Too many New Zealanders view Māori as ‘others’. But where does this “Iwi versus Kiwi” mindset come from? Penny Gault investigates, and finds that the media may be to blame.
Google has stopped suggesting Māori are lazy. Traces of racial stereotyping of Pākehā and Māori were wiped from Google's suggested results last week in accordance with Google's removal policy for hate speech, following a complaint by Auckland University of Technology PhD scholar Steven Elers. Elers was appalled to find suggestions of “stupid”, “scum”, “lazy” and “violent” followed his search for “Māori are”. Google's Autocomplete system uses a PageRank algorithm, which relies on popular search terms and related web content, to predict search results.

Despite this, results for “Kiwis are” have remained; Google suggests Kiwis are “dumb”, “racist”, “stupid” and “rude”. Irish are “drunks”. Chinese are “rude” and “cruel”. So why is Elers outraged by searches relating to Māori? When interviewed by The New Zealand Herald, Elers said he was concerned about the negative way Kiwis viewed Māori. It’s unclear what Elers thought these changes would have on the perceived social problem of racist attitudes towards Māori. It’s questionable whether asking an international internet giant to sweep evidence of racial stereotyping under the carpet is really going to ‘solve’ anything.

US AND THEM

Elers’ action raises an interesting question: what does it mean to be ‘Kiwi’? Elers’ concern about the way “Kiwis view Māori” suggests an answer in itself – that Māori are not inherently part of the ‘Kiwi’ identity, but instead are ‘the Other’.

At its most basic, ‘othering’ is a process whereby one group is able to identify themselves by referencing what they are not. In defining or shaping the Other, the producer of the representation constructs their identity by describing features that must deviate from the ‘norm’. The norm is otherwise unarticulated. By particularly identifying Māori, Elers suggests that Māori are a separate group, existing outside the bounds of his definition of the Kiwi norm.

However, as Senior Media Studies Lecturer at Victoria University Dr Jo Smith points out, the othering process is not so “cut-and-dried”. Instead, the relationship between “things Māori” and New Zealand as a nation is continuously negotiated. Of course, Māori are part of the nation. Often, the face of New Zealand on the global stage is a Māori face. We can’t play rugby without performing a haka. John Campbell heralded Whale Rider as a great New Zealand film. And yet, despite this, mainstream media continues to privilege a non-Māori perspective as the norm, often presenting news stories (in particular) as being about Māori. Smith reflects that “sometimes that about-ness tends to stereotype Māori and put them in a box – sometimes as the savage, or as the romantic native.”

“MAORI NEWS IS BAD NEWS”

The othering of Māori in mainstream news media, One News and 3 News being prime examples, occurs to such an extent that Senior Lecturer at the University of Auckland Dr Sue Abel has referred to it as “whitestream” media. Basically, according to Ranginui Walker, “Māori news is bad news.” Recent research has noted a general tendency in news media to depict Māori in ways that focus on violence, child abuse, and social deprivation. Such representations often draw on and reinforce recognisable stereotypes of the primitive, violent Other. In doing so, ‘whitestream’ media reaffirms a non-Māori perspective as the norm from which Māori apparently deviate. A moment’s consideration of ‘New Zealand’ film inevitably draws a pretty bleak image. New Zealand cinema has struggled to avoid the stereotype of expressing a dark psyche. In The Piano, the physical landscape involves that same notion of the cinema of unease, applying it to social deprivation. More recent New Zealand films, Taika Waititi’s Boy in particular, demonstrate a tendency to resist this thesis. Waititi sought to upset negative stereotypes in Boy, stating in a post-screening Q&A: “we get portrayed in two ways, like the [goons] in Once Were Warriors, or we get shown as the blue people in Avatar. I wanted to show that we are normal, awkward people – indigenous geeks.”

However, in that resistance, a level of engagement with the dark underbelly of New Zealand cinema is unavoidable. Waititi attracted some criticism from Māori communities for repeating stereotypes. Dr Leonie Pihama, Senior Research Fellow at the University of Waikato’s Te Kōkahi Institute, after viewing the film in 2010, felt that Boy was just “a rural-based Once Were Warriors”, recognising several repetitions of stereotypes, including:

- Māori children who are neglected, live in poverty and have to struggle against parties and alcohol for dinner;
- Māori men who are clearly shown as useless, who lie, bludge, steal, party and smoke dope;
- Māori fathers who desert their whanau and return only to get what they can take;
- Māori women who are mean-spirited and bossy;
- Māori boys who supposedly adore their father but at first opportunity steal from them.

NOT ALL DOOM AND GLOOM

But the fact that stereotypes are present isn’t necessarily ‘bad’. In order to get indigenous funding grants, it’s hard to get away from recognisable stories and stereotypes that have come to be understood as ‘Māori’ or ‘New Zealand’. Smith explains that economic realities and institutional histories contribute to the repetition of stereotypes, and therefore stereotypes should be considered in this context. “As a small nation within a global environment, often telling stories requires telling stories we already know.” Pihama argues that for Māori films to be supported in the New Zealand industry, “there remains an expectation that the film must not only be palatable to a non-Māori audience, but that it will, as with past films, continue to absolve any Pākehā contribution to the ongoing marginalisation and impoverishment of our people within contemporary New Zealand society.” It’s easier to recycle previously successful (economically, at least) stereotypes than to risk funding new stories which may be unpopular among non-Māori audiences.
To start diversifying representations of Māori, the stereotype – or the repetition of it – needs to be understood and presented within a wider, fleshed-out context. Media texts are communicative systems that generate relationships and responses particular to the individual viewer. Your interpretation of the latest episode of *The Walking Dead* is going to be different from your flatmate’s. While it’s tempting to say that negative stereotypes on the news make Māori feel like the Other, the reality is far more nuanced. We draw on a range of factors to filter news stories and films, including our knowledge of other texts, our upbringing, and the setting for our consumption, so it’s arbitrary to draw a distinction between Māori and Pākehā and assert how each might respond to a text.

The variety of possible interpretations is prevalent in responses to *Boy*. While Pihama argues the film absolves Pākehā of marginalising Māori, I felt differently. In a scene where a pack of jabbering cyclists whizz across the bridge and past Boy teetering on the edge, Waititi reverses the othering process evident in news media, instead casting Pākehā as ignorant and self-absorbed. While this could fit with Pihama’s interpretation of absolving Pākehā of any involvement, it seems like an indictment on whitestream media’s ignorance of the nuances of reality.

A symposium held at Victoria University to discuss *Boy* in 2010 revealed a tension between the repetition of stereotypes and the use of comedy. A level of discomfort was expressed by some – concerned that when the audience laughed, they may have been laughing ‘at’ the Other, rather than ‘with’ the characters on-screen. This discomfort surely has consequences beyond the initial moment of reception. How does the laughter at characters on-screen translate to social interactions off-screen? It’s potentially ostracising for those who identify with the characters on-screen. Or perhaps a level of discomfort is good, if it can spark some kind of discussion. Comedy gives us a ‘way in’ to talk about tricky social issues.

The advent of Māori TV in 2004 presented an opportunity to diversify the range of media texts available to New Zealand audiences. Being only ten years old, we’ve yet to see the impact, if any, Māori TV has had on the types of stories presented in whitestream media. What’s absent from mainstream news at present is a genuine understanding of things Māori. Providing funding alone for Māori content does not address the issue at the heart of othering practices. Instead, what’s needed is a wider consciousness of what it means to exist in New Zealand – Smith says this means trying to see from the viewpoint of the other. Māori TV provides a wider spectrum of representation between the stereotypical images of Māori that have been reduced to ‘good’ – the honourable, pure, native, representative of New Zealand on the global stage – and ‘bad’ – the violent savage frequently depicted in whitestream media.

Othering seems a bizarre contradiction to the appropriation of things Māori as inherently ‘Kiwi’, which occurs when New Zealand is thrust into the global spotlight. Air New Zealand, standing proud with a koru on its tail, turned around and refused to employ a woman with visible tā moko last year. John Key seems to think post-colonial issues have “passed”, and that a flag will be able to unite “all New Zealanders”. This is a pretty big call, considering we struggle to work out who ‘we’ are on a daily basis. But it’s aspirational, and as Smith reflects, “there are increasingly ways in which the media are creating spaces for other representations [of Māori] to come through. So it’s not all doom and gloom.”

*Waititi sought to upset negative stereotypes in *Boy*, stating in a post-screening Q&A: “we get portrayed in two ways, like the [goons] in *Once Were Warriors*, or we get shown as the blue people in *Avatar*. I wanted to show that we are normal, awkward people – indigenous geeks.”*