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The way Tame Iti is covered in the media shows his image is shifting. Photo: Getty Images

Tame Iti's media journey flips notion of violence

The lack of civility so often ascribed to Tame Iti is now ascribed to the Crown and Government thanks to the activist's representation in the media, writes Dr Julie Cupples

We are all familiar with the white celebrities—George Clooney, Bob Geldof, Bono, Angelina Jolie—who publicly embrace humanitarian causes and become famous for their activism as well as their acting, musical or sporting talent. There is, however, an additional dimension to the growth of this kind of celebrity culture that we might call the celebritisation of indigenous activism.

In many parts of the world, indigenous activists who challenge the colonial and capitalist status quo, and often risk their lives to do so, have become part of celebrity culture. Like conventional celebrities, they appear across the mediascape and attract substantial civic engagement and solidarity.

These activists include Kayapo chief Raoni Metuktire from the Brazilian Amazon, Maya Guatemalan Rigoberta Menchú, Australian Aboriginal anti-mining activist Yvonne Margarula and the late Honduran Lenca activist Berta Cáceres. In this list, we might also include Tūhoe activist Tame Iti, often described in New Zealand media as the face of Māori activism.

The celebritisation of indigenous activists, while not immune to the commodification that drives all celebrity culture, suggests a quite different

cultural politics potentially removed from the “white saviour” complex of conventional celebrity activism.

While the celebritisation of indigenous activism might seem contrary to the collective nature of indigenous struggles, celebritised indigenous activists are generally not engaged in personal brand-building and might therefore help to increase support for the progressive movements for which they speak.

The dynamics of media convergence—the ways in which material crosses platforms, sometimes enabling a more democratic and participatory form of media culture to emerge—have produced interesting kinds of civic engagement around the sort of politics Iti espouses.

Important technological changes that make it easier for ordinary people to produce, share and modify media content have occurred alongside forms of postcolonial political redress in New Zealand and work together to generate new outcomes.

In the research my colleague Dr Kevin Glynn, of Massey University, and I are conducting, we are focusing on Iti as a media figure—that is, as both a flesh and blood person and an assemblage of the ways in which he is represented in the media.

Our research is part of a broader project supported by the Marsden Fund of the Royal Society of New Zealand, in which we are exploring how the media environment is changing and enabling, or disabling, new modes of democratisation and decolonisation. In particular, we are interested in the difference indigenous media such as Māori Television makes to these processes.

Iti has been fighting for Māori and Tūhoe sovereignty for more than four decades and is well known for a highly theatrical style of protest that frequently becomes primetime news. His methods have unsettled many New Zealanders (including some Māori), have often attracted condemnation from conservative sectors of the political establishment, and have been subject to the frequently distorting lens of the media.

Some of Iti’s protests, such as on Waitangi Day in 1995, became seared in the national imagination and enabled a largely monocultural and Pākehā-dominated media to drain them of their cultural complexity and reproduce colonial ideas about Māori threatening the social order.

His actions, especially those involving spitting, flag-shooting and buttock-baring (whakapohane), upset dominant Pākehā notions of civility and politeness.

In 2007, in the aftermath of the Urewera terror raids, Iti was depicted as a dangerous extremist and accused of terrorism. Such representations are, however, highly contested and unstable, in part because of how Iti himself has used the media to oppose them, and also because they have occurred in a rapidly-changing political and cultural context in which, as a result of hard-fought struggles, Māori have successfully managed to challenge important aspects of their colonial dispossession.

As the Tūhoe chief negotiator Tamati Kruger noted during the Urewera trial, the current generation of New Zealanders is more comfortable with dialogue and debate around Treaty issues.

Furthermore, since 2004, Māori Television has been producing a different kind of programming and encouraging mainstream media to do better in their coverage of Māori stories.

Although Iti was jailed on firearms charges, the terrorism accusation was dropped and the police had to later apologise to Tūhoe for their heavy-handed and brutal behaviour. By the time of Tūhoe's 2014 Waitangi Tribunal settlement, the Crown officially apologised for the many injustices they had inflicted on the iwi, "including indiscriminate raupatu, wrongful killings, and years of scorched-earth warfare".

It is the Crown and the Government, rather than Tūhoe, that are now represented in the media as violent entities, refigured partly as a consequence of Iti's activism. The lack of civility so often ascribed to Iti is now ascribed to the Crown and agents of the state.

The substantial social and other media activity around a 2015 documentary about Iti, *The Price of Peace*, suggests an expansion of his celebritisation, a growing appreciation for his activism, and a widening recognition that colonial violence continues in New Zealand.

While depictions of Iti as a "troublemaker" still circulate (in April this year TVNZ had to apologise for falsely accusing him of stealing a Colin McCahon painting), detailed analysis of coverage of him demonstrates that his media image is shifting in line with changes in New Zealand society as a whole.

The notion that New Zealand is a harmonious bicultural nation no longer broadly convinces and there is a growing willingness to interrogate police brutality and the excessive criminalisation of Māori. In other words, analysis of Tame Iti as a media figure clearly shows the ongoing unsettlement of New Zealand's colonial confidence and a widening acknowledgement of the legitimacy of Māori grievances.

Dr Julie Cupples' and Dr Kevin Glynn's research is facilitated with the cooperation of Tame Iti and other Tūhoe.