Real news or reality TV shows in Francophone Pacific?

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The global ecumenical movement has a long association with the remote French colony of New Caledonia in the South Pacific through the Pacific Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches, most specifically in supporting the aspirations of the indigenous people for self determination. As the prospect of political independence, or “full sovereignty”,¹ by the end of this decade increases, possibilities, proposals, and projects are emerging to shape the cultural and political landscape – in which media are central to the development of a post-colonial identity.² The current colonial media landscape is dominated by publicly funded broadcasting; will the post-independence media landscape be the same?

The islands of New Caledonia (pop. est. 246,000)³ lie in the south-west Pacific, 1500 km off the east coast of Australia, and west of the Fijian archipelago. Along with the Wallis and Futuna Islands, and French Polynesia, they are one of three French colonial possessions in the Pacific. Agitation for independence by the indigenous Kanak people during the 1980s resulted in an agreement by the colonial power for an act of self-determination between 2014 and 2018.

This article, which is part of a broader study of journalism practice in the South Pacific, examines the current debate in New Caledonia over several new proposals for television services in the colony; services either publicly funded, or subsidised with public funds.

Anglophone public broadcasting in former British colonies in the Pacific has tended to follow the Reithian BBC model, although the postcolonial expression of this model varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Public broadcasting in the Francophone Pacific is entirely different.

Despite the fact that there has been both deregulation and privatisation of broadcasting the metropolitan France,⁴ there has been little change in the framework governing broadcasting in the Francophone Pacific, despite the fact that in the case of New Caledonia, there is an agreement under the 1998 Noumea Accord for an act of self-determination between 2014 and 2019. Little change, that is, until now.

Public broadcasting in French territories

Réseau Outre-Mer 1ère is the public broadcasting network which services France’s overseas territories. Between 1982 and 2010 the organisation was known as the Société de Radiodiffusion et de Télévision Française pour l’Outre-mer or (RFO). Its origins lie in the post-war Radiodiffusion de la France Outre-Mer (RFOM), which in turn was replaced in 1964 by the Office de coopération radiophonique (OCORA), an arrangement which lasted until 1982. In 2004, the organisation was incorporated into the French national (public) broadcasting system France Télévisions, where it is one of six channels.

Current broadcasting services in New Caledonia.

Radio and television services and New Caledonia are currently a mix of public and commercial broadcasting. In radio, there is a mixture of public broadcasting commercial broadcasting, and community radio. In television, free to air services are provided by the
public broadcaster Réseau Outre-Mer 1ère (1st Overseas Network), conscription television by a commercial provider.

Radio
There are five radio channels in New Caledonia covering both the AM and FM band, with 73 transmitters across the archipelago.⁵

- New Caledonia First (Nouvelle-Calédonie 1ère): 89.0 – 91.5
- Océane FM: 95.0
- Radio Djido: 97.4
- NRJ Nouvelle-Calédonie: 93.5
- Radio Rythme Bleu (RRB): 100.4

France Inter, a major French public radio channel, also broadcasts in New Caledonia (93.3).

Océane FM is a commercial radio run by Dumbéa Communication. RRB (a private non-commercial radio) and Radio Djido (founded by the Kanak Independence movement in 1985) both have some 22 transmission points, while NRJ Nouvelle-Calédonie,⁶ a French commercial media group with stations in over 20 countries around the world, principally in Europe and in Francophone communities around the world, such as Quebec, and in French territories (New Caledonia, French Polynesia), has one transmission point. New Caledonia First is the Outre-Mer 1ère network, with some 25 transmission points across the territory.

Television
The most significant changes in the media landscape are in television. Until November 2010 Réseau Outre-Mer 1ère used to broadcast on two free to air channels: Télé Nouvelle-Calédonie and a second network Tempo. However, Tempo was removed on November 30, 2010 when New Caledonia switched from analogue television to a national digital terrestrial television service (TNT) through which programming from the metropolitan French public broadcasting network are now retransmitted.

Nouvelle-Calédonie 1ère broadcasts local news and some local content. The group Canal+ Overseas, a commercial subscription television service founded in 1984 and owned by the French multinational media company Vivendi, also offer the Canal+ Calédonie, Canal+ Cinéma, Canal+ Sport and Canal+ Family channels. Dissatisfaction with the content being presented on the Outre-Mer 1ère network public broadcast channels has created some ferment in New Caledonia.

A new media landscape in New Caledonia?
Recognition that an act of self-determination between 2014 and 2018 may result in the creation of the newly independent nation of Kanaky, has brought forth new proposals for publicly subsidised television services in New Caledonia, and the proposals have generated a strong public response: “Propagandistic”, “necessary”, “dangerous”, “public-spirited”, “illegal”, “unacceptable”…⁷

These are just few of the adjectives that have been thrown about since October 2010 in New Caledonia, during a lively public debate over the two separate local television projects submitted last year to the Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel (CSA), France’s Paris-based national broadcasting regulator, by New Caledonian politicians, Paul Neaoutyine, a Kanak
political leader, and proponent of independence, and the former President of New Caledonia (2001-2004) Pierre Frogier. Noumea-born Frogier leads the anti-independence Caldoche party in New Caledonia, and has links to the current French President Sarkozy.

The supporters of these two projects which aim to be publicly funded, NCTV, “a citizen television” and NC9, “a consensual television” argue that these channels will complete the audio-visual landscape of New Caledonia by remedying the lack of local content produced by the only “local” public television channel, Nouvelle-Calédonie 1ère. Promoters of NCTV and NC9 also argued that creating a local TV channel is an initiative necessary to push the country forward toward a destin commun (shared destiny), given the inevitability of the country’s postcolonial future. Here are their two views:

“NCTV will be a citizen television that will participate in the creation of a common identity,” said Member of The Front de Liberation Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS), Jean-Pierre Djaiwe.

“NC9 is a television that we want to do together. It is a tool of rapprochement,” said Director of Radio Rythme Bleu (RRB), Elisabeth Nouard whose wish is to promote pluralism by bringing the staff of two concurrent Caledonian radios (Radio Djido known as a pro-independence radio and RRB known as an anti-independence radio) to work together, ‘a consensual cell’.

However, the community, local journalists and several political parties such as Calédonie Ensemble (Caledonia Together) have expressed some reluctance concerning these proposals.

On February 7, 2012, the New Caledonia government recommended to the broadcasting regulator, the Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel (CSA) that:

“A local private television is wished for and expected by all in New Caledonia. Such a communication tool appears indispensable for all. It has a social, cultural and intercultural interest and is in line with the recent and future evolutions of New Caledonia towards exiting the Accord de Noumea and the building of a shared destiny. No TV channel can sustain by itself its balance in the budget and its functioning costs. The finances of New Caledonia can only afford one TV channel and not two channels (that would cost 1.9 billion FCFP). We all express the wish for the promoters and local authorities involved in these projects to consider and discuss a soon as possible a fusion of the two projects in a single project so everyone can find their place in a shared television.”

At the time of writing, the CSA has made no decision regarding the TV channels projects and the major stakeholders of NCTV and NC9 claim not to be opposed to a potential fusion and are ready to work together.

Currently, only one TV channel in New Caledonia offers local content, which according to a Caledonian journalist interviewed in August 2011, “barely reflects or engage in a sufficient way with local issues and matters of great importance for the people of New Caledonia, they seem to associate ‘local’ with ‘folklore’. Nouvelle- Calédonie 1ère could be the place where important issues are investigated in-depth to give our people all the information they need, but for various reasons they fail to do so.”
Philippe Gomes, Algerian-born President of New Caledonia (2009-11), and creator of the anti-independence centrist party, Caledonia Together, does not disagree with this, but adds that *Nouvelle-Calédonie 1ère*, the current public broadcasting station, represents potential for what could someday be a real “local television” for New Caledonia:

“I am not against the idea of having a television that is more ‘of proximity’ than the one we have at the moment, a television closer to the people’s reality, to the cultural reality, to the geographic reality, and to the social reality of our country. However, to get there, there is no need to create one or two televisions. […] We already have the tool, which is *Nouvelle-Calédonie 1ère*. As soon as local productions of quality are available, we can make this television ‘à’ Caledonian television, a television that will be closer to the people and that will better represent the aspirations of the country as a whole.”

One thing everyone seems to agree on in New Caledonia is that the country needs a TV channel *de proximité*, a channel that will better reflect the reality of the life of the people of New Caledonia. By agreeing, Caledonians, local journalists, politicians and the government of New Caledonia also implicitly agree on the fact that *Nouvelle-Calédonie 1ère* does not offer this service to the country.

The fact that *Nouvelle-Calédonie 1ère* is a *France Télévisions* program – a metropolitan-based network – could be the reason why local opinion makers question the channel’s lack of serious local content. Essentially their argument is that metropolitan-based public broadcasting does not meet or match the “reality” of New Caledonia.

**What is the reality facing New Caledonia?**

New Caledonia is still a French colony where a referendum is to be held between 2014 and 2019 to decide whether it will remain within the French Republic as an autonomous overseas collectivity or become an independent state. Is the reality seen through the eyes of a French expatriate, who for one reason or another decided to leave the metropolis and its disadvantages in order to settle on a Pacific island that offers certain advantages? Or is it the reality as seen through the eyes of the Kanak people calling for independence and deploring centuries of colonial oppression? Or, eventually, are we talking about the reality seen through the eyes of the Caldoche French descendants born in New Caledonia like their six previous generations?

In terms of journalism, this array of socio-cultural “realities” is significant in shaping the political and cultural future. Thus, there is a need to ask if and how a television channel can properly navigate this kind of social pluralism, and successfully offer local content that deals with the multiple realities of New Caledonia.

The major TV broadcaster of New Caledonia seems to have largely failed in addressing the various cultural identities of the country, or at least, some have claimed that first the attention given to cultural matters by *Nouvelle-Calédonie 1ère* is only superficial (Journalist A), and that to become the arena of the many voices of New Caledonia, *Nouvelle-Calédonie 1ère* needs productions of better quality.

While various concerns have been raised regarding the two pending television channels, such as the use of these channels for political propaganda, this article focuses on the claim that both projects will make “pluralism” their priority, not only by creating a television of proximity that everyone apparently wants in New Caledonia, but also and firstly by making
sure that pluralism exists as the very source of the channel, i.e. in the composition of the staff working for the channel.

In October 2011, the NCTV delegation assured that “the channel staff will be representative of all components of society.” On the other hand, as noted earlier in this article, NC9 plans to bring together journalists from two concurrent newsrooms. This project might sound innovatory and some could see it as a step toward a so-called “shared destiny”. However, in February 2012, Gomes highlighted the fact that NC9 plans to have an evening news bulletin that will be divided in two parts: “half an hour will be given to RRB and the other one to Radio Djido” (Gomes, 2012).

A local senior journalist (Journalist B) interviewed on this topic said: “I cannot wait to see this. In one bulletin we will be told that a building collapsed somewhere in the city and in the other one we will be told that a revolution is on and that Kanaks have already attacked some buildings of the Republic.”

Another local journalist (Journalist C) said “This is the beginning of the end. What is the next step: toilets for the white people and toilets for Kanak people?”

Indeed, as ironically pointed out by CSA current member and representative of the Outre-Mer group, Alain Mear, and as reported in Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes in October 2011, the fact that this channel will be more “shared” than “consensual” is problematic.

Unfortunately, the journalists allegedly “already pre-located” by the delegation of NC9 appear to be the helpless actors of a TV show reflecting the sad reality of a confused society, more than the producers of content that conveys the complex socio-cultural reality of New Caledonia.

Moreover, the risks associated with state subsidised media are all too apparent in New Caledonia. David Robie and Alex Perrottet have reported that the radio station Océane FM was refused previously agreed funding because the politicians were unhappy with its coverage of politics.

As David Kerr observed in his study of the development of radio in post-colonial Central Africa in the two decades following the Second World War:

“The ‘media imperialism’ hypothesis suggests that one major function of colonial media networks was to put into place the institutional and ideological structures, which could allow the metropolitan cores to maintain cultural hegemony over peripheral centres in the former colonies after independence. The main technique for achieving this was the imposition of metropolitan media techniques and values through training and programming.”

Arguably, it is in the public interest of the New Caledonian people that such an outcome not be visited upon their territory.

Notes
6. The successful NRJ format is pop music.
7. Personal communication. These comments were encountered by the first author in news articles, at media conferences, and during face-to-face interviews conducted during a fieldwork visit in New Caledonia in August 2011.
8. The two proposed projects are to be sustained by public subsidies.
10. Nouvelle-Calédonie 1ère broadcasts local programs and French programs.
13. About AUD$ 20,976.816.39
16. Journalist A, B and C are local journalists that were interviewed for a doctoral project examining journalism practices in the South Pacific in August 2011.
18. Europeans living and born in New Caledonia for several generations. Note that while many people, especially Anglophones, still use this designation to refer to any “white” French settler permanently living in New Caledonia, locally, French settlers are more often referred to as Metros (for Metropolitans) while only the white people who have lived in New Caledonia for several generations are the ones referred to as Caldoches.
21. Gomes, 2012, interview transcript available at http://www.caledonieensemble.nc/interview-de-philippe-gomes-concernant-la-tv-de-propagande-rumpuc.html, accessed 27 February 2012. Note also that interviews with 6 journalists conducted in August 2011 purportedly involved in the NC9 venture suggest that these journalists had not yet been approached by anyone to discuss their involvement in this project and expressed negative feelings about the idea of a “consensual” radio as a whole.
22. In a Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes article (9/02/2012) Elizabeth Nouar said “As for the staff pre-agreements have already been made and we have locally pre-located journalists that are polyvalent in RRB. This applies to the pre and post-production aspect as well.” Article available at http://www.lnc.nc/article/pays/deux-nouvelles-chaines-locales, accessed 27 February 2012.

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