

Pasifika in the news: The portrayal of Pacific peoples in the New Zealand press

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INTRODUCTION

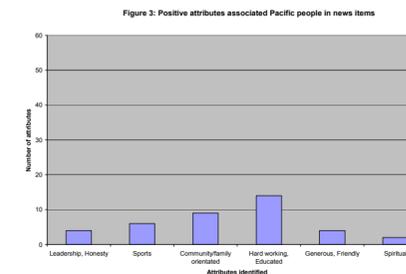
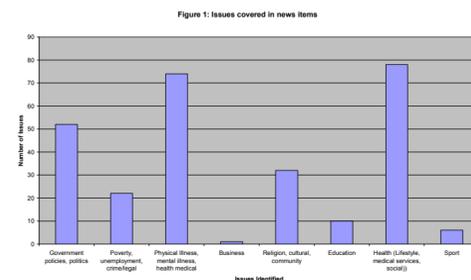
- News media do more than transmit information. Reports shape information and comprise forums for diagnosing social relationships, characterising groups, and offering prescriptions for addressing social concerns.
- Researchers have documented how ethnic minorities are often disadvantaged in mainstream media coverage, which function to silence minority voices and to privilege majority voices. Such representational practices have very real implications for the position of ethnic minorities in society, and their associated rights and life chances.
- Negative portrayals constitute serious public health risks and threats to positive social relations both within and beyond the borders of minority communities. Such portrayals are associated with higher rates of mental and physical ailments among these communities. Therefore, deconstructing and challenging discriminatory representational practices becomes a public health promotion strategy.
- The promotion of positive identities among marginalized communities is associated with increased civic participation and health gains.
- Academic research on media portrayals of Pacific Islanders is virtually non-existent. We document the portrayal of Pacific peoples in the New Zealand print media reports.

METHOD

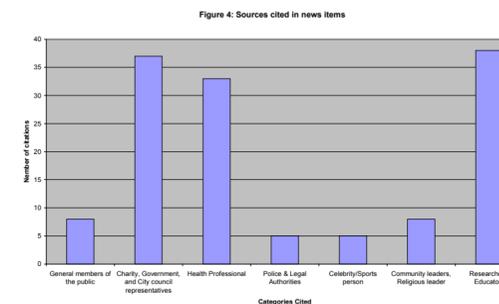
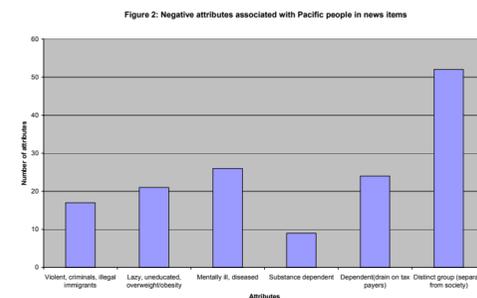
- Print news items (65) published in 3 major New Zealand newspapers (1 Oct - 30 Dec, 2004) were analyzed using quantitative and qualitative content analysis techniques. The analysis adopted a 'text-and-context' approach, which involved moving the focus beyond the description of trends in coverage to broader observations about socio-cultural processes and relationships underlying media representations. In this poster we present simple descriptive statistics from the quantitative analysis.

RESULTS

- Portrayals of Pacific Islanders in newspapers reflect processes whereby media monitor marginalized groups and give prominence to negative attributes. Figure 1 shows the frequency of issues covered in news reports, which reflect the stigmatizing of Pacific communities. If one uses a broad definition of health to include social determinants there were 184 instances associating Pacific Islanders with health concerns. Combined with the 52 references to considerations of governance, the focus on health issues reflects a storyline in which Pacific Islanders are characterized as unhealthy people to be managed by public institutions.



- Coverage associated both negative and positive attributes with Pacific people, but favored negative attributes. Figure 2 reveals that there were 99 instances of negative attributes characterizing Pacific people as dependent, lazy, violent, criminal, and drug abusers. The largest category was comprised of 52 references to Pacific Islanders as foreigners or inferior others who are out of place in Aotearoa. Conversely, Figure 3 reveals only 38 positive references to Pacific Islanders as hardworking and community orientated individuals who have leadership qualities and are generous and honest people.



- Figure 4 presents frequencies for the appearance of news sources, revealing that the majority of sources were non-Pacific researchers and educators (48), government representatives (37), health professionals (33), and police or lawyers (5). Only one 'expert' was identified as a Pacific Islander, and only 9.6% of all sources (13) were Pacific sportspeople, artists or community leaders. These trends raise issues around the ability of certain groups to access the media and thus influence the portrayal of Pacific peoples. It appears that Pacific Islanders are a group to be talked about and administered, rather than communicated with or encouraged to participate in public deliberations.



CONCLUSION

- The media need to raise health and social concerns for public consideration. However, the reliance on one-dimensional characterizations of Pacific Islanders effectively reduces the claims of Pacific peoples to public attention to their problems.
- A worrying finding from our analyses is the lack of space for Pacific peoples to speak beyond restrictive roles, and the displacement of Pacific Islanders from their own stories.
- A small percentage of reports did promote Pacific perspectives and more complex and positively orientated portrayals. Such reports were confined to sports and light entertainment pages.
- The participation of Pacific people in mainstream media coverage is necessary because the resources communities have to address social inequalities and to maintain healthy communities are often determined through public deliberations beyond the borders of local Pacific communities.
- Civic projects are necessary to involve media professionals in working with communities to promote participation in public decision-making and problem solving. The community activism that is central to such projects does not have to be manufactured by journalists from outside local community settings.
- In their 2004 strategic plan the Pacific Island Media Association points out that in all aspects of civic participation and governance Pacific peoples are under represented. This group aims to increase participation by monitoring media coverage and lobbying for fair representations that foster strong and positive Pacific identities. Such initiatives include the promotion of change in media representations through scholarships for Pacific peoples to attend journalism schools and hosting conferences to organize media monitoring and advocacy work. This paper contributes to this agenda by documenting both promising and negative trends in print news portrayals of Pacific peoples and providing a basis for us to open a dialogue with Pacific media activists.