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Media Representations of Policies Concerning Education Access and their Roles in Seven First Nations Students' Deaths in Northern Ontario

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Abstract

We employed postcolonial theory, a case study methodology, and critical discourse analysis to investigate the ways in which non-First Nations and First Nations news sources produced understandings of the role(s) that education policies may have played in the deaths of seven First Nations students in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada. We found that national non-First Nations media sources produced the discourse that First Nations peoples require federal government policy as a form of intervention in their lives. Further, we found that though these media sources focused on criticizing the present state of First Nations education, they ignored the colonial processes and policies that contributed to a situation that resulted in the students attending high school in Thunder Bay, rather than their home communities. First Nations and local (Thunder Bay) non-First Nations media sources, however, emphasized the need for greater cooperation between the Canadian government and First Nations peoples to resolve the long-standing policy issues that continue to affect First Nations youth and their education in northern Ontario. These findings point to important differences in the ways in which various forms of media cover First Nations policy issues.

Keywords

media, First Nations, education policy, death, northern Ontario

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Disclaimer

TRIGGER WARNING: The following article discusses cases of accidental death and suicide that some readers may find distressing.

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Media Representations of Policies Concerning Education Access and their Roles in Seven First Nations Students' Deaths in Northern Ontario

First Nations youth in remote areas of northern Ontario, Canada often lack access to secondary schooling in their home communities. As a result, many students are forced to travel hundreds of kilometres away from home to the city of Thunder Bay, population 121,596 (Statistics Canada, 2012). Tragically, between 2000 and 2011, seven First Nations youths from northern Ontario communities died while attending high school in Thunder Bay. The striking similarities between the circumstances of each death are troubling, as the students who died all shared more than the abrupt end to their young lives. For example, five of the seven students were found drowned in the same river on the outskirts of Thunder Bay, six of the students were boys, and all of the deaths were attributed to alcohol. While the nature of the deaths is quite similar, so too are their shared demographics. The vast and sparsely populated area of northern Ontario in which the students lived forced the seven youth, who were aged 15 to 18, to leave their home reserves to attend high school—a situation faced by hundreds of similar First Nations youth (Leung, 2012). While billeted with residents of Thunder Bay, none of the seven students were closer than 500 kilometers away from their home reserves, which are only accessible by air or, in the winter months, by ice road. In this article, we argue that policies requiring First Nations students to travel farther than 500 kilometers just to attend high school place these youth in situations that can have tragic consequences.

Previous studies have shown that the media play an important role in determining how Indigenous issues are understood (Coleby & Giles, 2014; Furniss, 2001; Harding, 2005, 2006; Henry & Tator, 2002; Stoneham, Goodman, & Daube, 2014). For this study, we employed postcolonial theory, a case study methodology, and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the ways in which non-First Nations and First Nations news sources produced understandings of the role that policies related to education may have played in the seven students' deaths. Due to the profound impact that mass media can have on policy decisions, the purpose of this article is to analyze the media coverage that surrounded the seven students' deaths and in turn make broader recommendations about how the media can better inform Canadians on First Nations issues. A well-informed population that better understands First Nations issues is essential to garnering support among the Canadian public regarding future policy decisions affecting First Nations peoples. The news coverage of these seven tragic deaths make an important contribution to understanding how issues pertaining to First Nations education are produced differently in a variety of news media, opening up the possibility of encouraging change.

Literature Review

In this section, we provide an overview of Canadian media portrayals of First Nations peoples and review First Nations education policy in Canada. Importantly, following Dye (1978), we take policy as indicating a government's intentions: "Whatever governments choose to do or not to do" (p. 3); we also concur with Lawford and Giles (2012) that a "government uses policy to rule, exercise a specific will and intent, and influence and control the decisions that people make" (p. 331).

First Nations Education Policy: A Brief Overview

Since First Nations education policy is addressed exhaustively elsewhere (Kirkness, 1999; Paquette & Fallon, 2010), we will provide only a brief overview. The Indian Act of 1876 as well as Treaties between

the government and First Nations groups formalized the federal government's responsibility for the delivery of education to First Nations peoples living on-reserve. Revised in 1985, the Indian Act requires First Nations youth to attend school from ages 6 to 16. It also states that the government must "establish, operate and maintain schools for Indian children" (Indian Act, 1985, S 114(2)) and "provide for the transportation of children to and from school" (Indian Act, 1985, S 115(b)). Nowhere, however, does it set standards about how far away a community can be from a school. Federal policy regarding education for First Nations students on reserves has historically been used as a means to assert the federal government's paternalistic duties over First Nation youth (McConaghy, 2000) through practices such as forcibly removing students from their homes in order to attend residential schools in often distant locations. This history, compounded by policies that have resulted in profound poverty and unemployment affecting a majority of remote reserves in northern Ontario (Nishnawbe Aski Nation, 2007), has created significant educational gaps between provincially run off-reserve schools and the federally run on-reserve schools.

Statistically, First Nations peoples living on-reserve have disproportionately low levels of educational attainment. High school completion rates for First Nations peoples on-reserve are low: only 42% of First Nations peoples living on-reserve in Canada complete high school, a stark contrast to the 90% of non-Aboriginal peoples who complete high school (Richards, 2014). The First Nations Education Council (2009) has argued that low levels of education attainment are due to the federal government's systemic underfunding of First Nations education. First Nations schools on-reserve receive on average \$7,101 per student from the federal government, while, for example, schools off-reserve receive on average \$10,578 per student from the provinces in which they are situated (Assembly of First Nations, 2012). This funding shortfall for on-reserve schools results in the federal government having great difficulty in meeting its responsibility to provide First Nations students with adequate buildings, equipment, teaching, and transportation, as required by the Indian Act (1985), and draws into question whether or not the Canadian government is in violation of the United Nations (UN, 2008) Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which stated that Indigenous peoples have the right to education without discrimination. As a result, the federal government has often been met with vocal opposition from First Nations groups (M. Kennedy, 2013). Despite the federal government's dismal achievements in the provision of education for First Nations peoples, members of the Canadian public often lack an understanding of the federal government's failures—a situation that has been exacerbated by the media.

Media Representations of First Nations Peoples in Canada

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) issued a report that covered a vast range of issues regarding the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Canada. One of the highlights in this 4,000-page report pertained to representations of Aboriginal peoples in the media. The report's authors argued that mainstream media portrayals do not reflect the realities Aboriginal peoples face in Canada: "Aboriginal people are not well represented by or in the media. Many Canadians know Aboriginal people only as noble environmentalists, angry warriors, or pitiful victims. A full picture of their humanity is simply not available in the media" (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, Communications section, para. 2). The result of this representation, the authors argued, is the weakening of Aboriginal culture in Canada.

Misrepresentations of First Nations peoples have long been prevalent in news discourses within Canadian media. Harding (2006) argued that news discourses involving Aboriginal peoples have been protecting dominant interests since colonial times and continue to do so today. Despite attempts by today's media to avoid actively reproducing practices of social inequality, passive ethnocentrism continues to pervade Canadian media reporting (Harding, 2006). Newsrooms, for example, are becoming increasingly hegemonic in the sense that a few large corporations own the majority of Canadian daily newspapers. Mahtani (2008) has maintained that journalists today face a "fear of challenging the status quo" (p. 657), as any reporting that resists newsrooms' monolithic, colonial style of discourse can result in less job security. The Oka Crisis in 1990 serves as a recent and important reminder that the "us vs. them" discourse impacts contemporary media, in particular surrounding issues that polarize First Nations peoples and non-First Nations. Anderson and Robertson (2011) sought to explore the role that letters to the editor surrounding the Oka Crisis had in empowering counter-colonial discourse. They found that although the letters offered a public forum for resistance, colonial-style reporting still appeared as the dominant discourse in media across the country.

Colonial discourses can be found in the media through strategies such as belittling and localizing First Nations issues to undermine the credibility of broad-scale First Nations concerns (Furniss, 2001). Negative portrayals of First Nations peoples both prevent and detract from progress in reducing racist stereotypes in Canadian society, which—within the Australian context—Stoneham, Goodman, and Daube (2014) argued can harm the health of Indigenous populations. The media representations of First Nations peoples throughout Canada's colonial history highlight structural inequalities present in Canada's society. As a result of the need to situate policies and related processes pertaining to First Nations peoples' education within a colonial legacy, we chose to ground our investigation in postcolonial theory.

Postcolonial Theory

It is important to note that the term "postcolonial" does not refer to a point in time *after* colonialism; instead, the term signifies a relationship of continuity—it was colonialism's *aftermath* that has and continues to have effects on those who were colonized (McEwan, 2009). Young (2003) argued that postcolonial theory can be used to frame power relations between colonizers and the colonized, and to show how their respective worlds are represented differently in the postcolonial world. Such an approach is particularly relevant to our study due to Canada's enduring relationship with colonialism. Although we are ostensibly in a postcolonial state in Canada, colonialism's legacy continues to pervade relations of power throughout the country, most notably through policy and legislation that influence First Nations peoples' access to healthcare, education, land, property ownership, and their very identities, and through accounts that describe First Nations peoples as being "at risk" (Galipeau & Giles, 2014) and essentially pathological (Kelm, 1998).

Critically analysing the representation of Indigenous peoples, whether through media sources or otherwise, allows postcolonial theorists to reveal the underlying relations of power evident in postcolonial society. According to postcolonial theorists, historically, language used in discourses produced by the media has formed an important avenue used to help impose on the colonized a nation controlled and dominated by the colonizers (Britton, 1999). Discourses produced by the powerful elite often describe society as quixotic and free of discrimination or racism (Van Dijk, 1993). Gandhi (1998)

noted that such descriptions rely on “postcolonial amnesia” (p. 4). Language used by the media is a critical tool employed in attempts at disowning historical wrongs and present-day failures; postcolonial theorists challenge this denial of responsibility and reveal the ethnocentric implications produced by certain dominant discourses.

Methodology

For this study, we selected an explanatory case study methodology. According to Yin (2009), case study researchers are interested in gaining in-depth understandings of real-life events and processes that enable us to broaden our knowledge of social, political, and cultural phenomena. A case study can take a number of forms, including a social situation, event, program, activity, etc., in single or multiple social settings (Bloor & Wood, 2006). Case study researchers who employ an explanatory approach use “how” and “why” questions to create explanations for certain events and how they can be applied to other situations (Yin, 1994). As our research question was “how do non-First Nations and First Nations media represent the role that education policy played in seven First Nations students’ deaths in Thunder Bay?” such an approach was appropriate.

Following Harding’s (2005) argument that critical discourse analysis (CDA) is effective in studying minorities’ treatment in media, we determined that CDA was an appropriate methodology to study the treatment of the seven First Nations students’ deaths in non-First Nations and First Nations media in Canada. According to Phillips and Hardy (2002), the purpose of CDA is to explore the relationship between discourses and the reality these discourses produce. This relationship is analysed by examining the way a social reality is produced through the constructive effects of texts (Hardy, 2001). For example, how the media constructs the issue of First Nations education will in turn shape the public’s understanding of the issue and thus the subsequent policy response by the government. Throughout our study, we grounded our analysis on the emphasis media sources placed when defining the problem—whether a stereotypical “us vs. them” mentality was apparent or if the media highlighted fundamental inequalities at play affecting these First Nations youth. These issues, and more importantly how these issues are framed for the public, play an important role in policy development and highlight the importance discourses can have at helping construct a social reality.

As researchers interested in identifying embedded power structures in society, it is important to understand language’s capacity as an agent of oppression or empowerment. CDA, therefore, is used to view language as “constitutive and constructive rather than reflective and representative” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 13). When language is understood to construct reality as opposed to represent it, it is clear that discourses produced by the media in Canada can play important roles in reinforcing or challenging dominant discourses. As such, analysts are able to delineate power relations in news reporting by exploring subtle variations in language used in discourse (Furniss, 2001). We employed CDA to examine differences in discourses produced by non-First Nations and First Nations media pertaining to the coverage of the seven First Nations students’ deaths in the City of Thunder Bay and the role that policies related education may have played in them.

Table 1 outlines the First Nations and non-First Nations media sources used in this study. We identified articles through the University of Ottawa’s library database by searching the names of each student who had died using search terms such as “student’s name,” “student’s name *and* Thunder Bay,”

or “student’s name *and* death.” The *Chronicle Journal’s* articles were the only ones not available online and were retrieved from the Toronto Public Library’s archives. Due to language barriers and resources limitations, the search methods used in this study were limited to English language newspaper articles and press releases.

Table 1. Articles by Media Source and Type

Media Source	Type	Number of Articles
First Nations News Sources		
Windspeaker	News Article	1
Wawatay News	News Article	4
Turtle Island News	News Forum	3
Aboriginal Legal	Press Release	1
Non-First Nations News Sources		
The Chronicle Journal (local)	News Article	9
Toronto Star (national)	News Article	6
TB News Watch (local)	News Article	3
The Canadian Press (national)	News Article	1
Canadian News Wire (national)	Press Release	1
CBC News (national)	News Article	1

It is important to note that we searched for articles in the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*, two of Canada's national newspapers. Neither newspaper included coverage of the students' deaths. We included the *Toronto Star* as a national newspaper, given its broad circulation and focus.

The first author coded each article or press release; the second author then verified each code. As we engaged with a postcolonial lens, we paid special attention to discourses pertaining to power, particularly as they related to who (e.g., federal government, provincial government, First Nations) was seen to be able to exercise it legitimately and how it was exercised, and to the labels that were applied to First Nations peoples. Codes that coalesced to form the colonial discourse that "First Nations people require federal government policy as a form of intervention in their lives" included "government-prescribed intervention," "political party blaming," and "unhealthy or hopeless First Nations youth." This discourse was identified in national non-First Nations news sources. A second set of codes, "education as empowerment," "cultural awareness," "cooperation," "resilience," "healing," and the "future," coalesced to create the counter-colonial discourse that "there needs to be greater cooperation between the Canadian government and First Nations peoples to resolve the long-standing policy issues that continue to affect First Nations youth and their education in northern Ontario," which was found in First Nations and local non-First Nations news sources.

Results

Our results indicate that reporting of the role that education policy may have played in the students' deaths is largely divided between the dominant discourse produced by national non-First Nations media, and the dominant discourse produced by local non-First Nations Thunder Bay news sources and First Nations media. National non-First Nations media's employment of the discourse, "First Nations people require federal government policy as a form of intervention in their lives," downplayed the effects of Canada's colonial history and policies while promoting government intervention as a necessary response to First Nations education. Local non-First Nations media highlighted structural inequalities at play in First Nations education and, like First Nations media, supported a collaborative approach with the government that recognizes the need for First Nations peoples' need to have meaningful roles in education decisions and policy, and therefore reaffirming their self-determination.

National Non-First Nations Media

In their reporting of the seven First Nations youths' deaths, non-First Nations media reported that attending secondary school in Thunder Bay was the only option for First Nations youth, as their "remote northern" communities did not have other available options:

The students have no choice but to leave their isolated reserves in northern Ontario if they want to further their education. (Talaga, 2011a, para. 4)

The author provided no reasons as to why many First Nations youth have no access to secondary school in their communities and consequently must leave to attend school. This sort of reporting was dominant in most national non-First Nations media. The reasoning for the lack of secondary school access, however, was often absent or subjugated to a short blurb with no discussion of possible colonial policy decisions that may have played a role in the deaths. *The Canadian Press* (Maurino, 2011) and *The Toronto Star* (Talaga, 2011b) did include then Assembly of First Nations National Chief Shawn

Atleo's explanation that First Nations education is a result of policies that render it underfunded and inequitable.

Concurrently, non-First Nations media (re)produced the idea of First Nations peoples being "wards of the state" and described the paternalistic duties of the government. Examples of this included an article by *The Canadian Press* following one student'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), leads the reader to believe it is solely the government's responsibility to help not only First Nations youth in northern Ontario, but First Nations youth across Canada. In fact, many headlines included references to one political party blaming another for failing to act on the troubling deaths of First Nations youth in Thunder Bay. For example, the headline of an article by Talaga (2011c) of the *Toronto Star* read, "'Double Standard' for Native Teen Deaths: NDP's Howard Hampton Blasts Province over Dead and Missing Youth." The double standard referred to in the article is government policies and responses for issues affecting First Nations youth when compared to issues affecting non-First Nations youth in urban areas. Only one of the national non-First Nations news articles, one by the *Toronto Star* (Talaga, 2011a), mentioned the need for the government of Canada to work with First Nations leaders to address the problems affecting First Nations education.

Local Non-First Nations Media

The *Chronicle Journal* is Thunder Bay's most popular daily newspaper and it is circulated throughout many smaller communities in northwestern Ontario. Unlike the readers of national newspapers in other communities, the *Chronicle Journal's* readers have a stronger relationship to the issues that occur in Thunder Bay. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that we found key differences between the *Chronicle Journal's* coverage of the First Nations students' deaths and that found in national non-First Nations media, particularly in the language its writers used.

An editorial ("A Life of Hope," 2011) in the *Chronicle Journal*, written following the death of one student, touched on the struggles newspapers face when covering such tragic—and often political—events. The editorial described the realities faced by writers when trying to include as much detail as possible in a short amount of time. The editorial argued that the humanity of events could sometimes be unintentionally left out of articles and not due to a lack of cultural awareness or empathy on the authors' parts. The editorial also argued that there are more issues at play than simply funding gaps between First Nations and non-First Nations students:

They involve cultural differences, historical and lasting inequality. (para. 11)

While national non-First Nations media often included political parties pointing fingers at each other over who is to blame in their headlines, the *Chronicle Journal* chose to focus on cooperation. For example, one headline read, "Co-Operation Key to Stop Tragedies: McGuinty" (Ketonen, 2012). The article highlighted that Dalton McGuinty (the then Premier of Ontario) advocated for increased communication and co-operation between the provincial government, federal government, and First Nations leaders, something that would require policy change; as demonstrated below, this discourse is the same as the one produced by First Nations media. Another article in the *Chronicle Journal* (Diaczuk, 2011) argued that, while Nishnawbe Aski Nation (the political territorial organization that represents 49 First Nation communities within northern Ontario) plays a leadership role in addressing

the inequalities affecting First Nations students, it could not do so alone and needed help and support from the provincial government.

The other local source, *TB News Watch*, had limited articles available to review, but still showed signs of producing discourses that supported First Nations' self-determination. For example, after an exhaustive 92-day search for one of the missing teens, the author chose to focus on the incredible determination and support the family received from the community:

There were a few volunteers who were there every single day with the grandmother. (Dunick, 2011)

The article continued by describing the closeness of the community throughout the search and the importance of raising concerns over the lack of support and resources students have when they move to Thunder Bay, which is a direct reflection of policy failures. The language used by both local news sources and the manner in which details were provided highlight the key differences between the discourses produced by local and national non-First Nations media pertaining to policies related to access to education.

First Nations Media

Like local non-First Nations media, First Nations media sources also argued for greater cooperation between the government and First Nations peoples to address the lack of educational access affecting First Nations youth. Instead of arguing for reliance on federal policy to resolve the education issues that resulted in the seven students moving to Thunder Bay, First Nations media supported a cooperative approach that includes First Nations community members and affirms their self-determination. *Turtle Island News*, a Canadian national daily Indigenous news service, highlighted Nishnawbe Aski Nation Deputy Grand Chief Waboose's demand:

The governments of Ontario and Canada work with First Nation leaders and educators to ensure that adequate support services are in place for students who must travel away from home for secondary school and to work with us to develop education services in all First Nations that is on par with the rest of Canada. (T. B. Kennedy, 2011, para. 54)

This article emphasized the desire for First Nations peoples to have meaningful input into policies and practices that address education problems persistent in northern Ontario. Similarly, *Wawatay News* (Garrick, 2011) recognized the role that a lack of social support and a lack of access to education could have played in their deaths. The author highlighted that a lack of available social support in this unfamiliar environment was a barrier students face when continuing their education in Thunder Bay. Opening and increasing dialogue and partnerships between First Nations peoples and non-First Nations peoples, especially concerning the Canadian government's existing policies and their impacts, was the strategy First Nations media advocated to address the students' deaths.

Along with promoting partnerships with the Canadian government, First Nations media highlighted that problems in First Nations education are part of a long legacy of colonization. For example, Aboriginal Legal's (2012) press release drew attention to the fact education problems in First Nations communities are not a new problem, but instead a part of a "continuing crisis in education and resources

for First Nation people in northern communities” (para. 3), which are related to government policies. *Turtle Island News* (Admin, 2013; T. B. Kennedy, 2009) also alluded to the fact that the problems First Nations education now faces have longstanding, underlying root causes that are leading to the deaths, and reaffirmed First Nations’ self-determination by focussing on the hope and courage of their youth. Following the death of a student in 2009, *Turtle Island News* stressed that the “strength and resilience” (T. B. Kennedy, 2009, para. 25) of First Nations youth in northern Ontario will help shape their role in the future. Further, the same article highlighted then Nishnawbe Aski Nation Grand Chief Stan Beardy’s hope that by “encouraging dialogue to increase cultural awareness and understanding among both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, we can better ensure our young people feel safe” (para. 25).

Discussion

Our results demonstrate key differences in the ways that national non-First Nations media, local non-First Nations media, and First Nations media reported the deaths of seven First Nations students in Thunder Bay and the role that education policies and associated practices played in them. By ignoring the history of colonial domination and existing relations of power in their reporting, national non-First Nations media failed to recognize the damaging impacts that colonial policies and practices have had and continue to have on First Nations peoples, a situation that can be described as “postcolonial amnesia” (Gandhi, 1998). First Nations media, on the other hand, reported the deaths as being part of a colonial legacy that needs to be addressed through policy change that results in meaningful partnerships between First Nations and the Canadian government. Interestingly, the local non-First Nations media in Thunder Bay mirrored that of the First Nations media.

Postcolonial Amnesia

Based on our analysis, national non-First Nations news coverage of the students’ deaths lacked discussion of the colonial processes that have led to the current state of First Nations education and, therefore, rendered the role of colonialism in the students’ deaths invisible. As a result, we argue that national non-First Nations’ media accounts of the students’ deaths represent a form of postcolonial amnesia (Gandhi, 1998). Ignoring Canada’s history of colonial repression and the current policies reflecting colonialism in education can result in the marginalization of the struggles First Nations peoples in Canada have endured and which lead to non-First Nations peoples justifying racism and social injustice. While the national non-First Nations media reports we analyzed demonstrated an understanding of the disparities in education and health between non-First Nations and First Nations peoples in today’s society, by omitting discussion of the dominant group’s historically damaging roles and continuing perpetuation of inequitable policies in First Nations education, non-First Nations media reporting both reflected and (re)produced postcolonial amnesia.

Gandhi (1998) stated that people in positions of power often “attempt to disown the burdens of their colonial inheritance” (p. 4), which can be understood as a failure to take responsibility for past and current wrongdoings. Non-First Nations media who disregard the past when reporting current problems in education are perpetuating some non-First Nations people’s attempts to disown their roles in past and current government-prescribed attempts at control and domination. While literature concerning First Nations education illuminates the fact that past approaches by the government

continue to have a harmful impact on First Nations peoples in Canada today (Glenn, 2014), not one national non-First Nations media source suggested that this history and its current policy legacy could have played a contributing role in the students' deaths. Interestingly, one local news source, the *Chronicle Journal*, did allude to cultural differences and historical inequities, which it argued were having an effect on current First Nations students. Education policy and practices have historically been used as a means to assimilate, institutionalize, and assert government's paternalistic duties over First Nation youth (McConaghy, 2000). Although reporters and others may be quick to point out that residential schools are now closed, First Nations education continues to be very much an issue today. Many residential schools have been replaced by boarding homes, where First Nations youth now have to live, hundreds of miles away from home, simply to attend high school. The physical distance alone exemplifies the need for a policy solution that brings education closer to home for these youth. Past successes have shown the potential that initiatives grounded in self-determination may play in addressing First Nations' education needs.

Self-Determination

In contrast to the discourses produced in national mainstream media, First Nations media promoted a cooperative solution to the education and health issues that contributed to the deaths of the seven students. As a result, First Nations media challenged the non-First Nations media portrayal of First Nations as child-like and in need of help, which is reflected in the Indian Act (1985), a piece of legislation that "still rules the personal and collective lives of Aboriginal people" (Tousignant, Vitenti, & Morin, 2013, p. 402). The Indian Act was based on the assumption that there was a need for paternalistic rule over the First Nation peoples by the Canadian government. By promoting the right of First Nations to play an active, self-determined role in education, First Nation media challenged the dominant discourse that First Nation peoples in Canada need government policy intervention.

While meaningful partnerships with the Canadian government were clearly advocated in the First Nations media we reviewed, we argue that partnerships are most effective when they enable First Nations' self-determination, which can be expressed and produced in many forms. Hayhurst and Giles (2013) argued that the acknowledgement and examination of power relations between First Nations and non-First Nations is critical if partnerships in economic, social, and cultural development are to succeed. The pursuit of self-determination by First Nations peoples in Canada does not necessarily always mean the desire to govern independently, but rather to work "through a process of dialogue in which the peoples concerned are participating on equal terms" (Henriksen, 2001, p. 14). The First Nations media reports we reviewed did not propose that First Nations education should be regulated independently from the Canadian government; instead, they stated that education initiatives should be approached in cooperation between the two parties and, as a result, should allow for First Nations self-determination. A policy shift from paternalism to partnership would give First Nations peoples input that is more meaningful and control over educational decisions being made on their behalf. Indeed, evidence of such policy changes can be seen through the emergence of community-based education, which May (1999) acknowledged as a necessary response to Canada's historic and contemporary paternalistic Aboriginal education policies. In northern Ontario, the Keewatinook Internet High School (KIHS) opened in 1999 and now serves 13 remote northern Ontario reserves, which allows students to complete high school without having to move away from home. KIHS is just one example of a community-based education policy that enables First Nations self-determination; the media, when

discussing First Nations education, need to include these existing cooperative strategies to better inform Canadians about issues affecting First Nations peoples.

Implications for Media Reporting and Research

Our findings indicate the need for reporters from national non-First Nations media sources to become cognizant of the colonial attitudes prevalent in their reporting. However, many challenges exist to changing the discourses produced by mainstream media. It is imperative that reporters who cover issues affecting First Nations peoples in Ontario, such as disparities in education, have knowledge and understanding of the complicated policy relationships that exist between the Government of Canada and First Nations peoples. The differences in reporting between national and local non-First Nations news sources seem to suggest that reporters who live in northern Ontario communities (e.g., Thunder Bay) have such knowledge and thus produce reports that are sensitive to colonial legacies and the ways in which they impact First Nations peoples. Unfortunately, a gap in knowledge of Canada's colonial history affects more than just the reporters. Even those who are extremely knowledgeable of First Nations issues cannot atone for the general lack of awareness and/or lack of criticism of Canada's history of colonialism. For example, residential schools—often held as being responsible for the cultural genocide of generations of First Nations peoples in Canada—was astoundingly not a mandatory part of every province's school curriculum (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Ignoring such an essential aspect of Canada's colonial history fails Canadian students and limits opportunities to become knowledgeable consumers of media, particularly in relation to First Nations issues. It is therefore critical that provincial and territorial education curriculums properly reflect Canada's history with all Indigenous peoples to aid the public in better understanding the complex and enormous issues affecting policy development.

Along with creating knowledgeable reporters and consumers, there must also be a shift in the polarizing and often partisan landscape of public media. The current state of Canadian media, with regards to First Nations issues, involves policy developers (i.e., the Canadian government) and First Nations groups who must live by the policy outcomes using the media as a “battleground” for shaping policy decisions by “narrowing, sensationalising or shutting down public debate” (McCallum, Waller, & Meadows, 2012, p. 101). The hegemonic state of the media favours discourses dominated by colonial attitudes in non-First Nations media, which results in First Nations peoples having a weak or non-existent voice. First Nations media play important roles in responding to the marginalization of First Nations voices within many non-First Nations media sources and in (re)shaping discourses about policy issues and potential solutions. Nevertheless, what largely occurs is the segregation of these debates and an “us vs. them” mentality that limits opportunities for insightful discussion from multiple perspectives. Creating and supporting media spaces where multiple perspectives are welcome would play an important role in breaking down existing dichotomies.

The abovementioned changes to education curricula and media organization will require long-term and fundamental changes to the current system; however, some changes to policy reporting can be implemented immediately. Rather than promoting the need for government policy intervention, which has a questionable history of success at best, national non-First Nations media could promote community-based strategies to address issues pertaining to First Nations education. Indeed, national non-First Nations media, we argue, should avoid (re)producing colonial discourses by reporting on First

Nations issues in a manner that reinforces, rather than represses, First Nations' self-determination and by recognizing the counter-productive effects of government policies that fail to engage First Nations peoples. Small changes such as these are the first steps necessary to start challenging colonial attitudes present in discourses produced by national non-First Nations media.

Limitations

All studies have their limitations, and ours is no exception. The relatively sparse media attention surrounding the deaths of the seven students led to a small number of newspaper articles available for analysis. This calls into question whether the discourses we identified are representative of the wider population, or just simply the result of individual reporter bias. While this can be considered a limitation, it is also important to note that the results of our discourse analysis are similar to recent literature surrounding Canadian Aboriginal media representation (Coleby & Giles, 2013; Graydon, 2008; Harding, 2006), and is thus likely to reflect the dominant discourse among non-First Nations media.

Another potential limitation is the "small" number of cases: seven deaths over 10 years (we were unable to learn how many students in total move to Thunder Bay from northwestern Ontario reserves to attend school). We believe that although this may be considered to be a small number of deaths, they are hugely important and illustrative of the larger context of inequity that plagues First Nations peoples. The assertion that the number of dead First Nations youth needs to be larger to justify concerted scholarly attention is deeply problematic.

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). Our study's findings suggest such assertions may not be so clear-cut. Both of the local non-First Nations news sources we examined produced discourses that included discussions of historical inequities affecting First Nations students. The discourses suggest the issue of colonial content in reporting is not readily clear or generalizable to all mainstream media. More research is needed to investigate the discourses produced by local news sources, and if or how these discourses represent First Nations policy issues in a manner that differs from other forms of media.

It is also important to note that the discourses reviewed in this study were limited to a specific event and region of Canada; First Nations issues differ greatly in other areas of Canada and change with successive political and policy landscapes. Focussing on one region in Canada, however, is also a strength of this study because we were able to separate local and national news sources and therefore add to the current understanding of colonial attitudes in media. This research can also be used as a building block for future research regarding the role the media plays in shaping policy decisions. For example, a Commission of Inquest into the seven deaths was announced in 2012; yet, the investigation into potential preventative measures to avoid further deaths was delayed due to issues of Aboriginal under-representation on the jury. The inquest eventually began in October of 2015 and was still ongoing at time of publication. Once the inquest is finally completed, an important question for the future will be how the results of the inquest will shape future education policies and, in particular, how such policy changes will be represented in the media. Further research is needed to identify the roles that First

Nations and non-First Nations media can play in addressing legacies of colonialism, particularly as they relate to First Nations education.

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