

Living with the backlash

The Tu Tangata survey of Maori journalists in newspapers showing two percent won't set the world on fire. But it should point to the reason for a large part of the ignorance about Maori issues both within the media and without in the reading public.

This ignorance was accorded respectability late last year as a normally uninterested media tried to make sense of the Maori Affairs Department Secretary negotiating an overseas loan for the Maori people's benefit.

All the media succeeded in doing was backing up prejudices about how unsophisticated Maori are. And the reporters who had few contacts in Maoridom, showed that lack of depth by faithfully carrying charge and counter-charge by the ten or so Maori in the public eye who are expected to be experts on everything.

It's the equivalent of reporters checking finance releases from Roger Douglas with Rob Muldoon and then reporting the two views as balanced journalism.

That's a type of lazy journalism that Pakeha are critical of, but it's been the bread and butter coverage of events in the Maori community for years now.

At a time when there are signs of reconciliation between Pakeha and Maori in society, there are equally signs of fear of change. Some fear is through misunderstanding, others are fearful through realisation that the power must be shared.

Most people have views shaped by the media and seek out what confirms their view.

Because of the low priority given the place of Maoritanga in New Zealand society, it remains a low priority in terms of 'news value' for editors. Most have had little acquaintance with Maoridom's value structures and priorities, and so have no basis on which to judge what is news in a Maori sense.

However the resurgence of Maoritanga and its effects on Pakeha New Zealand has not escaped the attention of the editors. Two opposite responses have been to either appoint specialist Pakeha reporters to cover Maori news or "cover Maori news just like any other news." Both responses have failed to do the job professionally because of the inability of the means (Pakeha reporter) and the medium (Pakeha newspaper) to carry a Maori perspective. This is news that goes further than

mentioning Maori placenames and people. And so newspapers, along with television and radio, are struggling to come to grips with this inability.

The training and hiring of Maori journalists has begun with little support so far from the media who will most benefit, in the way of more and better news, and therefore more sales. But as can be seen from the Tu Tangata survey, it is only a trickle coming through. The twenty five Maori journalists may be seen as being Maori by the editors, but in the Maori world they are just starting out and have to earn respect and cooperation from their elders. Although the survey is yet to be conducted amongst television and radio journalists, information shows that the total number of Maori wouldn't exceed twenty.

That could hardly be called being swamped with Maoritanga, as some critics have said. The benefit of a strong Maori presence in the media of New Zealand is that more New Zealanders get to know more about themselves as New Zealanders.

This is preferable to hearing, seeing and reading about ourselves from reporters in Perth, Fremantle.

