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# Slayers, rippers, and blitzes: dark humor and the justification of cruelty to possums in online media in New Zealand

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The representation of "pest" animals in mass media can reflect wider societal attitudes about belonging, race, and purity. In New Zealand, the Australian brushtail possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) is portrayed as the nation's top enemy. This project examined online news articles published in New Zealand between 2016 and 2023 to explore how possums were framed after the creation of the Predator Free 2050 "pest" eradication campaign that sought to eradicate all invasive rats, stoats, and possums. Through a process of qualitative thematic analysis, it was discovered that themes of militancy, economy, and desensitization of cruelty were paired with dark humor and extreme objectification of possums. This has created a culture of creaturely racism and speciesist xenophobia that presents cruelty as patriotism. A new media ethics that prioritizes an intersectional, anti-speciesist praxis is necessary to prevent the nation's enculturation of vigilante slayers who are encouraged to kill those deemed to not belong.

KEYWORDS

**brushtail possums, dark humor, ostracization, desensitization, racism, speciesism, media ethics**

## 1 Introduction

In Aotearoa New Zealand, brushtail possums (herein: possums) are the country's most despised villains (Potts, 2009; McCrow-Young et al., 2015; Major, 2023). The reference to "Aotearoa New Zealand" acknowledges both the Māori name and colonial name; however, the remainder of this paper will use "New Zealand" as the attitudes discussed primarily concern settler understandings of possums. These marsupials were introduced by colonial settlers from their native Australia to the largely mammal-free New Zealand in 1858 to establish a fur trade. Existing Critical Animal Studies research has explored how possums have been scapegoated as an invasive Australian "pest" and have subsequently been targeted by relentless "propaganda" campaigns (Potts, 2013; Armstrong and Potts, 2021), such as Predator Free 2050 (PF2050). PF2050, a "moonshot" government campaign that seeks to eradicate all possums, stoats, and rats by the year 2050 (Palmer and McLauchlan, 2023), hinges on the widespread education and dedicated participation of all New Zealanders in the trapping, killing, and removal of these nonhuman animals widely deemed to be "pests." Using the term "animal" as if it were separate from human beings is problematic; however, there is no perfect way to refer to nonhuman animals that does not reinforce the binary between human and nonhuman. For the ease of reading, "animal" will be used. "Pest" is deliberately written with apostrophes to denote the cultural construction of the word. Possums are routinely framed by the media using disparaging metaphors, such as "the only good possum is a dead possum" (Potts, 2009), or by

widespread misinformation about their diets, such as the overstated suggestion by conservation authorities that possums extensively predate on native birds and their eggs. While a possum may eat an egg or bird, it is highly irregular as their folivorous diets consist mainly of vegetation (State of Victoria Department of Environment, Land, Water, and Planning, 2017). These bird and egg "flora-devouring brutes" are described as "great [in Australia], not here" (Moroney, 2016, para. 12). This framing of non-native possums as antithetical to the nation's native species has resulted in a breeding ground for speciesist and racially motivated cruelty that has normalized and desensitized New Zealanders to abject violence against those ostracized beings. While many readers, particularly those enculturated in anti-possum rhetoric, may not agree that possums belong in New Zealand, the notion that possums should be treated with care and consideration should not be too far of a leap for a nation that prides themselves on cultural acceptance and diversity (for human beings, at least). The outpouring of support for the Muslim community as a result of the March 2019 terrorist attacks in Christchurch reflects the nation's recognizance that abuse and cruelty are not merited across racist terms (Royal Commission of Inquiry, n.d.)—so how could we think about cruelty and abuse of possums in speciesist terms? This article seeks to eschew these ideas, and though the focus is on possums, this phenomenon of a "war on species" is not new, as can be illustrated by the "war on rats" in New York City (City of New York, 2023).

This paper employs thematic analysis of online news articles that were published between May 2016 and August 2023 and included the word "possum[s]" in their titles. The purpose was to explore how language and images were used to support, reinforce, and police speciesist narratives regarding this introduced species. The motivation to pursue this project stemmed from McCrow-Young et al.'s (2015) seminal paper which examined New Zealand's print media narratives about possums between 2003 and 2014. Their article offered a snapshot of how possums were framed by news media using negative and often militant language and imagery that socially and culturally sanctioned abuse toward the species; however, their article was published before the advent of the PF2050 campaign in 2016. Though PF2050 has since received a host of criticisms, such as not being realistic to achieve within the short time frame (Linklater and Steer, 2018) and that its potential failure could cause a series of social, environmental, financial, and animal risks (Palmer and McLauchlan, 2023), its emergence signaled a turning point in the "war" against possums where proponents of the government-sanctioned campaign were given social license to kill the marsupial in the name of conservation vigilantism to correct errors from past wrongs. As such, this paper seeks to build upon McCrow-Young et al.'s (2015) work by exploring how media representations about possums have evolved post-PF2050.

While the aggressive and negative portrayal of possums that McCrow-Young et al. (2015) mentioned was replicated in the post-2016 articles, a sinister undercurrent emerged that combined dark humor, which sought to trivialize or make light of sinister subjects for entertainment, with casual objectification of possums, ultimately, making their abuse, suffering and cruelty not seen as abuse, suffering, or cruelty. This paper will discuss the findings of the subsequent media analysis and explore why and how this combination in the media has prevented possums from being awarded agency or consideration for empathy in the mainstream cultural milieu in New Zealand. The intersection of possums as a foreign species and unwelcome Australian invaders in the media has culminated in creaturely hatred toward the possum which invokes as metonym ideas about purity, belonging, and race.

Organizations, such as the Department of Conservation (DOC) and affiliated environmental and conservation groups, are largely responsible for curating and shaping the narrative about the place of possums in New Zealand. However, the media also plays an integral role in upholding, reinforcing, and maintaining these possums as "pests" discourses in the public sphere. Previous research has examined how these dominant narratives have taught New Zealanders of any age to treat the "forests as abattoirs," inciting grave concerns around the development of empathy and compassion in the nation (Major, 2023). Not recognizing these possums as sentient beings cultivates not only their unethical and cruel treatment in conservation but also supports and fosters a sociocultural ignorance that engenders racist and speciesist rhetoric within digital media that can cause lasting harm to more beings than just possums.

Ultimately, this research is critically important as it considers the extent to which the media contributes to and legitimizes forms of cruelty to not only possums and other "pest" species, but to those beings ostracized as condemned "others." A new media ethics that rejects these discriminatory discourses can be informed through the consultation of critical animal media discourse, feminist media ethics, and critical discourse analysis that prioritizes a more intersectional, anti-speciesist media literacy among the populace. Instead of possums being represented in the media as invasive villains who are the target of jokes that poke fun at their mistreatment, they can be reimagined as unwilling victims of colonization who were forcibly introduced to an unfamiliar land (to exploit and consume their bodies, nonetheless) and were persecuted when their once-nurtured abundance soured to disdain. Perhaps then, possums are victims of colonization, too, who belong alongside native species in this postcolonial nation of patchwork cultures; however, at a bare minimum, they are deserving of compassion, care, and respect.

## 2 Materials and methods

The media can play a critical role in shaping public opinions (Happer and Philo, 2013). Mass media, which is the method whereby information is dispersed through media institutions, like radio, newspapers, or television, decides what stories and information are worthy of sharing with the public. Given its reach as "vehicles of culture" (Spitulnik, 1993, p. 294), mass media can have a powerful impact on consumers' attitudes toward what information is seen as important and valuable (Beckers and Moy, 2023). The careful mixture of providing information that is useful and informative but also entertaining is key for the longevity of media outlets (Lee and Chyi, 2014). As media can have considerable influence over social attitudes, it can operate as a "watchdog" to mediate democracy; however, with this responsibility comes some potential issues as some outlets may fall victim to sensationalism, biased reporting, or selective coverage in a bid for increased readership and views (Robinson, 2017). Though media is an important and valuable institution for New Zealand, the coverage of brushtail possums is a unique example of how speciesism, racism, and objectification can reinforce cruelty and mistreatment of the maligned marsupial.

Before progressing further, it is important to specify that the reflections of this paper descend from my *tauiwi* (foreigner born outside of New Zealand) perspective that has been largely focused on exploring Pākehā (New Zealander of European descent) understandings and framing of the environment and possums, which are largely the dominant portrayal of possums in mainstream media. This discussion largely excludes indigenous Māori or Moriori perspectives—not because these perspectives are not relevant or vitally important—but, because these perspectives would be best informed by culturally-informed, indigenous-led research. Much of the following critique is thus centered on a Pākehā lens.

This project uses Braun and Clarke's (2006) qualitative thematic analysis to examine online media content. The purpose was to gather an impression of how possums were discussed and presented through textual and visual imagery in the media after the PF2050 campaign was announced in mid-2016. Given it would be very difficult to track down every written piece that refers to possums in the body of the text (primarily as the word "possum" can be synonymous with "pest," "villain," or "invasive species"), the scope was intentionally limited to media articles that contained the word "possum[s]" in the title and that were published between May 2016 and August 2023 by one of the following popular online news sites in New Zealand's media: *Stuff*, *New Zealand Herald* (NZ Herald), *The Guardian*, *Radio New Zealand* (RNZ), *Scoop*, *Otago Daily Times* (ODT), *The Spinoff*, and *Newshub*. While some of these sites publish their articles in both print and online form, the priority will be on examining their online database, along with any respective forum comments, if applicable. Before discussing the methods in more detail, the following subsection will detail the variety of news media platforms that were useful for this paper as each holds a unique place in New Zealand's media and, as such, the focus of their authors and audience is slightly different across platforms.

## 2.1 Contextualizing news media platforms in New Zealand

Online print media in New Zealand is dominated by the following mass media conglomerates: *Stuff New Zealand*, *NZ Herald*, *Newshub*, and *RNZ*. *Stuff New Zealand*, colloquially known as *Stuff*, is one of the most popular news sites in New Zealand. The website also includes some of the most popular print newspapers, such as *The Press* and *The Post*. The *NZ Herald* is another common online news site. Originally a daily circular in the city of Auckland, *NZ Herald* has transitioned to become a national source of online, audio, and print media. *Newshub*, which was at that time another large media conglomerate that shared news through television, audio, and print platforms. As a part of *Discovery NZ*, they were popular for their various television channels, though they had digital print media as well. Lastly, *Radio New Zealand* (RNZ), which is seemingly limited by its name, is more than just an audio broadcaster. *RNZ* is a multimedia organization that broadcasts audio and print news through its avenues of on-air and online broadcasts. Though it considers itself independent, *RNZ* is funded through public funding and is governed by the Radio New Zealand Act 1995. It operates in a liminal space as not an official government media organization, despite it being funded through and is influenced by government oversight as a Crown entity. Though other media sites are popular within New Zealand, such as *Yahoo* and *MSN*, these were not examined within this paper as they did not publish articles that fit the initial parameters of this project. This gap could be explained by the global background and international audience of organizations such as *Yahoo* and *MSN*, who typically report and share news that is of global interest and do not hire local journalists to report on targeted issues in the same way that the chosen organizations do.

In addition to the larger media companies, there were some smaller sites, such as *The Guardian New Zealand*, *Scoop*, *The Spinoff*, and *ODT*, which were used for this research. *The Guardian New Zealand* is a much smaller subsidiary of the international media platform, *The Guardian*. *The Guardian New Zealand* primarily brings international stories to a local platform, though there are several instances where their journalists have written about New Zealand-specific stories. Another smaller publisher, *Scoop*, which was created in 1999, is an independent, not-for-profit media publisher that specializes in open press releases from governmental, educational, and political sectors. Many of the *Scoop* articles used for this paper were written directly by the organizations and businesses the releases were for, making this publisher markedly unique from the others who had considerable editorial oversight. Similarly, *The Spinoff*, created in 2014, is a newer media organization that focuses on creativity to share what is new in popular culture and current affairs. While written journalism is still an aspect of *The Spinoff*, they also employ audio and video media to tell the nation's stories in captivating ways. Finally, *ODT*, which is the last publisher used for this study, is owned by *Allied Press Limited* and is New Zealand's oldest daily circular. They are among a network of other smaller newspapers and online media that specialize in relevant news stories from various regions in the South Island of New Zealand.

Despite these smaller organizations having fewer resources or more limited reach in comparison, some of them still published a considerable number of articles regarding conservation, "pest" control, and possums. The reasons for this may be explained by considering the socio-geographical positioning of these publishers within New Zealand. As *ODT* operates in the South Island region of Otago, which is inhabited by less than 5% of New Zealand's human population (Stats NZ, 2018), they target their stories to a more rural population of Kiwis. The term "Kiwi" has been adopted by Pākehā New Zealanders as their national identifier. Pākehā, who originated from European colonial settlers, symbolize their belonging through this "Kiwi" identity (Bell, 1996). Given this, it is not surprising their proclivity for discussing environmental concerns as existing research has shown that the more rural an area is in New Zealand, the more likely the residents are to agree that "pest" species are an issue that needs to be dealt with (Russell, 2014). This may be influenced by their economy which is largely linked to their resource-based assets, such as forestry and agriculture (Pomeroy, 2021). This does not preclude these attitudes from existing in more urban areas as well, it just means the protection of the environment is statistically more of a socially relevant topic among Pākehā rural dwellers (however, with the advent of more predator-free campaigns in urban areas, this is starting to change). This intersection of identity, belonging, and landscape is particularly poignant for these Pākehā communities and their perspectives toward "pest" control (Major, 2023). Through an examination of articles from these seven publishers, we can see a glimpse into how different streams of digital media portray possums through their imagery and language use.

In keeping with the initial approach of McCrow-Young et al. (2015), this project was influenced by Hall's (1997) representation theory, which suggests that media commonly employs stereotypes to represent people or groups. These stereotypes are informed by oversimplifications or misrepresentations that become reinforced and normalized in society. Hall (1997) argues this occurs as many media groups are owned by those who occupy hegemonic places in society; therefore, the representations of people or groups that lay outside of these hegemonic ideals are more likely to be misrepresented and made vulnerable by these narratives through visual and textual cues. While media and communication studies have long ignored the exploitation and oppression of nonhuman animals, there has been recent development regarding the inclusion of animals in the media through the creation of Critical Animal and Media Studies (Merskin, 2015; Almiron et al., 2018). When examining how the media in New Zealand uses "pest" stereotypes toward possums, we can begin to understand how these attitudes have evolved.

## 2.2 Gathering data

The process of gathering relevant material started with precursory searches online to find news articles that used the word "possum[s]" in their title. Individual site archives were also explored to ensure articles were not missed. In all, 327 articles met the filtering criteria (where they had to have "possum[s]" in their title, be published from May 2016 to August 2023, and be written by one of the seven publishers listed above). These articles were initially grouped based on the publisher and the number of articles they published, though only 148 of the 327 were deemed relevant enough to discuss for this paper (see Table 1). The decision to cut the 179 articles was made due to a variety of reasons, including the tendency for publishers to cross-post and share articles (meaning articles by the *ODT*, for example, were shared with *NZ Herald*, causing duplicate articles to exist across publishers with either very slight edits or no edits at all), or that the articles use the word "possum" in the title without the article itself discussing possums (for example, "Possum" was a nickname for a person instead of referencing the marsupial).

The articles were read several times to assess their compatibility with this project and its focus. As this was discursive analysis and not content analysis, the selected pieces were deliberately chosen for their use of languages or images, as well as their overall tone. The tone refers to how possums were discussed, whether "negative" (i.e., militant or dismissive language/imagery which framed possums negatively), "mixed" (i.e., a mix between negative and positive language and imagery, such as an interview with a possum carer that was critiqued by the author or publisher), or positive (i.e., an article written directly by a possum advocate). Several precursory groups were initially created by sorting the tones in either negative, mixed, or positive groups to indicate a general idea of what portion of articles portray possums in a particular way. As illustrated by Table 1, some publishers, such as *Stuff* and *NZ Herald*, had much more material referencing possums compared to others, like *The Spinoff* or *The Guardian*; however, this did not mean that publishers who produced fewer articles were not as relevant in the discussion about the framing of possums and media ethics. As such, a concerted effort was made to assess the materials more on how the articles were written rather than who published them, despite initial interest in this spread.

TABLE 1 Total articles per publisher.

| Publisher name | Total number of articles | Relevant articles |
|---|---|---|
| *Stuff* | 97 | 60 |
| *New Zealand Herald* | 95 | 27 |
| *Otago Daily Times* | 50 | 17 |
| *Radio New Zealand* | 30 | 14 |
| *Scoop* | 27 | 13 |
| *Newshub* | 21 | 12 |
| *The Guardian* | 4 | 3 |
| *The Spinoff* | 2 | 2 |

Once the final 148 articles were gathered and organized, each piece went through several coding sessions using thematic analysis principles to search for similar themes. As I wanted to avoid quantifying the data (as this can risk compromising the nuance embedded in this complex discourse), I adopted Braun and Clarke's "organic" approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006) for coding the material. First, I became comfortable with the data set and began creating initial codes, which are pieces of information that are condensed into smaller, more digestible fragments, through a process called open coding (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). In thematic analysis, open coding is the generation of codes that are not influenced by a pre-determined list and instead emerge on their own. These codes were then organized in a manual spreadsheet to allow for ease of movement between themes. Upon seeing the list of initial codes, they were then grouped and organized into clusters which eventually became the overarching themes (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In qualitative research, themes are "patterns in the data that are important or interesting" (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017, p. 3353). Thematic analysis, in its examination of these themes, is not to simply summarize the findings, but, instead, to interpret and attempt to understand the data and make meaning (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). Though I tried to keep an open mind, my previous doctoral research (which examined mainstream conservation narratives about possums) meant that I expected some themes to emerge based on my familiarity with the topic, such as notions of "pest" control, the economy, romanticization of "pest" control, and militant language and imagery. I also recognize that my positionality as a vegan, ecofeminist, Critical Animal Studies scholar with prior experience looking into these issues would have influenced my coding process and impacted how I interpreted these articles. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the themes discussed in the Results section below would have emerged, in part, from this praxis.

# 3 Results | war, patriotism, and the humor in death and cruelty

It was clear upon an initial read-through of the articles that McCrow-Young et al.'s (2015) themes of war, sport, and patriotism persisted well beyond 2015. These themes re-emerged in this study's analysis as well, culminating in the following themes which were replicated across both projects: (1) militant language and imagery, (2) economic benefits, and (3) objectification, desensitization, and

dominance. However, alongside these themes, an ominous undercurrent emerged in these more recent articles. Where war and patriotism were discussed, many pieces also employed dark humor and the use of trivializing language and images to downplay the inherent cruelty subjected to live possums or their dead bodies. These replicated themes, followed by emerging themes will be discussed in the following sections.

## 3.1 Militant language and imagery

Possums were routinely described as Australian "pests," which needed to be "eradicated" or "[culled]" (Thurlow, 2019; Edmunds, 2020, para. 13). These narratives frame possums as incredibly destructive to the natural environment, where they are blamed to "[kill] millions of native birds every year" (Palmer, 2019, para. 6; Newshub, 2017a, para. 18). Possums are described as "feasting on" (Watson, 2019, para. 6) and "devour[ing]" (Gates, 2022, para. 28) the chicks and eggs of native birds, while "destroy[ing] native trees" (Corlett, 2021, para. 10) in the process. Department of Conservation (2021) argues that "predator control efforts are essential for New Zealand's native species, as introduced pests like possums, stoats, and rats, eat native plants, insects, birds, and eggs" (para. 13). While possums do have an impact on the environment—as any being would—the overemphasis on their "predation," specifically of native birds and eggs, has been heavily criticized as the folivorous marsupial primarily eats vegetation as they have a hindgut fermentation digestive system, akin to horses and rabbits (Hume, 1989). This is not to say that a possum would not engage in these behaviors (particularly if they were sick or starving), but more that it is very rare for the species. This framing is juxtaposed by the treatment of common brushtail possums just over the Tasman Sea in Australia, where these possums are regarded as well-loved, albeit sometimes pesky, native species in the media and are protected by law (Russell et al., 2013).

In New Zealand, the "possum knockdowns" (OSPRI New Zealand, 2019, para. 10) have been referred to as an ongoing "battle" (Environment Southland, 2017, para. 1), where possums are the ultimate "scourge of farm and forest" (Hancox, 2019, title). These narratives of war suggest these "pesky" possums (Cook, 2023, para. 9) are enemies "under siege" (Pickett, 2017, title). These "possum blitz[es]" (Fox, 2016, title) are declared as necessary to not only reduce the threat of bovine tuberculosis but also to reduce the possums' impacts on native flora and fauna. While cattle are non-native to New Zealand, they are exempt from these "pest" control narratives as they play a role in the nation's primary industries in ways that possums do not. A 2016 article that shared new research about possums and "pest" control stated how the nation is "waging a kind of war on pests," where "[researchers] need to discover [the possums'] weaknesses… [by] fine-tuning our battle plan" (Stuff, 2016, para. 4). The advancement of new technologies is regarded as a "shift in the game," where "really flash military grade infrared" technology could see "thousands of possums stamped out by the end of the year" (Shaskey, 2019, para. 6). Another *Stuff* article succinctly reflected on this "ambitious" PF2050 plan, stating, "Scientists are talking about the mission in military terms: choking off pests on peninsulas and then advancing the front lines from there; developing new traps and genetic weapons; winning the hearts and minds of children and farmers alike" (Perry, 2017, para. 5). These statements paired militant wording, such as "stamped," "choking," and "advancing," with romanticized visions of a proud, flag-waving nation at home. It creates an image of patriotic people who are proud of their soldiers (conservationists) for the pursuit of a common enemy (possums).

The manner possums are killed is often through organizational or governmental trapping, shooting, or poisoning programs, though sometimes these activities are relegated to communities through "possum punishment" (Bathgate, 2017, para. 1), "Grand Possum Culls" (Northland Age, 2017, title), or "Pest Quest" events (Henderson, 2022, para. 1). These events are often set up as fundraisers for schools or communities, where money is fundraised through the event's tickets, silent auctions (where prizes are donated by local companies, with previous years' prizes including a gun silencer and a chainsaw), or through the selling of the corpses themselves for fur, meat, or skins. Often, the success of reducing possum populations was discussed as being "in the hands of the people" (Taunton, 2018, para. 18). This gamification of violence pays homage to McCrow-Young et al.'s (2015) research into how sport, war, and patriotism converge for possums. Arguably, the possums' existence as an Australian "invader" of a Kiwi "island paradise" (Gross, 2013, para. 1) reignites socio-political tensions between neighboring New Zealand and Australia. The relationship, while very close politically and geographically, has been described as akin to cousins or siblings, though also strategic "allies, but not friends" (Ayson, 2021, title). The introduction of Australian possums poses not only a significant threat to New Zealand's national identity as a "clean, green" brand that markets itself as a bird island paradise (Bell, 2006) but also threatens the nation's economy which relies significantly on its primary industries. As such, it was not a surprise to see that many of the articles justified this "war" in economic terms.

## 3.2 Economic benefits

The link found by McCrow-Young et al. (2015) between the economy and the protection of native species was also strong across these newer articles. Many of the pieces mentioned how possum "pest" control, while beneficial for native species, was directly advantageous for primary industries, such as beef and dairy (Harding, 2017; Austin, 2018; Taunton, 2018; OSPRI New Zealand, 2018a). Possums, along with some other species of "pests" which were forcibly introduced to the nation, are vectors of bovine tuberculosis. Control of possum populations was deemed "good for cows, as well as birds" (Hall, 2016, title), with the removal of "pests" regularly referred to as "amazing news for farmers" (Taunton, 2018, para. 1).

Several articles in this project also mentioned how these economic benefits extended to the possum trapper or hunter. For example, RNZ's (2020) piece detailed how a then-12-year-old earned "some extra cash" by "trapping possums before school, selling the fur, and saving native species in the process" (para. 1). The pairing of "pest" control with being a "good Kiwi" (i.e., whereby national belonging, particularly for Pākehā, is solidified through the removal of these invasive "pests") was a thread that linked through many of these articles. "Pest" control activities were often discussed in terms of not only removing the animal "threat," but also using their dead bodies in ways that could benefit the economy, such as the use of their fur or flesh.

It is not uncommon to see dead possums on the side of the road in New Zealand. It has become part of the cultural milieu to swerve toward possums (and hit them) rather than swerve away to avoid them (McDonald Textiles, 2018). One person in an article directly commented on this, stating, "[their dead bodies] makes you look differently at a [roadkill possum] … if it was a $5 note on the road, I think you'd stop, eh?" (Murray, 2021, para. 5). This valuation of possum fur resonated in other pieces as well, such as an RNZ (2016) article which detailed how a New Zealand clothing retailer, Annah Stratton, responded to an anti-fur protest outside of one of their shops. The retailer justified the use of possum fur in their products, stating, "Possums are a pest in New Zealand and we are doing a good job in protecting our native forests and birds. If wearing possum is going to save our forests, then great" (RNZ, 2016, para. 14). Interestingly, there were some contradictions where the removal of possums, which are poised as antithetical to "Kiwi" values and identity, were contrasted with the economic value ascribed to their dead bodies. Possums are so fervently being killed; however, businesses are reliant on their continued existence to operate.

In some of the articles, the agreement that possums should be eradicated was met with some resistance about *how* the eradication was done. This was not necessarily for the possums' sake, but rather the discussion was around how the economy should benefit from their deaths. The apparent frustration stemmed from the desire to see possums as more of a "resource" rather than a decomposing, disposable body that deteriorates on the side of the road (McMahon, 2022). The current poisoning scheme through PF2050, and the widespread use of the controversial sodium monofluoroacetate (also known as 1,080), makes it unsafe for possum skins and flesh to be used in products that could then be sold. The same contradictions about eradicating possums also posed a unique business opportunity, where their deaths are not only seen to benefit the environment and reduce the risk of bovine tuberculosis but also that their bodies can be made into products and provide an economic opportunity for the hunter. The disapproval that poisons could ruin a potential commodity was summarized by the quote, "If you kill something, you [should] kill it in a way to make a product out of it" (Hutching, 2016, para 25). For the articles that did discuss the use of 1,080, the emphasis was on the potential loss of revenue and completely ignored the animal which suffered an excruciating death as a result (SAFE, n.d.).

There was also a trend for articles to refer to possum fur as "fluffy gold". The increased popularity of "Perino," a mixture of possum and merino sheep's wool, proves how possum fur is marketed as "high-end" and "high-priced" (O'Hara, 2020, para. 1). This "happy marriage" of fibers is argued as proof that "pests make magic" (Catherall, 2016, para. 2). In an argument similar to Annah Stratton's response to possum fur above, these products are argued to be "cruelty free" (Stock, 2016, title). Possum fur has been regarded as an "ethical fur of choice" primarily for the conservation benefits perceived to result from their eradication (McDonald Textiles, 2018, title). In this case, "cruelty free" or "ethical" completely ignores the experience of possums, who are hunted, trapped, and hot-plucked (a method where a possum is plucked immediately after death as their fur easily detaches from their skin), and instead refers to the reduction of supposed cruelty that possums cause native flora and fauna. I am not arguing that possums do not impact the environment, but rather the intense hatred toward possums has inflated their impacts without recognizing the extent of human impacts on the environment, too. Essentially, these products are marketed as helping local Kiwi businesses while protecting the environment at the same time.

Similarly, the flesh of possums has also become a "novelty" protein in the burgeoning pet food market, with several pieces endorsing the benefits of possum flesh. Fond Foods (2020), a pet food company that manufactures, "Possyum," argues that "dogs have devoured more than 100,000 kg of possum meat, or approximately 70,000 possums" (para. 2). This increased consumption could "put a decent dent in possum populations" (Hope, 2021, para. 1). A similar article outlined another pet food business venture by a veterinarian who sought to "tackle New Zealand's most reviled pest" (Ridout, 2018, para. 1). The use of the words "tackle" and "revile" demonizes possums in a bid to elevate the product as a potential solution to the possum problem. This intersection of boosting the economy through "pest" control creates an economic dependency on the existence of possums, as many businesses rely on the stream of possums to turn a profit. This reliance is fueled by the objectification, desensitization, and speciesism of possums who are pawns in the never-ending pursuit of capitalism.

## 3.3 Objectification, desensitization, and speciesism

The objectification, desensitization, and speciesism toward possums were also prevalent within the articles, where the possums themselves, and their experiences, rights, and agency, were completely devalued and ignored using language and images. For possums, the way that discourse and language are used in the media reflects how society systemically villainizes and objectifies them through shared meaning-making. This process can be understood by social constructionism (Burr, 1995), which argues that societies construct meaning about the world around them. Thus, societal understandings of possums are not reflections of absolute truths, but, rather, are the reiteration of understandings that are constantly being re-imagined and constructed by society. The objectification of possums in New Zealand's media can be reflected by the sheer prevalence of using "it" to refer to possums. Not referring to sentient animals with personal pronouns, such as "he" or "she," if we know the sex, or "they," if we do not know the sex, is tied up in ideas of human exceptionalism (Merskin, 2022), where animals, especially "pests," can only ever be objects—not subjects. If we culturally recognized the sentience and rights of New Zealand's possums, it would be much more difficult for cruelty toward them to continue on such a momentous scale. This pervasiveness of using "it" is by no means a possum-specific phenomenon as humans refer to nonhuman animals as "it" all the time. However, it does symbolize the very separation between us and them that is so contextually prevalent between humans and possums in New Zealand.

The objectification of possums was also evident in the articles through the use of gruesome imagery that was presented as normal and *not* gruesome in the same way that an image of a dead or dying animal would normally be in mainstream media (including native species, companion animals, or even farmed animals). It is common in New Zealand's media to see images of possums in varying states of death and decay, whether the animal could be freshly killed, in the process of being skinned or hot-plucked, or even rotting as a carcass on the side of the road. Images of dead animals are not typically shared so readily in mainstream media; nevertheless,

possums seemed to be exempt from this. Holm (2015) argues possums are "anti-animals" in New Zealand's mainstream cultural consciousness. Theorized with Schmitt's (2008) foe versus enemy distinction, Holm (2015) recognizes "anti-animals" as beings which are not only enemies that need to be defeated but also intently hated and actively destroyed. Their dead bodies are used as visual proof that humans, who are framed as the "good guys," are succeeding in the battle against the pestilent "bad guys." English professor, Randy Malamud (2012), notes how this framing of animals is done in ways that recreate depictions that are often in line with mainstream attitudes, thus reinforcing the dominant narrative about the species.

One example that illustrates this framing well is the series of articles that discuss the business of Stu Bracegirdle, the owner of Egmont Skins and Hides Ltd. (Matthews, 2018; RNZ, 2018). One of these articles shared a series of graphic images from Bracegirdle's workroom that looked as if it were a working slaughterhouse (Matthews, 2018). Blood and dirt caked the back walls and possums were scattered haphazardly across the floor and piled in an indiscriminate hedge of fur and tails. A close-up image of a dead possum's face with their bloodied muzzle and tongue hanging limp out of their mouth is presented near the top of the article with no content warnings to the reader. This image was paired with the caption, "Bracegirdle said possums killed with 1,080 could not be sold to pet food companies" (Wilkinson, 2016). In the series of images where Stu is present, he stands confidently as he gestures toward the possum carcasses hanging limp from steel hooks that have impaled their skulls. Another image shows him proudly presenting the carcass to the viewer. The concerns presented in the articles are more about how 1,080 negatively impacts industries, such as Bracegirdle's, and do not discuss the animal victim and their experiences. The focus is on industry, economy, and human benefit.

Similarly, sheep farmer, Ben Stubbs, commented in another article how the possum fur industry was much more lucrative in comparison to his sheep wool business (RNZ, 2018). An image paired with Ben's article is centered on a pile of seven or eight decaying possums lying in a heap on the ground at the base of a tree. The accompanying caption mentions that with the use of an auto trap (which typically lures a possum into an area where a piston pierces the skull of the possum), "catches" like these are profitable for him and he would continue to pursue this line of work. These articles, for the most part, do not consider possums as animals as sentient beings.

Noticeably, none of these articles had any warnings about graphic images or content. These images, in the context of possums, are presented as completely normal in the New Zealand cultural psyche. Their prevalence signals how the public is consistently desensitized and normalized to violence toward possums and their dead bodies. The public is therefore more used to their deaths with the increased consumption of these kinds of images and objectifying language. Many of these articles also paired this violent imagery and language with repetitive cross-publisher phrasing that mimicked word-for-word the impact of possums, particularly that the species is said to deplete New Zealand's forests and ravage its native bird populations. Though possum carers, or other people with intimate knowledge about possums as individuals, disagree with this statement (Major, 2023), previous scientific research has also critiqued the veracity of these claims (Coleman et al., 1985; Sweetapple et al., 2004; Sweetapple and Nugent, 2007).

The tendency for publishers to repeat information without careful fact-checking was noticeable through several significant errors in some of the articles, specifically with an example where an incorrect species of possum was continuously presented—10 times to be exact—as the common brushtail possum. A single stock image of a short-eared brushtail possum, which is a subspecies of possum native to Australia, was used across an array of articles by *RNZ*, *Stuff*, and *Newshub*. Though these two species look somewhat similar in that they have general features of being a brushtail possum, short-eared possums (*Trichosurus caninus*) have noticeably smaller, rounded ears and, importantly, have never existed in New Zealand, while common brushtail possums (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) have larger, more triangular ears and have lived in New Zealand for over 160 years. Though mistakes do happen, and this is not a comment on the individual authors or editors, this lack of awareness about differentiating different species symbolizes a grave disconnect with the species New Zealanders share their environment with, particularly given the regularity for which the species is featured in the media and how they are framed to be overpopulating the forests of the nation. The connection between speciesism and racism is important to reference here. The very introduction of non-native species during early colonial settlement not only caused immeasurable impacts for the native species themselves but forever altered Māori relationships with nature. Māori are *kaitiaki* (guardians) of the environment, for which the land, water, soil, and all creatures who live within it, are *taonga* (treasures). Māori elders, in conversation with the naturalist author, James Prosek, articulated that "colonists ultimately diminished the Maori not with guns, but by cutting the forests, building dams, introducing insecticides and herbicides, and fragmenting the once-contiguous native bush… they also brought their own familiar species of animals—the trout, the hare, the stag—that in some cases successfully displaced the native creatures, the totems of the Maori" (Prosek, n.d., para. 23). The speciesist campaigns to make the newly settled New Zealand archipelago more like "home" for these colonists stifled not only native species but also Māori whose role as *kaitiaki* was further threatened (Selby et al., 2010).

The articles analyzed for this project were confronting. For the most part, these articles lacked any mention of concern for possums as sentient beings (though there was a small cohort of articles that either advocated for the rights of possums or mentioned how their mistreatment was problematic). The overall presentation of possums in the media was that their lives do not matter. The only value they bring is how their dead bodies could benefit human beings and their industries. Though these themes of (1) militant language, (2) economic benefits, and (3) objectification, desensitization, and speciesism were already identified in previous Critical Animal Studies research on possums in New Zealand (McCrow-Young et al., 2015; Major, 2023), there were some emergent themes which resulted from this project, including the media's prevalence to use dark humor, denigrating language, and negative imagery to degrade the death and cruelty of possums, ultimately reinforcing creaturely racism toward possums.

## 3.4 Emergent themes

While the themes above were discussed by McCrow-Young et al. (2015), it was apparent that post-2016 articles additionally paired dark

humor, language, and imagery that belittled death and cruelty toward possums. Several exemplary articles demonstrated this, including those that represented possums as hostile home "invaders" or outlined the "successes" of "pest" control fundraisers. Often, these articles employed linguistic puns and expressions that poked fun at possums, all to attract readers to these pieces while reinforcing the possum as a "pest" narrative at the same time.

Several articles discussed possums as intruders that were "rampaging" into people's homes (Stuff, 2017, title; Loughrey, 2019a,b; White, 2021a,b; McNeilly, 2019, 2021). For example, Loughrey's articles discussed how a "sharp-clawed pest… paid an uninvited visit" to a woman's home (Loughrey, 2019a, para. 2), whom she described as "staring at me like I was Satan" (Loughrey, 2019b, title). The possum ended up being a young, scared joey who was kidding in a closet, confused by being stuck inside an unfamiliar place. Similarly, a series of articles reported how a woman in 2021 was "held hostage… by a particularly aggressive possum" (McNeilly, 2021; White, 2021a,b). In this case, police attended a home on Blacks Road in Dunedin where a woman claimed she was "trapped" inside her home by a lunging possum. Upon arriving at the scene, the possum in question ran up to an attending officer and immediately climbed up their pant leg. The possum, subsequently dubbed the "Blacks Road Ripper" by police, was considered at the time to be an escaped pet who was unable to cope with being out in the wild (as these pets are typically rescued from their dead mother's pouches as joeys and habituate over time to human beings).

Subsequent articles reported that the "Blacks Road Ripper" was Scoby Lunchbox, a juvenile pet possum who escaped the safety of her enclosure. Her association of humans with food and comfort made the normal fear that wild possums have of humans obsolete. Scoby, who was released at a nearby treeline by police, was found several days later snuggled up in a chicken coop and was returned to her carer. Her release was exceptionally surprising given that possums are typically killed by authorities and keeping them as pets is often strongly frowned upon, if not illegal. Despite Scoby's "cute" appearance with wide doe eyes and a pink button nose, which was shared in a follow-up article on her adventure (Otago Daily Times, 2021b), the original story was paired with a close-up stock image of a snarling possum baring their teeth in what looks like an especially aggressive pose (White, 2021a). The image itself is highly suspect for several reasons. Possums are not often out during the day as they are nocturnal and are typically very fearful of humans. It is much more likely the picture is of an extremely distressed possum caught in some sort of trap and unable to escape. This exact image was used 11 times across different articles published between 2017 and 2023. The antagonistic framing of the Blacks Road Ripper turned to rear a more auspicious representation when the possum turned out to be a young, charismatic joey who sought love and affection. Stock photography, which was illustrated here, has been criticized for its creation of "generic," stereotypical images—ones which are meant to universally normalize and share a particular concept or notion (Frosh, 2020). The use of images that are blatantly unrepresentative of the targeted species, in both taxonomy and demeanor, demonstrates the lack of critical literacy by both the producers and consumers of news media. Each article where the aggressive stock image was used depicted possums as villains, though these stories often paired these militant narratives with humor. While these initial comparisons tied in with the theme of militancy, the way that possums were framed was deliberately done in jest to engage the reader and make light of "pest" control and aggressive attitudes toward possums.

Other articles also covered possum hunt activities and utilized dark humor to poke fun at the dead animals in the name of conservation. These "Pest-Quests" (Henderson, 2022, para. 1), or other possum or "pest" hunting fundraisers, are popular in rural and semi-rural New Zealand. One article covered how an upcoming "contest," titled "Save the Rata Possum Hunt," was created as a response to the "population explosion" of possums in the Southland region of New Zealand (McDonald Textiles, 2022, para. 1, 3). Modeled after the "Central Otago's Easter Bunny Shoot," the event was lauded as an opportunity for children and community members to earn money through the hunting, shooting, and trapping of possums (McDonald Textiles, 2022). Though the event's title suggests that the motivations for the hunt are to "save" the native rata tree, the article never discusses environmental concerns further or engages with material about how possums allegedly impact rata. Instead, the article details how the hunt would be beneficial to "knock the numbers back… for farmers at no cost to them" (McDonald Textiles, 2022, para. 5, 10).

The humor continues in another article, titled, "Hunters bagging rabbits and pimping possums for Easter school fundraiser," which jokingly described how the dead carcasses of possums were dressed up in various "pimping" outfits and judged by a panel that awarded prizes for creativity (Tuckey, 2017). The body of one possum was featured with a cigarette propped out of their mouth, with the caption "This chilled possum was a crowd pleaser… despite the odd blowfly" (Tuckey, 2017). The article continued, stating, "You cannot put lipstick on a pig, but sunglasses on a possum may just win you a prize" (Tuckey, 2017, para. 1). Another fundraiser at Uruti School also had a dead-possum dress-up competition, where a dead possum body was poised as a butcher, with a cleaver chopping up a sausage that was cable-tied to their paw (Persico, 2017). A slideshow of accompanying images of the dead possums poked fun at various other popular culture icons, such as former U.S. President, Donald Trump. A dead possum, who was dressed in the likeness of Trump, had a patch of carpet positioned on their head as if they were wearing a toupee. The article boasted the popularity of such representations (Persico, 2017). The principal of Uruti School stated that, as a result of some of the international criticism of the event, "These are country children. They love animals. We're in a rural district, and that's what we do out here" (Persico, 2017). It appears that discussions around animal cruelty and concern that children participate in the desecration of animal corpses are not an issue for event organizers and participants—it is reinforced as "what we do." These children are actively being taught speciesist narratives, where cruelty and desecration are funny when aimed at a certain subsect of animals, which could have some dangerous repercussions in the future if these attitudes about abuse toward vulnerable animals cross over to abuse to vulnerable human beings (Ascione, 2005; Flynn, 2011). Though there have been some scholarly debates around the strength of a potential "link" between violence to humans and violence to animals (i.e., not every person who abuses animals will automatically go on to abuse human beings), support is increasing that a connection exists between the two (Taylor and Signal, 2008; Linzey, 2009; Taylor, 2011).

In addition to fundraising events, humor was used to joke about "pest" control activities and "pest" research, such as an article that stated possums would have "No Christmas" due to "pest" control ramping up in the region (Hawkes Bay Regional Council, 2022, title). Other articles

called possums that were difficult to catch "bandits," such as Te Rauone Bandit (MacLean, 2023), or "brutes" (Moroney, 2016). Humor was also used to share an "unconventional" honeymoon story of a "pest busting pair" who celebrated the "perfect honeymoon" by "whacking possums" (Morton, 2019, title), The newlyweds were congratulated for "substituting cocktails and sun for traps and bait all in a bid to make Taranaki predator-free" (Farrell, 2019, para. 1, 2). Another piece, titled, "Dogs with Jobs: Peggy, the possum doo-doo detective," details how dogs are used to scent-track possum scat, referring to Peggy as a "possum-finding sleuth" (Groenestein, 2023, para. 1). Similarly, Jones (2017) reported on then-Deputy Prime Minister, Paula Bennett, who caught a possum in a neck trap, referring to her as "Paula, the possum slayer" (title).

These stories continued, with an article outlining the "mishap" of Auckland City Council's efforts in 2020 to repaint the white lines on the edge of a highway. The article featured a dead possum who was painted over on the side of the road. A commenter referenced in the article joked that the council "had one job" and that "moving the animal wasn't worth the effort," while another stated, "screw touching that disease-ridden filth. Paint the thing and carry on" (Marriner, 2020, para. 8). Another article shared how police attended to a "very drunk" man who was found flailing around the body of a dead possum by their tail in the street (Ryder, 2022). The article gave no information as to what happened to the possum before or after the man's detention.

The prevalence of New Zealand's media to reference possums often included stories of the macabre presented as Kiwi humor. This fusion of humor and militant language toward possums was perfectly exemplified in one of the several columns written by the award-winning journalist, novelist, and playwright, Joe Bennett. His article, titled "Playing possum with my apple thieves," began by mourning his former dog, Baz, who allegedly "lived to slaughter possums" and would "slew them with glee and with fervor" (Bennett, 2021, para. 3). After Baz's passing, Bennett (2021) claimed possums "were dancing along the [deck] railing… and peering in at me to giggle" (para. 4). He described subsequently setting a trap that breaks a possum's neck and cuts the blood supply to "its thieving brain" (Bennett, 2021, para. 7). Bennett (2021) describes the first time he caught one of the possums, lamenting he felt "a Baz-like surge of triumph" and a "Joe-like twinge of guilt" (para. 8). The comments on Bennett's article were overwhelmingly supportive of the piece, stating possums are "plain cunning" and that the article gave them a "belly laugh." One commenter even offered to shoot the possums in his garden for him. The flippant interactions between the article and its readers epitomize the shared hatred of possums, where cruelty toward the "invaders" is actively encouraged and supported through casual, patriotic quips that reinforce the cultural stasis of possum disdain.

It was clear that the villainization of possums and the humor of their (mis)treatment is commonplace in mainstream New Zealand media. The excerpts discussed above are only a small portion of the many examples gleaned from this project. Ultimately, understanding why this is the case is important if we are to consider how the media can become less racist and speciesist in its practices. The following discussion will consider the impacts of these narratives and how a new media ethics can create a more responsible, intersectional form of journalism.

# 4 Discussing media ethics

The media in New Zealand is largely governed by the Broadcasting Standards Authority, the NZ Media Council Principles, and several legal Acts (such as the Defamation Act 1992 and the Copyright Act 1994, for example). Several publishers also have their own Code of Ethics that run alongside these standards. For example, the *NZ Herald*, which was used in many of the articles for this paper, has eight editorial codes of conduct, including accuracy, independence, opinion, editing, diversity, conduct/integrity, complementary codes/principles, and scope (NZ Herald, 2023). Though this outward compliance and pursuit of ethical practice is proudly shared amongst media publishers, there is little discussion about how the media's inherent biases shape public discourses and narratives, particularly around "pest" animals; however, scholarly pursuits, such as the linguistic turn and animal turn, are beginning to explore the impact of language and images on societal attitudes toward animals. The linguistic turn refers to the increased recognition by social theorists of how language impacts society (Fairclough, 1992); while the animal turn denotes how scholars are beginning to acknowledge human-nonhuman animal relationships in their theoretical study (Cederholm et al., 2014). The demarcation of a Cartesian "us versus them" boundary between humans and animals makes it so that the animal is socially positioned as inferior to humans. For possums in New Zealand, this can be exemplified by derogatory language that pokes fun at the plight of possums or frames them in a way that scapegoats the species for issues that are more anthropogenic in nature (Holm, 2015; Bekoff, 2017; Major, 2023).

Feminist media ethics and critical discourse analysis can offer some insight into examining why possums are framed this way in the media and how these ideas can evolve. Feminist media ethics seeks to eliminate gendered oppression in the media (Steiner, 2020). These ethics criticize the stereotypes where being "caring" is seen as feminine and not typically conducive to mass media, juxtaposing the more masculine pursuits of being "rational" speakers of truth and justice. Feminist media ethics also critique how these caring attributes are weaponized through traditional media as being too "soft" on important issues. Alternatively, critical discourse analysis considers the social and political impacts of racist and sexist oppression in discourse seeking to explain, rather than describe, discourse structures (Van Dijk, 2015), though these overlapping intersections of oppression have been extended beyond race and sex as markers of oppression (Deckha, 2013; Jones, 2016). For example, given the interconnectedness between animal oppression and human oppression, critical discourse analysis can be useful to consider for animals as well (Stibbe, 2001). Incorporating critical discourse analysis into the media can be important as these media institutions are appreciated as markers of culture and authority (Steiner, 2020).

## 4.1 Slayers, rippers, and blitzes

While New Zealand's media is eager to align themselves with ethical practice, their quest to perfect ethical standards is missing a discussion about the intersection between speciesism, nationalism, racism, and patriotism (particularly around the discussion of non-native "pest" species). This has created a gray space where the very oppressions these media groups are allegedly trying to discourage are reinforced even more (albeit the victims are "pests" and not humans). This use of language to diminish the experience of possums does a disservice to the articles as it completely ignores the pain and

suffering of beings in exchange for quips of humor that are designed to increase readership and online article engagement.

A good example of this is the sheer number of articles that used derogatory or evasive humor in their titles. For example, Jones' (2017) article, titled, "Paula the possum slayer," which was mentioned above, deliberately links Paula's virtuous killing of possums with the fictional television character, Buffy, whose fight against the evil underworld to save humanity was epitomized in the titular hit series, "Buffy: The Vampire Slayer." Another example, which was illustrated previously with Scoby Lunchbox, referenced the joey who held a woman "hostage" as a "Ripper." "Ripper" is an eponym for a murderer who mutilates bodies, alluding to the infamous serial killer, "Jack the Ripper," who murdered five women between 1881 and 1891 in the Whitechapel region of London, England. Linking a small joey such as Scoby, who was used to human company and care, with the brutality of these crimes diminishes the very real terror that the "Jack the Ripper" case caused and trivializes crimes that have happened in the past. This was also noticeable with the naming of possum killing events as "Possum Purges" or "Possum Blitzes." Blitzkrieg, or "blitzes," were popularized by Nazi Germany in World War II. The word "blitz" is often linked to the Nazi regime as it was a warfare tactic that was engineered to surprise and overwhelm the enemy through swift, coordinated attacks that were very difficult to recover from. Referencing "pest" control as "blitzes" infers that the hatred toward possums is on par with global genocide and warfare. For New Zealand, slayers must seek out rippers and eliminate them in a blitz of fury.

Critical Animal Studies scholar, Dunayer (2001), argues that the use of language matters when talking about animals. How the media represented and framed possums in the articles for this project overwhelmingly reinforced the oppression and hatred toward the species. Most of the articles talked about possums in a negative tone, save for a select few that were written by activists or people with alternative perspectives. The question remains of where the media should go from here in how they talk about and represent possums. Recognizing the interplay of racism and speciesism is one way forward. Scholars, Milburn and Cochrane (2021), argue that though the law currently protects certain groups of humans from racist hate speech, there is no philosophically substantive reason why speciesist hate speech should also not be condemned for groups of nonhuman animals. Considering this, articles that discuss possums, and other "pest" species in New Zealand, should similarly be censured for hate speech as there are far-reaching ramifications if a society is so easily able to turn the compassion switch off (Major, 2023).

Moving forward, the New Zealand media must consider the impacts of creaturely racism on animals as sentient beings. This suggestion is particularly ironic though as New Zealand was the first country in the world to legally recognize animals as sentient beings with the 2015 amendment of the Animal Welfare Act 1999. At the time, international praise saw the change as a fantastic step forward; however, animal rights activists have criticized that the amendment is more a smokescreen as a range of species, such as possums, are exempt from some protections of the Act as these species fall under existing Acts, such as the Wildlife Act 1953, the Conservation Act 1973, and the Biodiversity Act 1993 (O'Callaghan, 2017; Beattie, 2023; Major, 2023, pp. 190–191). This has created a juxtaposition within New Zealand's society where specific forms of animal cruelty to possums are socially and culturally reprimanded, such as the several articles that criticized the Waitara man who punched a possum off a fence while his friends filmed and cheered him on (Otago Daily Times, 2021a; Sadler, 2021), while others are comedic commentaries on the gleeful slaughter of possums (Bennett, 2021). There is an interesting comparison between the reporting of Scoby Lunchbox and the possum who was punched as the Waitara possum did not receive the same level of care or concern that Scoby did. This touched on a key point that participants from my doctoral research mentioned: there is something in New Zealand about baby "pest" animals that can sometimes give these animals a "pass" from cruelty—that is if they are young, charismatic, or cute enough (Major, 2023). This discussion requires the recognition of class and geography where Scoby's region of north Dunedin is a relatively large city in New Zealand, while Waitara is considered an up-and-coming, lower-economic town that is still feeling the effects of colonization. Racism, which is directly influenced by colonization, stifled Māori relationships with the environment, and subsequently impacted those species who live within the environment, too; however, this is starting to be addressed (albeit very slowly). For example, in 2017, personhood status was granted to the Whanganui River through *Te Awa Tupua*, a legal settlement where the river as a whole was legally recognized as a distinct being with rights and authority (Perry, 2022), reinforcing how environmental harms, including speciesism perpetrated against animals, are associated with racism toward humans.

The regular use of graphic and disturbing images was also a stark reminder of just how far possums are separated from the moral concern society would normally afford for pictures of dead animals being shared in news media. It is not often that journalism depicts images like these if the species were companion animals, native species, or even other farmed animals that were sent to slaughter. Van Dijk (2015) recognizes how pejorative lexical depictions of those deemed as "Others" work to reinforce racist, nationalist, antisemitic, or ethnocentric biases toward these groups that underpin the recirculation of these ideas as dominant in the social, cultural, and political milieu. Though Van Dijk (2015) was largely referring to human "Others," this discussion can be extended to the speciesist stereotypes about possums (and arguably other species of animals) that are rampant in New Zealand's print media. This is exemplified by a Whanganui Chronicle article which argued New Zealand should "deport the possums back to OZ" (Thurlow, 2019, title). This connection of creaturely racism is reflective of a wider (eco) xenophobic rhetoric which can have dangerous consequences if left unabated (Dinat et al., 2019).

Evolving New Zealand's media ethics to move away from this would benefit from an intersectional approach that recognizes how oppressions are related to one another. For Freeman et al. (2011), a new media ethics should be prioritized, where journalism, in its cause to provide "a voice for the voiceless," should also incorporate nonhuman animal perspectives in its reporting to attempt to become less anthropocentric and speciesist. While providing a "voice" for nonhuman animals is complex as humans cannot truly know the perspectives of animals, this does not negate the importance of conducting journalism in ways that appreciate the pursuit of truth and multispecies justice (Freeman et al., 2011). Justice is justice regardless of the recipient.

In summation, based on most of the articles used for this research, save for a small group that highlighted alternative perspectives (Orman, 2016, 2021; Howard, 2017; Newshub, 2017b; Tulloch, 2018a,b; Tulloch, 2020, etc.), possums in New Zealand are largely

exempt from the main principles of ethical journalism. The combined use of dark humor, militant language, and speciesist objectification merge to reshape and reinforce shared cultural understandings about the misunderstood species. Images of possums were either used to promote the anthropocentric and patriotic success of "pest" control (i.e., where their bodies were proudly presented by the human "warrior") or used to reinforce and complement the main message of the article, such as the image of the snarling (i.e., petrified) possum used regularly with articles discussing the supposed violence and aggression of possums (such as the series of articles which covered Scoby Lunchbox). The articles, carefully packaged and presented for human consumption and entertainment, share stories of cruelty, distress, and desensitization. The marsupial's plight is condensed into a quick two-minute read and erases the lived experiences of the animals at the center of the stories. Thus, prioritizing a new media ethics that is informed by intersectional and anti-speciesist praxis is paramount. Instead of possums being represented as invasive villains that are deliberately destroying the nation, the potential to consider them also as victims of colonial violence can be a more compassionate and kinder step forward.

Ultimately, this paper presents an intersectional argument that human forms of racism and oppression of vulnerable human groups are intimately connected with creaturely forms of racism and oppression of vulnerable nonhuman groups. Aiming to be ethical in journalistic pursuits requires the institution of media, along with government and policy institutions, to reconsider the parameters of what oppression is, whom it harms, and why it is crucial to understand how the mistreatment of nonhuman animals, such as possums as "pests" in New Zealand, are contextually bound with human forms of domination and subjugation; only, until then, can the media—and institutions that reinforce discourses more broadly—endeavor to be truly ethical.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Author contributions

EM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

## Publisher's note



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