where to for Māori News Programmes?

You're reading a news story about an issue that's important to you, let's pretend it's the Blues vs Hurricanes last weekend. You get to the end of the article and you want more - a different perspective, different photos, what about that foul the ref missed, what happened to Dan Carter, etc etc. Basically you need more, so you go searching for 'media plurality' on the subject.

'Media plurality' means having multiple news outlets reporting on the same subject. Lucky for you there's no shortage of media plurality for the Blues' first game after lockdown. But when it comes to news about the Māori world, possibly more important than rugby, the government are planning to reduce media plurality.

The government funds Māori Television to make several news and current affairs programmes while also paying TVNZ \$2.3 million each year to make the long-running news programme, Te Karere. Meanwhile TVOne's current affairs show, Marae gets \$1.5 million a year to be made by an independent production company. But a new proposal from Māori Development Minister, Nanaia Mahuta proposes merging all Māori news programmes into one organisation - Māori TV. That would mean less TV news, less current affairs, less angles on Māori news. It might be the end for Te Karere and Marae.

Naturally this has caused a certain amount of unrest, particularly from TV Producers who stand to lose funding for their programmes. But there's plenty of people who aren't thinking about their back pockets when they raise the alarm, and with good reason.

Māori news is hugely important in New Zealand. There's a lot going on in Te Ao Māori every day and like anywhere it needs to be reported on. For the Minister to propose limiting media plurality in her own sector, for her own people seems strange. Particularly because fewer people watch the Māori TV news bulletin than Te Karere. Surely the Minister doesn't want fewer people watching Māori news? Even for the sake \$3.8 million.

Placing all that funding in the hands of Māori TV is asking for trouble if there's a perception that future funding of the channel requires government favour. There is a clear danger in bringing all editorial decisions that little bit closer to one set of media executives, who by necessity have quite close connections to government and politicians.

There must be more to lumping it all with Māori TV.

Perhaps the Minister is expecting TVNZ to pick up the slack. TVNZ has treaty obligations and are obliged to screen content that "reflects Māori perspectives" whether it makes money or not. It's high on time this corporate ne'er-do-well put more of its own money into less ratings-driven ventures. Funding Te Karere and Marae is a great way to reflect Māori perspectives, but convincing TVNZ of that is probably pretty difficult. It's probably more effective to criticise the Minister for withdrawing funding.

Perhaps the Minister knows what's coming to TVNZ in the next few years. As acknowledged in the discussion paper, the government has a parallel review happening, considering how to amalgamate TVNZ and RNZ. Could this new organisation be less venal and more public-minded, enough to fund its own Māori news service? In the last few years, Radio NZ has gone through a fairly rigorous self-evaluation over its commitment to Māori news and perspectives, and now apparently it has one of the largest Māori newsrooms in the country.

Like New Zealand's public media, privately owned media, social media and any other type of media, Māori media faces big challenges reaching its audience and staying relevant. It's great that the government is trying to solve problems and asking for public input into how to do that. The risk is that they'll make matters worse by reducing media plurality, so there's less Māori news videos distracting us from the really important rugby news.

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