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## Framing Possums: War, sport and patriotism in depictions of brushtail possums in New Zealand print media

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### Abstract

There is a common saying in Aotearoa New Zealand: 'the only good possum is a dead possum'. This colloquialism demonstrates much about the negative reputation and maltreatment of brushtail possums in New Zealand. Introduced to this country from their native Australia in the 1800s, possums thrived in their new predator-free environment. Possums' adaptability has since proved to be problematic, not least for the nation's lucrative meat and dairy industries. In the past few decades a concerted campaign mounted by the New Zealand government has targeted possums as ruthless pests, demonizing these marsupials to the extent that international tourists are even advised to swerve while driving on the country's roads in order to hit and kill these animals. This paper examines how the print news media in New Zealand frames possums in a way that helps to sustain and encourage violence towards these marsupials. We argue that print media in New Zealand promote an overwhelmingly negative representation of possums which influences cultural understandings and public attitudes – ultimately reproducing and reinforcing hatred, disrespect and maltreatment of possums as pests warranting extermination and undeserving of compassion.

# Framing Possums: War, sport and patriotism in depictions of brushtail possums in New Zealand print media

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## Introduction

There is a common saying in Aotearoa New Zealand: ‘the only good possum is a dead possum’. This colloquialism demonstrates much about the negative reputation and maltreatment of brushtail possums in New Zealand. Introduced to this country from their native Australia in the 1800s, possums thrived in their new predator-free environment. Possums' adaptability has since proved to be problematic, not least for the nation's lucrative meat and dairy industries. In the past few decades a concerted campaign mounted by the New Zealand government has targeted possums as ruthless pests, demonizing these marsupials to the extent that international tourists are even advised to swerve while driving on the country's roads in order to hit and kill these animals.

This paper examines how the print news media in New Zealand frames possums in a way that helps to sustain and encourage violence towards these marsupials. We argue that print media in New Zealand promote an overwhelmingly negative representation of possums which influences cultural understandings and public attitudes – ultimately reproducing and reinforcing hatred, disrespect and maltreatment of possums as pests warranting extermination and undeserving of compassion.

The news media plays a powerful role in providing interpretative frameworks for social meaning production (McCombs and Shaw 176-177, 185-187; McQuail 405-409). With the use of certain media frames, aspects of an issue can be made more salient in a given media text ‘in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described’ (Entman 52). Media

frames are here understood as persistent patterns of selection, emphasis, and exclusion proffering a favoured visualisation and interpretation (Gitlin 7). Journalists put these frames into action by the selective use of words, metaphors and visuals that convey certain values and can work to marginalize some actors and empower others, increasing the probability of a certain interpretation of a text (Dearing and Rogers 30-33).

Scholars studying human-animal relations have examined how animals and animal-related issues are represented in the news media (Packwood Freeman 78-79; Herzog and Galvin 77-80; Molloy 2-10; Jepson 128-129; Montoya et al. 273-274, 288-290; Baker ix-x). For example, in her analysis of depictions of farmed animals in American media, Packwood Freeman shows how 'production animals' are discursively objectified by disavowing their emotional experiences and through omitting any description of them as inherently valuable individuals. Packwood Freeman also argues from a media ethics perspective stressing the necessity of news coverage to include a balance or variety of viewpoints, in order to support an open exchange of views (Packwood Freeman 86; see also Bivins 17-22; Peterson 74-75, 82). In this paper we adopt a similar approach by arguing for the promotion of a non-speciesist perspective within media ethics. This would mean that stories discussing issues about nonhuman animals such as possums, although they cannot include the actual 'voices' of possums, should better represent their inherent value and rights. The stories should also offer alternative viewpoints from New Zealanders who are not in favour of – and sometimes directly challenge – the current treatment of possums.

The print media in New Zealand give preference to a selection of main themes, which contribute to the dominant discourse of the possum as a menace, an invader and an object to be dominated. We examine the way patriotic attitudes and casual violence are used to frame these themes, and serve to justify the extermination of possums. Running parallel to these representations of possums is the notion of the human hero who is protecting the vulnerable and special native species and environment. While there is much to be said about the representations of human masculinity, or more specifically the white male's identity (Kheel 104-106; Kalof and Fitzgerald 119-120), it is the purpose of this research to focus on what discourses such as these mean for the nonhuman animals themselves. The analysis of the construction of the 'human hero' thus will be used insofar as it relates to the possum's perspective and the consequences it

has for the living conditions of actual possums. In this essay we examine one aspect of the way possums are socially constructed (in print media) since this is an important site of meaning production. Annie Potts' earlier research focuses on a broader examination of anti-possum rhetoric within multiple areas of New Zealand society (see Potts, 'Kiwis Against Possums').

## Background on Possums in New Zealand

Brush-tail possums were first introduced from Australia to New Zealand in 1858 in order to initiate a possum fur industry in this new colony (Warburton, Tocher and Allan 251-261). Released possums flourished in the forests of New Zealand, finding no natural predators in this new environment (compared with their native land of Australia), resulting in unanticipated impacts on flora and fauna (Clout and Ericksen 1-9). There are now thought to be around 30 million possums in New Zealand, and these marsupials are publicly vilified for their detrimental impact on trees and the habitats of native birds. However it is the discovery of their capacity to act as carriers of bovine tuberculosis (thereby threatening the lucrative dairy and meat industries in New Zealand) that has sparked the concerted government-sanctioned demonization and persecution of brush-tail possums in the latter part of the twentieth century (Potts, Armstrong and Brown 203).

Accordingly, since the 1980s at least, negative attitudes towards brush-tail possums have intensified in New Zealand. In an analysis of anti-possum rhetoric across a range of popular cultural domains, Potts identifies key narratives which perpetuate the demonization of possums. In the 'foreign threat narrative', the possum is described as 'spreading', 'infecting', 'invading' and 'attacking', and the nation is urged to fight back and eliminate these foreign enemies (Potts, Armstrong and Brown, 204-206). In the 'revenge narrative', possums are condemned for having seemingly deliberately caused the devastation of native bird habitats; the rhetoric associated with this perspective favours retribution and punishment (Potts, Armstrong and Brown, 207-209).

We argue that this warmongering attitude and promotion of violence towards possums is reproduced and encouraged in the discourse of New Zealand print media. This can be seen in the way possums are framed as a national threat and a pest through the repetition of certain words and images, and the consistent use of derogatory language in news articles. In this way,

the treatment of possums as objects to be dominated and exterminated is presented as something which is right and natural (Nibert 23).

New Zealanders' identification with the native kiwi bird is frequently emphasised throughout this discourse as a way of contrasting and highlighting the possum intruder. The kiwi as a symbol of New Zealanders' identity has become more than a mere emblem: it has been appropriated to the extent that it is embedded into the cultural psyche. In this way, to be a New Zealander is to *be* a Kiwi. The level of identification with the kiwi thus extends into the very fabric of the national image, so much so that New Zealand people are known as and referred to as 'Kiwis' (Barker 7). This strong connection with the kiwi that New Zealanders have is important for the way in which negative possum narratives are shaped, and it is particularly evident in the 'enemy versus innocent' theme which we address in later sections.

## Methods and materials

This study employs a textual analysis method inspired by Stuart Halls' approach ('Representation' 7), exploring how news articles contribute to the meaning making of the possum based in words and visuals. The news texts are treated as discursive practices, constructing and organizing knowledge on the possum, and producing certain cultural messages of human supremacy and domination over other animals and the natural world. While news organisations are not the only source of power that defines discourses on possums – they operate within a network of other hegemonic institutions in society – they do, however, have authority to construct meaning and play a role in supporting or challenging a regime of truth through their choice of topics and frames.

The texts analysed were chosen from a variety of newspapers, including metropolitan and regional dailies, a national magazine and national and community newspapers. Since our aim was to look at highly accessible print articles, we focused on publications with mass circulations that covered locations in both the North and South Islands of New Zealand. An initial perusal of a range of these newspapers was conducted to identify articles related to possums. Because our goal was to conduct a discursive analysis as opposed to a content analysis, these articles were intentionally rather than randomly sampled. Both text and visual images in the chosen news

articles were analysed for how patriotic attitudes and casual violence framed possums as ‘objects’.

Print news articles of possums were analysed in both local and national newspapers from 2003 to 2014.<sup>1</sup> We chose to limit our scope to news articles and the images which accompanied these, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the discourses operating within traditional print media. Therefore, our analysis does not extend to the news organisations’ social media platforms or broadcast journalism. We find limiting our analysis to print media to be a useful starting point to begin to look at the ways possums are constructed in mass media in general, particularly as this is an immense area of research. Analysis began with a familiarisation of the chosen articles, involving reading, re-reading and note-taking. This resulted in an initial identification of common themes running through the articles, which were then placed into groups according to relevant excerpts from the texts.

From these closer readings three themes were identified: 1) the techniques and updates on the War on Possums, 2) possum killing as sport/a game, and 3) victims versus enemies. News frames in the articles were also examined using Gitlin’s textual analysis techniques (109-119, 293-306) to identify issues such as newsworthy topics; how problems and involved parties were defined; whether they included the animals’ perspective; what social values were emphasised or assumed.

## The War Machine and the Possum

We begin our analysis of New Zealand print media by focusing on the way in which possums are positioned as ‘objects’ to be vilified, dominated and exterminated. This theme conjures an image of patriotic warfare waged against an alien invader, which we argue has many parallels to the framing of human warfare in news media, for instance the War on Terror and the Gulf War.

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<sup>1</sup> News articles from the following publications were included in the final analysis: *Rotorua Daily Post*, *The Northern Advocate*, *Sunday Star Times*, *Taranaki Daily News*, *Stuff National News*, *The New Zealand Herald*, *The Nelson Mail*, *New Zealand Geographic*, *Rodney Times*, and *Dargaville & Districts News*.

While there are strong elements which certainly correspond to each other, this is not to say that all warfare coverage is identical or separate from the particular context in which it was created. Journalism scholars like Schwalbe (268-269) have noted how the US news media, in framing the war in Iraq, gave preference to some perspectives over others (for example the American perspective rather than the Iraqi) and emphasised themes such as victory, freedom and heroism, rather than loss, failures and destruction. Griffin ('Picturing America's "War on Terrorism"' 393-398; 'Media Images of War' 30, 36) adds to this analysis pointing to how the visualization of the war in Iraq converged around a narrow range of repetitive images of the mustering and deployment of the military arsenal. Similarly, Goddard et al. (16, 27-28) note that the war was framed with much patriotic emphasis and a focus on battle strategy.

Across the New Zealand news articles we analysed, we observed similar frames of patriotism, heroism and a focus on battle strategies and weapons arsenal when representing the war on possums. For example, news coverage often highlights the tools and technology of possum killing, thus allowing for a very narrow dominant narrative where war is portrayed as a technical 'hardware' endeavour. Common articles which appear in this theme revolve around the 'control' technologies used to regulate possum populations and make the practical details of such technologies the key feature of the piece, using similar imagery and language to the news coverage of human war since the time of the Gulf War (Baudrillard 3). Similarly, the framing of many articles from the War on Terror is focused on military hardware, where the act of war is rendered as a controlled and sanitized activity (Griffin 'Media images of war' 26-27, 31-34; Griffin 'Picturing America's "War on Terrorism"' 393). New Zealand news articles focusing on 'the war on possums' are frequently accompanied by images of men posed beside new possum-destroying technologies (see images below). This establishes the idea of the patriotic hero, a fellow 'soldier', prepared to defend and protect the innocent native species using the latest powerful weapons. It is also important to note that this human patriotic hero in all of the selected news articles is a male, which speaks to the gendered nature of hunting and killing of other animals (Kheel 104-106; Kalof and Fitzgerald 119-120).





Image 1: *Sunday Star Times* Photo: Kevin Stent



Image 2: *Taranaki Daily News* Photo: Andy Jackson

These human ‘soldiers’ are the central focus of the images, and are commonly holding and/or using the traps/weapons, something often seen in hunting images, serving to create a sense of action which asserts human dominance over the situation (Haraway 28-34, 41-44). The hand placed on the weapon reinforces this sense of human intervention and control. Similar to the mobilization and behind-the-scenes images of weaponry and troops that have been a central theme in news coverage of war since the Gulf War (Baudrillard 3), these images highlight the proactivity of the mission of the war on possums, further drawing a parallel between the battlegrounds of the respective human and possum wars.

The inclusion of these human-centric images in news articles creates a sense of duty being served, and emphasises the pragmatic aspects of war tools. We are not invited to look outside of what is being presented or rather what is literally framed in these images. The animal and human victims who will have these weapons used against them are not present, thus reinforcing the authoritative and unquestioned narrative of war.

Altheide and Grimes state that ‘War programming refers to the organization and structure of the discourse of recent reportage about wars, and not mere content. It encompasses content as well as thematic emphases and dominant frames’ (618). Using Altheide and Grimes’ concept of War Programming (618) the framing of the war on possums can also be seen as utilising an authoritative tone to detail the necessity of the war machine and its functions. In this way, the wider context of this ‘war’ is never addressed, and contrary or opposing views are rare, if they exist at all.

The print media’s structuring of the reporting of the war on possums shows many similarities to the how the reporting of the Iraq war was structured in US news media (see Griffin ‘Media Images of War’; Goddard et al. ‘Patriotism Meets Plurality’). Any dialogue which might raise concerns over the war machine is excluded, and thus potentially disruptive readings of this war are prevented. This organisation of the war discourse serves to maintain focus on the ‘mission’ of mass possum control, rather than offering up objective or alternative viewpoints. These articles work to keep readers’ focus on cold facts relating to the war machine, such as specific methods of trapping and poisoning, as well as emphasising the scale of the attack plans and the enormity of the possum problem.

Furthermore, these articles draw on the clinical language of War Programming and a battle/strategy frame where emphasis is placed on facts and figures, such as the monetary costs involved, and the total number of ‘pests’ controlled. One article titled ‘Possums get the chop with new gas trap’ (Ninness) is a prime example of the language of the War Programming style; its primary purpose is to provide detailed scientific information about the superiority of the ‘military hardware’ (Griffin ‘Media images of war’ 30, 36) and the effectiveness of this new cutting-edge technology: ‘The trap’s designer...said the main advantage of the trap is that it can kill up to 35 possums before the gas cylinder (weighing just 60g) which powers the blade needs to be replaced and the bait dispenser replenished’ (Ninness).

This emphasis placed on facts and figures, costs and numbers, can be seen as deeply connected to modern rationality and calculability, as well as human relations to and domination over nature and other animals in modernity (Bauman 41, 47). This tactic of reducing possums to statistics is common in news articles, and serves to promote a certain moral evaluation of the war, justifying it by highlighting its successes, emphasising victory, and removing the animal perspective and indeed any understanding of the animal as a living sentient being. Similarly, the news media's discourse during the Iraq War also used collective terms for communicating how many non-Americans were killed, often using army terminology to classify people (Schwalbe 272). Where the American anti-Iraq discourse refers to people as 'insurgents' and 'others', the narrative of the possum war substitutes the word 'pest' or 'predator' for animals:

'U.S. Marines killed 25 *insurgents* and captured 25 *others* during several hours of fierce fighting, the American military said Thursday.' (Roberts, emphasis added)

'Sanson said there was "good science" which had successfully demonstrated that 1080 had minimal impact on *non-target wildlife*, but New Zealand had such a large problem with *introduced predators* that DOC needed more options.' (Dunn, emphasis added)

Altheide and Grimes go on to argue that the dominant frames within mass media are shaped by influential agencies, or 'claims makers', for example highly influential think tanks like the Project for the New American Century whose conservative political stance shaped the coverage of the Iraq War (623). Looking at New Zealand print media's representations of the war on possums, the dominant themes appear highly anthropocentric. In this regard, certain groups of humans act as the claims makers, so that any possum-related article is framed accordingly.

Schwalbe discusses the way the Iraq War was framed online using 'selective processes that telescope events into a few images that stand for the whole' (266). The print media's war on possums in New Zealand is consistent with the media discourse of the Iraq War in its selectivity, exclusion, and highlighting of hegemonic themes. Therefore, these tactics are in line with War Programming (Altheide and Grimes 618), and place emphasis on 'the big, powerful' mechanisms of war and the battle strategy aspects and the weaponry and mobilization (Schwalbe 272). In this way, the war on possums provides an example of Mirzoeff's claim (23) that the

visuality of war is profoundly undemocratic, in that some parts of it will remain forever out of sight of the media. The actual possum as an individual does not exist, and with the individual being removed, the potential for empathy is averted. The reader's attention is instead funnelled into the authoritative narrative of conquest and control.

By utilising the language and format of War Programming, the news media creates a discourse of unquestioned patriotic warfare, where contrary views either do not exist or belong to extremists, and where individuals are replaced by numbers. Similarly, there is an establishment of the 'enemy' or 'intruder' possum married to this theme, which will be discussed in later sections.

## Spectacle and Sport

The second dominant theme within the print media's representation of possums is that of sport or a game. Frequent use of overly colloquial and derogatory language combined with repeated imagery frames stories in this theme in a tone of casual violence. Here we see the way the language and construction of the articles merges with real world social practices. The primary types of article featured under this theme are reports about local and national possum killing competitions. The way in which these competitions are framed in the articles is unsettling, as the excessive violence towards possums is trivialized and made to seem natural and unquestioned, even recreational and fun. In this way, repeated language use and imagery serve to legitimise existing and ongoing graphic violence against possum 'pests'. Most disturbingly, emphasis is placed on the spectacle of these events, and human hunters are celebrated as heroes.

Possom killing events have become hugely popular in New Zealand, and are usually orchestrated by local councils or school groups. These events are characterised as sporting and/or fundraising events and typically revolve around team-based competition, where the teams who kill the highest number of possums within the allocated time are rewarded with cash or other material prizes. The number of possums killed at one event can reach at least 6,000 (Lambly). Other possum-related events also masquerade as sport, and can include tasks such as throwing possum carcasses (Paulin), dressing dead possums in costumes (Smith) and skinning the highest number of possums.

The discourse evident within these articles aligns possum-killing with entertainment, and utilises the narrative of sport and games in a way which celebrates acts of gratuitous violence against possums and portrays humans as champions. In discussing the spectacle of drug violence in US media, Correa-Cabrera states that ‘Media images not only reflect the national mood but also play a powerful role in shaping national discourse’ (211). This idea is applicable to the way in which the media showcases these possum killing events, in that by choosing the type of content to display and how to present it, it fuels negative public attitudes towards possums. Representing possums in this manner is part of a cycle of violence and anger in what Potts terms the ‘revenge narrative’ on possums, in which humans seek to retaliate against the possums that defile New Zealand nature (7).

We often see derogatory colloquialisms used in reference to these competitions, which serve to belittle the possums themselves, while the use of humour undercuts the act of violent killing. This framing of the lives and death of other animals in the news media as light entertainment and humorous events has been identified by Critical Animal Studies scholars (Molloy; Packwood Freeman) as a prime example of how speciesism operates through news media discourse. In this way, these articles reflect and encourage the cultural attitude of possum-hating and further highlight the possum as an object for human entertainment. For example, these headings typify the way idiomatic language is used to depict possum killing as reasonable and as light entertainment: ‘Pop a possum and win money and prizes’, ‘Fur flies for helicopter’, ‘Three thousand possums bite the dust’ and ‘Teenage hotshots drink to success.’

The mockery evident in this colloquial language throughout these sport articles not only works to obscure the extreme violence, but also expresses the sense of deserved punishment in which humans ‘seek revenge for [possums] presence’ (Potts 7). This sense of revenge is explicit in the national sentiment that the only good possum is a dead possum, which is touted over and over in articles of ‘sporting’ nature (e.g. Lambly’s ‘Fur flies for helicopter’). Similar phrases also appear in possum competition stories, which work to support the notion that mass killing is a kind of service, and that desecration of possum corpses is all part of the game. In one article detailing the upcoming event ‘Mamuku Marsupial Marathon’, readers are invited to join in the fun activities of hunting, trapping and poisoning, in order to ‘make a dent in the possum population while raising school funds’ (King). Language techniques like alliteration and a casual

tone are common traits utilised by news media to encourage the feeling of a game and entertainment, deliberately preventing readers from critically engaging with ideas such as children maiming and killing animals for sport.

These possum sport stories establish a narrative which is coded in terms of human camaraderie, and largely ignores the possum as an individual. Strong parallels can be drawn here to traditional hunting narratives, as shown in Critical Animal Studies research in this area (Jasper; The Animal Studies Group; Kheel; Molloy). In her analysis of hunting in popular media, Molloy argues that traditional trophy photographs serve to silence the animal perspective, and in representing animal hunting, the actual suffering of the animal is edited or obscured (144). Of particular interest in the case of possums are the images which accompany these sports stories, which all serve to celebrate the human hero, while at the same time marginalise the possums and omit their suffering.

Humans in these images are centrally framed and are frequently depicted smiling into the camera. On the flipside, possums are always aligned with props, or rather as sporting equipment and/or spoils as a result of the 'game', contributing to the construction of possums as mere objects for human entertainment. Possums are commonly shown in large piles, and are photographed when dead; thus, they are not allowed to occupy the visual space as anything other than trophies. In this way, their lifeless bodies serve to bolster the humans' dominance, and any opportunity for them to live, even in imagery within this theme, is denied.

This image [Image 3] accompanied the article titled 'Three Thousand Possums Bite the Dust' which described the 'record number of possums...culled by a team of Dargaville cullers during The Great Northland Possum Cull Competition' ('Three Thousand Possums'). The caption to this image reads: 'POSSUM HEAP: Members of the Kauri Coast Recreational Hunting & Fishing Club with a trailer load of possums culled...' ('Three Thousand Possums').



Image 3: *Dargaville & Districts News* (photo courtesy of Dargaville & Districts News)



Image 4: *Nelson Mail* Photo: Alastair Paulin

Images such as this are common within the possum-sports narrative, and evoke classic pictures of human hunters posed beside their dead animal conquests. What we can draw from the similarities between these post-killing event photographs and hunting trophy photographs is the way they seek to normalise gratuitous violence. In their analysis of animal trophies in hunting magazines, Kalof and Fitzgerald argue that typical trophy photographs reflect the notion that exploitation of and violence towards animals is normal and natural (120).

When the media draws on the tradition of photographing hunting trophies, there is a layering of active framing occurring which capitalises on learned associations. In this way, the

viewer brings the normalised violence associated with hunting (and reinforced through animal trophy images) with them into these current frames of possum conquests. Images such as these exemplify the narrative of the human conqueror, and contribute to the dominant discourse that violence towards possums is an achievement.

The result of these incredibly pervasive images is a desensitisation towards maimed possum carcasses and possum abuse in general. Because these images appear so frequently alongside possum sport articles, the idea of seeing a pile of dead possums is nothing new for readers, and thus perpetuates the idea of ‘suffering as entertainment’ (Jasper 80) and also the objectification of possums themselves. This refusal to acknowledge the living possum (and therefore his or her right to life) is an ongoing theme in these images, seen in the way possums are only represented as fragmented bodies and en masse as carcasses. In this way, we are not invited to question whether this gratuitous killing is morally right, only to participate in the ‘enjoyment’ of the sport of possum killing.

### Enemy Versus Victim

In addition to situating possums and possum control within warfare dialogue and belittling acts of possum-killing, the print media also constructs an image of beautiful and ‘unique’ native species who are in need of protection, thus setting up an opposition to the possum ‘enemy.’ This enemy-versus-victim dichotomy is an extremely common frame utilised throughout all news articles. To illustrate this theme we will focus on discussing the general markers used to establish the contrast, and draw on the case of the kiwi named ‘Darkstar’ as a brief example.

Inclusion of words such as ‘devouring’ and ‘destruction’ in reference to possums’ feeding habits, and constant labelling of them as ‘invaders’ combine to construct this overwhelming notion of the enemy threat. Here, we can see the ‘foreign threat narrative’ in action whereby ‘the possum is positioned as an aggressive trespasser contaminating the very backbone of the New Zealand economy’ (Potts 4). Arluke and Sanders’ concept of the sociozoological scale (169-186) can be used to understand this notion of the possum as a destructive trespasser. The sociozoological scale is the idea of a vertical social order, a ranking of animals (with humans at the top) not only on biological grounds, but on moral and social ones as



well. We see this concept in operation here, where a scale of value is created within the media's representation of possums. This scale places possums at the lowest point on the 'ladder', with native birds and humans above them. Since possums cross human-drawn boundaries, and threaten to contaminate the environment, they land at the bottom of the scale (Arluke and Sanders 180-181).

The news media frequently portrays possums as deliberately causing destruction, and consistently adopt a xenophobic tone in relation to any mention of possums. In this way, possums are characterised as straying outside of the bounds of their assigned place, as Potts notes 'It is as if the possum is inherently and deliberately evil, hell-bent on damaging the land and destroying its indigenous animals' (7). Representing possums as criminal actors, or 'bad animals' (Arluke and Sanders 170) works to justify the mistreatment of possums. Inextricably linked with these highly negative representations is the actual culling of large numbers of possums, sanctioned and carried out by the government. Labelling possums as deliberately destructive serves not only to legitimise the mass killing of them, but makes the idea of 'population control' more palatable: 'Since these creatures are perceived as both symbolic and real threats to social order, they may be killed' (Arluke and Sanders 170).

The primary figurehead for the 'victims' is kiwis; these birds are held up as the epitome of innocence and embody the nation's identity (Barker 7), thus becoming the ideal symbol to contrast with the possum 'enemy'. Articles detailing heroic instances of saving kiwis from danger, and warnings to keep an eye out for kiwis are commonplace in news media, and draw on emotion to sustain the 'victims' theme. The public are constantly encouraged to protect kiwis by [news media in continuous articles with titles with] calls to action such as 'Watch Out for Kiwis, Drivers Urged' and 'Warning: Kiwis Crossing at This Time of Year.'

Here we see the recurring discourse that kiwis should be protected on the roads, and when one is hit by a motorist it is a catastrophe and a tragic accident, whereas hitting a possum with your car is encouraged and commended. One article encapsulates this mentality succinctly, in describing the recovery of the kiwi named Darkstar; 'Mr Brown said drivers could run over a kiwi thinking it was a possum, so it paid to check' (Irvine). As mentioned earlier, New Zealanders' national identity is intrinsically linked with the living kiwi birds (Barker 7), and therefore any incident where kiwis are harmed is coloured in an anthropomorphic manner,

whereby the humans are just as much victims: after all, it is 'kiwi' identity that is being threatened.

## Darkstar

To examine this further we turn to the story of Darkstar, a kiwi who became famous when national media chose to profile her exploits in detail over a series of months during 2010. A succession of unfortunate events made this bird's story all the more interesting to the public, and the media encouraged this fervour by featuring her in numerous local and national papers. Having been bred in captivity at Auckland Zoo, Darkstar was ceremoniously released into a sanctuary, and then released again into the wild. Following her release, she was hit by a car and was treated for her injuries back at the Zoo. After recovering from her car accident, Darkstar died from drowning inside a storm drain a month later.

Gouabault et al. describe this phenomenon of animal celebrities in their analysis of personified animal figures in news media (77-78). Their research is of interest in the case of Darkstar, who fulfils the criteria of a 'shown animal', contrasted directly with the sinister possum, an 'undesirable animal' (Gouabault et al. 80). The fact that Darkstar is given a name and her actions become the focal point of all articles is evidence of anthropomorphism used to engender sympathy towards her, and thus to align the reader's emotions on the side of all kiwis (that is, both the birds and the New Zealand people). Gouabault et al. state that 'the placement of individual figures at the center of media representations increases the potential for emotional connection and proximity' (78).

The high visibility and individuality assigned to Darkstar within news articles emphasises the kiwi position at the top of the sociozoological scale, and creates an accessible victim for New Zealanders to relate to. In contrast to this, possums are very rarely individualised or given personal names or qualities, but rather are commonly referred to as a collective entity within articles. This treatment is similar to how Gouabault posits that livestock are represented in the media: 'Animals intended to be eaten... were either not named, in order to avoid an inopportune attachment, or were given standardized names that transformed them into objects that could then be morally slaughtered' (79).

We would argue that allowing birds such as Darkstar to possess human qualities and to occupy the role of the star in news articles creates a strong juxtaposition between the presentation of kiwis as victim and possums as enemy. We see this in the way Darkstar is referred to using personal pronouns and is given a unique personality; one article opens with ‘Darkstar, the laid-back kiwi, is on the road to recovery...’ (Irvine), while another refers to her as ‘the plucky bird’ (‘Bright Future’).

Furthermore, Darkstar was often depicted in the arms of humans, and cradled like a human infant. This imagery directly contributes to the framing of Darkstar, and all kiwis, as vulnerable victims in need of human protection. The image below is a typical example of this framing, in that Darkstar is held up as the symbol of goodness, while at the same time the human man is depicted as the strong defender of the symbol.



Image 5: *Northern Advocate* Photo: Northern Advocate

Victim stories about kiwi birds commonly include these types of images, which again are a direct contrast to the images of large piles of dead possums mentioned above. Darkstar therefore became another symbol of the kiwi conservation cause (and thus the anti-possum cause), just as

Knut the polar bear<sup>2</sup> became a mediatized icon for environmental causes (Gouabault et al. 87-89). Darkstar's fame and media attention strongly exemplifies and contributes to the discourse of the good animal, and the tendency to celebrate and protect native animals.

Possums on the other hand, become aligned with the Other, and repeated language techniques are employed to sustain this discourse. For example, one article refers to possums as 'furry invaders' (Carey), while another labels them as 'furry pests' (Paulin). In this regard, the narrative of the invader is established, and further illustrates the low position on the ladder occupied by possums; 'Bad animals are mostly considered as a species; furthermore, their foreign origin...encourages the description of danger as coming from outside.' (Gouabault et al. 92)

The overt mourning of kiwi deaths in print media is a stark contrast to the constant demonization of possums, and the celebration and encouragement of possum deaths. It highlights the deeply ingrained paradoxical attitudes of the New Zealand public towards different species, and also works to sustain the cycle of negativity when it comes to representing possums (as well as other so-called 'pests' such as stoats and feral cats).

Although native birds like Darkstar are afforded the label of 'good animals' on the sociozoological scale, and thus are represented positively, their high position on the scale is still only determined by the use they provide humans, and therefore native birds are also misrepresented within this dialogue. They serve as mere placeholders for innocent victims, who are portrayed as being tormented by evil possums, and they are only regarded highly for the value they provide to the human sense of national identity.

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<sup>2</sup> Knut was a polar bear was born in captivity at the Berlin Zoological Garden and raised by zoo-keepers. He became a mass media phenomenon all over the world, spawned toys, media specials, DVDs, and books, and was behind the fact that the Berlin Zoo had its most profitable year ever in 2007. He died at just four years old after drowning in his enclosure (Moore; Boyes).

## Conclusion

Representations and images of animals affect our attitudes, behaviours, ecological sensibilities, and cultural values and practices. When possums are framed in New Zealand print media they are disempowered, their social and cultural sphere of appearance is delimited. Arguably, by avoiding any moral debate over the killing of possums, the print media in New Zealand is not adequately serving its social responsibility function as a diverse public forum that represents the interests of all groups, including those who advocate for possums.

The print media in New Zealand partakes in a ‘modern propaganda campaign’ as Altheide and Grimes suggest (617), which serves to reinforce the demonization of possums, and marginalise them further. Structuring content in the form of War Programming works to justify mass possum killing as part of the bigger picture of control and national protection. Excluding any context for this ‘war’ against possums and focusing on the technologies and war weaponry places emphasis on the mechanisms of warfare, while the possum as a living being is obscured.

The framing of possum killing competitions as sport and spectacle encourages the entertainment factor of killing and trivializes possums’ lives and deaths. It creates a narrative which makes the activity of participating in possum killing events seem enticing, enjoyable and culturally valuable.

In addition to these themes, an opposition of ‘good animal’ versus ‘bad animal’ is established within news media discourses to further marginalise possums, and construct a human champion in the fight against them. The tactics utilised in these themes in news articles are so pervasive that to challenge the dominant themes becomes extremely difficult (Glenn 76). Even though so much space is dedicated to possum-related news articles, the possums’ perspective is always excluded from any debate. Their point of view is never considered; rather possums are prevented from living at all – both literally in the environment and within print discourse (and certainly in any positive representations or imagery).

Potts describes this phenomenon of targeting possums as a ‘sustained and vigorous campaign’ (1), and the print media in Aotearoa is quite clearly a major player in this crusade. This is a rich area for research, and there are many more topics to be explored and examined. As mentioned, the idea of the human hero or patriotic protector would benefit from an extended

analysis, particularly of how ‘performances’ of masculinity intersect with displays of possum culling. Examination of the ways in which other animals labelled as ‘pests’ in New Zealand (such as stoats, wallabies, hedgehogs) are represented in news media would also provide a clearer picture of the extent to which possums are scapegoated.

It would certainly be of interest to also critically analyse how possum culling is enmeshed in the animal economy, particularly in terms of the overlapping interests of the state and primary industries. This research could be extended to examine these other influential actors in the anti-possum campaign, looking at how they may influence the way possums are represented in discourse, and how this intersects with cultural attitudes.

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