Media Representations of First Nations Youth's Deaths in Northwestern Ontario

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Introduction

First Nations youth in northwestern Ontario often have to leave their communities for larger urban centres to have access to secondary education. Since 2000, there have been seven First Nations youths who have died while attending high school in Thunder Bay. This study focusses on media representations of these seven deaths. Specifically, I employ critical discourse analysis (CDA) and post-colonial theory to examine the different ways in which non-First Nations and First Nations news sources produce understanding of these events and their impacts.

Previous studies have shown that the media play an important role in determining how First Nations issues are understood (Coleby & Giles, 2014; Furniss, 2001; Harding, 2005, 2006; Henry & Tator, 2002). Based on my findings, I argue that non-First Nations media sources reinforce the discourse of First Nations peoples being "wards of the state." Furthermore, in their reporting of the seven students' deaths, non-First Nations media focus on criticizing the present state of First Nations education and producing it as a current problem, but ignore the colonial processes that have created the situation.

Conversely, First Nations media sources emphasize the need for greater cooperation between the Canadian government and First Nations peoples to resolve the long-standing issues that continue to affect First Nations youth in northern Ontario. These findings exemplify how ongoing tensions related to colonialism are reflected in the media.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA aims to explore the relationship between discourses and the reality that these discourses produce (Phillips & Hardy, 2002); this relationship is analysed by examining the way in which a social reality is produced through the constructive effects of texts (Hardy, 2001). By seeing language as "constitutive and constructive rather than reflective and representative" (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 13), analysts are able to delineate power relations in news reporting by exploring subtle variations in discourse (Furniss, 2001).

Harding (2005) argued that such an approach to analyzing texts makes it "particularly well-suited to studying the treatment of people of colour and other minority populations in the press" (p. 5). I employed CDA to examine differences in discourses produced by non-First Nations and First Nations media pertaining to their coverage of the seven First Nations students' deaths in the City of Thunder Bay.

Retrieved from: http://www.cromartyfund.ca

Table 1: Non-First Nations News Sources

Source	Type	# of Articles
The Toronto Star	News Article	5
TB News Watch	News Article	2
The Canadian Press	News Article	1
Huffington Post	News Article	1
Canadian News Wire	Press Release	1
CBC News	News Article	1

Table 2: First Nations News Sources

Source	Type	# of Articles
Windspeaker	News Article	1
Wawatay News	News Article	3
Turtle Island News	News Forum	3
Aboriginal Legal	Press Release	1

Results

In their reporting of the seven First Nations youth's deaths, non-First Nations media sources described the conditions in which the students lived both in their respective reserves and while living in Thunder Bay. Reporters often stated that the students were "forced to leave home" to attend school due to a lack of facilities in their hometown. However, non-First Nations media sources rarely mentioned the history that created the current situation. By not describing the colonial processes that led to this situation, the media is denying the existence of the dominant interests' historically damaging role to the status of First Nations peoples' health and education.

Concurrently, non-First Nations media reproduce the idea of First Nations peoples being "wards of the state" and describe the paternalistic duties of the government, which protects dominant interests by producing First Nations peoples as children. Examples of this include an article by *The Canadian Press* following Jordan Wabasse's death in 2011. The article, entitled "More must be done for safety of Native teens after another death: opposition: Help native teens now, opposition tells Liberals" (Maurino, 2011), sets an "us vs. them" binary and leads the reader to believe it is solely the government's responsibility to help these youth. First Nations media, conversely, argued for greater cooperation between the government and First Nations peoples. Instead of relying unilaterally on the Canadian government to solve problems persistent in health and education, First Nations media actively support a cooperative approach that includes First Nations community members and affirms their self-determination..

Conclusion

Harding (2006) argued that discourses produced about Aboriginal peoples in the media have "remained constant over the last century and a half" (p. 205). My study's findings support this assertion. Non-First Nations media continue to downplay the legacy of colonialism, while First Nations media continue to draw attention to it..

Further research is needed to identify ways of improving the current situation of First Nation's education and health in northern Ontario and in supporting First Nations people in their fight against colonial structures. The success of future generations of First Nations people should not be hindered by media protecting dominant interests; First Nations media are actively changing the status quo by producing their own media discourse to counter those produced by non-First Nations media.

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