



TELEVISION/NEW ZEALAND

Spreading the word

Maori Television is breathing life into a fading language through its indigenous broadcasts. But will naysayers and a tight budget halt the network's progress?

By *Justin Bergman*
Photography *David Straight*

(1) Maori Television's new headquarters in suburban Auckland (2) Moana Makapelu-Lee, reporter for news and current affairs

Every morning at Maori Television, a bell is rung and the staff assemble for the daily *karakia*. As employees bow their heads, an incantation is read in the Maori language for spiritual guidance and protection to start the day. The ceremony ends with a song before everyone returns to work and the reporters prepare for the morning's editorial meeting.

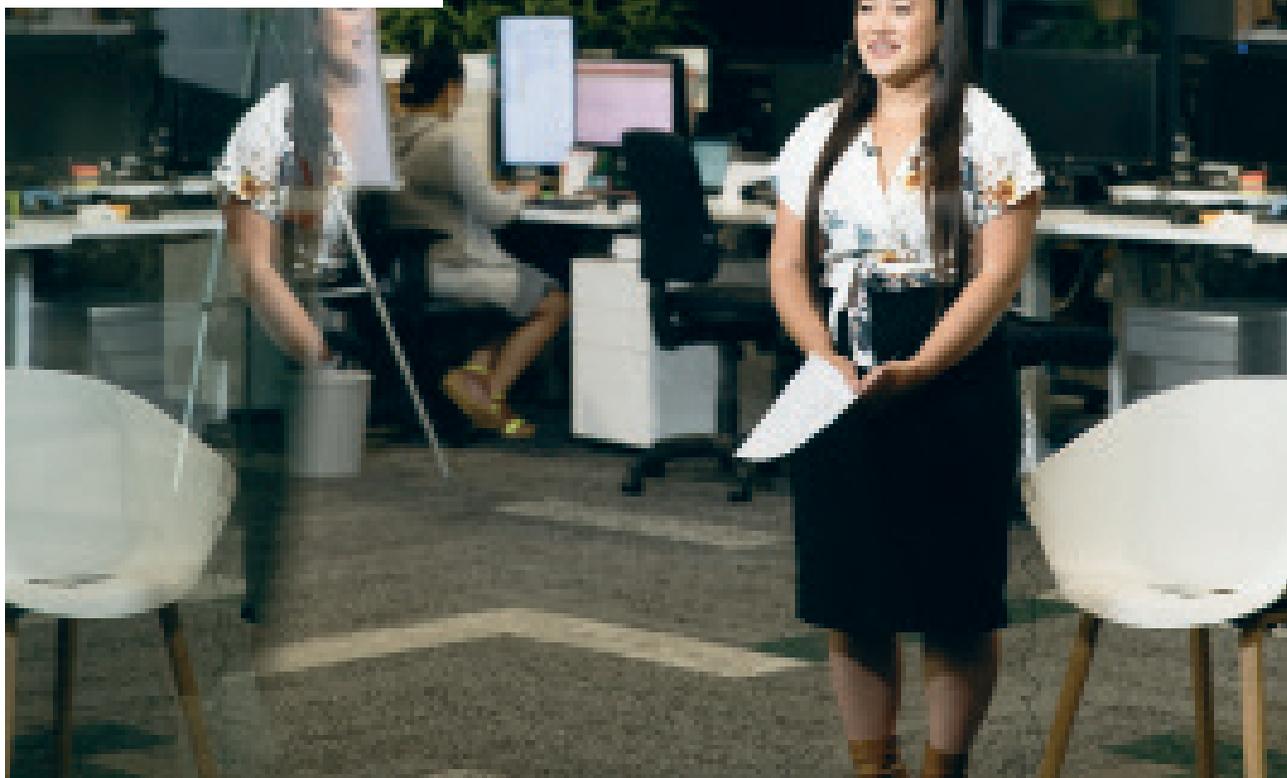
It's certainly a point of departure from most newsrooms, where mornings are decidedly lacking in ceremony (and, at times, congeniality), but one that speaks to the heart of Maori Television's mission: a devotion to preserving the culture – and specifically the language – of New Zealand's 700,000 Maori residents, about 15 per cent of the country's population.

Like other indigenous-language broadcasters, such as Ireland's TG4 and the Welsh S4C network in the UK, Maori Television was founded with the goal of reviving a language that's been in decline over the past century. Maori activists struggled for decades to overcome resistance from New Zealanders, finally succeeding after the courts ruled that the government was duty-bound to protect the language under a 19th-century treaty.

Since its inception in 2004 the network has established itself as a vital voice for a community long misunderstood by the mainstream media. Maramena Roderick, a former foreign correspondent at state broadcaster Television New Zealand, took up the role of head of news four years ago.



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Before Maori Television's launch, she says, coverage of Maori issues tended to be overwhelmingly negative. "Our stories and our views were ridiculed. They were misconstrued, misrepresented. It was a real movement by the Maori people to say that we actually want Maori journalists telling our stories." Now, on the nightly news programme *Tē Kaea* and current-affairs shows such as *Native Affairs*, Maori reporters are doing just that. The programmes examine national issues through a distinctly Maori lens and dig deep to identify under-reported stories on a local level. When MONOCLE visits the studio in suburban Auckland, a tropical cyclone is lashing New Zealand but *Tē Kaea* isn't leading its report with breathless storm coverage.

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Rather, the launch of an inquiry into the abuse of children in state care is the top story, followed by a visit by Ainu students from Japan looking to revitalise their own dying language.

But Maori Television isn't a slave to navel-gazing. The network routinely secures interviews with New Zealand's main party leaders in the run-up to national elections and sends reporters to cover Australian and US elections too, focusing on how the policies would impact indigenous populations. *Tē Kaea* is broadcast in Maori with English subtitles and other programmes, such as *Native Affairs*, are broadcast mainly in English.

The energetic news team also puts out a quality broadcast. Piripi Taylor, the co-anchor of *Tē Kaea*, brings a suitably solemn demeanour to the set – as well as a booming baritone delivery. Reporters handle live shots with skill and editors move swiftly to ensure that subtitles are accurate. Maori Television has also invested heavily in the latest technology and



(1) 'Tē Kaea' presenter Piripi Taylor (2) CEO Keith Ikin (3) Interviewing Maori musician Troy Kingi (4) Control suite (5) Top floor of the new Maori Television office (6) 'Wharekai', which roughly translates as café, a social space for staff

everything from the editing to graphics feels sharp and polished.

The main objective, however, remains the revitalisation of the Maori language – and Maori Television isn't alone in its mission. Three years ago a Maori weather presenter on the mainstream network TV3 began using Maori in her reports, sparking a vocal reaction – both positive and negative – among viewers. Other presenters on Radio New Zealand and TVNZ followed suit.



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With Maori rights such a political flashpoint in the country, Maori Television has its detractors, who complain that its coverage is one-sided or politically motivated. Roderick bristles at the suggestion, stressing that it operates by the same standards as any other broadcaster. "Our very being here corrects cultural biases," she says. "So many wanted it to fail – and still do." Despite these criticisms, the network continues to expand its viewership. Though television ratings are declining across the industry, Maori Television's online audience is growing, with three million unique users in 2016, a 9 per cent increase on the year before, and a 55 per cent increase in online views from 2016.

More indigenous broadcasters:

NRK Sapmi (Norway), Yle Sámi Radio (Finland), SVT Sapmi (Sweden)

Sami programming for the indigenous population of Lapland began in 1946 with Sami-language radio broadcasts in Norway. In 2002 all three began collaborating on television.

Taiwan Indigenous Television (TiTV)

Founded in 2005, TiTV broadcasts entertainment in Mandarin and news in 16 of the country's official indigenous languages.

Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN)

The national broadcaster for Canada's indigenous communities reaches 10 million households, with 28 per cent of its programming in aboriginal languages.



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To boost these numbers, head of content development Nevak Rogers believes that young viewers are key. With half of all Maori now under the age of 24, the network has focused more attention on this audience by developing its own scripted dramas and comedies, popular programmes about *kapa haka* (a traditional Maori dance) and reality shows such as *What's up with the Tumoanas* (the Maori equivalent of the US's *Kardashian* clan). The Tumoanas'



exploits are not high brow but the programme resonates with Maori viewers nonetheless.

Last year the network moved into a spacious new studio that allows it to continue expanding its programming. But challenges remain, not least of which is the network's limited budget, which was NZ\$34.7m in 2016 (about a quarter of s4c's annual budget in Wales) the vast majority coming from the government.

The network does bring in some money from advertising and is looking at developing new content-related partnerships to further drive revenue. But its dependency on government funding keeps new CEO Keith Ikin awake at night. "In the past 10 years there has been a surging interest in learning the language," he says. "We would like to have a stronger presence through our regions."

The other big challenge is the lack of Maori-fluent journalists, scriptwriters, actors and others needed to meet the demand for content. This is where Maori Television can have an impact but it will take time. "It took decades for us to lose our language," says Roderick. "For Maori Television to turn that around in 14 years, that's a tide you're turning around on your own. We're a drop in the ocean." — (M)