

RETHINKING JOURNALISM AND CULTURE: AN EXAMINATION OF HOW  
PACIFIC AUDIENCES EVALUATE ETHNIC MEDIA

*Journalism Studies*

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## RETHINKING JOURNALISM AND CULTURE: AN EXAMINATION OF HOW PACIFIC AUDIENCES EVALUATE ETHNIC MEDIA

*Studies of indigenous and ethnic minority news media tend to emphasise their political advocacy role, their role in providing a voice to communities overlooked by mainstream media and, increasingly, the cultural forces at work in these media. By considering ethnic media in terms of how ethnic minority audiences understand what they do with these media, this study provides a different perspective. Focus groups held with Pacific audiences at several urban centres in New Zealand found participants routinely use the idea of journalism in evaluating Pacific media – and journalism for them was a term defined to a significant extent by wider societal expectations around journalism, and not by their ethnic difference. Through examining the intersection of media practices with the ideals and expectations of journalism, this paper questions how far we should foreground the specifics of culture in interpreting people's media use, and advocates a commitment to more empirical research to reorient the study of ethnic media away from a fixation on difference and towards people's media practices.*

KEYWORDS: culture; ethnic media; journalism; media practices; Pacific audiences

This paper studies audience members of Pacific ethnic media in terms of how they value the news they receive from ethnic media sources. It suggests that, contrary to the expectations of some ethnic media research, societal-wide ideas of journalism are central to assessments by these members of Pacific media audiences in New Zealand. Indeed, when viewed from the "bottom up" (Madianou 2011) through the prism of audiences' talk, widely studied ethnic media dimensions of community-building, cultural values and information deficit recede and the role of journalism comes into sharper relief. The paper concludes that studying ethnic media within categories of ethnicity or culture only helps us so far. We need to look also at broader categories, starting with those that audience members themselves say are important. By paying closer attention to ethnic audiences' orientation to news media, this study suggests that ethnic media are more complex and, in some respects, more ordinary than the scholarship supposes. This is not to say that theories about the cultural role of ethnic media are not valid, but simply that they have room for modification and greater complexity (Stenson & Ahva 2015).

This study also begs closer scrutiny of how we theorise ethnic media, and suggests a need to temper the scholarly hunt for what is *different* about ethnic media. Definitions based on difference risk overlooking commonalities between dominant and ethnic media and exaggerating the 'otherness' of ethnic minority and indigenous groups (Smith 2012). Pacific audiences' desire for news that is appropriately culturally framed, for instance, does not preclude a desire for news that also meets quality criteria (Urban and Schweiger 2014, 823) of timeliness, comprehensibility, relevance and accuracy. Again, this is not to say that cultural influences are unimportant, but an argument for a tempering of our focus on culture. If we focus too narrowly on the cultural dimensions of ethnic and indigenous media, for instance, we risk overlooking the structural factors that limit ethnic media producers' ability to produce quality journalism (or to perform the watchdog and empowerment roles

ascribed to them in the literature (Hanusch 2013a)) and thereby miss the opportunity to contribute critical insights that might benefit the marginalised groups we research.

### **Approaches to ethnic journalism and culture**

Typically, studies of indigenous and ethnic minority news media regard these types of media outlets as providing a voice to communities that may be left out of the discourse in mainstream national media (Shumow 2014). Definitions of ethnic news media tend to emphasise their cultural preservation work and political advocacy, such as maintaining the language of an ethnic group and providing cultural and political self-representation (Browne 2005; Husband 1994; Riggins 1992) or providing a counter narrative to dominant media and a space for empowerment (Hourigan 2003; Pietikainen 2008). These aspects are clearly important and are mirrored to varying degrees within Pacific audiences' talk about media, but when closer attention is paid to what these audiences say and do in relation to media (here, media audiences are not assumed to be filling the audience roles that producers set out, and their media use is viewed as part of their participation in society, not an activity apart), and how they categorise what they are doing (Couldry 2004, 2010), another explanation emerges.. In this study, audience participants used the idea of *journalism* to evaluate Pacific media: they clearly valued dominant Western journalistic values and standards at least as much as cultural traits or counter narratives, and more than is accounted for in the literature. By focusing on their talk and practices rather than ethnic media texts and production (Couldry 2012, 44), this study aims to foreground the fact that ethnic audiences want journalism that attends more closely to their news and information needs and thereby open up the ways in which we might understand and theorise ethnic media.

The literature suggests that ethnic media serve several functions, including journalistic functions, but these are often under-explored or overshadowed by a focus on other functions, chiefly maintaining the language and culture of an ethnic group, combating negative stereotypes, and providing self-representation, that is, 'telling one's own story and celebrating one's own culture in one's own way' (Browne 2005, 31). Subsidiary functions include creating and strengthening identity, providing news about the ethnic community (often expressed as news from the 'homeland'), and covering the community's activities. Some (Lind 2008) propose an activist mission for ethnic media, such as promoting groups' political interests, motivating them to be politically active, and serving as collective expressions of anger at injustice. Others (Forde et al. 2009) view ethnic media as agents of empowerment for ethnic groups.

A few studies have examined the link between cultural values and journalism, and there is evidence (especially from comparative studies) that such work is useful in explaining differences in journalistic practices (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Hanitzsch et al. 2010; Hanitzsch et al. 2011). Most studies that have explored cultural forces in ethnic media have so far been concerned largely with analyses of published news content or with news producers' views of their journalism (Hanusch 2013b; Pietikainen 2008). For instance, Mercado's (2015) large-scale content analysis *El Tequio*, a magazine produced by a pan-ethnic organisation of Mexican immigrants in the US, found that preservation of cultural capital was a recurring preoccupation. Elsewhere, earlier research on Pacific news media in New Zealand (Ross, 2014a, 2014b) that focused on producers and their texts revealed a clear intent on the part of producers to do journalism in demonstrably Pacific cultural ways, such as treating high-status sources with deference, identifying subjects by their island or village affiliation, and enacting collectivist values of 'serving the community'. Certainly,

there is evidence to say that cultural differences influence *journalistic work*. It is less clear, however, how or to what degree cultural differences influence *audiences'* media practices.

What makes such analysis difficult, too, is the fact that culture is a murky and essentially contested concept, and difficult to define. It has different meanings in different contexts, alternately referring to sets of ideas (values, beliefs), practices (social, communicative, ritualistic), artefacts (traditional dance, Samoan language newspaper) and whole ways of life (Williams [1965] 2001). Cultures and cultural identities are widely recognised as fluid, contested and in continual process – changing according to time, place and usage (Hall, 1990, 1996a, 1996b). In the New Zealand Pacific space that is especially true. There are significant differences between and within Pacific ethnic groups such as between island-born and NZ-born and between language speakers and non-Pacific language speakers, as well as debates over authenticity and tradition, which is often performed in special Pacific events and festivals and privileged as culturally representative (Underhill-Sem 2010, 11). Research on Pacific media producers (Ross, 2014a) for instance, revealed that producers' intentioned cultural practices often draw on narrow identities that privilege Pacific cultural performance and symbolic representations of 'homeland' despite the fact almost two-thirds of Pacific people are born in New Zealand and have varying degrees of connection to 'home' islands and cultures. As a result, the representations in Pacific news media often fall back on well-established, often elite versions of Pacific identity that misrepresent the diverse and shifting identities of New Zealand's Pacific population, especially its New Zealand-born youth (Ross, 2014a). Indeed, in this study of Pacific audiences, many participants said producers' cultural practices and representations turned them off – they were just too bright, too stereotyped, too "cliché, eh". Similarly, although language revitalisation and preservation is commonly listed as a core reason for ethnic media outlets' existence (Hanusch 2013a), Pacific media in New Zealand are increasingly produced not in Pacific languages but in English. In fact, language loss within Pacific communities, where more than half of Pacific people are unable to hold an everyday conversation in their first language and fewer still are able to read it (Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs 2011) clearly undermines the ability of Pacific media to fulfil their supposed language – and cultural preservation – role.

Empirical audience research elsewhere hints at a complex picture of minority audiences' media use, not all of which can be ascribed to or framed by culture or 'difference'. Georgiou (2004) and Madianou (2005) demonstrate that ethnic minorities use a mix of ethnic *and* mainstream media. Other studies reveal that, in some cases, only a minority of ethnic minority group members prefer or actually use ethnic media (Arnold and Schneider 2007; Lewis 2008; Ojo 2006) raising the possibility that, for many ethnic group members, ethnic media may not be important. In their study of Turkish-speaking audiences, Aksoy and Robins (2003) found that migrants' diasporic television viewing was neither ethno-cultural nor 'diasporic' in motivation, but entirely social; migrants, like homeland viewers, were simply looking for the familiar. All of which suggests that complex cultural processes are at play when audiences engage with ethnic media – and that ethnic audiences may have quite ordinary motivations for their media use that are obscured by a scholarly focus on the 'alternativeness' of ethnic media and the 'otherness' of ethnic minorities' practices. Indeed, Waisbord (2010, 155) advances the view that while particular traditions and cultures clearly infuse journalism with certain characteristics, we must resist

examining them through an essentialist view of culture, which necessarily curtails critical reflexivity.

### **New Zealand context**

New Zealand's Pacific peoples comprise the fourth-largest major ethnic group in New Zealand, behind Pākehā (New Zealand European), indigenous Māori, and Asian ethnic groups. They are a diverse group comprising a variety of linguistically, culturally and geographically distinct ethnic groups, primarily Samoan, Cook Islands, Tongan, Niuean, Fijian and Tokelauan groups, with smaller numbers from Tuvalu, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and the small island States of Micronesia (Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, n.d.). There are important cultural, historical and legal differences between the groups and some, particularly older, Pacific peoples have resisted a collective Pacific identity (Anae, 2001; Macpherson, 1999; Macpherson, 2001). Younger, New Zealand-born Pacific peoples, however, particularly those with mixed Pacific ethnicity, are increasingly adopting a shared Pacific or 'fa'a NiuSila' identity that departs from their parents' and grandparents' migrant origins and traditions (Anae, 2001; Macpherson, 2001; Spoonley, 2001), marking significant intergenerational and cultural transformation within Pacific groups (Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 2006).

From a tiny immigrant community of just 2,200 in 1945, Pacific peoples have become a population of considerable size (295,941 in 2013) and social significance (Statistics New Zealand, n.d., 2002). Today's Pacific population is mostly New Zealand-born, predominantly young (with a median age of 22 compared with 38 years for the total population), highly urbanised and characterised by rapid growth. By 2038, Pacific peoples are projected to make up about 10.9 percent of New Zealand's population, compared with 7.8 percent in 2013 (Statistics New Zealand, 2015). In just a few decades, the population has changed from a predominantly migrant group to a largely New Zealand-born population, and most Pacific groups have become stratified in terms of identity, language proficiency and world views between first-generation Pacific migrants who settled in New Zealand and those of Pacific Island heritage who were born in New Zealand. Despite differences between Pacific groups, many share common genealogical and cultural links that have become a basis for collective identity in New Zealand, where solidarity with other Pacific peoples provides a sense of security (Health Research Council, 2014, 3), especially in the context of being the smaller 'Other' to more numerous and politically dominant groups, as well as one of the more vulnerable groups in New Zealand. While there have been improvements in the educational and economic prospects of Pacific peoples, they have lower levels of formal education and income than the total population, poorer health status and higher rates of unemployment, and they are over-represented in lower-skilled manual jobs (Callister and Didham, 2008; Statistics New Zealand, 2002).

In terms of their relationship with the State, Pacific peoples are generally treated as a collective. NZ on Air, the State's main media funding agency, addresses Pacific audiences' needs in a single Pacific Content Strategy (NZ on Air, 2012a) and funds content predominantly through pan-Pacific programming and a pan-Pacific radio channel. Though "Pacific" is an external categorisation, Pacific media producers themselves perceive and describe themselves as such. In 2001, producers formed the New Zealand-based Pacific Islands Media Association (PIMA), which has become a lobby group for pan-Pacific print and broadcast media as well as various ethno-

specific radio, print and web media. For all of these reasons, this study takes a pan-Pacific approach to studying Pacific media in New Zealand.

Not surprisingly, given their minority status, Pacific peoples' media are small in comparison to most other media in New Zealand, where the mediascape is dominated by mainstream outlets that are largely Pākeha-dominated and, in the commercial sector, foreign-owned (Myllylahti 2014). The State funds public service programming on the publicly owned broadcasters Television New Zealand (TVNZ), Radio New Zealand (RNZ), the Māori Television Service (MTS), and the National Pacific Radio Trust, as well as on community-owned and privately owned broadcasters, such as Samoa Capital Radio. Following the deregulation of broadcasting in the late 1980s, however, the public service role of television in particular has diminished and commercial success, which generally counts against ethnic minority audiences, has become the dominant concern (Stephens 2014). The Māori media sphere, though small, appears to be thriving, helped partly by legislative and State funding support for indigenous media. Funding for Māori Television, along with funding for more than 20 iwi radio stations and various Māori programmes, follows Waitangi Tribunal and Privy Council decisions in the 1990s that forced the Government to support the cultural revitalisation of te reo and tikanga Māori through public broadcasting. These State-sponsored media, along with smaller commercial Māori media, such as *Mana* and *Tu Mai* magazines, comprise a small but conspicuous Māori media sphere.

Pacific media in New Zealand are minnows in comparison. Utanga (2007) and Kailahi (2009) describe a range of mostly small, family- or church-run newspapers, a national magazine, a handful of radio stations, some television programmes and online media, which, though growing, are less well established in New Zealand than overseas. The focus here is on news and current affairs media – not social or creative media such as entertainment television or music – and on media produced in Aotearoa/New Zealand (not in the wider Pacific) for New Zealand-based Pacific communities. In terms of publicly funded Pacific news media for New Zealand audiences, the State funds TVNZ's weekly news and current affairs programme *Tagata Pasifika*, the Pacific Media Network, which operates the national Niu FM channel as well as the Auckland-based Pacific language channel Radio531pi, the Wellington-based Samoan-language station Samoa Capital Radio (which broadcasts fewer than 40 hours a week) and, indirectly, various Pacific community radio programmes through its funding for community Access radio. There are also several independent Pacific-language newspapers, the pan-Pacific English-language newspaper *New Zealand Pacific*, the Samoan language station Radio Samoa, national magazine *Spasifik*, a handful of community television programmes such as *T-News* that are broadcast on the Auckland channel Face TV, and a growing number of online media such as *Moana TV*, *Kaniva Tonga* and *The Coconet.TV*.

### **Methodology**

This research represents a pilot study of the relationships that intended audiences of Pacific media have with Pacific media products and content. Focus group interviews were chosen as the method of investigation, first, because they are a recommended way of consulting with Pacific groups (Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 2006). Second, they enable researchers to better attend to communal relationships and interaction, which are fundamental to a Pacific research

methodology (Health Research Council, 2014), and to observe how audiences make sense of media in their interactions with each other (Hansen and Machin, 2013, 232), and, third, because Forde, Foxwell and Meadows' (2009, 24) qualitative audience research on Australian indigenous and ethnic community media audiences recommended focus groups as a model for encouraging disadvantaged communities' participation in discussions about 'their' media.

The method has limitations. Some participants can dominate discussion and group pressure can marginalise dissenting views (Hansen and Machin, 2013, 233), and studies have shown that people's orientation toward individualistic (mostly Western) or collectivistic, such as Pacific, cultures can affect the directness of their communication (Smith, 2008). However, Pacific peoples in New Zealand straddle both Western and Pacific cultures (New Zealand-born young people in particular are socialised to New Zealand norms) and adopt the mores and norms of each at different times depending on the issue (Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 2006, 27), and it cannot be assumed that the focus groups had an entirely common set of collectivist beliefs. Indeed, to assume that there might be only one legitimate response based on community consensus disregards complex socio-cultural dynamics and diversity among Pacific peoples (Health Research Council, 2014, 22)

Seven focus groups, ranging in size from 3 to 10 participants, were held in three major urban centres in New Zealand (Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland) with a total sample of 46 participants. Attention was paid to having a mix of ethnicities and backgrounds in each group to ensure a variety of views on Pacific media would be heard. Groups were also selected to highlight differences in perception and view; two groups, for example, comprised mostly under-25-year-old tradesmen while another comprised mostly 30- to 50-year-old female health workers. Focus groups did not aim to provide a statistically representative picture of Pacific audiences, but rather a theoretical sample (Glaser and Strauss, 1968) to generate talk that might help theory building around ethnic news media. As noted by Dhoest et al (2012), it is not possible to select "typical" ethnic minority audience members, so the point was to look for diverse and multiple identifications. It should be noted that although the sample is diverse, both between and within Pacific groups, it is nonetheless small and its findings cannot be easily generalised. However, by exploring the practices of a previously neglected group of audiences, this study hopes to raise questions that might focus future research and theory-building.

Focus group participants were found partly through a 'snowball' method and partly by tapping into existing Pacific groups. The sample comprised 20 women and 26 men, and a mix of ages, including 15 participants aged below 25 years but no one aged over 60. Almost three-quarters of participants (74 per cent) stated they had a good understanding of or were fluent in a Pacific language; 16 per cent said they had limited to no understanding of a Pacific language. Focus groups represented a mix of 1st-, 2nd- and 3rd-generation New Zealanders and a mix of Pacific ethnicities, (though a majority of participants identified as Samoan, the largest Pacific group in New Zealand).

The researcher, who is of Pacific and Pākehā heritage, was positioned as both insider and outsider. As a 3rd generation member of the diasporic Pacific community and directly accountable to the communities she is part of, the researcher was insider. As someone who can claim only 'part' Pacific ethnicity, and who was positioned differently to many of the research participants by educational, professional and socio-economic experiences, she was outsider. That location between insider and outsider positions as a researcher required extra care when making sense of

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participants' talk and the researcher drew on advice from the study's Pacific Advisory Group for guidance in this regard.

The interviews themselves were semi-structured – each group was prompted to talk about their media use and what influenced their decision to use Pacific or mainstream media – but aimed to privilege “horizontal interaction” to allow participants' perspectives and interactions to dominate the interview space (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2005). In analysing the data, participants' talk was read not as concrete evidence of media consumption, but more as a form of social action (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2005). What was important was how participants made sense of Pacific media within the social space of the focus group – the repertoire of narratives and meanings they called on and how they socially constructed those through talk (Lunt and Livingstone 1996). Focus group transcripts were read in their entirety several times, interrogated for recurring words and phrases and coded using theme analysis.

### Results and discussion

Only 19 focus group participants said they had used Pacific media in the previous week. That does not make the other participants non-users – all 46 participants said they had consumed Pacific media at some point and most referred in their focus group interviews to recently using Pacific media to follow stories on topics as varied as climate change, suicide, Samoa's recovery from the 2009 earthquake and tsunami, education issues and sport. Of those who had used Pacific media in the last week, the majority (n=15) listened to a Pacific radio station. Most (n=13) listened to the State-funded Pacific broadcaster Niu FM and a handful listened to the smaller stations, Samoa Capital Radio, Radio Samoa and Radio Ivanui. Eleven participants watched *Tagata Pasifika*, New Zealand's longest-running Pacific television news and current affairs programme, six read Pacific newspapers (notably, six also said they had watched Māori television news) and only two said they had followed Pacific news online.

Their talk about Pacific media and their media use reflected the literature on ethnic media in several respects. Participants felt a strong sense of alienation from mainstream media news, typically describing mainstream media as untrustworthy and racist and their portrayal of Pacific peoples as non-existent at best, or negative and stigmatising. Focus group participants were clear that if they followed mainstream news it was in a detached way: “It's not my news”. Indeed, participants talked in terms of looking for news but rarely finding it. Mainstream media had little room for their news – “They don't cover most of our stuff. There are various things that are important to each ethnic group that should have been covered, but they do not do that.” – yet Pacific media did not provide it as quickly, cheaply or conveniently, or in the form that participants wanted.

Focus Group Three: In terms of access too, [mainstream media] are much better than Pacific media. When I talk access is that international radio they get their news straight away, you know, but Pacific media it gets to them second and stuff.

Focus Group Four: [Mainstream media] is easier to understand if you're like, born here or can't understand the language. For the Samoan oldies, they like to go and get the Samoan paper because they understand it.

Focus Group Five: One thing I was following was the Samoan Independence celebrations – I was trying to look for you know coverage of the day and



*Tagata Pasifika* had some, so that's trawling for that, but there was very little other information other than people putting their own videos online.

Focus Group Seven: I'd also like to see just updates on the news of what's happening in Tonga, Samoa in terms of the local stuff and that's where all the nitty-gritty things, all the daily news that we get here do, which is what the Māori TV have for their people and – they've done so well, you know, why can't we do the same?

Instead, participants described various practices of searching for alternative sources of news in which Pacific peoples were visible, that was connected to their daily lives and communities ("Like 'the taro is arriving in Auckland'.... It's community-centred. It's not about what's happening in the world") and that demonstrated Pacific values of family and community service as well as a familiar socio/political outlook ("That the journalist who is asking the question ... it would be the same questions from Porirua as a single mum asking, 'Why?'"). Participants looked for news that reflected themselves and captured their lives and their concerns – mostly in Pacific media, but also in Māori media (see below) – and much of their talk was about the trust, credibility and belonging that came from the shared experience and worldview they recognised in those news sources.

In such ways, Pacific audiences' talk reinforced the functions described in the literature of providing self-representation and counter narratives to dominant media representations. There was less clear support in their talk, however, for the emerging scholarly emphasis on the importance of culture, argued, for instance, by Hanusch (2013b) who calls for a renewed focus on culture in his paper on the influence of culture and cultural values on Māori journalists' professional views and practices, and Kenix (2013), who argues that culture is central to how journalism is conceived by audiences and journalists and, in her study, more influential than organisational norms or professional orientation. The absence of cultural explanations in audiences' talk about their media use might indicate the extent to which cultural values and practices are taken-for-granted by participants but also raises questions about what we mean when we say culture shapes how people use and make sense of media. For these participants, no simple dichotomy of 'mainstream culture' and 'our culture' emerged in their talk.

Notably, in this study, talk about language and the cultural markers of Pacific media was not generally volunteered; it was usually prompted by researcher questions about what made media 'Pacific' and, then, participants talked most about "perspective". While the concept of perspective partly reflects a *cultural framing* of news, participants often described it as a worldview shaped as much by socio-economic context as by culture. For instance, many participants spoke of the appeal of indigenous Māori media, which represent a different cultural framework and ethnic community yet were seen to speak to a shared Māori and Pacific experience of being brown, marginalised, and having poorer economic circumstances than the overall New Zealand population (Statistics New Zealand and MPIA 2011). Participants said Māori television programmes spoke to people "the same as me – well, they're brownies", and asked "the questions that I would want to know" as opposed to mainstream media, which had "no idea of the community that I live in... South Auckland". [1]

The closest Pacific audience focus groups in this study came to describing a cultural framework for journalism was in discussions about humour. Participants typically valued a presentation style that was less formal than in the mainstream

media and characterised a Pacific journalism style as making jokes: “That’s our flavour.” For instance:

Participant 1: It’s like a mocking each other. That’s all they do because that’s what PI [2] is... we’re not taking ourselves too seriously.

Participant 2: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Participant 3: That’s right. It’s good content but it, it’s all masked in humour.

Where Pacific media presented news in too serious a tone, participants viewed them as less genuinely Pacific, describing them instead as “constructing” their content or “wanting to be like mainstream”. Like many cultural concepts, the idea of humour in news was ephemeral and merits a separate project of study.

Language is a clearer marker of culture, and was reflected in the participants’ talk, but even here the concept was slippery and contested – and demonstrated the dangers, as Madianou warns (2011), of focusing on groups or identities as homogenous or complete wholes, or privileging cultural practices that are neither straightforward nor uniform. If we want to avoid essentialising, then we need to understand the value of these media for people by beginning from their existing knowledge and social practices and the position of these specific media in that world.

Participants described a range of language practices, from an ideal of fluency through basic conversational understanding to simply being able to pronounce Pacific words correctly. In such talk they revealed complex negotiations of identity and group-boundary setting, and an interesting catch-22 for ethnic media. When asked to specify the media they had used in the last week, less than a quarter of participants listed Pacific language media (though almost three-quarters of participants stated they had a good understanding of or were fluent in a Pacific language). It was clear that language loss among those who were New Zealand-born was a significant barrier to their Pacific media use. Most young New-Zealand-born participants could not follow media in a Pacific language: “I just wish it was more accessible because I know I can’t learn Samoan. Like, I have been trying, but I can’t learn it in a quick amount of time.” Even participants who described themselves as fluent speakers said they struggled to read in-language: “Samoan is a second language so it takes a lot more time ... so I just look at the pictures.” Though only a minority of participants said they used Pacific language media, most saw it as the natural role of ethnic media to foster ethnic languages and several called on Pacific media to provide more language instruction: “Because it gets youth more involved in the language and stuff”; “That’s the main problem that the youths today –their mother tongue, they’ve lost it.”

On the face of it, such talk appears to support the language mission defined in the ethnic media literature, but it should not be overstated. Respondents’ statements may say more about the cultural capital of language fluency in Pacific spaces (Mila-Schaaf 2010, 262; Southwick 2001, 125) than the role of these media in people’s lives. Elsewhere (NZ on Air 2012b, 37), Pacific audiences have said that Pacific broadcast programming should be focused most on language and culture, but when researchers interrogated that more closely they found that language on its own was significantly less important than culture, which was in turn less important than Pacific perspectives and news and current events. In this study, the apparent gap between audiences’ idealisation of the language mission and their actual media practices suggests further study is needed to test whether older definitions about ethnic media’s language and cultural role can explain the place of ethnic media, especially in a wider context of generational language loss. The fact that producers of the State-funded national Pacific radio station Niu FM sought permission to relax its language programme targets suggests that talk about what media *should do* does not necessarily match up

with Pacific realities. At Niu FM, at least, producers found that Pacific language use was turning listeners away: “Once you start pushing language at our audience they just switch off” (Interview with Niu FM producer, 2011). [3]

### *Valuing quality journalism*

Significantly, rather than foregrounding culture in their talk about Pacific media, a stronger theme about which participants not only spoke more often but also spoke without prompting, was essentially about journalism. Discussion in every focus group turned to various aspects of the content and format of Pacific news and media outlets’ journalism practices. In particular, participants talked about Pacific media with regard to their lack of timeliness, their perceived amateurism, their outdated practices (particularly how they were not up-to-the-minute with the digital formats and platforms that participants used in their everyday lives), and a lack of reporting depth, especially on social issues.

I’d like to see all facets of our Pacific community not just the achievers and the scholarship winners. I get tired of that... We’ve got massive issues in housing and education and social areas, but you don’t want to just hear the politics of that or solutions to that; you want to hear some stories about the struggles and in between.

Participants used the idea of journalism in evaluating Pacific media – “there’s not the kind of depth you’d have in mainstream” – and used it in terms that would be unremarkable for any other audience group in New Zealand. Journalism for these participants was defined by wider societal norms as giving a critical, comprehensible and accurate account of daily events and current affairs, and disseminating relevant news and public information in a timely fashion (Bardoel and Deuze 2001; Urban and Schweiger 2014): “I’d like to see what’s hot, and what’s hot and on top right now, not like from a week ago.”

To be clear, participants articulated their critique within a Pacific-only space and it is unlikely that participants would have voiced the same critique in a predominantly Pākehā forum, especially given their strong assertion of ownership and loyalty to Pacific media. Regardless of whether they consumed these media or were satisfied with the news these media produced, participants routinely described them as “our media” and there was an implicit expectation that Pacific peoples should know them – the strength of one’s ethnicity/Pacificness hinged to some degree on one’s recognition of these media as important cultural objects. This echoes NZ on Air’s findings (2012b, 5) that Pacific audiences’ criticism of the depth of Pacific radio and TV coverage did not dampen their enthusiasm for “connecting to their Pacific identity and communities across all formats”.

Nevertheless, the dominant talk that took hold in focus groups was that Pacific media failed to match up to their desire for high-quality journalism in key respects. First, they were seen as out-dated – their formats and styles had not changed, and their technology was “behind the times”. “You would have thought we would have evolved,” was a typical comment. Participants, most of whom described their media habits as web-based, wanted more news online, news alerts on their phones, Pacific news apps, and a more sophisticated social media presence from Pacific media. A search of Pacific media outlets revealed several, including larger outlets like Samoa Capital Radio, had no social media presence, while others had no website or a website that was under construction, broken or out-of-date. The larger State-funded media

(Niu FM and *Tagata Pasifika*) had a relatively strong social media presence, but posts were more often promotions for upcoming shows and competitions than news updates.

Pacific audience participants were similarly critical of Pacific media's perceived amateurism relative to other news outlets. They described presenters at the main Pacific broadcasters as weak – unable to carry out a proper conversation, unable to handle debate, unable to handle complexity – and the community newspapers and radio programmes as often inaccurate.

They've either got to train up and have apprenticeship type things to really boost their skill base – but I actually think they just don't know what they're doing because they think that their accent is what's getting their audience.

What is notable here is that participants measured Pacific media against mainstream (and Māori) news media and their norms. While they expected Pacific media to be different from mainstream media in some respects – subject matter, point of view, and cultural framework – that did not equate to a different expectation of quality journalism.

I'm quite selective now because we have this mainstream that we've been kind of adapting to for so long and then having something that doesn't quite [live] up to that standard, will really annoy me.

Ethnic or in-group connection and loyalty to 'our media' was no substitute for the quality journalism that participants said they wanted – and wanted more often. The desire for up-to-date news was a common refrain in focus groups. Many Pacific media publish or broadcast only weekly and their news has often been reported first elsewhere [5], so news reports can be quite old by the time audiences see them, which clearly frustrated participants: "Why can't we just have updates every day of the news"; "We're getting it too late, you know"; "I want to know what's hot right now in Samoa or in Tonga or whatever. You know, we need to be update right now."

van der Wurff and Schoenbach's large-scale survey in the Netherlands (2014) suggests that audiences value journalism that not only disseminates the news as quickly as possible but that interprets it as well. Media talk within the Pacific focus groups suggests Pacific audiences similarly value a more interpretive role for journalism. Participants demanded more detailed analysis of news and current affairs and more coverage and interpretation of social problems and the "nitty gritty" of Pacific peoples' lives. They repeatedly voiced frustration with Pacific media outlets' false positive image of their communities, which they said was driven by focusing too narrowly on inspirational and feel-good stories: "It's all a bit celebrate, festival events-based rather than what's the nuts and bolts of the politics that's going on."

Research on Pacific media producers (Ross, 2014b) found most producers feel a need to portray their communities in a positive light, usually to combat stereotyped or negative representations in mainstream news or to provide positive role models for socio-economic advancement, and this mirrors findings in studies of ethnic media elsewhere (Daniels 2006). But, again, by attending to what ethnic audiences say in relation to news media – and how they categorise media – a modified mission for ethnic media emerges.

They need to be a little bit more open ... because we tend to focus on the positive we are actually not really covering the reality – that life for Pacific people is quite difficult.

## **Conclusion**

Viewing ethnic media through the prism of audience members' talk, and paying close attention to what they are doing on the ground with and around media

(Couldry 2011, 226), can provide fresh perspectives on the role of ethnic media. Clearly, while the Pacific participants in this study spoke in terms that linked to a number of widely studied ethnic media dimensions such as language, they also spoke in terms that foregrounded aspects of media that are neither particular to ethnic media nor to participants' ethnicity and culture. Indeed, a 'bottom-up' approach allows us to rethink the explanatory power of essentialising categories of ethnicity and culture, which risk being a lens of difference. As this study shows, accounts about the culture of a Pacific person in New Zealand must also include having access to good journalism and ideas of high quality public debate.

In key respects this is an important point to make because an approach that allows us to view ethnic media in journalistic as much as cultural terms may have very real consequences for the political and economic framing of ethnic media spaces, not just in New Zealand but elsewhere. For instance, Pacific media producers often value specific cultural skills over journalism skills, preferring to hire someone with language fluency over someone with journalism training or experience (Utanga 2007, 26), when audience participants' demand for higher-quality journalism suggests this may not always be the best approach. Furthermore, funding and regulatory structures often prioritise cultural functions at the expense of journalistic functions. The State-owned Pacific Media Network, for instance, is required to prioritise Pacific languages and culture and must report to its funder against language targets of at least 90 hours of Pacific language a week on Niu FM and 531pi, while NZ on Air funding for Pacific news and current affairs programmes like *Tagata Pasifika* has been relatively poor compared with funding for cultural and/or entertainment programmes such as *Fresh*, a youth-orientated magazine production "with a light-hearted take on Pacific culture and events" (NZ on Air, n.d.) But when external funders are more focused on cultural representation and performance than journalism (and interviews with producers [6], as well as the State's 2014 request for proposals for the Pacific television shows, *Tagata Pasifika* and *Fresh* [NZ on Air, 2014], suggest that is often the case) then ethnic media producers, who already face significant structural and funding constraints, are unlikely to get the resourcing they need to produce the higher-quality, in-depth journalism that audiences say they want. [7]

None of this is to say, of course, that the cultural dimension of ethnic media is *not* important. Clearly, for Pacific producers, cultural factors are very important (Ross, 2014b) and it is probable that they are important to audiences also, perhaps in different ways and in ways that are harder for audiences to articulate. The point remains, however, that the concept of culture is far from straightforward (not least within Pacific social spaces where what counts as 'authentically' Pacific is hotly contested [Southwick 2001; Mila-Schaaf 2010]), and attempts to define it within ethnic media research risk essentialising what are diverse and dynamic groups, values and practices. Instead, ethnic media research could usefully draw on a wider theoretical base, including those theories grounded in the periphery (Connell 2007), and a practice-based approach that complicates our understandings (Couldry 2012, 38) about the intersection of cultures, media, and social groups and institutions. The aim here is not to contradict earlier theories about ethnic media but to advance the idea that we reassess them in light of the practices of journalists and audiences alike – and to argue, as Steenson and Ahva (2015, 14) have elsewhere, for an audience-inclusive aspect to theorising journalism. We must aim to ensure our study of ethnic media is oriented away from narrow and essentialised views of difference and/or culture towards people and their diverse practices. Studies with audiences are a good place to start.

### NOTES

1. In a 2011 survey of Pacific peoples' views on Pacific broadcasting (NZ on Air 2012b) more than 70 per cent of respondents said they watched Māori TV for "Pacific programmes", making Māori TV their second-most-watched television channel.
2. Pacific Islander.
3. This tension is mirrored elsewhere, for example at the indigenous Māori Television Service. Launched in 2004 with the explicit aim of contributing to language revitalisation, it created a second te reo channel in 2008 for fluent Māori language speakers and second language learners in a bid to manage the competing tasks of programming for language revitalisation and programming to build and maintain audience share (Māori Television Service, 2008).
4. New Zealand European.
5. Typically, ethnic media outlets lack enough trained staff and/or are too poorly resourced to undertake much of their own reporting and news is often pulled second-hand from elsewhere (Browne 2005; Kailahi 2009; Utanga 2007).
6. Interviews with producers: Samoa Capital Radio, 18 September, 2010; *Pacific Beat Street*, 30 September, 2010; Niu FM, 24 August, 2011.
7. The capacity of Pacific media to produce high-quality journalism was brought into sharp relief by Television New Zealand's (TVNZ) decision in late 2014 to outsource its Pacific programmes. At the time, Radio New Zealand noted in a 13 December, 2014 report that New Zealand had only one small Pacific production company and *Spasifik* reported (November, 2014) that Pacific communities questioned the capacity of small independent companies to produce the shows to the same quality with the same budget.

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