Reading News about Māori

Responses from non-Māori media audiences

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Abstract

The media has the potential to undermine wellbeing and opportunities for Treaty-based social justice in its representation of Māori, relationships between Māori and non-Māori, and in its promotion of particular understandings of the Treaty of Waitangi. This paper presents research exploring the meaning-making of Pākehā and tauiwi (immigrant) focus group participants in relation to media representations of Māori and the Treaty of Waitangi. We also discuss the impact of recurrent media portrayals of Māori and the Treaty on health and wellbeing as understood by the focus groups.

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Introduction

It is part of my daily routine to read the paper because you get yourself ready for what you might get volleyed with [at work].

Māori focus group member, Kupu Taea, 2007

This quote comes from a member of a Māori focus group discussing mass media and its impact on their everyday life, reported from an earlier study (Rankine et al., 2008). We place it here for the way in which it evokes the fundamental tensions at play between Māori and non-Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand, and speaks of the mundane surveillance and interrogation experienced by many Māori living and working in contemporary contexts.

The role of the media as a resource and vector in the production of social order is a topic of increasing salience (Chamberlain & Hodgetts, 2008; Hokowhitu, 2004; Nairn, Pega, McCreanor, Rankine, & Barnes, 2006), and there are now several decades of research on the ways in which the mass media contribute to and reproduce racism and marginalization of Māori.

In this paper we shift the gaze from media products and media commentators to provide useful insights into what a key audience sector makes of coverage of Māori and Māori issues. We report on focus group data from a first round (of three) sessions with five focus groups, convened as part of a Health Research Council-funded project, Media Health and Wellbeing in Aotearoa. The project uses a range of qualitative and quantitative research methods to look at multiple databases—including a representative sample of media items, focus groups of Māori and non-Māori audience members, and interviews with news producers—relating to the representation of Māori and Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi) in the mass media. It follows two pilot studies, funded by the Cathy Pelly Maungarongo Trust and the J. R. McKenzie Trust, which produced research reports now available on the Treaty Resource Centre website. In this paper we provide thematic analyses of data transcripts from a set of focus group interviews to highlight the understanding and meaning-making practices of such groups in response to the representations of Māori they encounter in the media and to which Māori respond on a daily basis.

As a key social institution, the mass media is a primary site of ideological work (Gray, 1987; Shah & Thornton, 1994; van Dijk, 2000), and assists in the construction of representations through which most people experience and understand the social world, themselves and others (Chamberlain & Hodgetts, 2008; Nairn, 2009). This crucial role as social narrator enables the reproduction of dominant discourses and ideologies. As Hartley (1996) points out:

In modern, complex, fragmented societies, no one can hope to know the other members of their community directly. The only real contact with others is, paradoxically, symbolic, and rendered in the form of stories, both factual and fictional, in the electronic and print media [original emphasis]. (p. 207)

In the field of race relations, mass media replicates predominant societal explanations and understandings and can contribute to stigmatization and marginalization (McGregor & Comrie, 1995; Thompson, 1954; Walker, 1990). The media is a key contributor to what Smith, Yosso, and Solozano (2007) call “the racial priming socialization process”. They argue that this “exposes Whites to countless daily racial stimuli that they unconsciously, yet systematically, internalize as racist attitudes, stereotypes, assumptions, fears, resentments, discourses, and fictitious racial scripts” (p. 561).

International research on the impact of media suggests that, particularly for white people, ongoing negative portrayals of minority
group members entrenches dominant power dynamics and is damaging to social cohesion (Dixon, 2006; Domke, McCoy, & Torres, 1999; Dong & Murillo, 2007; Entman, 1990; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Johnson, Adams, Hall, & Ashburn, 1997; Tan, Fujioka, & Tan, 2000). This continual construction of social realities supports racism by increasing negative perceptions of minorities (Dixon, 2008; Dong & Murillo, 2007; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Johnson et al., 1997; Lee, Bichard, Irey, Walt, & Carlson, 2009); contributing to pessimistic perceptions of inter-ethnic neighbourhoods (Gillam, Valentino, & Beckmann, 2002); endorsing more punitive policies for crime (Gillam et al., 2002); and increasing opposition to affirmative action policies (Tan et al., 2000) and immigration (Domke et al., 1999).

From the research cited above it appears the media is deeply involved and implicated in social relations. However, the relationship between media products and audience uptake is complex (Thomsen, 2007). Audiences are not passive vessels unquestioningly accepting media stories, but are active in accepting, critiquing and making meaning from media texts. But having a critical understanding of media portrayals as a representation of reality does not automatically equate to being immunized against the dominant discourses in media content. Contradictory understandings can be held within individuals simultaneously—people may deconstruct and critique the media while still partially or fully accepting media depictions as reflective of reality. Such inconsistency was theorized by Potter and Wetherell (1987):

Variability is an expected feature of conversation and social texts despite the fact that people often try to reduce it when it is pointed out to them or when it becomes salient for some other reason. (p. 38)

Although dominant discourses may be actively contested, negotiated and deconstructed by the public, they are still available as a default position when one is tired, stressed, unthinking or in the company of those who accept dominant discourses (McCreanor, 2008). In addition, having a critique of negative media portrayals of Māori does not inoculate a person against acting on competing racist beliefs and assumptions. Consequently, an awareness among non-Māori of the existence of negative coverage in the media about Māori and Te Tiriti (the Treaty of Waitangi) may not translate into a less hostile or racist environment for Māori. In addition, media audiences do not exist in a vacuum. They negotiate media text from positions and world views formed and informed by non-media sources such as personal experiences, relationships, and alternative discourses and explanations.

New Zealand media research has found that Māori are under-represented in news media (McGregor & Comrie, 1995; Moewaka Barnes et al., 2005; Rankine et al., 2008), and when reported, they are often represented negatively (Moewaka Barnes et al., 2005; Rankine et al., 2008). Researchers argue that Māori are not allocated their share of “voice”, given their status as indigenous people who have been unjustly treated in the colonization of Aotearoa and according to their rights guaranteed by the Treaty, which acknowledged their sovereignty and promised social equity (Barclay & Liu, 2003). Mass media representations of Māori, Pākehā, The Treaty of Waitangi and broader Māori–non-Māori relations continue to undermine the potential for integrity in relationships and social justice in Aotearoa New Zealand. Mass media has always produced and reproduced predominantly negative discourses about Māori and the Treaty of Waitangi (Colvin, 2010; Matheson, 2007; Nairn et al., 2006). McCreanor (2005, 2008) argues that racist and divisive discourse frame Māori in the media and in the everyday talk of Pākehā people. Māori are flexibly categorized as “good” or “bad” (those who fit into Pākehā society, or those who fail or resist); stirrers (those who foment trouble and attempt to spread discontent regarding social
equity for Māori); privileged (those possessed of advantages sanctioned on the grounds of having Māori ethnic identity); and violent (towards Pākehā and within their own communities). Such discursive resources and themes in Pākehā talk are just as apparent in both media stories and in everyday talk, even in the first decade of the 21st century, and show strong continuity with earlier studies (Nairn & McCreanor, 1991; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), and with analyses of historical discourses (Ballara, 1986; Belich, 1986; Salmond, 1991) dating from earliest contacts between Māori and Europeans.

Our investigation of these issues and dynamics belongs within the broad rubric of media reception studies, which in turn owes much to the encoding/decoding theories of Hall (1980) and Morley (1980), which suggest that the meaning and interpretation of news media items depends on the situated readings of audience members. Typically, eliciting data for such studies relies on what can be gathered from interviewees in response to general questions about media use, or the interpretation of specific stories, and our work uses both forms to continue this tradition.

Method

In this paper we discuss findings from five focus groups of media audience members held in 2008 looking at media representations of Māori and Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Focus groups have a long history in the social science field and yield rich data (Krueger & Kasey, 2009; Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007). The nature of group dynamics and the potential for interviewees to respond in agreement and disagreement allows for nuanced discussions within the group (Stewart et al., 2007).

The focus group database reported here consists of two groups of Pākehā of mixed age and gender (Pākehā 1 and Pākehā 2) and two groups of tauwi (non-Pākehā, non-Māori New Zealanders), whom we have called Tauwi 1 and Tauwi 2. There was also one youth group that was a mix of one Pākehā and two Māori young men (Mixed 1).

The focus groups contained members with a diverse mix of familiarity with Māori issues and the Treaty of Waitangi—from those who were very informed to those who knew virtually nothing beyond what they were able to recall from the media. Semi-structured interviews gave opportunities for participants to speak openly about their personal perspective of the media, as well as about how others in their communities may perceive and respond to media depictions.

Each focus group began with a general discussion about the participants' views of the media in general, before turning to their thoughts about media portrayals of Māori and the Treaty of Waitangi. The groups were then provided with one newspaper article to read and one television news item to watch. The researchers asked questions relating to the items. The newspaper item was reporting a claim being lodged with the Waitangi Tribunal about water rights. The television item was a report of White Ribbon Day—a march of men to show their support for stopping violence towards women and children. Sessions were one to two hours in length, and were audio-recorded. The recordings were transcribed verbatim, checked for accuracy and coded using thematic analysis (Patton, 2006) in the discursive/inductive form as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Here, the researcher is encouraged to describe broad patterns within participant talk while holding and working with the assumption that participants traceably use deconstructive techniques such as those described by Potter and Wetherell (1987), constructed through the discursive forms and features of particular utterances.

We present thematic analyses that point to the complex, nuanced and sometimes resistant meaning-making practices of non-Māori audience members in relation to Māori news items and to media coverage in general. On the basis of this evidence, we argue that mass media
portrayals of Māori and Te Tiriti o Waitangi are not conducive to social justice or a harmonious bicultural future, and are out of step with audience needs for balanced and contextualized information.

**Findings**

From the introductory segment of the interview we established that most focus group members read, watched, and listened to a range of print, radio and television media. Some participants also had direct experience with media production, having been interviewed before or having produced press releases due to their work or particular knowledge and expertise.

The following findings are presented as a series of themes in which descriptive analysis is anchored to data by means of frequent verbatim quotations. Primary themes included depictions of Māori, dominance of Pākehā perspectives, the Treaty of Waitangi, impacts on non-Māori audiences and areas of possible improvement.

**Depictions of Māori**

Participants thought that the overall coverage of Māori issues in the mainstream media was poor and predominately negative, with Māori repeatedly positioned as possessing negative characteristics and aligned with problematic social phenomena.

Maggie: Because all you hear is negatives—you never hear any positives. It's always—it's always about the Māoris, what they want—they want they want, they don't give. That's negative, isn't it? And they're the ones who are fleecing the system—it's all negative. I've never heard any positive news about Māoris—apart from that girl who was playing in Whalerider, you know. And then she got pregnant when she was so young, so it was bad again. I don't think you hear any positive things. (Pākehā group 1)

Wendy: I think there is more negative than positive things. See, with Māori everything is bad. Education is bad, poverty, family violence, child abuse . . . with Pākehā they might talk about doing well about . . . such and such and highlighting the good parts, and then Māori always the negative. (Tauiwi group 2)

These participants engage in an interesting interplay between the politics of ethnicity-reporting and its implied overlap with issues of class and residential location (Remuera is an iconically upper middle class residential district in Auckland city). The argument here is that the gaze is focused on Māori to the detriment of reporting how the equivalent issues are playing out amongst other groups, particularly Pākehā.

Participants thought that news media report- age of Māori repeatedly emphasizes social ills such as crime, poor health and failure and that
this has a detrimental impact on non-Māori perceptions of Māori.

Amanda: I think we all know it’s about crime and stuff. If you have no contact with Māori, all you get in the media is the crime rates—all those sort of statistics are always in the paper. You never hear any good stories ... I just think we judge Māori from the papers, from the news media, and we get a very negative view. (Pākehā group 1)

The cumulative effect of negative coverage and the absence of good news is perceived as entrenching an overall negativity. A further excerpt illustrates the impact among new New Zealanders.

Wendy: So these things are always highlighted, like migrants, like us, people come and get the impression that Māori are bad and they are the criminals and violence. (Tauiwi group 2)

Here the media is implicated in creating the link between Māori, violence and crime—but the generalization “bad” to cover all aspects of life is also a feature. The speaker makes a meaningful connection between the way minority groups (Māori and migrants) can be subject to a similar discourse by the media. She implies that “people come” to New Zealand and when faced with negative depictions of Māori (and having little opportunity to experience alternative views), will often accept the stereotypes as accurate.

Dave: When the majority of the minority commit something, for example like the majority of Māori do a lot of violent crimes in the society, then nobody interest to learn about Māori culture. And then like we try to kick them out of the wider pond, out of the society. (Tauiwi group 1)

This participant highlights the power of media portrayals in his belief that the majority of Māori commit violent crimes. Alternatively, given that English is not the participant’s native language, it is possible he believed that the majority of violent crimes are committed by Māori. Either interpretation makes his later comment about the active exclusion of Māori from wider society justifiable and necessary. He is clear that given such depictions of Māori as violent criminals, to learn and respect Māori culture is therefore unnecessary and undesirable.

Of greater concern is the following comment:

Bob: You can see in the Māori society they commit crime, they are violent, they do lots of that. So when we have younger children we don’t want them to get too involved in those because it might influence them. We try to get out straight away from the school [that has] a high majority of Māori. To be honest that is how it is ... don’t look at me [speaking to other group members] ... It is true [group laughter] because once they get involved they hang out, they start to go together. (Tauiwi group 1)

This participant voices what he understands to be a widespread view among new migrants—one that justifies active discrimination against Māori. The removal of children from particular schools purely on the basis of the proportion of Māori students is seen as an honest and natural outcome, given the view that most Māori are violent and criminals. His aside to other participants, “don’t look at me”, and their laughter implies that they recognize the statement as true to their community view, while also being shameful and racist.

**Media views: Pākehā views**

Participants discussed multiple ways in which news coverage reflected Pākehā perspectives on the issues of the day. Some participants said that media representations of Māori reiterate and may often act as a proxy for entrenched Pākehā understandings.
Corina: I actually think the media just represent the continual views in Pākehā society, and often particularly badly. (Pākehā group 2)

They argued that the mass media both reflects and encourages Pākehā prejudice through the culture-laden perspectives and values that routinely inform their practice. Such understandings were seen to inadequately provide contextualized stories about Māori-related issues.

Kelly: But you see the reporters don’t have the knowledge. They don’t have tacit knowledge. They don’t understand the culture, the concepts are so different. I think you’ve got to have a reporter that does have the knowledge to represent the complexities [and] that they understand them. (Pākehā group 2)

This participant highlights a crucial point about the lack of core cultural competencies and knowledge about Māori people, concepts and cultural practices among most news reporters. She alludes to the notion that little or no competence in these areas seriously affects the quality and accuracy of the media produced.

Kelly: It just feeds paranoia and fear, what people have anyway. But I guess you don’t get a lot of feel-good stories. I mean, you often hear reading about the abuse and child abuse and crime. You know, they stick in your mind, and stealing bodies and taking them back to the pā, and those stories I find confusing, really confusing from a Pākehā’s point of view. I still don’t know who’s right and who’s wrong, or why it should be in the paper anyway. (Pākehā group 2)

This participant speaks of striking but confusing stories that evoke concepts and cultural practices about which Pākehā have generally little knowledge. Combined with a perceived imbalance towards negative items, such coverage serves to reinforce a negative orientation towards Māori and Māori-Pākehā relations.

**The Treaty of Waitangi**

Media coverage of Waitangi Day and the Treaty of Waitangi in general is included under this theme. Participants reported a general absence of positive news stories about the Treaty, although there were variations discussed in relation to regional reporting, with smaller provincial newspapers considered to provide more informed articles. One participant could not recollect any media coverage about the Treaty in the media at all.

Of the little coverage there was, there was consensus that stories tended to be negative. Historical grievances, tensions over resource allocation, and the threat of loss of access to land for non-Māori were examples of participant recollection primarily of mass media.

Jamie: It’s just like when you get something like the Treaty of Waitangi or something like this represented in the paper, it tries to portray Māoris as you know they’re just trying to grab everything. (Mixed group)

Some of the participants in Tauiwi 1 and Tauiwi 2 felt that within migrant communities the lack of historical and contextual information about the Treaty of Waitangi contributed to a questioning of the validity of Treaty settlements and a lack of support for affirmative policies such as quotas for Māori students. Participants felt that the media had a role to report positively on the Treaty so as to contribute to greater understanding, and counter resistance to Treaty claims and settlements. Moreover, the media focus on mismanagement of settlement monies was perceived to encourage the idea that Māori should not receive such settlements as they were poor managers of assets.

Marvin: That’s why I say Māori, when they get the money for the land that has been confiscated, some of the people and the press try
to make trouble and say that too much money has been given to them, but if the media could explain why this money has gone to them . . . If they get this money and it is mismanaged, there is highlighting of all this mismanagement in the papers, in the news media. So always I think “useless these Māori people look at the news, look at what is happening, they are unable to manage the hundred million dollars they are given, why should they be given this money.” So this is a negative aspect of how we expose their activities, and it is always bad. (Tauiwi group 2)

The Treaty was rarely framed as being important and beneficial to New Zealand as a whole, or as a potential site for positive bicultural development.

Corina: You know like, I don’t see articles about the Treaty . . . which are actually positive, well informed, celebratory and forward looking. (Pākehā group 2)

Here, an absence of alternative framings for the Treaty signals a common belief among participants—the need for more historical and contextual information to educate the wider populace about the Treaty’s role and status. Some migrant participants thought the lack of contextual information in media coverage of the Treaty often left recent arrivals ill-informed, as argued by this participant:

Wendy: If you had just come here or hadn’t been living here for a long time and you relied on media explanations, you wouldn’t understand much about the Treaty. (Tauiwi group 2)

Some Pākehā participants offered particularly insightful comments about the continual framing of the Treaty as solely a “Māori issue”:

Corina: The Treaty is not portrayed as an opportunity for Pākehā or a thing that Pākehā should be taking responsibility for. It’s portrayed as this is about Māoris. Treaty is not about Māoris. (Pākehā group 2)

Critiquing such coverage, this participant opens up discursive space for discussion of the Treaty as an “opportunity” for Pākehā people—a view in contrast to what she understands as the mass media’s approach.

Waitangi Day

Media portrayals of Waitangi Day repeat a standard pattern of drama, unrest, conflict and protest. This, rather than the provision of contextual information about the Treaty, is often the focus. Participants saw Waitangi Day coverage as “narrow” and “sensational”, with an emphasis on politics and politicians. They noted the absence of interviews with “ordinary” Waitangi Day attendees who could provide information and alternative (perhaps more positive) perspectives.

Mik: There is definitely an education needed on the Treaty of Waitangi. Otherwise we get the impression of the Treaty and you know “these Māori” and sensationalized news . . . and things, and someone hitting at each other and kicking and that is highlighted. So. And then that whole thing is taken over and then the politicians going there getting thrown at by mud and all those sorts of stories are the ones that get highlighted. Not so much the Treaty as such. (Tauiwi group 2)

This participant uses a specific 2004 protest directed at the then leader of the opposition, Don Brash, to illustrate that news prioritizes such displays over the more fundamental issues at stake—the Treaty and the unjust colonial relations it has come to symbolize.

Overall, participants saw Treaty and Waitangi Day coverage as a strong example of how poorly the media handle the issue of Māori–Pākehā relations generally. Some also
saw it as a missed opportunity to provide factual and contextual information about the Treaty and to explore a diverse range of perspectives about the Treaty and Waitangi Day.

Silence

A number of participants drew attention to what they saw as gaps in coverage that amounted to weak media performance in the representation of Māori and Māori–Pākehā relations.

Mik: That’s one of the key points. The majority of the media are willing to talk about the negative bits . . . Māori are more likely to be in jail, to have the diabetes . . . so what are we doing about that? What is it that [is] killing them?

Wendy: Something is being done but it is being put in the papers. People are doing lots of the [inaudible] things, but it is not coming in the papers. It’s not balanced, its only one-sided. (Tauiwi group 2)

These participants appear to draw on personal knowledge of potential stories that do not appear in media coverage, contributing to the belief that the media is one-sided and fundamentally imbalanced.

Below is a complicated discussion posing rationales for the persistent absence of stories about Māori. Absences are suggested as being symptomatic of audience disinterest and apathy, inadequate information from the media, a lack of journalists or inexperienced and indifferent journalists and sensationalistic news reporting.

Maggie: I just wonder if journalists don’t go and do those Māori stories because they think nobody wants to know anyway. People won’t be interested or [they] want to know what is happening in Australia and how the stock market is going and how the housing market is going. I don’t know. Maybe that is the point that they are coming from. Thinking that nobody is interested in it anyway . . . could that be why they don’t cover it as well as they could?

Harriet: I agree with that. I see these things on the news and I see a bit of it and I think I need to know a lot more about that—I need to know the background and everything else.

Maggie: You need to find it out yourself, don’t you?

Amanda: I just wonder if the media are just a little bit lazy, or are they understaffed, or are they not experienced enough to do these stories?

Maggie: They’re sensation hungry. They just want to get the big stories out.

Larry: Anything that’s got a bit of drama in it. (Pākehā group 1)

The reference to knowing “the other side” in itself speaks of a wider imbalance of news stories on the basis of who news producers view as their audience. Focus group members construct the relationship between journalist and audience as reciprocal and interactive, informed by their perceptions of audience apathy with Māori issues and events.

Generally, the perception was that the conventional news values of the mass media accentuated primarily negative stories about Māori and neglected coverage of positive actions Māori took on issues. The absence of positive stories about Māori has become so normalized that it is not always noticed by non-Māori audiences unless specifically brought to their attention.

Alternatives

Participants argued that there could be alternatives to the effects of negative mass media coverage on non-Māori:
Wendy: I think I can understand Māori better now than before. I think before we would say we don’t mix with them, they are violent and they have parties, they drink; now we understand it much better. Now I think we understand that those sorts of things, it happens everywhere, it is not just Māori, it is happening everywhere. (Tauiwi group 2)

Here, the participant implies that media depictions of Māori are inaccurate. Better knowledge brings the insight that social problems are not restricted to Māori, but are encountered throughout the diversity of New Zealand society.

Corina: Yes, I think it’s [media coverage] seeding alienation, mistrust, hurt, pain, fear and hatred, and that’s pretty much what’s happening under the radar and then occasionally you get really good stuff happening as well that cuts across and builds bridges. I mean, we have awesome experiences but it wasn’t because the media helped. (Pākehā group 2)

Here, the media are portrayed as both contributing to social division and failing to aid (or report) positive inter-cultural relations that do occur around the country.

An exception to negative interpretation was indigenous media, which was perceived by some participants as providing positive alternatives to mainstream coverage of Māori.

Corina: Pākehā’s news feeds on conflict, good and evils [are] simplistic analysis and I think what’s happening in this country is we now have Māori media with lots of good news stories and lots of positive stories and so people can choose to watch that and there’re really good stories out there about young Māori cause I watch them on Māori Television every night. There’s awesome, amazing stuff happening and lots of young Pākehā are working for Māori Television, like there’s lots of Māori and Pākehā working together. There’s all this good stuff happening. There’s lots of Pacifica stuff that’s really awesome, but it’s not crossing over into those [mass media] journalists’ brains. (Pākehā group 2)

The Māori Television Service, which commenced as a Māori-controlled, state-funded broadcaster in 2004, is held up as a real alternative to mass media, not only in the media it produces, but in its different model of workplace relations. The collaboration of Pākehā and Māori at Māori Television was seen as a positive way to support and contribute to improved news practice. In addition, this participant positions mass media journalists as out of step with contemporary developments in media practice.

Central ideas generated from participant discussion were that education on social relations, real-world experience of Māori, and the contributions of indigenous media can all offer significant opportunities for building better social relations.

Discussion

A number of themes were evident in focus group discussions. Participants thought mass media depictions of Māori were predominantly negative, with Māori routinely associated with social problems. They found the consistent negative framing of Māori to be cumulative, with few alternative stories available to counter the prominent discourse. Participants suggested that this leads to division in the community through the marginalization of Māori by non-Māori, and a reluctance to engage with Māori and Māori culture.

Participants recognized the normalized position of an unmarked dominant and frequently uncontested Pākehā world view in the mass media. Pākehā are the assumed audience, and participants felt that mass media coverage generally reflected Pākehā viewpoints, world views, values and interests. Focus group participants thought the mass media implicitly promoted Pākehā world views, and often neglected voices
(both Māori and non-Māori) that support Māori aspirations. Participants believed that Pākehā enjoy a more trusting and beneficial relationship with the media. Pākehā evade the collective scrutiny often applied to Māori, and their perspectives remain largely unexamined and unchallenged. Some participants thought that Pākehā achievements were covered and celebrated, while Māori achievements were either ignored, reported rarely or framed within a “good Māori/bad Māori” discourse.

The Treaty of Waitangi fared no better in the media, being frequently ignored, marginalized, decontextualized, or used to encourage anxiety in non-Māori around allocation and access to resources. The Treaty was rarely presented as a positive framework for future relationships between tangata whenua (indigenous people of the land) and tauwi, or as an opportunity for non-Māori to engage in a bicultural future. Mass media reporting of Treaty settlements encouraged audience criticism of Māori entitlement and financial management. Waitangi Day coverage was considered to be sensationalized, with an emphasis on discord and drama (although there were perceived regional variations). Overall, Treaty of Waitangi and Waitangi Day news reporting was considered to leave audiences under-informed, ill-informed and confused.

Participants talked about the positive portrayals by Māori media of Māori and Māori-non-Māori relations, showing that alternative views are possible and necessary. The positive interpersonal relationships of participants with Māori, and an acceptance of a counter-discourse with regards to the distribution of social ills throughout New Zealand society, were seen as antidotes to the impact of predominantly negative media coverage of Māori bicultural relations.

Conclusion

As a pivotal site for the construction, maintenance and enhancement of relationships between social groups, the media has an enormous potential to be transformative. Literature from this country and beyond suggests that mainstream media produces and reproduces stories that support systematic power imbalances in the wider environment. These imbalances contribute to societal inequality, and New Zealand media is no exception. The potential for a positive future committed to social justice is currently being undermined by mass media representations of Māori and the Treaty of Waitangi. This is not inevitable or without the potential for transformation. The media can offer opportunities for marginalized discourses to be disseminated (Barclay & Liu, 2003; Collins & Rose, 2004; Hodgetts, Bolam & Stephens, 2005; Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2006), for myths to be dispelled (Medvene & Bridge, 1990), and for positive stories to be told (Smith & Abel, 2008).

The information gleaned from the first round of non-Māori focus groups in the Media, Te Tiriti and Wellbeing project has implications for relationships between non-Māori and Māori, and for social cohesion in New Zealand.

Participants strongly linked the uptake of negative stereotypes of Māori to the depictions created by and reproduced in the mass media. This supports findings by other researchers, such as Liu (2009). The enforcement of dominant societal discourses about Māori and the Treaty of Waitangi, and the harmful impact this has for Māori-non-Māori relations is striking. The constant and continual portrayal of Māori as violent, as criminals, as protestors and child abusers, appears to reiterate long-held stereotypes which are being used to justify and naturalize overt racial discrimination towards Māori. International evidence makes clear that this will be having immediate, deep and profound effects on Māori health and wellbeing (Jones, 1999; Paradies, Harris, & Anderson, 2008; Paradies & Williams, 2008).

Focus group participants highlighted the diverse and often complex interactions between the media and its consumers. Audience members
continually negotiate an ideological minefield of complicity and critique, acceptance and resistance, reception and rejection. This results in an intricate and often contradictory set of understandings. Some participants articulated a position of awareness of media portrayal of Māori and the Treaty, and realized that the picture was wider than that conveyed, but nonetheless maintained the colonialist discursive resources available to them and the beliefs and behaviours these enable (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

What is consistent, however, is that the presence and strength of racial stereotypes about Māori in the mass media (fuelled by negative portrayals and few meaningful alternatives) contributes not only to the marginal status of Māori people and their aspirations; the damage wrought in this critical sector of our society is to the detriment of identity formation, social cohesion, race relations and the development of a fair and just society in Aotearoa.

Glossary

Māori

Pākehā

tangata

whenua

tauīwi

Te Tiriti o Waitangi

The indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand
New Zealanders of European descent
local people, indigenous people of the land
Non-Māori, usually non-Pākehā, New Zealanders; immigrants
The Treaty of Waitangi; an agreement between the British Crown and Māori signed progressively between 1840 and 1841. Contested interpretations range between cession and guarantee of Māori sovereignty
References


Zealand (pp. 85–96). Dunedin: University of Otago Press.
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