

*Māori TV: The First Ten Years*

By Jo Smith. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2016.

ISBN: 978 1 86940 857 2

Reviewed by Jennifer L. Gauthier

In February of 2018, Māori Television began broadcasting several shows associated with the WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) franchise, including its flagship programs, “Raw” and “Smackdown.” One airing per week is in te reo Māori. Not surprisingly, this decision led to a wave of controversy that has not dissipated. Critics cite the promotion of violence and the lack of Māori content on the show, while supporters note that broadcasting popular entertainment will bring more viewers to the station. Some Māori leaders argue that the use of Māori language in any setting is a positive step, and they point out that the WWE attracts a youthful demographic. Whatever you may think about this partnership, it nicely encapsulates the main challenges facing Māori TV since it began airing in 2004. Jo Smith’s book, *Maori Television: The First Ten Years*, lays out these challenges convincingly and compellingly. Smith’s book offers scholars, students and interested lay readers an engrossing and thorough account of the organization’s development. Tracing its often-conflicting priorities and the various strategies that staff members have employed to reconcile these goals, Smith paints a picture of a quasi-independent media entity whose success ought to be celebrated (albeit with a measure of institutional self-reflection).

Smith, associate professor of media studies at Victoria University of Wellington, undertook this research with her colleague, Dr. Sue Abell, beginning in 2012 for the Onscreen Indigeneity Project. The extensive data gathered include interviews with 58 Māori TV stakeholders (network staff, board members, independent media producers, funders, language advocates, politicians, media commentators and academics) and focus group feedback from 40 audience members (36 of whom are Māori). Combined with a thorough history of the station’s provenance set within the national media landscape and a close examination of several programs as case studies, the research is wide-ranging. Smith’s multi-pronged methodology and varied data provide a well-rounded perspective on a media institution that has been much-discussed in New Zealand. *Māori Television: The First Ten Years* is the quintessential critical media studies project; it does not limit itself to the study of an industry, or an audience, or a set of texts, but instead combines all three. In its design and approach, Smith’s research serves a model for other media scholars and students who are training in the field.

The book is structured according to Smith’s five frameworks for understanding Maori TV. These are essentially different methodological approaches for examining the institution, rooted in a variety of academic disciplines, including history, anthropology and media studies. The five frameworks are historical, tikanga, programming, audiences, and the politics of culture. Data gathered through each of these frameworks offers a distinct perspective on the network and when combined, they provide a detailed account of its challenges, its successes and its ongoing development.

In her examination, Smith returns repeatedly to the structuring tensions that have plagued Māori TV since its inception. Charged with providing quality programming to a wide audience, the network is also expected to play a leading role in the protection and promotion of te reo Māori. To put it simply: is the main goal of Māori TV to entertain or to educate? Obviously, it can do

both, and based on the feedback of audience members and stakeholders, it has done so fairly successfully for the past ten years. Although measuring the impact of Māori TV on actual people (both Māori and non-Māori) is difficult, there can be no doubt that it has been a positive influence in many peoples' lives. Watched by people of all different cultural backgrounds, Māori TV programs have served to challenge negative stereotypes of Māori; raise the profile of te reo Māori; inform viewers about issues in Māori communities; and educate audience members on tikanga Māori.

Some of the most powerful testimony to come out of the various kōrero focuses on the development of pride in Māori identity. Māori participants talked about how watching certain programs enabled them to get back in touch with their whānau or make connections with non-Māori in their daily lives. Considering the power of contemporary media to isolate and fragment, Māori TV seems to be a force that brings people together. Language too is an important aspect to making connections, as some respondents lamented their loss of te reo and the joy they felt in hearing it on television. Māori TV's role in supporting the revitalization of te reo Māori is complex. In its founding mandate, the network was charged with meeting the needs of children participating in immersion programs, people whose first language is te reo Māori *and* those just learning te reo. Since each of these audiences has a different level of proficiency, programming shows to meet all of their needs is difficult. As Smith suggests, a new framework for addressing language issues has arisen, rooted in Article III of the Treaty of Waitangi and based on the idea of citizenship. Focused on changing peoples' attitudes toward te reo Māori, this approach highlights the shared identity of all New Zealand citizens. In order to bring communities together, Māori TV may do well to embrace this model as it moves into its next ten years.

Smith highlights other tensions that arise for Māori TV due to industry norms and expectations. Producers are often constrained by the generic norms of television, both in the content and process of creating shows. It is clear that both stakeholders and audience members desire innovation in both arenas; attention to tikanga as well as more authentic interaction with communities were two specific suggestions for improvement. The frustrations shared by Smith's informants often came back to insufficient funding with which to challenge the norms of the media industry and make meaningful change.

Making change in the political arena is a related issue for many of Smith's respondents. In her chapter on the politics of culture, Smith traces the links between a thriving Māori television institution and a thriving Maori populace. Originally the result of legal and policy maneuvers rooted in Article II of the Treaty of Waitangi (which ensures the protection and promotion of Māori language and culture), Māori TV is driven by a decolonizing impetus. However, debate persists over its role in movements for sovereignty and self-determination. As Smith reveals, dissent on this question exists even within the organization itself. She calls for all stakeholders to imagine future possibilities that advance the diversity of Māori dreams and aspirations.

A beautiful 16-page photo insert augments Smith's research. This visual component allows readers to put faces to names of those who have been instrumental in Māori TV's creation and development. The images include production stills, activist documents, snapshots taken at industry gatherings and official news photos; happily, many of them are in color. A valuable resource in and of itself, the album preserves for posterity the work of some of the most influential pioneers

in Māori media history, such as Barry Barclay, Merata Mita, Tainui Stephens and Don Selwyn. Juxtaposed with the current generation of Maori producers, the mana of these kaumātua permeates the pages of Smith's text.

The book also includes three appendices with helpful supporting information. The text of the original 2003 mandate for Māori TV and a schematic map of the funding stream add insight into the challenges faced by the organization. Additionally, Smith includes a response written by Paora Maxwell, Māori TV's Chief Executive Officer at the time. In this "Right of Reply," Maxwell enumerates the accomplishments of the institution, its ongoing commitments and its future challenges. This reply seems to echo many of Smith's findings, indicating that the organization is well aware of the tasks ahead as they move forward.

Generally easy to read, with little academic jargon and few dense theoretical passages, the book does have some potential stumbling blocks for a wide audience. For readers outside the New Zealand context, it can be difficult to keep track of the various governmental and non-governmental bodies that play a role in the institution. Moreover, as a non-Māori language speaker, I found it challenging on occasion to decipher the meaning of te reo words and phrases. Both Smith's account and the comments of her informants are heavily laced with te reo Māori, often used without English translation. I understand this decision, especially for New Zealand citizens, but it creates some challenges for readers elsewhere. An explanatory list of the most frequently-cited organizations and a short glossary of recurring te reo terms would help some readers to be more fully immersed in the book's arguments.

Taking stock of Māori TV's first ten years is a useful endeavor as the network moves into the future. With new staff, a revised mandate, and new set of challenges in the contemporary media landscape, the enterprise needs to reinvent itself to remain relevant and valuable. Dr. Smith's research will surely assist in this effort.