

# **Contested language use in ethnic media: A case study of New Zealand's Pacific media**

Tara Ross

*Department of Media and Communication, University of Canterbury, Christchurch,  
New Zealand*

[tara.ross@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:tara.ross@canterbury.ac.nz)

Tara Ross is a senior lecturer and head of the journalism programme at the University of Canterbury, where she is also a research fellow with the Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies. She was an award-winning senior reporter for *The Press* and the *Sunday Star-Times* newspapers, and has worked as both a freelance writer and editor, as well as for community news publications. She is of Pākehā and Tuvaluan descent, and studies journalism, diversity issues, ethnic minorities and Pacific media.

[@taraross\\_nz](#), [orcid.org/0000-0002-6664-711X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6664-711X)

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New Zealand's Pacific communities face significant generational language loss and their media are increasingly produced in English, raising questions about the centrality of language for ethnic media and their audiences. By drawing on semi-structured interviews with 23 media producers, this study finds tensions within and between Pacific-language and English-language media over the use of Pacific languages. It suggests that language is a strategic resource of identity in Pacific media that is shaped by a dialectic of internal and external identification. Rather than viewing ethnic media language practices as simply about language preservation or translating information for migrants, this paper suggests we examine language as a way that media producers intentionally perform their identity and legitimate Pacific media production.

Keywords: Pacific media, language, identity, New Zealand

## **Introduction**

Aotearoa New Zealand is in a moment of transition regarding both its Pacific population, which is undergoing significant intergenerational and cultural transformation, and its media, which, like media elsewhere, are grappling with the need to reinvent themselves in a digital age. That makes it an interesting case study of ethnic minority media<sup>1</sup> practices. By exploring New Zealand Pacific media producers' practices and discourse in relation to language use – and their awkward fit with the literature on ethnic media, particularly in relation to language and language maintenance – this paper underlines the importance of theoretical work that can account

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<sup>1</sup> Ethnic minority media are defined in this study as broadcast, print, and digital media that serve a particular ethnic minority group, i.e. New Zealand Pacific.

for shifting language practices, as well as diversity and conflict within ethnic mediascapes.

Many categories and theories traditionally assumed for ethnic media, such as community, language and diaspora, have tended to be predicated on unitary, homogenous audiences, but New Zealand's Pacific communities comprise multiple and diverse ethnic groupings as well as distinct generational communities of island-born and New Zealand-born, with the latter increasingly using English rather than a Pacific language. What's more, Pacific media are increasingly produced in English (Utanga 2007), further raising questions about some language-based ethnic media models' assumption that language is central to cultural identity. Against that backdrop, Pacific media language practices provide novel case study material for sociolinguists, communication scholars and practitioners – and insights into the ways in which language acts as a symbolic and strategic resource of identity, authenticity, legitimacy and belonging.

Accounts of the link between language and identity can often assume an ineluctable connection between language and (ethnic) identity (May 2005, 327; Meadows, 2009), reflecting perhaps the early ideologies of language-identity and monolingualistic purity identified by Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes (2011) in their three-era model of minority-language media. Pacific languages can be an important and constitutive factor of people's individual and, at times, collective identities, and they perform an important boundary-marking function, especially in relation to the dominant language and culture (May 2005, 330-332). Indeed, the conspicuousness of linguistic demarcation may help to explain why 'language often has a heightened sense of saliency in relation to identity

when its role as only one of a number of cultural markers might suggest otherwise' (ibid., 331). Certainly, language holds considerable power for some members of Pacific groups and remains a significant symbolic resource in Pacific spaces – the ability to speak a Pacific language affords considerable advantage and profit (Mila-Schaaf 2010, 248). Orthodox Pacific constructions of an ethnic 'us' versus a non-Pacific 'them' often hinge on whether one can speak a 'homeland' language (Mila-Schaaf 2010; Southwick 2001; Tiatia 1998). For groups who are invested in remaining distinct (and the media that serve them), Matsaganis et al. (2011, 88-89) suggest that publishing in a home country language is a statement of exclusivity and 'authenticity' that sets a bar for inclusion as a 'real' member of the group. Language is used to draw a clear line between who does and does not 'really' belong.

That becomes problematic in the face of generational language loss (such as that described below), and can become a closed discourse of identity that denies the real-life contexts of many young New Zealand-born and -raised Pacific peoples, who are less likely to be fluent Pacific speakers (and potentially, as Maher [2005] suggests, more likely to eschew essentialist identities and ethnolinguistic duty). In that case, continuing to publish or broadcast in a homeland Pacific language marks a disjuncture between what media producers think people should know and audiences' own realities (Matsaganis et al. 2011, 87), and may position such media precariously for the future (Lin & Song 2006, 382).

The endurance of discourses within New Zealand's Pacific media that privilege and essentialise Pacific languages<sup>2</sup> is partly a result of the everyday reality of living as a marginal identity in dominant Pākehā<sup>3</sup> society. Pacific peoples define themselves *and are categorised* in reference to a 'significant other', generally the dominant English-speaking group. Their sense of self, particularly at the collective level, is informed by that explicit contrast: where Pākehā speak English, 'we' speak a Pacific language. In the face of generational shifts – in language ability, connections to 'homeland', and toward multiple ethnicities – this discourse has not waned, but arguably gained extra significance. Cohen (1985, 70) has found that when the structural basis of a community boundary is undermined because of social change, people resort increasingly to symbolic behaviour to reconstitute the boundary. It may be that as Pacific ties to home islands and exclusive ethnic identities have weakened, *language* has become an even more powerful symbolic resource for determining authentic 'Pacificness'. Pacific discourses about language authenticity are also a strategic<sup>4</sup> means of asserting and reinforcing traditional power structures in the New Zealand context, as they afford power to those who are privileged by language, typically 1<sup>st</sup> generation Pacific migrants. Leadership roles on advisory boards and committees, for instance, are usually reserved for island-born elders and leaders (Anae 2001, 115) because the New Zealand-born are not 'legitimate' holders of fa'a Pacific<sup>5</sup> (Mila-Schaaf 2010; Tiatia 1998).

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs' (2012, 4) assertion that 'Pacific languages are an integral part of Pacific culture, are vital for the expression of Pacific identity...'

<sup>3</sup> New Zealand European

<sup>4</sup> Spivak's (1993) concept of strategic essentialism holds that while strong differences might exist between members of a group it is sometimes advantageous for them to 'essentialise' and promote their group identity to achieve certain goals.

<sup>5</sup> A catch-all phrase based on fa'a Samoa, meaning the Samoan way.

This means ethnic media must be understood within these contested and changing environments – and language understood not simply as a distinct cultural structure but also as a symbolic resource and social practice that is the product of social interaction between specific groups and specific social and historical contexts (Jenkins 1997). The aim here is to examine language practices in Pacific media without privileging language as an explanation for these media. Rather, the focus is on examining 1) how language is practised within New Zealand's Pacific media, and 2) how and where language is practised *differently*.

### ***Pacific peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand***

New Zealand's Pacific peoples comprise the fourth-largest major ethnic group in New Zealand, making up seven percent of the population in the 2013 census, behind Pākehā (New Zealand European), Indigenous Māori and Asian ethnic groups (74 percent, 15 percent and 12 percent respectively [Statistics New Zealand n.d. 2013]). They are a group marked by multiple ethnic identities, linguistic and cultural diversity, geographic spread throughout the country and a significant inter-generational divide. All of which means that Pacific media speak to multiple audiences, and a younger pan-Pacific audience is a growing element within this mix. In particular, there is an emerging fracture between typically older Pacific migrants and younger New Zealand-born Pacific peoples, which marks significant intergenerational and cultural transformation within Pacific groups (Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs 2006). The social and material experiences of New Zealand-born or -raised Pacific peoples are diverging in terms of the ways they perceive themselves and the importance placed on their Pacific identity (Tiatia 2008, 6). This is particularly so among New Zealand-born, who are increasingly adopting a shared Pacific 'Nesian' or 'fa'a NiuSila' identity that departs significantly

from their parents' and grandparents' migrant origins and traditions (Ross 2017a) – and that echoes the 'Metroethnicity' Maher (2005, 84) says inevitably challenges the orthodoxy of language loyalty.

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Number in NZ</b>	<b>% of NZ Pacific population</b>	<b>% of total NZ population</b>
Samoan	144,138	48.7%	3.6%
Cook Islands Māori nfd	61,077	20.9%	1.5%
Tongan	60,333	20.4%	1.5%
Niuean	23,883	8.1%	<1%
Fijian	14,445	4.9%	<1%
Tokelauan	7,173	2.4%	<1%
Tuvalu	3,537	1.2%	<1%
Kiribati	2,115	0.07%	<1%
Pacific Peoples nfd	1,407		
Other Pacific Peoples	4,866		
<b>Total Pacific Population</b>	<b>295,941</b>		

Source: Statistics New Zealand n.d. 2013 census

Table 1: Pacific groups as a percentage of New Zealand Pacific and total population 2013

Almost two-thirds (62.3 percent) of Pacific peoples are now born in New Zealand. As a result, Pacific peoples are not primarily defined in terms of their experience of migration from a distant homeland. Those groups with New Zealand citizenship rights have the highest New Zealand-born numbers proportional to their overall population: Niueans (78.9 percent), Cook Islands Māori (77.4 percent) and Tokelauans (73.9

percent). These groups, in particular, cannot easily be described as immigrant or diasporic communities; nor can the subsequent generations of Pacific peoples who are New Zealand-born, as these terms refer more to newly arrived communities and their immediate 2<sup>nd</sup> generation.

Many Pacific groups, particularly those with longer-standing rights of residency in New Zealand, are also experiencing a shift towards English as their preferred language and some groups face serious language loss. More than half of Pacific people in New Zealand are unable to hold an everyday conversation in their Pacific language (Statistics New Zealand n.d. 2013 census). The extent to which Pacific peoples speak their heritage language differs from community to community, with some experiencing language loss at a faster rate than others. Overall, 63 percent of Tuvaluans in New Zealand reported that they could speak their own language, compared with 12.8 percent of Cook Islands Māori, 18.7 percent of Niueans, 27.7 percent of Fijians, and 31.9 percent of Tokelauans (Statistics New Zealand n.d. 2013 census). In many cases, Pacific languages are limited to use in the private domains of family and church, and it is English that is used in wider communication, business, employment and education and, increasingly, Pacific media (Utanga 2007).

### ***Pacific media in Aotearoa New Zealand<sup>6</sup>***

Pacific media in New Zealand are mostly small, under-resourced and heavily reliant on state funding and patronage from other funding sources, and there is high degree of

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<sup>6</sup> Despite the differences within and between Pacific groups, there is value identifying 'Pacific' as a category. Pacific peoples share a sense of mutual social connection and common genealogical and cultural links that have become a basis for collective identity in New Zealand, particularly in the context of being the marginalised 'other' to more numerous and politically dominant groups.



churn within the field. They are highly diverse in terms of media type (including whether they are state-owned or funded, commercial and/or community media), location, audience and language. Within the broader New Zealand mediascape, which is dominated by outlets that are largely Pākehā-dominated and, in the commercial sector, foreign-owned (Myllylahti 2014), Pacific media are bit players. New Zealand-based outlets range from two small newspapers (*Samoa Times*, *New Zealand Pacific*) and two national magazines (*Spasifik* and *Suga*) to at least three television programmes, upwards of 50 volunteer programmes on the country's 12 community access radio stations, four radio stations and at least five emerging online media: *Moana TV*, *Kaniva Tonga*, *TheCoconet.tv*, *The Coconut Wireless* and *e-Tangata*<sup>7</sup>.

Their income levels differ, but a lack of funding is common to all. Most of the broadcast content for Pacific audiences is fully or partially public funded as Pacific audiences are among the special interest groups the Broadcasting Act requires NZ on Air to address (NZ on Air 2012, p.1). Hence, the state directly funds TVNZ's weekly news and current affairs programme *Tagata Pasifika*, the Pacific Media Network (which operates the national Niu FM radio channel and Auckland-based Pacific language channel Radio 531pi) and the Wellington-based Samoan-language station Samoa Capital Radio (which broadcasts fewer than 40 hours a week). Indirectly, it also supports various Pacific community radio programmes through its funding for community Access radio and its advertising and information campaigns (Ross 2017a). Those that are not publicly funded are usually self-funded or heavily supported by churches and other charitable sources.

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<sup>7</sup> The Internet's potential for Pacific media merits further study. Le and Uribe-Jongbloed (2017) say the emergence of web-based media brings potential for improved transnational networks and increased minority language exchange – as well as greater English language penetration.

These New Zealand-based Pacific media sit within a wider regional context of Pacific Islands-produced media – a context in which English-language figures prominently. Fiji's media organisations publish or broadcast predominantly in English (Robie 2004). Elsewhere, English is often used in tandem with Pacific languages (as in the Tongan government-owned newspaper, the *Tonga Chronicle*) and is often the main language on Internet news sites (Cass 2004; Molnar & Meadows 2001), while English-language radio programming from New Zealand and Australia is broadcast 24/7 (Moala 2010).

Some state-funded media, such as the Pacific Media Network, are heavily regulated, including around language. Its radio stations Niu FM and Radio 531pi, are together required to produce more than 4100 hours of programming annually in at least nine Pacific languages (Ministry of Culture and Heritage 2015). Yet, language shifts within the wider Pacific population – and some media outlets' response – challenge the implicit regulatory assumption that language is central to these media. Many models of ethnic media identify preserving and transmitting culture and identity, chiefly by maintaining the language, as a key function. In the New Zealand context, however, that is increasingly not the case. State-run and -funded media Niu FM, *Tagata Pasifika* and *TheCoconet.tv*, and other pan-Pacific media such as *Spasifik*, *Suga Magazine* and *New Zealand Pacific* have created Pacific identities in English. What's more, they have forged Pacific identities that are not dependent on a geographic locale or community in New Zealand or a particular island locale in the Pacific. As such, these media are neither language- nor place-based and must work harder to distinguish themselves from mainstream media and define the boundaries of their conglomerate ethnic media audience.

### *Ethnic media in the literature*

Little has been written about New Zealand's Pacific media or their audiences. A small body of research has focused on Pacific people's under- and misrepresentation in mainstream media (see, for example, Pamatatau 2012; Loto et al. 2006), while Utanga (2007), Kailahi (2009), Robie (2009), Papoutsaki and Strickland (2008) and Neilson (2015) have made useful attempts to summarise issues within Pacific media from a production perspective. Mostly, these few works highlight the role of Pacific media in combating negative stereotypes, as well as the challenges they face regarding a lack of resources (income, audience data and trained staff) and competition for small but highly diverse audiences, but have little to say about how Pacific media are responding to these challenges.

The wider literature on ethnic minority media is small and dispersed across different disciplines. It also tends to be hard to find (Benavide 2006); largely descriptive (Johnson 2010, 113); and often conceptually unclear (Hickerson & Gustafson 2016, 946). Much of the research has been investigated through case studies that, while informative in specific situations (Le 2015), do not necessarily translate in the New Zealand context. The literature also reveals some big gaps – studies of ethnic minority audiences, in particular, are relatively rare (there are few reliable statistics about their audience reach), and very few studies have much to say about how people use ethnic media. Various works attempting to pin down the role of ethnic minority media, including Browne (2005), Forde et al. (2009), Georgiou (2004), Hanusch (2013), Matsaganis et al. (2011), Riggins (1992) suggest they serve several functions, among them maintaining the language and culture of an ethnic group, combating mainstream

media narratives and stereotypes, providing self-representation and news about the ethnic community, and providing a public sphere (Browne 2005) that can act as a space for empowerment (Forde et al. 2009; Hanusch 2013).

Several scholars – Cormack and Hourigan (2007), Davila (2001), Downing (1992), Henningham (1992), Lewis (2008), Moran (2006), Pietikäinen (2008) and Moring et al. (2011) – have further viewed language maintenance as a core function of ethnic media. Typical arguments are that media in minority languages help answer human rights claims and legitimise marginalised languages through a public discourse domain (Cormack 2013, 256 and Cotter 1999, 144 cited in Le and Uribe-Jongbloed 2017, 364), and provide, among other things, the linguistic and cultural resources to bridge ‘old’ and ‘new’ homelands, a link to world events for those who have no command of the majority language, and a crucial space for the practice and survival minority languages (Pietikäinen 2008). However, it is not clear exactly *how* minority languages affect or are affected by the media. Smith notes (2016, 29), that ten years of Māori Television provision has not improved fluency in te reo Māori<sup>8</sup>, nor has research on language and media shown a way to identify a definitive link between broadcasting practices and increases in the health of a language. Indeed, Le and Uribe-Jongbloed (2017, 365) say the function of media for language maintenance ‘remains a point of contentious debate in MLM studies and minority language communities’.

Others have suggested instead that language may fulfil symbolic rather than informative functions, such as media branding (Narbaiza et al. 2013) or standing as a symbol of

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<sup>8</sup> The 2013 census found 21.3 percent of Māori could hold a conversation about a lot of everyday things in Māori, down 4.8% from the 2006 census (Smith 2016, 29).

ethnic belonging (Dolowy-Rybinska 2013), prestige (Smith 2016) or “cool” (Maher 2005). By demonstrating that some ethnic media thrive *without* their ethnic language, Johnson’s (2000) work, though not easily generalised, raises questions about language-based ethnic media models. The rapid growth of bilingual Hispanic television shows and bilingual and English-dominant Hispanic print media, which create Latino identities in English, proves the need, Johnson argues, for a revised model of ethnic media that can account for the possibility of more symbolic ethnic media functions. The argument is relevant here, as Pacific media are also increasingly produced, not in Pacific languages, but in English, and the assumption that minority languages are a determinant of minority media does not hold in the New Zealand Pacific context. Moreover, there is evidence (Ang et al. 2002; Gillespie 1995; Hargreaves 2001; Hargreaves & Mahdjoub 1997; Madianou 2005; Milikowski 2001; Rios & Gaines 1997, 1998; and Wilkin et al. 2007) that few ethnic minority groups consume media only in their minority language – most also use dominant language media. Indeed, Cormack (2007) rightly asks: why do bilingual audience members choose to consume their media in one language or another?

Markelin and Husband (2013) and Husband (2005) further demonstrate that it can be difficult in practice to prioritise language preservation when an ethnic minority group is fractured by diverse languages and cultures (as are Pacific peoples in New Zealand). This suggests the language revitalisation role of ethnic media cannot be taken on faith; instead, we need to examine ethnic media’s actual language practices closely. Johnson (2010, 108) notes, too, that ethnic media definitions based on language take no account of media produced for groups whose languages have been lost or rarely used (such as U.S. Native Americans) or groups like Europe’s Roma (and New Zealand’s Pacific peoples), who speak a variety of languages. In these ways, language cannot always be

seen as a unifier. Uribe-Jongbloed (2016) argues that we must study the specific context of media in detail to determine how language interacts not only with other identity markers but also with competing functions such as being a space for overcoming stereotypes.

### ***Materials and methods***

This paper reports on a small part of a wider research project that attempted to explore Pacific media as they are understood by Pacific media producers and audiences – through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with media producers, focus group interviews with Pacific audiences, and qualitative text-based case studies of key Pacific media. The material discussed below draws on one-on-one interviews with 23 Pacific media producers, which aimed to explore how the creators of Pacific media content understood their role and the purpose of Pacific media. It focuses on producers' discourses and practices of language, but does not attempt to measure their effect (how these media are used by audiences or what effect they have on Pacific communities and language is beyond the scope of this article).

A comprehensive census of Pacific media was considered impractical within the highly volatile Pacific mediascape, where new products appear and disappear at a fast rate. Instead, Pacific news media were purposively sampled for those media that best represented diverse mediums, ownership, organisational structure, target audiences and language (English, bilingual and Pacific language-only). The aim was not so much for a representative sample as a sample that would provide a window (Bouma 2000, 172) into different media. All interviews were one-on-one except for one interview with three *Samoa Nius* journalists who were interviewed together at the newspaper's offices. Most

interviews lasted between an hour and an hour and a half, and used a loose guide<sup>9</sup> to give each interview a shared focus of inquiry. All interviews (excepting follow-up interviews and interviews with the Wellington-based RNZI and Samoa Capital Radio<sup>10</sup>) were conducted face-to-face to build the kind of relationships and rapport that is necessary for Pacific research. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full, amounting to more than 240,000 words of data. A handful of producers provided more comment after reviewing their transcript, and five were followed up to clarify their interview responses.

As author, I was positioned as both insider and outsider in this study. As a 3<sup>rd</sup>-generation member of the diasporic Pacific community, I was an insider (as I was with media producers who recognised my 15+ years' experience as a journalist). As someone who can claim only 'part' Pacific ethnicity (and who doesn't speak a Pacific language), I was an outsider. That location between insider and outsider positions required extra care and, as a result, I established a Pacific Advisory Group, comprising community and media representatives, to oversee and provide advice on the research project, including advice on research design and 'best practice' for working with Pacific communities (see Forde et al. [2009] for a similar approach). My insider/outsider status also sharpened my focus on the ways that Pacific media are responding to demographic changes, particularly the growth of 2<sup>nd</sup>+ generations who are, like me, New Zealand-born and unable to speak a Pacific language.

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<sup>9</sup> Interviews were kept deliberately open-ended, and questions broadly probed how producers defined Pacific media, what they thought made their outlet Pacific, what they did that was different from media that did not have a Pacific identity, who they saw as their target audience and how they interacted with them.

<sup>10</sup> The RNZI and Samoa Capital Radio interviews were intended to be face-to-face but for various reasons were rescheduled outside the fieldwork travel period. As a result, they were conducted as phone interviews.

## ***Results/Discussion***

What is marked about Pacific media is that, far from being primarily about Pacific languages (and in line with trends noted in ethnic media internationally [Lin & Song 2006; Matsaganis et al. 2011]), they are often produced in English – a fact that challenges language-based ethnic media models. Of the 16 Pacific media outlets where interviews were conducted for this study, six were produced wholly in English and four were a mix of English and Pacific languages. Only six were produced *solely* in a Pacific language (and two of those were planning to – and subsequently did – introduce English inserts and/or web pages). That finding partly reflects the research sample in that eight of the media products are pan-Pacific media, which are necessarily in English. No one Pacific language bridges New Zealand’s diverse Pacific groups and English comes the closest to a shared language across Pacific ethnic groups (and reflects Pacific media’s response to wider language loss within Pacific communities).

Interestingly, the pan-Pacific national radio station Niu FM broadcasts in English – but in a style of English that several informants characterised as ‘Pacific-English’ or ‘a type of Pacific language’, a recognisably Pacific lingo that combined English, Pacific phrases and text-speak that participants said was heavily influenced by social media and used predominantly by New Zealand-born and raised Pacific youth<sup>11</sup>. By asserting that ‘that’s how we talk as Samoans’, a Niu FM producer asserted that English language could be used to define Pacific identity. Indeed, linguistic research (Bell & Gibson

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<sup>11</sup> Gibson and Bell (2010) noted two linguistic variants of Pacific English – one spoken by middle-aged and older Pacific people who were immigrants from the islands and who learned English as a second language, and a second variant spoken by second generation, New Zealand-born, usually Pacific youth.



2008; Gibson & Bell 2010) has demonstrated the emergence of an ethnolect or distinctive way of speaking English through which Pacific youth in New Zealand, whose dominant language is English, are able to project their ethnic identity (Gibson, n.d.). Gibson & Bell (2010) say this variety of New Zealand English is related to an emerging sub-culture associated with being young, Polynesian, possibly living in South-Auckland, and interested in hip-hop culture – and is instantly recognisable to Pacific youth.

Not only are there signs of a shift towards English in Pacific media, but also evidence of tensions within and between Pacific-language and English-language media over the use of language, which is strongly contested.

I don't believe you should be called Pacific media if you're not using ... a Pacific language. \_Producer, Samoan-language media

You will have Tongans and Samoans who can't speak the language, and the language isn't in fact the primary determinant of whether you're Pacific or not ... It doesn't have to be a Pacific Island language. Most of our people are either bilingual or working at being bilingual. \_Producer, English- and Pacific-language media

I can't read Samoan. I can speak properly, but it takes me hours to read one sentence, so I'm more likely to go with reading in English. \_Producer, English-language media

There's more than 2000 Samoans migrating to New Zealand every year, right? The Samoans that come here only know Samoan ... so we need to cater for those guys.

\_Producer, Samoan language media

These tensions are not always explicit, even to producers themselves. Samoa Multimedia producers, for instance, insisted that Pacific media should be in Pacific languages and its subsidiaries, Radio Samoa and the *Samoa Times*, were, at the time, in Samoan. Even so, they saw no contradiction in advertising in a bilingual format – Samoan and English – or in starting (as they did shortly after being interviewed for this study) an English-language Facebook news page, radio programme, and television website.

In interviews, Niu FM producers said they were straitjacketed by the station's trust deed and funding agreements, which required the station to foster and maintain Pacific languages through set hours of programming in Pacific languages (National Pacific Radio Trust 2010). They said the station repeatedly lost listeners when it switched its national channel over to Pacific-language night programmes, and Niu FM had stopped playing music in Pacific languages for that reason.

What we've found, once you start pushing language at our audience, they just switch off, because we don't just cover one language; we cover up to eight. If I'm a Samoan and I'm listening and I hear a Fijian song, that doesn't resonate with me. I'm going to switch. Which is why Niu FM today is way different than what we were in 2002. In 2002, we catered for everybody; we played a Fijian song, we'd play a Samoan song, we'd play a Cook Islands song. Now we don't play any of that in the language. \_Pacific media producer

These tensions were most pronounced when producers discussed claims of cultural authenticity, for example, that only Pacific languages and not English were authentically 'Pacific'.

Some people say, 'Well, I'm a New Zealand-born Samoan'. Yeah, but then how do you define a New Zealand-born Samoan? And then when they meet up with their own culture, like at a big Samoan event, that's when they realise: 'I'm at a loss here. I can't even speak a word of Samoan. I'd better go and get back to my roots. \_Producer, Samoan-language media

When they stand up and say, 'If you can't speak this, you're not that', I think it's quite a naïve perspective and it tends to be in a lot of ways I find it a little insecure, because it's more of a controlling statement. 'I speak Tongan therefore I am a Tongan and you aren't'. It's all about me, me, me, me, whereas I find that quite insecure.... Like I said, in New Zealand it's different. As a Pacific person in New Zealand it is different. \_Producer, English-language media

Our next generation are stuck. They're caught, and when you have the system or you have academics telling them, 'the reason you're failing is because you can't speak your language' – god, they have enough bloody burden to bear getting on with life and getting a meaningful, rewarding career without being burdened with having to learn their language as well.... I will argue black and blue; you don't have to learn your language. \_Producer, English-language media

Along with the prevalence of English language within Pacific media, these diverse positions demand a rethink of the role of language in ethnic media. Rather than taking language as a straightforward given, it may be more helpful to examine language as a performance and symbolic practice – a way that producers *perform* their identity and community (Madianou 2005, 523). Television New Zealand's long-standing *Tagata Pasifika* programme, which was cited by most media producers and journalists as the leading example of New Zealand's Pacific news media, is in English and therefore inadequately accounted for by language-based theories. However, at times, its producers called on Pacific languages to demonstrate the programme's Pacific credentials, in-group belonging and difference from majority media. For instance, one talked about how audience members questioned a presenter's authenticity based on her physical appearance, describing how her use of language established her credentials:

I have a particular problem sometimes because the look of what a Pacific Islander is, is changing. It does, it changes you know. For example, you see X there and she's so glamorous and, apart from her name – the Samoans all know that – some will go, 'she's not a real Samoan'. Then if you get her to speak Samoan and they go, 'oh she's one of us, she's one of us!'. \_Pacific media producer

In this instance, the producer said, language retention was key to demonstrating the programme's identity and connection with Pacific groups.

In another instance, a *Tagata Pasifika* producer described the programme's deliberate performance of Samoan language in its coverage of the widely-reported story of Fulole Muliaga, an Auckland woman who died in 2007 after the electricity supply to her

oxygen machine was cut. Producers debated in which language to interview her bilingual husband, Lopaaeva Muliaga – in Samoan or English. The fact that producers debated which language to use stands as a critique of culturally determinist explanations that fail to account for the ways in which language is often contested. It also demonstrates the nuanced ways in which producers choose to enact a Pacific identity. Mr Muliaga had already been interviewed in mainstream media in English, but producers, after some debate, decided to interview him in Samoan. The *Tagata Pasifika* producer said the interview in Samoan, ‘gave a whole new perspective on his situation and his story that hadn’t been in the media before’, and used this as an example to demonstrate how *Tagata Pasifika* was the authoritative and authentic voice of Pacific peoples (and dominant media were not).

Samoa Capital Radio, a state-funded station broadcast predominantly in Samoan, resorts to language as a means of differentiating itself from other competing Pacific media. Its vision is to be the leader in Samoan broadcasting in New Zealand and its mission statement is ‘to entertain, educate, inform, forewarn and culturally and spiritually grow Samoans living in New Zealand *through the use of their language*’ (my italics). One of its producers repeatedly criticised as ‘non-Pacific’ the national Pacific radio station Niu FM, probably Samoa Capital Radio’s closest competition in terms of radio audience and funding, because it broadcast in English.

So, you ask yourself, ‘Who is your audience? Are you catering for the Palagi audience, universal audience? What about mum and dad that can’t even speak the language?’ So, they’re not helping in maintaining and sustaining the language.... I don’t believe you should be called Pacific media if you’re not using the language. \_Pacific media producer

While clearly reflecting a desire to preserve the Samoan language, such criticism also demonstrated the need to establish difference in an environment where funding was contested and measures of group representation and accountability were poorly defined. In moments such as these, the wider structural context of media production and community of practice lends producers' language practices some of their meaning (see Husband [2005, 475] . In this case, language usefully distinguishes Samoa Capital Radio from English-language Pacific media, like Niu FM, which compete for similar state funding and advertising dollars. Samoa Capital Radio typically gets \$180,000 annually from the government's broadcast funding agency NZ on Air and almost as much in indirect state funding via local and central government advertising and contracted programming aimed at Pacific communities. In the absence of audience ratings or a similar mechanism, language stands in as a default for producers trying to prove their 'Pacificness' to funders and connection with Pacific communities to advertisers.

Indeed, by examining more closely *why* Pacific media use the languages they do (and, given the very low rates fluency of some Pacific communities, why they use Pacific languages at all) we start to unpack complex negotiations of identity and cultural boundary setting. For instance, in Samoa, the *Samoa Observer* is produced in Samoan *and* English, but when it was launched in New Zealand, an audience backlash forced its publishers to reproduce the paper in Samoan only. Language, in this case, appeared to reflect a need to stage one's 'Samoan-ness' in the New Zealand context (which Naficy [1993] calls the fetishisation of homeland culture and Smith [2012] calls staging cultural identity). Where so much of daily life is Pākehā-dominated and mostly in English, language stands in as a defensive definition of 'being Samoan'.

Hence, language use within ethnic media is not simply about language preservation or revitalisation, or translating information for migrants; it is also a symbolic resource (Cohen 1985) that groups use to mobilise and construct their identity and their social and symbolic, (and, sometimes, economic) capital. How it is used differently, and for which identities, depends on the wider social, cultural and economic contexts within which Pacific media are situated, and the interrelationship of producers' internal and others' external categories of identity (Jenkins 1997). Accordingly, in the examples above, we can see that language use was shaped by a dialectic of internal and external identification: in-group pressures that forced a presenter to prove her ethnic belonging and authenticity; out-group competition that impelled producers to assert language as their point of difference and proof of authoritative representation; and economic imperatives that encourage media to prove their 'Pacifinness' (or in the case of Niu FM, to conform to a particular idea of 'Pacifinness') to state and other agencies that have established 'Pacific' classifications as a criterion for funding. When researching and theorising ethnic media, therefore, we need to think of language as part of situated performances that themselves require explanation (Madianou 2011, 447), rather than privilege it as a taken-for-granted function of ethnic media.

## **Conclusion**

Far from being a homogenous entity, Pacific media are diverse and often in contest with each other. As this discussion demonstrates, they are not necessarily in-language but are differentiated by different discourses and practices of language, which make it hard to categorise them according to definitions often asserted in the ethnic media literature, particularly the longstanding field of minority language media research (e.g. Cormack

2004; Cormack and Hourigan 2007). By looking more closely at how producers position themselves in different contexts, it becomes apparent that there are several tensions running through New Zealand's Pacific news media that demand a rethink of how we conceive – and foreground – language functions within ethnic media. When language is practised differently – and media producers demonstrate different understandings of both the role of language *and* the function of media for language maintenance – theories that assume the centrality of language to media identity become problematic. This study provides further evidence of the need for theoretical work (such as that being developed by Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes, 2011) that can foreground diversity and complexity, and better account for contested and overlapping practices, including the production of ethnic media for purposes other than language maintenance (such as for participation in the public sphere, overcoming stereotypes [Uribe-Jongbloed 2016], symbolic power [Johnson 2010, 116] and identity).

This study also provides a case for opening up the frames with which we analyse ethnic media, by demonstrating that when language maintenance no longer dominates the view other possibilities can come into sharper focus. For example, Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes' (2011) model of the three eras (and logics) of minority language media or Husband's (2005) model of communities of practice lend themselves to an analysis of the political economy of Pacific media; might some of these producers' contested practices be better explained by the different historical logics and processes or communities of practice of each media outlet? Alternatively, (Ross 2017a, 2017b) analysis of Pacific media producers' discourses and practices suggests that language practices might also be understood as *locative practices*, that is, strategic practices of identity and connection that are tightly intertwined with ideas of community,



interrelationship, authenticity. In this vein – and drawing on Maher’s ideas of ‘Metroethnicity’ and the identity of ‘Cool’ – the language practices of Niu FM producers might be explored as a locative practice of affiliation with an emerging urban youth ‘Brown/ ‘Nesian’ identity, and dissociation with orthodox migrant Pacific identities. Such an approach would open up possibilities for studying Pacific youths’ identity of shared ‘Brownness’ with indigenous Māori in ways that a focus on language (and the ethnic and cultural orthodoxies that go with it) do not.

As such, this paper argues that it is not enough to take language functions at face value; the diverse practices found in this study suggest we need to look for more complex, overlapping explanations that can account for the heterogeneity of ethnic media production and the ‘‘messy’ and emergent multilingual practices of the community’ (Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2011, 65). My own experiences, for example, give lie to orthodox language-based explanations of media practice: I was a Pacific journalist who worked in English-speaking media and am a 3<sup>rd</sup>-generation Pacific woman who cannot speak her heritage language. Theoretical models that can account for such messiness are more likely to be able tease out and explain the various tensions faced by ethnic media professionals – for example, between the moral concerns of cultural survival and the economic or professional logics of media production (Husband, 2005) or between fluid notions of language (which can account for multilingualism and emblematic/symbolic language use) and the more rigid media policies that are designed to safeguard language *and* media provision (Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2011, 67). None of this is to say that we must reject extant theoretical perspectives, rather that we must attend more critically to the complexity that typifies diverse, multi-ethnic societies. People’s practices in relation to identities, cultures and media can be complex and unexpected.

By paying close attention to what people say and do with and around media (Couldry 2011, p.226) – to open up, rather than narrow, the ways we think about identity media – we might, more helpfully, see multiple perspectives at once and move beyond the explanatory power of categories of ethnicity, culture and language, which can only help us so far.

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