



RESEARCH BRIEF

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Unpacking Media Narratives: Racism and Problematic Reasonings

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Executive Summary

In this research brief, we present summaries of four case studies of racism in mainstream and social media in Aotearoa. Through a series of carefully selected datasets sourced from TV episodes (Police TEN 7), print media such as news articles (including Northland checkpoints), and tweets (Three Waters reform), we outline how Māori are represented across these mediums. With an expert in language modelling on our team, we analysed large datasets that give us sufficient statistical power to infer specific Māori discourses on respective platforms. Further, we examined key themes that characterise how Māori are represented in the media and signal the scale of anti-Māori attacks. For instance, we found that the predominant discussion on Three Waters reform on Twitter focused on 'conflict' (distrust towards government; 33%) and 'capability' (questioning the credibility of the reform; 23%) rather than its core intention of promoting water 'safety' (7%). The modelling analysis was supplemented by in-depth qualitative analysis that integrates anti-Māori themes (Moewaka-Barnes et al., 2012) and problematic reasoning tactics (Sturgill, 2021) to elucidate how false, deficit-based rhetoric about Māori is deployed to fuel racism and disinformation. In summary, our findings reinforce Kupu Taea's call for new media sectors to integrate Te Tiriti o Waitangi into their practices to safeguard Māori and other minoritised groups who are likely to be at the fore of racist attacks.

Introduction

The WERO project *Monitoring Racism in Mainstream and Social Media* aims to identify and monitor racism among users, and responses to racism in mainstream and social media. The purpose of the media analysis is to illuminate discourses involving race and the operation of racism (with a focus on anti-Māori prejudice) in media in Aotearoa and to identify areas for intervention. Our study builds on prior traditional media analysis by leading scholars who have documented forms of anti-Māori discourse (Gregory et al., 2011; Moewaka-Barnes et al., 2012; Moewaka-Barnes & McCreanor, 2023), as we explore such expressions in new mediums and how these discourses not only reflect problematic reasonings but also the growth and spread of false information.

Research undertaken within the WERO: Working to End Racial Oppression research programme has been developed in relation to the Takarangi framework. The Takarangi is a double spiral pattern prominent in Māori carving that is also depicted in the background of this brief. In WERO, the Takarangi framework has shaped our work on the values and ethics of all research that we undertake to address racism. Further information on the Takarangi is available online: <https://wero.ac.nz/research/takarangi-wero-values-and-roadmap/>

In this brief, we present four case studies involving research into different mainstream and social media. We chose to investigate how anti-Māori discourse manifested during recent events occurring between 2020 and 2024. Notable events such as the Northland checkpoints set up by iwi Māori to prevent Covid-19 dissemination and the Three Waters Reform highlighted how Māori quickly became the central target of racism. These events provided a rich source of information for researching the evolution of racist speech since previous research conducted a decade ago (Moewaka-Barnes et al., 2012). We employed a range of methods, including a custom-trained natural language processor and qualitative analysis (e.g., coding and theming), to build a body of theoretical and narrative-grounded evidence.

Next, we discuss each of the four media case studies in turn, then outline the next steps of our research and provide recommendations for addressing racism in media.

Police TEN 7

As our project began in 2020, a great deal of media attention focused on TVNZ's long-standing Police TEN 7 'reality' show. The show faced allegations of racism in 2021 and was subsequently cancelled in February 2023 due to declining audience ratings.

The public debate over the show centred on the term 'reality'. On the one hand, justifications from the show's producers and its supporters characterised Police TEN 7 as an "accurate" (Cardwell, 2021) and "factual" (NZ On Screen, 2025) depiction of reality where "[t]he people who commit the crimes are the ones that select themselves..." (Graham Bell [the former host of Police TEN 7] as quoted in NZ Herald, 2021).

On the other hand, a wealth of overseas literature demonstrates that international shows of this nature (e.g. *Cops* in the United States) clearly distort reality (Lindemann, 2022; Monk-Turner et al., 2007; Oliver, 1994). Typically, they disproportionately depict minoritised groups (including Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) as violent criminals (e.g., Monk-Turner et al., 2007), to name just one of many concerns. Such practices have been shown to sway audiences to stereotype certain communities as a 'danger' to civilised societies (Ramasubramanian,

2011). The framing of these shows as 'reality' that supposedly mirrors the real world needs to be critically examined as news media have an ethical responsibility to be accountable and responsible in their depiction of Indigenous and minoritised communities (Rankine et al., 2022). In Aotearoa, there is a longstanding media tradition of depicting Māori through a deficit lens (Gregory et al., 2011; Moewaka-Barnes et al., 2012). At the time debate about Police TEN 7 emerged, prominent voices like the New Zealand's Race Relations Commissioner (at the time Meng Foon)—amongst many others—questioned that framing of reality, suggesting the show was "feed[ing] racial stereotypes" (NZ Herald, 2021) much like *Cops* in the US.

Public opinion was divided: either the show was 'racist', or it was merely recounting "cold, hard uncomfortable truth" (Graham Bell as quoted in NZ Herald, 2021). However, routinely missing in this debate was evidence from the show itself.

Our analysis (see Yan et al., 2023) identified the extent to which Police TEN 7 was perpetuating negative stereotypes on Māori and Pacific peoples. We coded 24 episodes of Police TEN 7 that aired between 2011 and 2021, coding the types of criminal offences committed and the ethnicity of the alleged perpetrators. Our results show that Māori and Pacific people were much more likely to be shown as 'violent' perpetrators than Pākehā (New Zealand European). Nearly 2 out of every 3 offences in our sample ($n = 28$) were depicted as such—over 20% more than the national average coming from New Zealand Police's own data. Māori and Pacific people (64%) were twice as likely as Pākehā (29%) to be identified as suspects of violent offences. In a nutshell, our findings offer evidence that Māori and Pasifika people were disproportionately framed as violent criminals on Police TEN 7.

Our findings therefore question whether TVNZ is adhering to its public broadcasting mandates and its commitment to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi. We also strongly recommend that analyses of much larger samples (access we could not achieve via TVNZ's online archive) at regular intervals are necessary both to test the robustness of our findings and to continue to add much needed evidence to public debate over the show.

Print media

In November 2020, *Stuff* issued a historic front-page apology to Māori for its depiction of tangata whenua (see Figure 1).



Our Truth, Tā Mātou Pono is a Stuff project investigating the history of racism.

JOHNSON WITEHIRA / STUFF

Figure 1. Apology to Māori by Suff. Image sourced from Stevens (2020). Link: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/pou-tiaki/our-truth/300165985/stuffs-apology-to-mori-our-truth-t-mtou-pono>

This apology served as another impetus for this project. Over decades, in-depth qualitative work has demonstrated how Māori have been problematically framed through themes of Pākehā race talk in traditional news media (e.g., Moewaka-Barnes et al., 2012). Our aim was to contribute to that body of research by employing new methods to further develop this substantial body of evidence.

We collected and examined roughly 800,000 sentences discussing Māori in New Zealand's print media between 1995 and 2021 (Phillips, 2023). Using machine learning algorithms of topic modelling (Latent Dirichlet Allocation) and word embeddings (fastText), we quantitatively analysed these sentences and the dimensional relationships between keywords looking to test (if not replicate) the wealth of prior qualitative research in this area.

For example, Figure 2 presents the results of our topic model representing discussions of Māori in traditional media. The size of words in these figures indicates the magnitude of difference between the topics. For example, nearly a quarter of Māori mentions in news media fell in the 'customary claims' category (23%), with obvious prominent focus on 'land', 'treaty', 'rights', 'courts' and the Waitangi Tribunal. For more detailed information about the definition of each classified topic, see Phillips (2023).

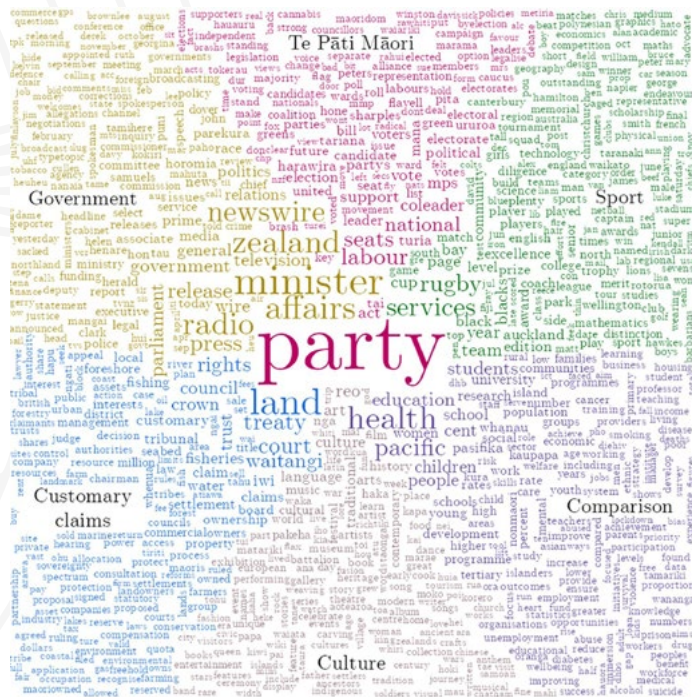


Figure 2. Topic model of 'Māori' mentions in New Zealand media. Topic sizes: comparison (24%); culture (23%); customary claims (23%); Te Pāti Māori (16%); politics (11%); and sport (10%). Image sourced from Phillips (2023). Link: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1177083X.2022.2122517>

Our results also indicate that the language used to discuss Māori in this sample reflects the problematic relationship between media reporting of crime, race, and violence. The quantitative contribution is crucial here, as the embedding space (i.e., not a qualitative reading of the text) empirically demonstrates a

Positive	Neutral	Negative
Protection/safety: Protection of communities and sharing information about COVID and government restrictions	Inconvenience: Inconvenience caused to locals, travellers, and police by the checkpoints	Informative: Factual details on the checkpoints (e.g., times & locations)
Partnership: Partnerships between Māori and the police to establish the checkpoints	Practicality: Questioning of the logic and locations of the checkpoints	Balanced: Equal emphasis on both positive and negative frames
Community: Wider community participation (including from non-Māori) at checkpoints	Legality: Questioning of the legality of the checkpoints or the authority of Māori to establish these	
Effectiveness: Success of the checkpoints	Deficit: The need to protect vulnerable Māori communities with poor health and social conditions	
	Political: Calling out the Crown authorities for inaction on checkpoints or COVID response strategies	

Table 1. Thematic coding of discussions on 'checkpoints' and 'iwi' in 366 news articles.

quantifiable relationship between the word Māori and terms such as 'crime', 'violence', and various racial descriptions of offenders (e.g., an assailant with 'dark', 'olive', 'coloured', 'skinned').

Northland checkpoints

As the Covid-19 Delta variant spread across Aotearoa, Northland iwi took the initiative to establish checkpoints to protect their populations from exposure to the virus. The checkpoints were set up prior to Auckland entering Level 4 lockdown, but they quickly became contentious due to backlash from travellers wanting to go to Northland or escape Auckland, and politicians like ACT leader David Seymour labelling those who blocked roads (predominantly Māori) as thugs (Witton, 2021).

Two Nga Pae o te Māramatanga summer scholarship recipients (Hineana Tihore and Melissa Bradley) explored how Covid-19 checkpoints were framed in 366 news articles on the subject between March 2020 and December 2021—particularly in relation to iwi, Māori, policy, and community-led

checkpoints. The dataset was coded based on themes according to positive, negative, and neutral frames (see Table 1). The proportion of negative frames (29.8%) outnumbered (22.1%) positive discussions in the sample, but, most critically, the summer scholars also identified a major discrepancy between the type of checkpoints and how they were discussed by different media.

For example, 'Māori checkpoints' were discussed in a majority of the articles, with 'police' (27%), 'partnership' (19%), and 'community' (3%) checkpoints taking up considerably less attention. Further cross-referencing of the types of checkpoints with the sentiment of frames, shows that Māori-led checkpoints not only dominated the coverage, but also prompted the fewest number of positive frames (13%). By contrast, 'police checkpoints' commanded notably more positive frames (36%).

The summer scholars composed a poem that illustrates the shift in narrative over time concerning the media's discussion of checkpoints (see Figure

used to propagate false information about Māori and incite anti-Māori rhetoric (Tan et al., forthcoming). Table 2 presents some of the core themes, with exemplars provided to depict the underlying erroneous reasonings.

Race-based themes	Problematic reasonings and examples
<p>Māori resources: The control of resources by Māori is seen as a threat. The desire to preserve the status quo of predominant Pākehā resource control is tied to concerns that others will miss out on economic gains from the reform.</p>	<p>Red herring: An unrelated issue is introduced to divert attention from the topic being discussed.</p> <p>Example: <i>@[De-identified] Watch NZ to see this all playing out right now. 3 Waters is a grab for all of the water to be under co-government with Māori. Names being changed all over...soon New Zimbabwe.</i></p> <p>The fear-based persuasive message seeks to gaslight readers by constructing a narrative that 'Three Waters is a grab [of rights from tauiwil]' and employed a hyperbolic metaphorical reference to the socially deprived situation in Zimbabwe.</p> <p>Ad hominem attack: A critique is directed at the speaker rather than their idea.</p> <p>Example: <i>@[De-identified] The waste is all the money Ardern is spending on Three Waters, merging TV programmes and Consultant fees which never come to anything. Oh, and racist projects created by Willie Jackson and Mahuta. I could go on?</i></p> <p>The Honourable Nanaia Mahuta (the MP overseeing the Three Waters Reform) has been labelled a "racist" due to her advocacy for iwi and hapū involvement in water resource decision-making.</p>
<p>Māori culture and management: Māori culture, reo, and mātauranga risk being seen as primitive and irrelevant, with stereotypes portraying Māori as financially incapable and unfit for management roles.</p>	<p>Strawman argument: A straw man is set up when a person tries to counter a viewpoint that was not actually stated.</p> <p>Example: <i>Tribal people don't see nepotism as a problem. It's how they operate. The interests of the tribe are the priority, not the nation. This is why we have 3 Waters.</i></p> <p>The critique of Māori society as inferior to Pākehā governance and the accusation of in-group favouritism in Indigenous cultures resemble a strawman argument. The core reason for the water reform proposal (i.e., to address water crises with equal input from local councils and mana whenua) was intentionally left out of the discussion to deceive others.</p> <p>Conspiracy: A propaganda technique in which speakers produce a big lie and label those who try to disprove them as bad actors.</p> <p>It was alleged that the Māori are plotting to secure excessive power within the government. The speaker argued that the water reform proposal, would lead to social unrest and potential clashes between Māori and the "working and middle classes" due to stereotypes of Māori society as unstable, corrupt, and divided.</p> <p>Example: <i>@nzherald A paragon of nepotistic corruption. point is under the nitemare of "co-governance", Māori health and 3 waters, this will be the norm as we slide into the morass of third-world tribal conflict hegemony and chaos with the working and middle class.</i></p>

Table continued overleaf.

Māori privilege:

Māori are portrayed as receiving rights or benefits unfairly withheld from others.

Poisoning the well: An effort to undermine someone's credibility by sharing adverse information about them in advance.

The speaker poisoned the well by prematurely concluding that tauiwi have been unfairly excluded, without addressing the merits of the consultation with mana whenua who have historically been excluded from decisions regarding their land. This argument biases others into thinking that the water reform is a 'racist' bill before they have a chance to learn the details.

Example: *They had consultation with mana whenua before they even started this process. The rest of us? We're being told to sit down, shut up and that the Three Waters Select Committee will not listen to New Zealand. @dbseymour, @NZNationalParty and @TaxpayersUnion - what are my options?*

Black and white fallacy: A thinking that falsely assumes that there are only two possible consequences.

The speaker is positioning themselves as a justice advocate while condemning a supposed "minority takeover". This tactic is a bait to distract others from considering alternative explanations that could shed light on the complexity of the issue.

Example: *3 waters was only designed to be a minority group takeover and leave us the bill for repair costs and extra payouts for the group.*

Table 2. Anti-Māori themes and problematic reasoning tactics within Three Waters Tweets.

'Tweeting about Māori', and the future of our work

In the time since we began this work, enormous technological changes – such as the advent of ChatGPT – have significantly improved our methodological capabilities to analyse text data. Traditionally, the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) algorithm has been the primary method for topic modelling text data, a rudimentary process that leverages word frequencies (i.e. 'bag of words') to sort topics within a predetermined number of categories. We employed this method in our own research on print media and Three Waters that we have outlined above. The recent development of large language models—combined with other machine learning algorithms—is perhaps the most obvious advancement over the last 24 months (e.g. see Grootendorst, 2022), though the new topic modelling methods require considerably more technical skills than LDA and continued access to large swaths of data.

This recent explosion in large language model capabilities has ironically caused social media platforms to substantially curb access to their data, though. That is, models like ChatGPT are trained on large swaths of social media data, something previously free for academics to acquire. To

capitalise on this emerging market, and to maintain a competitive edge on AI development, social media platforms like Reddit and X/Twitter have placed substantial restrictions on API access, both financial (i.e. paid access) and logistical (i.e. smaller data caps). In other words, while we have never been more technologically capable of exploring social media discourses, obtaining—and rigorously examining—the data is now harder than ever.

We navigate these changes in our final leg of this project. The goal of this final study was to transition our research from traditional (e.g. newspapers and TV) to social media. The mission was therefore to explore how Māori were discussed across an entire social media platform; in what we believe not only to be a first-of-its-kind study of Māori but also of how any Indigenous people are discussed in totality online. Thankfully, prior to X/Twitter's data access changes, we managed to collect data for our final project: 1.5 million tweets discussion Māori between 2009 and 2022.

While this project is ongoing, initial findings suggest that the frequency in which Māori are discussed on X/Twitter has increased substantially during this period, despite Google searches for the term remaining static. This suggests that the public is discussing Māori issues on X/Twitter more than ever before. In our view, a substantial amount

of this content involves 'cultural tourism' where Māori culture is consumed in a tourist-like fashion, with tweets focusing on 'Haka' and 'Hongi' as some examples. Surprisingly, we also found that tweets about Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's Royal Visit, with reference to Māori (e.g. traditional greeting, korowai/kakahu) commanded some of the most engagements—a rather bizarre result of the data given the Crown's history with Māori, though perhaps one in line with our cultural tourism assessment. Finally, the data also suggests that Māori receive considerable focus during political campaigns, and that since the 2017-2019 period there has been increasing attention on Māori resources and political participation—a finding perhaps unsurprising given our Three Waters research above.

Conclusion & recommendations

The WERO project has documented a series of anti-Indigenous and anti-Māori messages propagated through traditional and social media platforms. Overall, we observed a trend of overrepresentation of Māori in deficit-based media reporting on crime, race, and violence due to assigned racial stereotypes, which has remained relatively stable over the years (Gregory et al., 2011). Even within initiatives designed to address inequities for Māori, media discourse often hyper-focuses on 'race' and divert attention from the primary benefits of these initiatives. Descriptions of Māori in racially denigrating ways have largely stayed the same (Moewaka-Barnes et al., 2012), for instance, 'hypersensitive' Māori in response to 'harmless' Pākehā ignorance and 'privileged' Māori that reinforces the zero-sum thinking (i.e., other groups are disadvantaged).

The new insight derived from our analysis is the deployment of problematic reasoning strategies to perpetuate racist rhetoric against Māori. With the surge of false information hindering the public from accessing the truth and steering us to form conclusions based on poor justifications, our studies highlight the need to promote media literacy training across educational, community, and institutional levels. Such training is essential for equipping the public with the skills to critically assess information validity and identify problematic reasoning.

In 2022, the Kupu Taea (a media research group) published a report entitled *Te Tiriti Framework for News Media* that outlines five key action areas for embedding Te Tiriti responsibilities and accountabilities at the institutional level within the news media sector (Rankine et al., 2022). These areas include: 1) Organisational policies and practices, which recognise and fulfil responsibilities under Te Tiriti; 2) Relationship with Māori, ensuring that Māori voices are equitable and engaging meaningfully with mana whenua; 3) Staff recruitment, involving training on Te Tiriti-based journalism practices and preparing Māori staff for leadership and decision-making roles; 4) Te Tiriti relations and social justice, reflecting on colonial history, cultural destruction, and institutional racism, and exploring ways to transform anti-Māori narratives that cause harm; and 5) Changing news practices, which include increasing the use of te reo Māori, assessing story beneficiaries, and determining how Māori sources are quoted.

Research in this area in Aotearoa is only emerging, and further research is required to examine the perpetuation of racist ideologies (including anti-Muslim, anti-LGBTQIA+, and other forms of prejudices targeting minoritised groups) across different media and time periods as new forms of speech and technologies continue to develop. We also recommend that future analyses be underpinned by sociological theories, such as critical race theories that interrogate the operation of whiteness in language, and psychological theories, such as those examining the drivers of false beliefs (Ecker et al., 2022), with a focus on the intersection of misinformation, disinformation, and racially motivated hate speech.

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We also acknowledge the passing of Fa'anānā Efeso Collins in February 2024. A former Member of Parliament for the Green Party Efeso first brought attention to the racialisation within Police Ten 7. Efeso Collins experienced significant personal and professional risk for calling out racism in media depictions of Pacific and Māori.

We also acknowledge the sudden death of Associate Professor Damian Scarf in December 2024. Damian felt the injustice directed at Efeso and the Pacific and Māori community and sought to highlight the role of the media in perpetuating harmful stereotypes.

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