

Journalism and indigenous public spheres

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JOURNALISM has played – and continues to play – a crucial role in ‘imagining’ indigenous people and their affairs for most non-indigenous people. Although the trend in the past 20 years has been away from the overt racism of the colonial press, institutionalised racism is manifested in the systematic omission of indigenous voices in the news media. Indigenous sources make up a fraction – between one fifth to one third – of all sources used by journalists in stories about indigenous affairs. This alarming statistic has remained unchanged in Australian journalism for the past 20 years and is a prominent feature of news coverage of Native people in the United States and Canada (Weston, 1996; Meadows, 2001).

Adam (1993) reminds us that journalism is ‘a form of expression that is an invention. It is a creation – a product of the Imagination – in both an individual and a cultural sense.’ In making his case, Adam suggests that the world – through acts of nature – is ‘born in our imaginations’. Here, he is drawing on the work of Anderson (1984) who highlights the role played by the media – journalism, in particular – in the process of ‘imagining’ the modern nation state and our place within it. Journalism is a key cultural resource in the strategic management of cultural goods, like the media – hence, a central process in what we call the public sphere. In the eyes of many theorists – including Jurgen Habermas (1989), generally acknowledged as the instigator of the idea of the public sphere – the media and the public sphere are one and the same. Much earlier, Antonio Gramsci (1988), himself a journalist, recognised the media as the ‘most dynamic part’ of the ideological structure of society. Since then, global media systems have extended their power and reach. The point I want to make here is that the cultural practice of journalism, as

‘the primary method of framing experience and forming public consciousness of the here and now’ (Adam, 1993), has played a central role in the representation of indigenous people and their affairs – through the processes and formation of the public sphere.

Notions of the public sphere role of the media have been sharply criticised, particularly in terms of media’s claimed ‘Fourth Estate’ status. Along with the emergence of the so-called information society, the practice of journalism was caught up in the rise of middle-class professionalism – with journalists, alongside doctors, lawyers, and social workers, forming national groupings (Carey, 1997). The claim of independence by journalists was a natural outcome of this process. It relies on the idea of media institutions being seen as ‘the Fourth Estate’ – independent of the other three ‘estates’ of the judiciary, executive government, and parliament. But what of the public in all this? And what of disadvantaged sections of the public? In pursuing Fourth Estate status, the media have claimed for themselves the position of adversary – a watchdog – relying on notions such as objectivity and professionalism to support this stance. In the process, the public – and indigenous people in particular – has been excluded and this is reflected in continuing popular disdain of the media and journalism. No other marginal group in Australia has such a public relationship with the state and it may be that it is this alone that separates indigenous people from the rest of the population.

Indigenous public spheres

Many indigenous people have responded by turning their backs on mainstream media and engaging in their own forms of cultural production. It is a global phenomenon which occurs in a diverse range of sites appropriating community-based media – primarily radio, television, and new media technologies – and creating what I have described elsewhere as ‘indigenous public spheres’ (Avison and Meadows, 2000). If cultural resistance – mirrored in indigenous communities around the world – can be linked globally, it might represent a challenge to the notion of mass communication and the contemporary practices of much of modern journalism. While in one sense this activity is at the periphery of mainstream conceptions of the public sphere, the implications are far more profound. To consider this, I suggest that rather than adopting the idea of a single, all-encompassing public sphere, we should think in terms of a series of the existence of parallel and overlapping public

spheres – spaces where participants with similar cultural backgrounds engage in activities of importance to them. Each of us simultaneously has membership of several different public spheres, moving between and within them according to desire and obligation. In this way, these multiple spheres of activity articulate their own discursive styles and formulate their own positions on issues that are then brought to a wider public sphere where they are able to interact ‘across lines of cultural diversity’ (Fraser, 1993; Avison and Meadows, 2000).

So indigenous public spheres should not be understood in terms of a non-dominant variant of the broader public sphere. Although they develop in close proximity to – and with a great deal of influence from – mainstream society, they should be seen as discrete formations that exist in a unique context as the product of contestation with the mainstream public sphere. While they operate within a dominant context, it is their ‘indigenouness’ that is the defining characteristic (Avison 1996). Extending Fraser’s (1993) notion of the existence of multiple public spheres, I suggest that indigenous public spheres can be seen as providing opportunities for people who are regularly subordinated and ignored by mainstream public sphere processes. They enable indigenous people to deliberate together, to develop their own counter-discourses, and to interpret their own identities and experiences. The deliberations are then able to interact with the wider public sphere – in theory. This highlights the importance of seeing the notion of Aboriginality, or identity formation, as a dynamic process which takes place through dialogue (Langton, 1993; Avison, 1996).

Establishing a dialogue

It is the routine, day-to-day journalism with its steady repetition of stereotypes and ethical transgressions – deliberate or otherwise – that sets up a ‘structure of attitude and reference’ for audiences (Said, 1993). This is part of the process which continues to enshrine racism at an institutional level. Racist ideas and assumptions are maintained by institutions like the media and sets of cultural practices like journalism – essentially, public sphere activity. The media represent key cultural resources where ideas and assumptions about the world are created, worked on and perpetuated – a process through which information is strategically managed (Hall, 1981). The news media play a significant role – as they have always done – in framing the ways in which

we think about issues, especially indigenous issues, as there are virtually no other sources of information for most people.

A more enlightened approach to journalism practice might explore ways of negotiating with indigenous public spheres in the same way as journalists learn to move easily within and between more familiar information networks as part of the everyday practice of newsgathering. It suggests the need to understand the impact of the omission and invisibility of indigenous people, stereotyping, notions of identity, and the use of derogatory and imposed labeling, the aim being to enable indigenous speaking positions, and to negotiate conflicts like the ownership of knowledge versus notions of editorial control. Sensitivity to such issues might invoke reporting strategies such as using an indirect approach in news interviews, consultation and negotiation over meaning, acknowledgment of the existence of indigenous English and local languages, and making use of translators or subtitles where appropriate – in other words, negotiating indigenous identity through dialogue with indigenous public spheres (Langton, 1993).

The picture which emerges from a long ‘history of indifference’ towards indigenous people is a continuing media misrepresentation of their identities and lifestyles. Largely because of this, the frameworks of understanding around Indigenous affairs in nations like Australia and Canada are remarkably enduring. Journalists are in very sensitive and powerful positions and journalism can play a key role in exploring cultural histories in order to demystify these frameworks. Some argue that all of these considerations get in the way of a good story – in the way of free speech. Deadlines demand quick reaction times by journalists, somehow threatening the validity of a story. But it is precisely free speech which is threatened unless all sides of a story can be heard and debated intelligently and in context.

Conclusion

Some indigenous public sphere activity has begun to be incorporated, albeit belatedly, into the processes of the wider public sphere. For example, a 2000 Productivity Commission review of Australian broadcasting acknowledged for the first time the existence of an indigenous media sector in Australia. But do such ideas translate through to the public imagination via the media and the practices of journalists? There is scant evidence of this to date.

We must see journalism as part of the broader process of making culture

– or ‘imagining’. If we view journalism as a key cultural practice within the operation of the public sphere – and we begin to explore ways in which dialogue occurs between different public spheres – it enables us to think how journalism itself might be reconfigured so that it may be again both of and for the public, despite its ‘Fourth Estate’ status. Langton’s (1993) notion of dialogue may be a crucial element here. It might be interpreted simply as encouraging journalists to use Indigenous sources for their stories about indigenous affairs. This alone might enable access to indigenous public spheres – ‘across lines of cultural diversity’ – that challenges prevailing frameworks of understanding about indigenous people and their worldview.

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