Book review: Racism, ethnicity and the media

M. Hirst

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme

Recommended Citation
Hirst, M., Book review: Racism, ethnicity and the media, Asia Pacific Media Educator, 1, 1996, 169-172.
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss1/19

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
are located in the regions about which they write, they are also working in relatively pluralist locations provided through universities and networks throughout the world.

Students' reading ability in this very specific and sophisticated communications text might be considered before recommending the book. A case in point is the following in which complex notions like "cultural ecologies" and "geolinguistic regions" are presented as assumptions of prior understanding:

"Shifting geopolitical patterns within the world system, most notably the partial dismantling of national boundaries in Europe, the demise of Communism, and the rise of the Asian economies, are having a profound effect on cultural ecologies and the consequent receptiveness of many regions of the world to new cultural influences, including new sources and kinds of television. Alongside this, and related to it, the last ten years have seen major changes in television cultures of many countries as technological innovation, industrial realignments, and modifications in regulatory philosophy have begun to produce a new audiovisual landscape."

This is not meant as a criticism, but rather a warning that understanding concepts like these require some contextualising before the book is recommended to students.


Reviewed by Martin Hirst

A central concern of this book is that the myths of Australian national identity, especially as generated and communicated by the mass media, do not accord with the multicultural diversity of Australian life. This dissonance has varied and related causes. Some of them, such as declining national economic fortunes are locally-generated, though with an international context. Other factors are external, but impinging explicitly on national life and consciousness in Australia.
Most important on a global scale is of course the collapse of Stalinist monoliths in Eastern Europe and the uncertainty of future directions in the former "Communist" nations of the world. Regionally the issue that dominates debate about what makes "Australianness" is economic and communications integration with nations in Asia.

The authors argue that the media is a channel for laying to rest the old myths (such as the bronzed Aussie "ANZAC" bravely fighting against unspeakable odds at Gallipoli in WWI, or the "Diggers" of WWII and the ubiquitous "Man from Snowy River") and generating new ones (in particular, the myth of a harmonious and unitary, yet multicultural, nation). The purpose of the new national myths is to maintain the existing social order, that is they have an overt function as ideology, binding audiences as citizens to the Australian nation-state and the dominant interests it represents.

Their theoretical approach is refreshing and reflects the growing maturity of media studies in Australia. Broadly the interest is in communication "strategies" in post-colonial societies, Australia being a prime example of a settler state that is still having trouble coming to terms with a violent and racist past. Two main tools of analysis are adopted, complementing each other and leading to a rich cross-fertilisation of ideas.

The first approach looks at ownership and concentration and the conclusions, though brief, support the general consensus in media sociology that concentration of ownership in fewer hands, linked to globalisation of production, leads to shrinking diversity in media output.

However, this does not fall into a bleak conspiracy theory (à la Herman and Chomsky) because it is linked to a view of audiences as active and participating in the generation of meaning. This approach is very close to that adopted by the Glasgow University Media Group and the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies. Consequently due reference is made to the work of pioneers in this field, such as Stuart Hall.

In an interesting aside open to several interpretations, the authors have a go at what they describe as American empiricism in media research. They argue that this school is dry and unable to move beyond circular arguments of cause and effect. The authors' affection for the British tradition, over one of the US models, is perhaps a subtle indicator to non-Australian readers of Australia's antipodean status as a former British colony with very little tradition of independent intellectual reasoning.

A crucial element of the early chapters, each of them a short definitional and explanatory essay on ideology, racism and media, is the integration of a textual and sociological analysis that
recognises the importance of power differentials. As the authors themselves note (pp.8-9), their work fits into a growing field of international comparative research into ethnicity, national identity and the role of the mass media.

The early part of the book also offers a cogent critique of the Anglo-Celtic (sic) tradition of media studies, which in many instances and often unthinkingly, already constructs individuals from non-English speaking backgrounds as the "Other". In the Australian context this leads to an interesting assertion that the national broadcaster charged with explaining, inventing and carrying multiculturalism to the Australian public is caught in an assimilationist time warp servicing the "national" interests of the state and powerful groups who live by its patronage.

According to Jakubowicz et al, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) also intervenes into national life to "internationalise" the Australian middle class, "in the face of a globalising communication and production environment against which that class remained resistant" (p.13). This is a contentious point and beyond the scope of this review, but I have no doubt that on the first point at least they are correct.

A further sign of the maturity of cultural and media studies in Australia is that the authors situate the debate, not on the liberal democratic "level playing field" of consensus and pluralism, but on the rough terrain of conflict and struggle. In this interpretation, meaning and significance are contested and while the dominant ideologues can guarantee acceptable levels of compliance, it is never 100 per cent. Resistance on the ground of class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality ensures that not everyone will submit to manufactured consent.

The chapters on racism deal with two distinct problems, which are not unique to Australia and perhaps provide an interesting case study for other settler-state nations that have experienced high levels of immigration since the 1950s. First, the treatment of indigenous people, dispossessed, wiped out and forgotten for almost 200 years. Second, recent arrivals of migrants in Australia have been subjected to varying degrees of racism, rejection and humiliation that are now being addressed in many forums.

In recent years advances in technology have led to a surge in indigenous broadcasting and print media and to a growing recognition by second generation children of migrants that they can appropriate their identities for positive, or even subversive actions. The examples they give of Imparja television broadcasting in remote central Australia and the hit stage show Wogs Out of Work are useful reminders that cultural hegemony comes at a price. In order to accommodate resistance, some room
must be found at the table for the opposition.

What strikes a reader of this book who is familiar with the Australian situation is the inherent racism of the nation-state in its treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people on a spectrum from extermination to assimilation, which in the opinion of some is ultimately the same thing.

The book also looks closely at the media industry using both political economy and cultural studies approaches. Thus makes the chapters on news production; news values and ideology comprehensive and easy to understand. I particularly like the authors' definition of news as "constructed and negotiated by the people who gather it and present it - it is not simply a rigid or predetermined ideology" (p.159).

It is also worthy of note that the authors have interviewed a number of young media workers from non English-speaking backgrounds (NESB) and they have plenty to say about employment practices, time constraints and the framing of news values; all of which contribute to the lack of good representation of NESB communities.

My only real criticism of the book is the final section, perhaps self-consciously titled The Way Forward. Here the authors stumble on the well-travelled road of media reforms. Unfortunately all they can come up with is a plea for more ethnic voices in the media, more sympathetic management and more access for NESB communities. This is a shame because the authors make a strong case for their final observation that a socially responsible media in Australia remains a vision, rather than a reality.

So what's the alternative? A possible answer lies in the authors' comments near the end of the book where they reverse the usual question asked by media studies: Is the pattern of oppression recreated in the media the result of conscious action by media owners, managers and workers? Instead a different approach to research is suggested. We should be asking: What conscious activity (by producers and audiences) could change or prevent oppression?

It is true that media communication while becoming more globalised with appalling consequences for news values and inclusivity in the media, is consumed locally. Here lies the possible solution. We can hope that as news from an ever more unstable world is transmitted simultaneously from Tienanmen Square, to Red Square, to Times Square, to Piccadilly and Martin Place, local people will make of it what they can and respond accordingly.