

The Pantomime Public Sphere: New Zealand Broadcasting News 1923-1962

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Abstract

It is a curious feature of New Zealand's broadcasting history, which dates back to 1921, that for forty of those years there was no independent news service. In fact, from 1937 to 1962 broadcasting news was prepared by government officials. From 1937 to 1950 it was actually prepared, each day, in the Prime Minister's office. Allied to all this was a ban on the broadcasting of controversial material that stretched from 1924 to 1954.

This paper examines the period from 1937 to 1962, the lifetime of what was known as The Official News Service. In particular, it examines in detail the early part of that period, up until the late 1940's when the system was put in place. Those were the years of the first Labour Government, one of New Zealand's most significant administrations in terms of social change. Labour's idealism shaped its broadcasting policy in many ways - music, drama, community broadcasting and more. During these years the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra was set up under the auspices of the New Zealand Broadcasting Service. Yet Labour policies also showed political opportunism, even cynicism - the control of radio news, the approach to controversy.

The paper asks the question: why did one of New Zealand's most idealistic and democratic governments behave in such an undemocratic way towards radio news? Drawing on the Parliamentary debates of the period, and a variety of secondary sources the paper uses a theoretical prism from the public sphere notion of Jurgen Habermas and the development theory of Denis McQuail to provide an insight into the dynamics of broadcasting in New Zealand. This enables the paper to conclude that Labour not only failed to create a public sphere in broadcasting, but in fact created an environment that mimicked a Habermasian public sphere by creating a pantomime public sphere. And using McQuail the paper concludes that there were deeper reasons for this than political cynicism and suggests that Labour's approach to news and current affairs sprang out of its idealism, however misplaced that might have been.

Introduction

This paper emerges out of a long-standing interest in the Official News Service and the contradictions in the radio policy of the first Labour Government. Students have found it odd that as recently as the early 1960s radio news was written, in effect by the government; and that there was a time when the Prime Minister oversaw the process. However strange that might seem today, it did not seem all that strange back then. A radio listener in the late 1930s and 1940s would have heard radio news bulletins; talks by appropriately qualified persons; radio debates; and the live broadcast of Parliament's proceedings.

It all seemed like a smaller, colonial version of what one might hear on the BBC, which was the standard New Zealand aspired to (and deviated from more than it cared to admit). There was no great secret to it all. Prime Minister Michael Joseph Savage often explained the process by which his office

compiled the news bulletins under his supervision. But the wider implication of this was usually overlooked except by Labour's political opponents, the National Party (who, despite their regular complaints, was happy enough to continue the system when they came to power at the end of 1949).

The Official News Service lasted through three governments: the first labour Government (1935-1949); the first National Government (1949-1957); and the second Labour Government (1957-1960). In 1960 the arrival of television and the election late that year of the second National government saw the beginning of a shift which resulted in the 1961 Broadcasting Corporation Act which the old Broadcasting service turned from a government department into a public corporation with, among other things, the right to set up an independent news service. This was quickly done when the new NZBC came into existence in 1962.

This paper focuses principally on the period up until 1949. It begins with a discussion of Habermas's theory of the public sphere.

The Public Sphere

Right at the start of his 1964 essay, "The Public Sphere", Habermas makes clear the nature of the public sphere: it is a social space where public opinion can be formed. And that occurs through the public use of reason. In his 1962 masterwork, "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere", Habermas locates the evolution of his public sphere in specific space and time, tracing its development from the Middle Ages to an ideal in the England, France and Germany of the eighteenth century. But in reality Habermas is creating an argument about the nature of public debate in the process of creating informed consent.

The key is the oppositional nature of the public sphere. The public sphere evolved as a space between the private sphere (domesticity, private commerce) and the sphere of public authority (the State). Habermas argues that the public sphere developed in opposition to public authority in the sense of scrutinising and overseeing it through public opinion. Habermas describes this as the principle of supervision, and, in a sense, the battle for a public sphere is the battle to assert the right to supervise the State;

"To the principle of the existing power, the bourgeois public opposed the principle of supervision-that very principle that demands that proceedings be made public. The principle of supervision is thus a means of transforming the nature of power, not merely exchanging one basis of legitimacy for another." (Habermas in Mattelart and Siegelau 1979:199)

This goes to the heart of the public sphere: by standing apart from the State and supervising it, the public sphere transforms the nature of power. The power of the public sphere, expressed through public opinion, is a constant factor in the power equation. But the separation of the public sphere and the State is essential if the principle of supervision through public opinion is to function properly. As Robbins (1993) observes the public sphere differs from the concept of "hegemony":

"The public sphere is less on the side of rule, more open to opposing views." (Robbins 1993:xvii)

With the primacy of public opinion in the public sphere, Habermas lays great emphasis on the process of opinion formation. In, "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere", Habermas argues that it is the process that gives

legitimacy to the end result, not the other way around. (Habermas in Calhoun (ed) 1992:446) This public opinion that has not been arrived at through vigorous and transparent debate among all citizens is less valid than otherwise. That underlines the centrality of the media to a healthy public sphere. Habermas describes the press as “the pre-eminent institution of the public sphere.” (1989:181)

In, “The Structural Transformation of the Public sphere” (1989), Habermas’s account of the rise of the bourgeois public sphere is underpinned constantly by advances in press freedom. And it’s the commercialisation of the press that plays a crucial role in the structural transformation that Habermas describes:

“To the extent that the press commercialised the threshold between the circulation of a commodity and the exchange of communications among the members of the public was levelled; within the private domain the clear line separating the public sphere from the private gets blurred.” (1989:181)

The inability, or unwillingness, of the press to balance its private, commercial drives and its public responsibilities was a key factor in the erosion of the Habermasian public sphere, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The rise of the advertising and public relations industries exacerbated the problem. Manipulation by media, rather than illumination through the media became the rule to an increasing extent. There sets in a process that Habermas calls re-feudalisation: a reversion back to the feudal situation where power is established, not through informed consent, but is asserted by public authority through ceremony, and display which appeal to emotion rather than intellect.

Corner has argued that the idea of the public sphere “has undoubtedly been the most influential idea in recent media research on policy and institutions” (Corner 1999:21). But the Habermasian template has been seen as flawed in significant ways, from its elitism and gender bias (Fraser in Calhoun 1992) to its historical accuracy (Schudson in Calhoun 1992). But if there is dispute on specific aspects of the public sphere there is also a recognition of the value of its insights and portrayal of an ideal of rational critical debate in a democratic society. A debate, facilitated by an independent media, which resulted in the supervision of the state through public opinion. This highlights the prime importance of the role played in such an ideal by the media itself.

Is it possible, therefore, to argue that in a healthy public sphere, the critical importance of rational, critical debate means that individual media outlets must in a sense be mini-public spheres? They should embody within themselves the elements of a true public sphere - quality information, vigorous debate, open access and integrity of process.

A pantomime public sphere is one in which these qualities have been hollowed out while the outward forms remain: for example news bulletins or current affairs debates.

This was the situation that evolved through the early decades of New Zealand broadcasting. Listeners could switch on their radios and hear the normal range of offerings from the public sphere of broadcasting, typified by an outlet such as the BBC. But these forms and formats were a pantomime. At the heart of the matter lay that core concept of the Habermasian public sphere: its relationship with the State.

New Zealand Radio Pre 1935

In 1923 the Government passed regulations forbidding the fledgling broadcasting industry from airing material of a controversial nature and gave the appropriate minister wide powers to determine the content of radio broadcasts:

“Broadcasting stations shall not be used for the dissemination of propaganda of a controversial nature, but shall be restricted to matter of an educative or entertaining character, such as news, lectures, useful information, religious services, musical or elocutionary entertainment, and such other items of general interest as may be approved by the minister from time to time.” (Day 1994:51)

The same regulations also forbade broadcasters from carrying advertising. The regulations also allowed the minister to ban broadcasts which, in his or her judgement, fell outside the regulations or did not “conduce to the public interest” (Day 1994:51).

These were broad provisions and they were to cast a long shadow. The phrase “propaganda of a controversial nature” was open to wide interpretation, especially in the light of the power given to the minister to interpret the public interest. Also of interest are the terms “news” and “useful information”. The early radio stations often interpreted these being one and the same. (Sullivan 1987). Day observes that the regulations clearly showed Government’s determination to control broadcasting even if it had not yet decided to run radio stations itself. The ban on controversial broadcasting was modelled on comparable legislation in Britain and would remain in force until 1954, apart from a brief period in 1935-36 (Britain lifted this ban completely in 1928).

During the 1920s and into the 1930s New Zealand’s radio industry was a mix of private stations (known as “B” stations) and, after 1925, four publicly-owned stations, operated by a private company, The Radio Broadcasting Company, under contract to the government. It was rather an experimental period. But in 1931 the Government decided to tighten further the public control of broadcasting along the lines of the British public broadcasting model. The contract of the RBC was not renewed and the Government took over the running of the four public stations through a government-appointed Broadcasting Board. The private “B” stations were tolerated, but not encouraged. The ban on advertising remained in the hope that the “B” stations, starved of income, would die away. For their part, the “B” stations refused to go away, and pushed hard to be allowed to carry advertising and controversial broadcasting.

The ban remained in force; but there was one loophole - religious broadcasts. Officials were reluctant to censor the clergy and shrewd religious broadcasters were often able to embark on significant social comment under the camouflage of their radio sermons. One such parson was Colin Scrimgeour who broadcast a regular Sunday night programme, *The Friendly Road*, on the country’s largest “B” station, Auckland’s 1ZB.

“Scrim”, as he was known, acquired a considerable following and since he was close to Labour (though never a party member) he was regarded as a threat by the conservative government of the day. On the eve of the 1935 election Scrim’s regular Sunday night broadcast was jammed by Post Office officials, apparently acting on instructions from the government (Day 1994:200-208; L. Edwards 1971:81-83).

The jamming of “Scrim’s” programme underlined both the potential and

the vulnerability, of radio as a vehicle for public discourse. Between 1925 and 1935, radio had gone from being a novelty, with only 4,702 radio licences in the country, to a regular household appliance, with 152,808 licences (Aitkinson 2003:139-140). But there had been no comparable development in radio news services. Both private and public radio stations broadcast stories from newspapers under arrangements with newspaper owners and had what Day has described as, “a wary alliance” with each other (Day 1994:119). The largely family owned newspapers would have preferred radio to be private enterprise rather than come under state control (Ibid).

But state regulation, especially in the area of controversial material, was a reality for radio stations. Indeed, an opinion from the head of the Post and Telegraph department, which was responsible for radio, told the radio broadcasting company, “that nothing should be said having for an object the inflaming of political feeling” for its part the RBC argued that, “strictly interpreted, the regulation prohibited most spoken programming” (Day 1994:91). Caught in this bind, radio remained passive in the news area, interpreting news as useful, factual information sanctioned either by prior publication or government approval.

Hope has argued that this state regulation resulted in the equation of public service with the protection of the public good. And worked against the idea “that information might be disseminated as a public resource for argument and social reflection” (Hope in Continuum 1996, Hutchison & Lealand (eds) Page 16). As a result by the mid 1930’s a precondition had been created for moving radio news from state regulation to direct ministerial control.

1935 Labours Opening Moves

Labour won the 1935 election and proceeded to set up its first government. The “B” stations, of which there were 22, had high hopes of Labour’s sympathy on advertising and controversial broadcasting; but those hopes were misplaced. Labour proceeded to allow advertising and to ease the broadcasting of controversial material; but they did so in such a way as to ensure that the, not private broadcasters, monopolised these areas. In the 1936 Broadcasting Act the Labour government introduced complete government control of broadcasting, including content on the private stations. The groundwork for the introduction of commercial broadcasting was laid (The details would be incorporated into the 1937 Broadcasting Amendment Act). But commercial radio would only be for state-owned radio stations, thus ensuring that private stations, unable to advertise, closed down. The Government embarked on a programme of purchasing private stations and the nature of these arrangements sometimes led to acrimony in Parliament (See for example NZPD Vol. 248:447). Opposition to private broadcasting was a long-established Labour policy, but two factors played a part in the decision: first Labour felt that the press was hostile and they wanted to have radio as “their” medium, especially in the audience-rich popular radio formats; and second, Labour feared that if the “B” stations became commercially successful through advertising, then newspapers would purchase them, thereby opening up a second media front against Labour.

Also in 1936 the Government introduced the live broadcasting of Parliament. This was an innovative, indeed radical, move. For the government it was a no-loose situation: broadcasting Parliament was a popular thing to do; it provided the government with a plausible argument for avoiding a wider

airing of controversial issues (who better to debate these issues than the people's elected representatives?); and since the government controlled Parliament's agenda it meant that the government controlled the public debate on the nation's airwaves.

For those wanting a wider public sphere of debate on radio the broadcasting of Parliament provided a problem: it was an excellent idea, but the airing of all public debate through Parliamentary broadcasts restricted the range of independent opinion reaching listeners. Moreover, the format of debate tended to frame discussion in bi-polar terms which was not necessarily ideal for broadcasting which thrived on a range of opinion. During the Parliamentary sessions of 1936 and 1937 the government frequently pointed out how often Opposition MPs were on the air criticising the government. On one occasion at least Savage noted that given the Government's large majority Opposition backbenchers spoke more often than their Government counterparts. (NZPD Vol. 249:510)

In response, Opposition MP (and future Prime Minister) Sid Holland, argued that the State operated broadcasting service should be operated fairly and "it was not operating fairly outside the Chamber". (Ibid) The opposition's real gripe was with another of Labour's innovations: a radio news service run out of the Prime Minister's office.

In September 1937 the Government set up an Official News Service for radio. In many ways this was the most far-reaching, and most pernicious, in its impact on radio's public sphere. In effect, the Official News Service prevented the creation of an independent source of news on radio for the next 25 years.

During that time the local news bulletins were prepared by government officials, first in the Prime Minister's office and later, after 1950, in the publicity section of the department of Tourism and Publicity. These bulletins of government-approved information were then given to the broadcasting service to read. Prime Minister Savage told Parliament that he personally saw all the material before it went to air. Savage's fullest explanation of the process came on August 19 1938 during a debate on the estimates for the Prime Minister's office. Savage was asked about a person in his office referred to as "the reference officer". Savage told Parliament that the reference officer was the person who compiled the nightly radio news bulletin, to the Prime Minister's instructions. The Prime Minister told the House:

"Every afternoon member's would see the broadcast for the day come to him and he approved it and he approved it before it went out. He might not have been entirely successful, but he had always done his best to cut out anything in the nature of propaganda". (NZPD Vol. 252:442).

Savage always took great pains to emphasise the integrity of his sub-editorial efforts. He would explain that the bulletin was just a compilation of neutral facts from government departments. But the politically cynical side to Official News Service was acknowledged by him, in effect, almost a year earlier, during debate on the Broadcasting Amendment Bill. Savage recounted to the House a conversation he had had with Sir John Reith, the Director-General of the BBC, in London, a few months earlier. Savage had told Reith about the plans for an Official News Service. Reith had asked if a Government news service would not be one-sided?

"I replied, 'it is one-sided now, so we cannot make it much worse'. He asked, 'What do you mean?' I replied, 'We only get one side of the political argument through the newspapers'." (NZPD Vol. 249 pp 149-150)

In these three ways New Zealand broadcasting took different directions from the British model which successive governments had looked towards as a model. New Zealand's attitude was selective: it used those aspects of the British experience that suited and discarded those that didn't.

A Question of Motives

No doubt there was a good deal of political advantage in controlling radio news and Labour had long been suspicious of the "Tory" press. Eliminating private radio would also eliminate the possibility of newspapers purchasing radio stations and opening up a second media front against the labour Government. Prime Minister Michael Joseph Savage was also Minister of Broadcasting, and his biographer notes;

"As the daily newspapers started to seek and obtain options over various B stations. Savage feared that the powerful new medium of communication could be used to oppose Labour in the same way as most newspapers had criticised the party over the years." (Gustafson 1986: 193)

The B stations had pushed hard for the right to carry advertisements, a concession which would ensure their economic survival; and the business community was keen to advertise on the new medium. The government recognised this and by confining commercial broadcasting to the state-owned system they removed potential rivals and ensured a new stream of revenue for the public system. The Broadcasting Act of 1936 also showed the first indication of a ploy that would be used by future labour Governments in 1973 and 1989: the impulse to protect and strengthen publicly owned broadcasting by co-opting into the public model characteristics more commonly associated with the market. In 1936 that characteristic was advertising; in 1973 it was competition; in 1989 it was profitability.

There were differences of course; in 1936 and 1973 the respective Labour governments sought to foil and pre-empt private broadcasting interests by co-opting the quality the private operators most ardently sought: advertising in the one case; competitive television in the other. But 1989 the Labour Government was friendly to private interests and welcomed the introduction of private television, but it wanted to ensure the survival of publicly owned television by forcing it to adopt market characteristics. Even the demise of the B stations was a blow to the prospect of developing a public sphere in broadcasting. They had pushed for the right to carry controversial material and to develop independent news services.

Savage's Perspective

But there was a deeper factor at work here, Savage had a longstanding interest in broadcasting and he had a definite idea of what he wanted from it (Hall 1954. Gustafson 1986). He'd been a supporter of the B stations in the past, and while he'd been forced by his caucus to change tack on that, he was the key mover behind the creation of a publicly-owned commercial radio service. Savage believed public broadcasting should have a wider scope and appeal than the traditional BBC model (Gustafson 1986:194).

Savage had a populist view of radio; he wanted a service that would bring music and drama to ordinary people and enrich their lives intellectually

and spiritually, just as his government was altering their lives economically and socially. Savage articulated a vision of radio as part of the development of the nation. In his words:

“Radio will soon be as necessary for the mind of the citizen as water is for the human body and will be laid on to every home in a similar way.”
(Gustafson 1986:195)

In this view radio was no mere entertainment, no toy of private interests, but rather a key element in the nurturing of citizens just as were the health and education services that Labour was developing. Radio was part of a sense of nation-hood.

A Society on Development

Mein Smith has described the 1930's and 1940's in New Zealand as “a formative era in nation building, through the conscious ‘making’ of New Zealand” (Mein Smith 2005:150). Savage headed a government of radical reform, and it ran into significant opposition from established interests in certain areas of its economic policies. These critics included the British government who were opposed to Labour's attempts to introduce import controls and attempts to create secondary industries which would have reduced income for British industries. Sinclair has argued that “official British views of the Labour government varied from impatience to scorn to outright hostility” (Sinclair 1976:175-6).

Perhaps as a result of these pressures, it was also an authoritarian government in the sense of using its authority to achieve certain ends. It was an authoritarianism which sprang out of its popular support rather than running contrary to popular will. P.J. Gibbons in an essay entitled “The Change of Opinion” made the point:

“The Labour Party believed in using to the full the power of the state for change. This was a time-honoured tradition in New Zealand but the Labour Party, partly because of its socialist roots, partly because of its massive electoral support, used state power more enthusiastically and extensively than any previous governing party. Hence much cultural innovation after 1835 was under the auspices of the state. By 1940 broadcasting was almost entirely in the hands of the Government.”
(Gibbons in Oliver and Williams (eds.) 1981:323)

These strands of populism, authoritarianism and national development come together in McQuail's national development theory of media. This provides a useful lens through which to view the first Labour Government's broadcasting policy - in particular, its authoritarian approach to news and current affairs.

McQuail identified several characteristics of government policy towards media in developing countries:

- the primacy of the national development task (economic, social and cultural)
- the pursuit of cultural and informational autonomy
- support for democracy
- solidarity with other developing countries

McQuail makes it clear that national development includes culture and Savage certainly regarded radio as a key element in cultural development. And it is also clear that “autonomy” in this context means national autonomy as opposed to foreign ownership; it did not necessarily mean the autonomy of individual media outlets in providing information services. The third criterion is

open to a variety of interpretations simply because the word “democracy” is open to interpretation. The first Labour Government was fully prepared to use its powers to effect change, but it was a, by Westminster standards, democratic government in every respect except for its control of radio news. And it is at this point that the significance of McQuail’s national development theory comes into focus. He observes:

“Because of the priority given to these ends, limited resources available for media can legitimately be allocated by government, and journalistic freedom can also be restricted. The responsibilities of the media are emphasised above their rights and freedoms.” (McQuail 1994:131)

From that perspective a vigorous, independent radio public sphere could undermine the national development task. Private operators of an emerging medium like radio will have to import equipment thereby using scarce overseas funds. This might well justify the avoidance of duplication of public and private services by centralising ownership and control in government hands.

But why the restriction of journalistic freedoms?

The views of the man who actually ran the non-commercial National Broadcasting Service (NBS) under Labour are interesting here. The NBS, unlike its commercial sibling, the NCBS, carried the news bulletins prepared by the Official News Service. Professor James Shelley was a Reithian who, in Gregory’s words, regarded broadcasting as a “sacred trust”. (Gregory 1985:28) And Shelley intended to take long view of that sacred trust. Shortly before taking up his new job, Shelley told one audience:

“I am not thinking of what the casual listener wants to hear in 1936. I am thinking of what they will be having in 1945.” (Hall 1954; 87)

Savage told Parliament of a conversation he had had with Shelley on the very first day of the professor’s running radio, December 1, 1936. Shelley had apparently revealed a vision of radio’s possibilities that had come as a revelation to the Prime Minister. Shelley had discoursed on a range of matters that, in Savage’s words, “make life worth living” (NZPD Vol. 249 p 149).

Yet nowhere, at least in Savage’s recollection of the conversation, was there any indication that news, debate, even controversy, might be among the things that give value to a society. Gregory argues that there was a major shortcoming in Shelley’s thirteen year stewardship of broadcasting: “the inadequate development of those public broadcasting functions deemed essential to the emergence of an open society” (Gregory 1985:29). Gregory argues that while Shelley dealt with a government determined to control radio news, he himself did little, if anything, to challenge this policy.

Under Shelley’s directorship little was achieved that reflected any desire on the part of the broadcasting authorities to establish radio news as something more than a means of disseminating officially-sanctioned information. There was no sustained attempt to bring within the service’s ambit a more independent and comprehensive news facility to fulfil the democratic purposes of public debate on and scrutiny over governmental activities” (Gregory 1985:29).

Shelley and the General Will

Such debate and scrutiny lay the heart of the Habermasian public sphere; citizenship was an on-going process with information and opinion emerging from a variety of sources. But the New Zealand broadcasting system under Labour and Shelley purveyed only “officially-sanctioned information “ and radio

talks were conducted by speakers especially approved for their authoritativeness. The cut and thrust of debate and competing opinions - the market-place of ideas - was seen as a threat to social cohesion. This was reflected in Shelley's words:

"It should be the aim of a broadcasting service to transmit, honestly and simply, only such information as has the stamp of authenticity, as well as opinions that have the backing of mature minds and adequate knowledge. Broadcasting should bend its efforts to develop a spirit of trust and tolerance, and not succumb to the temptation to provide the superficial excitement of petty strife." (Gregory 1985:30)

Shelley's words capture the ostensible soundness of this view: "authenticity", "mature minds", "adequate knowledge", "trust and tolerance". But they don't conceal the potential pitfalls lurking beneath the surface. This was an exclusionary approach which gave the broadcasting authorities considerable discretion in deciding just who had a "mature mind", and whose knowledge was "adequate". It was an approach which inevitably favoured official sources and commentators with whom established opinion felt comfortable.

And the final section raises the question: at what point does the legitimate cut and thrust of opinion become "petty strife". Some of Shelley's actions would suggest that broadcasting authorities, and the government, had a fairly low threshold for the appearance of "petty strife". For example, in 1941 when a gunman, Stanley Graham, ran amok on the West Coast of the South Island killing several police officers, no coverage was allowed on the NBS (Sullivan 1987:33-34). Shelley, in explaining the decision, stated that it was not considered desirable to broadcast crime news particularly in relation to a manhunt,

"... Since such broadcasts are apt to cause hysterics among impressionable listeners." (Sullivan 1987:33-34)

Gregory argues that Shelley's approach (and, by extension, the Government's) resembled the Rousseauian concept of the General Will rather than the Millsean "marketplace of ideas" (Gregory 1985:31). It is worth pondering this point.

In both "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" and in his later essay "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere", Habermas explicitly attacks the Rousseauian concept of the General Will, essentially for its implicit passivity. As he explained in "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere":

"I criticised Rousseau's 'democracy of non-public opinion' because he conceives of the general will as a consensus of hearts rather than of arguments." (Habermas in Calhoun (ed) 1992:445-6)

For Habermas what is lacking from Rousseau is the creation of public opinion through debate. He argues that Rousseau relies too heavily on the innate goodness or morality of people ("consensus of hearts") to guide them towards opinions. For Habermas opinion must evolve from debate (Habermas in Calhoun (ed) 1992:445-6).

In "The Social Contract", Rousseau makes a distinction between the general will and the will of all. The former, he argues, only considers the common interest while the latter takes private interests into account and is "no more than a sum of all wills" (Rousseau in Britannica 1952:396-397). What is striking is Rousseau's view on what he calls "associations". Rousseau argues

that the general will emerges from individual citizens arriving at their views in private. Rousseau envisaged individual citizens “furnished with adequate information “arriving at their decisions having “no communication one with another” (Rousseau in Britannica 1952:396-397).

But when associations form at the expense of “ the great association then a division of loyalties takes place and the association becomes the primary loyalty or rather its interests are seen as the same as the State’s:

“The will of each of these associations becomes general in relation to its members, while it remains particular in relation to the State”. (Rousseau in Britannica 1952:396-397)

Robert Walker in his essay on Rousseau, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau: moral decadence and the pursuit of liberty” (1984) argues that Rousseau’s aversion to factions within the State marked him out from other eighteenth century political thinkers like Montesquieu and Madison (Walker in Redhead (ed) 1984:129).

In a sense Habermas also has a concern with factions; after all his ideal Public Sphere fragmented into competing interests in what he called the social-welfare state (Habermas 1964:1989). Both Habermas and Rousseau value the primacy of the individual. But for Habermas the general interest is reached through individuals engaging in critical debate. For Rousseau that leads to factionalism.

Belich (2001) argues that Labour placed a high premium on national harmony. Belich argues that Labour inherited three “harmonies” From previous governments: racial harmony; moral harmony; and social harmony. To these Labour added sectoral harmony, which Belich describes as “an unholy alliance of rival sectors” (Belich 2001:263).

These sectors - State, business, farming and labour - worked increasingly in concert after 1938 and Belich suggests this harmony was particularly important to Labour since it was historically rooted primarily in one sector - manual workers. Belich further argues that there were two key factors in Labour’s ability to impose harmony on potentially competing sectors: the avuncular public appeal of Prime Minister Savage and his mastery of radio (Belich 2001:259-260).

Radio offered several advantages: its ability to transcend geography and literacy; it was a mass medium which reached the whole nation; and therefore it was able to create a shared experience for all citizens simultaneously. Labour with its strong base in public sentiment, underlined by its increased support in the 1938 election, used such electoral success and the charisma of its leader, to position itself as the embodiment of the General Will as it commandeered the resources of radio in pursuit of national harmony and the harmonising of faction.

The Dilemma of Controversial Broadcasting

At this point it would be useful to take a closer look at the question of controversial broadcasting since this was the area with the greatest potential to create division and faction. The Labour Government elected at the end of 1935 reinstated the prohibitions against controversial material but it also recognised the demand for coverage of controversial issues. Their answer to this was the introduction of live broadcasts from Parliament. As Day points out this was a groundbreaking, and popular, move (Day 1994:215).

Sullivan observes that the broadcasting of Parliament was a

“... move which ended any doubt about discussions of political issues having no place on the air waves. At last Savage could have Labour Party policies explained to and heard by the public without being hampered by the whims or antagonism of newspapers.” (Sullivan 1987:24)

And that was a critical point for the Government: Savage argued that Parliamentary broadcasts the public was receiving the best possible information. In his words:

“By means of broadcasting the people are getting the truth right from Parliament, the pure unadulterated Truth.” (Gregory 1985:17)

Gregory observes that that was a shrewd argument and difficult for political opponents to counter. Labour made much of the point that they were introducing the discussion of controversial material on the airwaves in, as Deputy Prime Minister Peter Fraser put it:

“... as fair, impartial and informative as possible, so that the people can form intelligent opinions.” (Gregory 1985:18)

But having formed these opinions, where could they express them on the airwaves? Gregory argues that by introducing controversial broadcasting in this way, the Government was suggesting that Parliament was:

“... the primary if not the sole locus of political disputation.” (Gregory 1985:17)

This was essentially paternalistic, top-down democracy. The impression conveyed is that the citizen's role is to quietly form opinions from officially conveyed information and then act on their opinions every three years at the ballot box. There is no sense of the formation and expression of public opinion as an on-going process. Yet that process lies at the heart of the Habermasian public sphere. Habermas argued that the public nature of parliamentary proceedings ensured the influence of public opinion:

“As a consequence of the constitutional definition of the public realm and its functions, publicness became the organisational principle for the procedures of the organs of the state themselves; in this sense one spoke of their ‘publicity’. The public character of parliamentary deliberations assured public opinion of its influence; it ensured the connection between delegates and voters as parts of one and the same public.” (Habermas 1989:83)

But that connection should not just be one-way: from the top down. Habermas envisaged a public sphere which through public debate transformed the nature of power: from the unquestioned will (“voluntas”) of a sovereign to free and reasoned (“ratio”) acquiescence of citizens. This consensus about the best interests of all was arrived by:

“... the public competition of private arguments.” (Habermas 1989:83)

This is a critical passage; the public sphere requires that private ideas and arguments should become public and should compete in public. Therefore the role of the media is critical. Habermas argued:

“A set of basic rights concerned the sphere of the public engaged in rational-critical debate (freedom of opinion and speech, freedom of press, freedom of association and assembly etc).” (Habermas 1989:83)

In New Zealand the press had the traditional freedom, radio did not. The rules were enforced by Shelley, who as a professor of education had done so much further familiarity with ideas; in 1937 he aborted plans by 1YA for a debate on socialism. Around the same time he told a minister of religion

whose broadcast sermon had dealt with pacifism that he would have to avoid that subject if he wished to broadcast again. Nor was the commercial service immune from censorship: although it did not carry news and current affairs, it did broadcast a Sunday night talk by its director, Colin Scrimgeour, and Scrim was always likely to run foul of the authorities especially after his patron Savage died in 1940.

An example came in 1943 when Scrim proposed a Sunday night talk on contagious sexual diseases. That was certainly regarded as controversial.

Carter notes:

“Official muzzling of political debate itself became controversial. Radio Record articles aired objections to censorship.” (Carter 1993:238)

Thus the public was treated to the sight of radio’s own in-house magazine criticising the actions of broadcasting’s masters. It was an indication of the different rules for print and radio, even within the broadcasting establishment. But it certainly indicated the division within broadcasting and the pressure coming from the lower levels - a pressure that would become significant during the 1940s and 1950s. Carter argues that Shelley himself was divided whatever misgivings he may have had about censorship but “having taken the Government’s shilling he felt constrained to implement the government’s policy” (Carter 1993:238).

But as Hall showed Shelley was in tune with government’s thinking, as this quote in the Radio Record indicates:

“I (Shelley) regard radio as ‘the great’ modern instrument for securing a real cohesion of the citizens of the community based on mutual understanding and sympathetic tolerance.” (Hall 1954:88)

Eventually pressure did come on the government to change that policy, but it came from Labour’s back-benchers rather than the broadcasters. In 1946 the government agreed to allow radio to broadcast a series of debates on topical issues.

The year 1947 was significant. The Second World War had created an enormous interest in accurate and up-to-date information. The NBS did nothing towards satisfying this interest by creating a local news service (although it did send production teams overseas to send back reports); but rather relied on broadcasts from the BBC. Some listeners complained that they heard news about New Zealand on the BBC before it appeared on the local, Government-controlled bulletins (Sullivan 1987:34).

But if little had been done locally to take advantage of the dramatic growth in news that accompanied the war, those wartime years still had an impact, as Sullivan explains:

“What the war had created, though, was an appetite for news among both listeners and broadcasting staff, and the post-war decade was to see some determined efforts to start a genuine New Zealand radio news service.” (Sullivan 1987:36)

Those efforts came from a range of sources, but immediately after the war it was a group of government back-benchers who pushed for changes to radio news. They focused on the competence of the Official News Service, pointing to obvious shortcomings where radio was late with stories or even failed to mention major stories at all. For example, on September 17th, 1947, the minister of broadcasting, Fred Jones, was questioned by several members about the failure of the 9pm radio news to mention a serious rail accident in Auckland although the accident had happened some four hours earlier. (NZPD

Vol. 278:306)

A month later, on Oct 16, 1947, there was more debate on the inadequacies of the Official News Service. One government MP, Martyn Finally, criticised the continual lateness or non-appearance of stories in comparison with the newspapers. Finally argued that with a radio news service the newspapers would have to follow radio and not the other way around. (MZPD Vol. 278:899) The minister's response to these complaints was to acknowledge deficiencies, but point to the cost having agents around the country reporting news for the radio service. (MZPD Vol. 278:899) Day notes, tersely, that the minister acknowledged lapses which were explained away with no attempt to change the system:

"The Government failed to investigate, let alone introduce any new system, and news bulletins continued to be prepared under Prime Ministerial supervision". (Day 1994:288)

But these debates did signal an important shift in the argument: the criticism of the news service was now focusing on its professional deficiencies rather than simply its fairness; and the defence of the system was focusing on the cost of improving, or replacing, it. These two new focal points in the argument persisted for the rest of the Official News Service's lifetime. In one sense they lengthened the lifetime of the ONS since cost will always seem more plausible and prudent than fears about the press; but concerns about professional competence were a potent undermining force since such failures are apparent to those who do not necessarily are about the wider issues of the public sphere.

Aside from news, the government was prepared to make adjustments in radio talks and that would have ramifications for broadcasting's wider public sphere, including news. Day recounts that in 1946, in reply to an inquiry from Federated Farmers, the minister indicated that the NZBS was:

"... investigating broadcasts of controversial subjects, additional to those already broadcast during the parliamentary debates." (Day 1994:288)

This was an important admission that the parliamentary debates might be insufficient coverage of controversial subjects and that perspectives other than those of members of Parliament might be needed. But it became quickly apparent that the government did not intend to open any floodgates to unrestricted debate. Shelley drew up a plan for the proposed debates. Day explains that Shelley's plan allowed for a multi-layered debate: starting with group discussion to be called "Open Forum", followed by debate and studio presentations by opposing speakers.

This plan was accepted by the government which specified that it would approve the topic of each debate (Day 1994:288). Day explains:

"The minister kept a close scrutiny on the discussion topics and rejected, among others, 'That equal work should be rewarded with equal pay, regardless of sex', 'Does advertising add to the cost of living', and, 'Is watersiders being unduly criticised?'" (Day 1994:290)

This sampling of rejected topics shows a suspicion of subjects that might challenge established social or economic values; and it needs to be borne in mind that watersiders were a controversial, even demonised, group in the years prior to, and after, the 1951 waterfront dispute. The rejection of these topics indicated a government anxious to maintain a certain level of social cohesion and saw radio as a potential threat to such cohesion.

But the government was not keen to reveal its role in all this: the public was never told that the minister approved or vetoed debate topics in advance (Day 1994:290). And the government did not stop at controlling the topics for debate. Shelley's initially had called for an "open forum" before each debate; When the "ZB Citizens" Forum "allowed comment from the audience, the minister stepped in and put a stop to that practice (Day 1994:290). This provoked questions in Parliament.

On July 14, 1948, the minister, Fred Jones, acknowledged that he had stopped questions from the floor in Citizens' Forums. He told MPs that the purpose of the forums was to "stimulate thought among listeners". In his view the balanced treatment of the topic under discussion was best served "when questions are submitted in written form" (NZPD Vol. 280:576). The minister did not indicate whether there would be a vetting process for written questions. In any event, nothing was to be left to spontaneity. The Citizens' Forums were sites of officially licensed opinions on officially licensed topics.

In this way a tightly controlled pantomime public sphere was created in radio. No element of unpredictability in the opinions expressed was allowed.

Habermas notes that a feature of the re-feudalised public sphere is that parliament becomes a forum for ritualised expression of party platforms rather than a genuine exchange of views among representatives; Habermas argues that true debate occurs in parliament's committee rooms (Habermas 1989:205-206).

In the expanded and re-feudalised public sphere display and stage-management are of paramount importance just as were ritual and display in the feudal Middle Ages. Habermas observed of parliamentary transactions:

"Before the expanded public sphere the transactions themselves are stylised into a show. Publicity loses its critical function in favour of a staged display; even arguments are transmuted into symbols to which again one can not respond by arguing but by identifying with them."
(Habermas 1989:206)

The final sentence of Habermas is crucial since it describes precisely what had happened in the pantomime public sphere that developed in New Zealand radio in the late thirties and mid forties. The radio listeners were treated not as involved citizens but as the audience at a play liking or disliking certain characters (for which read "arguments"). That was shown by the minister's refusal to allow audience participation in the ZB debates when that was first tried. This not to argue that the broadcasting of Parliament, or even stage-managed debates, do not add to the public sphere. Indeed, the broadcasting of Parliament brought part of the parliamentary process right into the home. But these moves were insufficient in themselves; even worse, they were used a reason for not expanding the public sphere further.

McQuail in his definition of national development theory noted that a commitment to democracy was a feature. The first Labour Government was committed to democracy in its Westminster form. Opposition speakers were accorded due airtime in Parliamentary debates and there was a reasonably fair allocation of air-time during election campaigns. But there was an air of a licence about opposition views on the airwaves during these years: opposition to the government's policy was licensed either by the ballot box or by approval from those in authority. The traditional phrase by which the parliamentary opposition is described as the Loyal Opposition seems to have held sway.

Broadcasting System

The broadcasting system set in place by Labour lasted until 1962, through two changes of government in 1949, 1957 and 1960, with only two significant changes. After becoming government in 1949 National shifted the preparation of radio news from the Prime Minister's office to the department of tourism and publicity; and in 1954 the restrictions on controversial broadcasting were lifted. In practice these changes made little difference: the news was still prepared by government officials; and even after the lifting of the ban on controversial broadcasting the minister still felt free to interfere in the content of the Citizens Forums (Day 1994:302).

There was still some official acknowledgement of the deficiencies in the news service and the government authorised several attempts to negotiate a news service from the New Zealand Press Association. These negotiations came to nothing, and would have constituted a stream of information rather than an independent radio news service. But it was at least recognition of the deficiencies of the current system in gathering news. Sullivan notes that through the 1950s complaints about radio news would appear at conferences of the governing National Party.

These came, in particular, from the farming communities, key backers of the government. Cost continued to be the main reason given by the government for not setting up an independent news service (Day 1994:301). During the early 1950s the broadcasting serviced began to run deficits (NZPD Vol. 303:898). The service was extending its network of provincial radio stations - known by the call sign X. As these provincial stations came on stream, they were in effect a physical and geographical network of stations ready to play their part in newsgathering when the time came. As it was, these stations were keen to send information about their regions into network headquarters.

In 1954 the NZBS went to far as to experiment with news programmes built around contributions from the regions (Sullivan 1987:42). But the journalistic and technical expertise was not there at that stage. Even so, broadcasting was building its case; and the government's agreement that there were shortcomings in the news service and that cost was the key impediment was in effect a tacit acknowledgement that something would have to be done sooner or later. The continued negotiations with the New Zealand Press Association underlined that. The NZBS kept up the pressure and in 1958 mounted a detailed case for a news service (Sullivan 1987:47-49).

But it was the arrival of television in 1960 which transformed the broadcasting scene. The introduction of television had been regularly considered during the 1950s and the second Labour agreed to go ahead in 1959 (Boyd-Bell 1985). Labour and National went into the 1960 election with differing approaches: Labour believed that it could maintain state control; but national had received advice that the BBC-style, public corporation model was the appropriate structure for publicly-owned broadcasting (Day 2000:32-33).

In 1961 the new National government introduced the Broadcasting Corporation Bill which gave the new corporation significant (though not total) independence from Government. The bill also opened the door- a little way - to privately owned broadcasting, by giving the new NZBC the power to authorise private stations under carefully detailed conditions. Among its powers the MZBC had the right to set up its own news service. The new corporation decided to do that as one of its first acts upon taking over in April 1962 (Day

2000:70-76).

Conclusion

The underlying thrust of this paper has been the Habermasian proposition that a healthy democracy requires a healthy public sphere of dialogue and debate. If, as Habermas argues, the media play a critical role in creating and fostering a public sphere, then it might reasonably follow that the media should embody the key features of the public sphere itself: they should not only be vehicles of information but also of analysis and debate. The media are not the only sites where citizens can obtain information and participate in the exchange of ideas. But given their reach the media have a special function to perform. The inability of radio to perform its full role in the public sphere, for so long constituted a serious gap in New Zealand's public sphere. But what actually happened was, arguably, worse than a gap.

The New Zealand government and broadcasting authorities, during the 1930s and 1940s, created a phoney public sphere: a pantomime that mimicked a true public sphere in its forms but which had been gutted of the essentials of independence from state control and the nurturing of critical debate. This was clearly illustrated by the Citizens' Forums which were stage-managed by the government with the broadcasting minister controlling the topics for debate and eliminating any audience spontaneity in the interests of control. That is not to say that participants were told what to say but rather that there was a sense of some viewpoints being "licensed" for airing within controlled structures. The lack of spontaneity meant that the critical examination of viewpoints was limited.

The live broadcasting of Parliament was a real innovation by the first Labour Government and was its way of dealing with controversial topics. The system certainly gave plenty of time. But as a means of dealing with controversy there were limitations. Focusing so much upon Parliament meant that controversial material was cast in b-polar, party political terms. No doubt Parliamentary broadcasts did help listeners to make up their minds on certain issues. But there was nowhere on radio, as there was in newspapers, for them to air their own views.

This was top-down democracy with established viewpoints, licensed by either the ballot box or the authorities, filtering downwards. The listeners' role was to absorb these views and make up their minds, acting at the ballot box. Out of all this would emerge the mood of the nation; Rousseau's Great Will.

It is easy to read into this political opportunism of a high level. That was certainly there as Savage's conversation with Reith shows. Yet there was also a grand idealism about Labour's approach to radio as Savage's conversation with Shelley shows.

The idealism lay in the foregrounding of national development and national identity - indeed a concept of these ideals that could lead to both the setting up of the National Symphony Orchestra as a part of broadcasting, while denying the other intellectual ideals of the free flow of information and the importance of debate. The irony is that those who made and implemented broadcasting policy during those years did not regard the Official News Service as undermining democracy but rather as enhancing it by promoting a cohesive national identity. It would take several more decades for broadcasting's masters to appreciate that diversity and debate can strengthen national identity rather than undermining it.

The conditions of the period under study were unique, indeed extreme, and obviously unlikely to be repeated but the episode does show for broadcasting professionals the need for the vigilant protection and development of professional norms. The New Zealand situation diverged so markedly from the public broadcasting template, devised by Reith and the BBC, that it is surprising that there was not more significant protest from broadcasting executives. This remains one of the most striking aspects of the period. Whatever their misgivings, and these were usually expressed after leaving broadcasting, the broadcasters remained largely quiescent.

Hope's point about the dangers of acquainting "public service" with the "protection of the public good" remains valid. For professional broadcasters public service may mean challenging conventional concepts of the "public good". In the end, the Habermasian principle of the public sphere supervising the state through the media and the creation of public opinion was persistently violated through this period, in respect of broadcasting. Thus, during the period of this study, radio was never allowed to fulfil its proper role in the public sphere.

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