

Research Paper

A qualitative and quantitative analysis of the New Zealand media portrayal of Down syndrome

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Abstract

Background: There are only a small number of studies that systematically explore the tensions between the global shift to universal screening and the media representations of the people with Down syndrome. This paper contributes to the literature by analyzing the New Zealand media coverage of this topic.

Objective: To describe the content and quality of selected New Zealand media references to Down syndrome in light of the claim by New Zealand support group Saving Downs of state supported eugenics via universal screening.

Methods: Quantitative content analysis was conducted of 140 relevant New Zealand articles (from 2001 to 2011) and qualitative critical discourse analysis of 18 relevant articles (from 2009 to 2011) selected from television, magazine and newspaper.

Results: The content analysis showed no strong directional reporting although the quality of life for people with Down syndrome was represented as slightly negative. Most articles focused on issues of society, government and care rather than genetics. The qualitative analysis identified themes around quality of life, information and bias, preparedness, eugenics, the visualness of disability and the need for public debate around genetic screening and testing.

Conclusion: The New Zealand print media coverage of these issues has been relatively balanced. Recent mixed media coverage of the topic is critical, complex and socially inclusive of people with Down syndrome. © 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Media; Reporting trends; Down syndrome; Screening

As prenatal genetic testing for Down syndrome is routinized worldwide,¹ localized studies are emerging which explore the resulting changing meanings of disability, care, and choice.² Implicated in these changes is the mass media coverage of the experience of living with Down syndrome,^{3–5} which demonstrates some national variety in the portrayal of life with Down syndrome and intellectual disabilities. For example in Taiwan during 2008 intellectual disability was portrayed pessimistically,⁶ while in Iceland 2000–2005 as affected families pondered the eugenics potential of screening for Down syndrome the media demonstrated little critical debate on the issue,^{7,8} serving instead

to ‘amplify’ the technological advance of genetic screening. The Australian print media in 1993 demonstrated questionable language around people with developmental disability while noting overall improvements in the representations of living with disability.³ In contrast, a comparison between Canada and Israel during 1998 showed developmental disability as the least positively portrayed disability in both countries (behind both physical and psychiatric disability) with language being slightly more positive in the Canadian papers.⁴ A UK comparative study of the representation of people with intellectual disabilities from 1983 to 2001 noted that while there appeared to be a change toward increasing differentiation of the population of people with intellectual disability, people with Down syndrome were still overly represented through reference to children.⁵

Our New Zealand study contributes to this literature and is timely given the establishment in 2010 of the local activist group – Saving Downs – who have made adroit use of social networking and mainstream media as parents and friends of children with Down syndrome to appeal to the International Criminal Court⁹ over the alleged eugenics

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removal of people with Down syndrome from New Zealand society via ‘state sanctioned abortions’ following the introduction of universal screening for developmental anomalies in first trimester. Lord¹⁰ discusses their claim appreciatively via a detailed focus on New Zealand government policy for screening and termination and the notion of citizen’s rights. Shakespeare¹¹ however has argued that such a discourse restricts rather than encourages rational debate on the impact of testing — a finding echoed by some New Zealand scholars¹² albeit contested.¹³ Our research group takes the allegation of eugenics by the Saving Downs group seriously, prompting our study of the local media for empirical evidence of discursive references to eugenics in the discussion of Down syndrome, for, in addition to being a potent source of information about life with Down syndrome, the media is also a conduit for discussing government policy and a stimulus to ethical reflection.^{6,14}

Our research questions were: (1) what is the information type and tone of the New Zealand print media coverage on the topic ‘Down syndrome’ and (2) what themes and language typify the mixed media (television, magazine and newspaper) coverage on this topic 2009–2011 (a time frame that includes the emergence of the group Saving Downs).

Like Bryant et al.,¹⁵ we used a mixed methods approach, drawing on the methodological tradition of Critical Discourse Analysis¹⁶ which is one of several possible discourse traditions¹⁷ and is derived from the philosophical legacy of Kant, Marx and The Frankfurt School.¹⁸ Phase One, the content analysis, provided an overview of the tone and the type of articles which included a reference to Down syndrome, and the tone and frequency with which the term appeared in conjunction with key terms in the debates around genetic testing i.e. ‘genetic testing,’ ‘care,’ ‘choice,’ ‘abortion’ and ‘quality of life.’ Phase Two, the discourse analysis, drew on a wider array of mixed media including television, magazines and print. The discourse analysis was designed to uncover the more nuanced messages around the topics identified in phase one, drawing on complex media texts of high public visibility. Together, both phases provide empirical data from which to identify the specific socially contextualized discourses around Down syndrome present in New Zealand media which influence public interaction with the controversial screening program. From this basis, the Saving Downs group claims of the New Zealand presence of a eugenics discourse (at least within the public media) can be assessed. It is worth noting, however that other alternative and informal media forms are used in New Zealand, which may effect perceptions of Down syndrome but were not considered in this current research.

Methods

Phase One: A quantitative content analysis was conducted of 140 print articles from the *New Zealand Herald* newspaper which related to Down syndrome. This newspaper has a circulation of 817,000 copies per day¹⁹ in Auckland,

a city with a multi-ethnic population of 1.5 million people²⁰ representing approximately 35% of New Zealand’s population. Articles were sourced from the Factiva database²¹ using a keyword search with the terms ‘Down syndrome/Downs syndrome/Down’s syndrome,’ across material from 2001 to 2011. A template of 18 questions was created to systematically identify key properties of these reported articles as illustrated in Table 1. The articles were then independently coded by the first, second and fourth authors, with consistent agreement on the interpretation of categories emerging after the first 30 articles had been coded and discussed. All articles were crosschecked for consistency in coding by first and second authors. Calculated trends in the media content are reported as percentages and calculated by first and third authors with key examples set out in Table 2.

Phase Two: A qualitative critical discourse analysis of 18 mixed media (i.e. television, radio, magazine and newspaper) texts was conducted. These were purposefully selected based on their high relevance to Down syndrome, genetic testing, their high public prominence during 2009–2011, and their complexity as texts. The number selected for analysis reflected the amount of researcher time available to make two independent readings of the selected material within the time frame allotted to the project (which was 10 weeks). In order to identify the “historically specific, socially situated, signifying practices” around the topic⁸ the texts were analyzed in relation to language, tone and discourse to determine their particular discursive practices around Down syndrome, with a focus on the same areas of interest as were addressed in the (Phase One) media content analysis. The technique involved detailed multiple readings of each text, taking note of key words, type of language (e.g. emotive, legal, medical), focus and scope of content, tone (e.g. positive, slightly positive, neutral, slightly negative, negative etc.), main characters, narrative arch, use of images, and the structuring and oppositional positioning of arguments within the text. Initial readings were conducted by the first author and presented as text that was then independently validated by the second author. Using this information, the two streams of data were then synthesized to explore discursively the social meanings of Down syndrome and genetic testing in contemporary New Zealand media culture paying attention to areas of reinforcement and contrast between the emergent themes identified in the richer mixed media texts and the substance and tone of the key topics from the content analysis.

As this study utilized public information, ethics approval was not required.

Results

Phase One: The 140 print news articles were composed of standard news stories (53.6%), feature stories (23.6%), letters (8.6%), column content (5%), and opinion pieces (including letters) (2.9%) with the remaining 6.4% comprised of other

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