

# American influence on citizens through New Zealand commercial music radio

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## Abstract

*Emerging consensus tends to suggest there is overwhelming American dominance of New Zealand radio in music. This study sets out to enquire on such claims by looking at music, and enquiring on its effect on citizens and their engagement and creation of culture. There is evidence emerging that indicates a mixture of American as well as British influence. Foreign influence in the radio scene has been apparent since the time it became a popular addition to the New Zealand household in the 1920s. Over the following decades, the radio industry has turned to the dominant Anglo-American players for guidance and inspiration. Now with a maturing local industry that is becoming more confident in its own skin, this reliance on foreign industry is coming under question regarding its affect on the indigenous population. We set out to question which theory best describes the new landscape that the radio industry finds itself in, and how this is affecting the production of content received by the listening public. Working within a framework of cultural imperialism and hybridity, the findings indicate where it is contrary to what has been simplistically alluded to as a simple mixture of global and local.*

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## Introduction

Radio in New Zealand has changed from a quiet public service British model to a predominantly commercial American model. This is certainly true of the current crop of commercial music radio stations. This paper addresses the link between American and New Zealand commercial music radio and argues that the policies to promote more New Zealand music on commercial radio has resulted in citizens being exposed to styles and representations of locally made music indeterminate of place, and more akin to carbon copies of Americana. The effort to expose citizens to more local culture through the media has in fact resulted in homogeneity, or sameness in the music scene.

New Zealand radio has undergone unique and major changes in its history. Among such changes is the total opening up of radio broadcasting to foreign ownership that promised positive changes in terms of competition and diversity. Contemporary issues involving concentration of ownership, diversity and homogeneity all stem from the policy decisions made in the 1980s and the effects of these decisions warrant rigorous academic debate as to the outcomes, whether they be intended or unintended on the cultural landscape of New Zealand.

There has been a definite shift in attitude by broadcasters from a medium where the needs of all stakeholders were considered to one where the shareholder is principal. In a drive to increase revenue efficiency, there appears to have been a tendency to normalisation of products and maintenance of the status quo. This has resulted in a loss

of localism, centralisation of decision-making and a lack of innovation, risk-taking or development of further brands aimed at fulfilling identifiable audience needs.

Since deregulation in 1989, there are now just two dominant foreign-owned companies commanding 90 per cent of the New Zealand commercial radio market. This lack of diversity is alarming, leading to pro-active government attempts to foster and protect New Zealand culture. There is a battle to re-establish local content in the face of overwhelming global content. Hybridity is offered as a by-product, but what do we actually end up with? Are the cultural products being promoted by New Zealand music radio considered a truly hybrid product, or are elements of our radio diet just carbon copies of popular American culture?

One of the major conduits for disseminating music to a mass audience comes from the common radio. With such influence from this medium, there needs to be some critical investigation on how well commercial music radio is standing up as a reflection of a country's diverse culture. It is time to scrutinise an industry that has strong ties with America. This relationship needs to be studied to see how well we are holding up as a unique country in the face of massive global influence from foreign cultures.

One of the major problems with radio, as well as television, is that citizens are exposed systematically to a selective view of society on almost every aspect of life, a view that tends to shape their beliefs and values accordingly. The internationalisation of mass communication poses serious questions regarding indigenous cultures.

So, with these changes to New Zealand radio, is the industry now at the whim of American influence? Has the culture been so devalued that the radio industry leaders can only look to America for guidance and support? The implications of a wholesale adoption of American broadcasting techniques and music will have an effect on our cultural fare and indigenous culture. This world view certainly sounds bleak because it ignores the active resistance or negotiation of local cultures prepared to stand up for all that it wants to protect as inherently precious. Is New Zealand really as dependant on foreign influence as some media scholars would have us believe, or is New Zealand a nation that can accept or reject various parts of imperialism at their convenience? Due to its geographic isolation and comparative size it is impossible to remove the country from the rising "globalism", but is New Zealand radio so tied up in American influence that it is impossible to keep core elements of the culture intact, such as accent and geographical content, or is radio a breeding ground of cultural hybridity? On the other hand, is the American influence dominant at all considering New Zealand's historical tie to Britain?

## **The New Zealand example**

Radio in New Zealand has undergone some major changes. Deregulation in 1989 brought about an intensification of commercialisation in New Zealand radio and, as more radio stations entered the market, there was an extremely cautious approach to choosing material for airplay. Bad choices would switch listeners off and feed them to the competition. Without listeners, you cannot attract advertising, and therefore profits. The international sound of American and British music was considered "safe" and local music was "risky". Combined with foreign ownership looming as a concern for the direction and control of an identifiable New Zealand culture, there were significant issues surrounding New Zealand's musical cultural autonomy that could not be ignored.

Part of the driving force behind the changes to the industry was neo-liberalisation and globalisation. Globalisation has been seen as a process, but also as a project; a reality, but also a belief. There is continuing debate over its onset, definition and result. Many believe that a global culture will emerge with the rise of globalisation. Yet opinions are divided over the nature of this culture—whether it will be a single homogenous system that is characterised by convergence or an ensemble of particulars that features long distance interconnectedness.

Giddens's (1990, p. 64) classic definition of globalisation is the "intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many mile away and vice versa".

Globalisation generally refers to the rapidly developing process of complex interconnections between societies, cultures, institutions and individuals worldwide. It is a process which Tomlinson (1999, p. 165) calls a

compression of time and space, shrinking distances through a dramatic reduction in the time taken—either physically or representationally—to cross them, so making the world seem smaller and in a sense bringing human beings "closer" to one another.

But it is also a process that "stretches social relations, removing the relationships that govern our everyday lives from local contexts to global ones" (Tomlinson, 1991, p. 154). This is a positive view of globalisation. However, the more efforts at globalisation—that is, the spread of commodified consumer culture around the globe—the more likely that confrontation will emerge between various global cultures or civilisations. According to Huntington (1993, p. 26):

the interactions among peoples of different civilizations enhance the civilization consciousness of people that, in turn invigorates differences and animosities stretching back deep into history.

Some critics suggest that the concept is too difficult to define. Held adds that "no single coherent theory of globalisation exists" (as cited in Sparks, 2005, p. 436). However, others have tried to tie the globalisation concept down into something a little less broad and make it more manageable in a modern context. The Americanisation argument has been fraught with point and counter-point for a number of decades. "Triumphant capitalism has unleashed a powerful drive toward inequality, not improvement in the social sphere" (Schiller, 2000, p. 56). Globally, the removal of boundaries and barriers to trade and investment has led to the fundamental phenomenon of concentration.

Using the framework of cultural imperialism to create an entry point to understand the current scene, McQuail (2000, p. 493) defines it as a tendency of global media industry exporters (especially from the USA) to dominate the media consumption in other smaller and poorer countries and, in doing so, impose their own cultural and other values on audiences elsewhere. Not only content is exported, but also technology, production values, professional ideologies and ownership. Explicitly or implicitly, it is assumed that cultural imperialism leads to dependence, loss of autonomy and a decline in national or local cultures. Some latitude exists as to whether the process is deliberate and about the degree to which it is involuntary at the receiving end. The concept is a basic one that can be fleshed out in lots of different ways, but it has strong resonance. In more recent times it has been derided as an incomplete method of understanding cultural contexts, and new theories have been advanced as better predictors of how cultures interact.

The concept of hybridity has become a new facet of the debate about global culture in the social sciences. It is a site of struggle and resistance against imperial powers. With the goal of abolishing the distinction between centre and periphery, this interpretation of cultural change is a significant departure from the linear model of the West to the rest.

Hybridisation has become part of an ongoing trend in cultural production, with both the globalisation and localisation of the culture industry. Hybridisation, however, is not merely the mixing, blending and synthesising of different elements that ultimately form a culturally faceless whole. In the course of hybridisation, cultures often generate new forms and make new connections with one another. Few, if any, cultures have developed as completely isolated phenomena—because part of adaptive cultural growth is selective borrowing and exchange (Hall, 1991).

The issue arising from this is that borrowing does not come from a range of countries, but only from a few. Its weakness is that it does not acknowledge structural inequalities and it has been accused of being an ongoing condition of all human cultures that contain no zones of purity. So therefore, globalisation has brought about nothing more than a hybridisation of already hybrid cultures. Most cultural products are evidence of this as imitation, borrowing, appropriation, extraction, mutual learning and representation erode all possibilities for cultural authenticity. To those in the business of cultural production, boundaries and restrictions serve to stifle rather than enhance creativity.

The critical thing to take from these theoretical standpoints is that New Zealand commercial music radio is not subject to cultural imperialism—a one-way flow of American or even British songs and spheres of influence—but instead follows more closely to the theory of hybridisation. From this, we can look for some practical implications of how hybridity can be used as a critical term to think about radio and regulation of national culture. We are going to look at the way in which hybridity has some practical relevance and how a clearly hybrid musical landscape can be analysed in terms of quality. What must be remembered is that hybridity is a complex concept that must be understood beyond a simple semantic level, to a more nuanced understanding of the concept that favours privilege and unequal power relations. That being said, how does it actually manifest itself at a local level?

So let's look at this in a New Zealand musical context. New Zealand music faces an onslaught of competition from foreign (mainly American) music and it is not a battle to maintain any sort of authenticity, as the concept is not one that can be defended. You would be hard pressed to define any commercial music as authentically New Zealand, completely independent of any outside influence. So by that logic, a hybrid form is the most appropriate to define what the industry plays.

Demand for cultural products has led to the localisation of global products and the globalisation of local products. This phenomenon allows producers to borrow ideas to enlighten an established cultural model or to make content adjustments to cater to the needs of a different audience, but it also creates a need to adapt, repackage or transform an existing product to make it more appealing to different listening groups.

Lee (1980) uses the term “delocalisation” to describe the minimisation of local elements to create content that is “least objectionable” to a larger, more diversified audience, and the term “relocalisation” to describe the incorporation of local elements into transnational products.

So cultural fusion and hybridisation are strategies for international success. On the other hand, is the inclusion of local ideas just superficial? Are localised products really local products, or are they essentially global? Is the real aim of music producers just a national or an international hit?

To label a cultural product fake, in disguise or authentic presumes the existence of a standard prototype that simply does not exist. Cultures are fluid by nature and are always in motion as the result of continuing interaction both from within the culture itself and with the outside world. Therefore, by that definition, all modern cultures are hybrids.

But here is where the concept needs to be unpacked even further, and this has some implications for policy makers, especially in the realm of New Zealand on Air. If they are charged with defending and promoting our distinct New Zealand identity, then careful consideration should be given to New Zealand music funding and where and what areas should be supported and what areas should be encouraged to modify their content.

Is New Zealand commercial music radio copying America, or is it really trying to take the best from overseas and adapting it into a local product? Can it do this under foreign ownership?

We can forget about the concept of striving for a pure authentic New Zealand sound, as well as the other end of the spectrum with straight carbon copies of Americana; we will look at the contested theory of hybridisation. This is not a one-size-fits-all concept, although it has been described as such. You cannot paint all music produced and made in New Zealand with the same coloured brush. Hybridisation needs to be broken into separate parts, some leaning more towards a solid mix of New Zealand foreign culture, others leaning towards a thin interpretation of identifying itself with its place of origin, high versus low.

The government agency charged with getting more New Zealand music played on radio stations is called New Zealand on Air (NZOA). It is a government-funding agency whose aim is to ensure the production and broadcast of New Zealand-made programs that would otherwise not be provided in a commercial market are made. They admit that broadcasting plays a powerful role in shaping a nation's culture and identity. Hearing ourselves on air helps us to connect as a society, and to know who we are as a nation in the South Pacific. New Zealand on Air funding ensures that our culture, our stories, our music and our identity are enjoyed today and preserved for tomorrow.

The question we need to answer is: is the music they are funding emulating the American sound or are local producers assimilating music into a new form of Anglo/American/Kiwi hybridity?

Foreign success is not as simple as just copying what everyone else is doing overseas. Just look at the success of Moana, Scribe and Dobbyn—artists with a strong sense of identity in their music, offering a truly foreign/indigenous mix of hybridity.

With the voluntary New Zealand music quota of 20 per cent being achieved quite easily, perhaps it is now a time to move from the quantity of New Zealand music gracing our airwaves to the quality of these recordings, and by quality meaning something more reflective of our identity.

Should the funding decisions be now focussing more about its mission statement instead of just getting any old sound on the wireless irrespective of its cultural leanings?

So, what is NZOA's mission? In a sentence: to get more New Zealand music played on the radio, especially on commercial radio. They are in the broadcasting business and are driven by airplay results—airplay results count. Infiltrating commercial radio airspace, reaching the three-quarters of the radio listening audience, winning them over—that is the way to make New Zealand music matter in the mainstream. As they say, it is all about making hits.

It is a fact that there is more New Zealand music on commercial radio today than at any time in the last seven years. In 1995, it was less than 2 per cent; in the December 2008 quarter, there was nearly 20 per cent. Quite simply, more New Zealanders are hearing more New Zealand music.

However, this desire to get hits on the radio at any cost runs contrary to NZOA's mission statement about protecting our diverse culture. Getting more New Zealand music on air is an admirable objective, but to fill the airwaves with American-sounding music runs contrary to its clear mission statement. Making hits is not a term used with television funding. In fact, for television, New Zealand on Air tends not to fund previously successful formats, if they think the programs can stand up and be successful on their own merits. New Zealand on Air says it will promote a diverse range of innovative programs that reflect and foster the different expressions of New Zealand's cultural identity and serve the needs of viewers as citizens, not simply as consumers. Generally, the programs funded by New Zealand on Air would not be able to be produced in a wholly commercial broadcasting environment.

New Zealand on Air, by legislation and inclination, is in the business of making culturally specific stories. It admits that, for television anyway, it is not interested in projects in which the story is not a New Zealand one or is deliberately rendered geographically anonymous. So for television, New Zealand on Air is not looking at making pure saleable hits; it funds "high risk" shows, shows that reflect our culture. So if they are prepared to take that path for television, then why not for radio?

The key thing here is not censorship; nor do I advocate thought police to make sure we try to produce something culturally authentic. I am suggesting, instead, that the hybrid model should be renegotiated to take into account different levels of hybridity; and these levels have implications for the development of a country's culture. There should be gentle encouragement to fund projects that lean towards the high end of the hybrid cultural products. It is not an impossible dream—there are plenty of high-end artists doing good work and receiving national and international accolades for their music. If a local band wants to chase Anglo/American sales with low-end cultural products, they should go for it—but, in the future, they should not expect the government to help them fund the project.

The trends emerging in New Zealand music hybridity has important implications for citizens, policy makers, content providers and more broadly, our culture. It is critical to foresee how the localism in local radio fits in with identifying our national culture.

Strategies should be put in place to deal with hybridised products. We are experiencing a give-and-take among cultures that encounter each other, a multifaceted and complex working of forces. However, questions remain about who has given and taken what, what has been the result of such give-and-take within the existing industrial framework and the implications of the answers to those questions for the cultural globalisation debate. The media have a key role in disseminating culture to citizens, and how people receive, understand and create culture into the media involves a feedback loop that can

potentially regress into global impersonation rather than local inspiration. Citizens need to be aware of this and demand better.

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