

## BROADCASTING SYMPOSIUM

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Paper on session entitled: *Television and Cultural Identity*

This presentation will begin by examining the concept of identity. In particular, a distinction will be drawn between two complementary beliefs that exist within Western cultures, about the nature of identity: 'one *blind to* difference, the other *recognizing* difference' (Blum, 1994: 182).

The first of these perspectives is 'blind to difference' since it maintains that certain social rights are universal and inalienable. These include 'certain individual rights (freedom of speech, religion, pursuance of career, due process, and the like)' that accrue to them 'independent of differences' (Blum, 1994: 182). These may be thought of as citizenship rights. The second instead sees people's identities as distinctive. Therefore in order to 'respect the identity' of others it is necessary to recognize not what they have 'in common, but what renders them 'distinctive' (Blum, 1994: 183).

It will be argued that both these perspectives on identity are expressed in the Treaty of Waitangi (in Article 3 and Article 2 respectively) and therefore have some constitutional importance to New Zealanders. In contrast, television, as a mass commercial medium, understands its role largely in terms of the citizenship dimensions of identity. It has therefore become an active agent in the conception and construction of public festivities such as 'contemporary sports epics' that are represented as culturally normative. However, with the Broadcasting Act, and with the interpretation of that Act by New Zealand on Air in particular, it is the second of these definitions of identity that is stressed. The policy consequences and of this situation are considered.

Finally, conflicting evidence about the cultural impacts of television will be presented. On the one hand, this proposes that the cultural forms television has evolved consolidate identity through contributing to the maintenance of 'ontological security' (Silverstone, 1994: 15). On the other, it is suggested that the cultural *importance* of television may be negligible. This is because (even in those countries with a relatively high level of local content) extended viewing is regarded among audiences as an 'unwelcome habit': a source of 'guilt' that readily produces 'dislike' of 'such an unproductive activity' (Horna, 1988: 298).