

Putting the microscope on Pacific workers' scheme media coverage

June 30 2020



Kiwifruit orchard, the North Island, New Zealand. Credit: [James Shook](#), licensed under [CC BY 2.5](#)

A study of the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme has raised questions of how Pacific workers are portrayed in New Zealand regional

media.

Dr. Angie Enoka's Ph.D. in Media Studies examined media coverage of the New Zealand government's RSE scheme, a policy which allows the horticulture and viticulture industries to recruit workers from overseas for seasonal work.

The RSE scheme began in 2007 with a cap of 5,000 workers from five eligible Pacific nations, and despite fluctuations in local unemployment, has grown every year since. Today, that annual number has almost tripled to a current cap of 14,400 workers from nine Pacific nations.

Dr. Enoka studied newspaper coverage of the scheme during its first five years while Pacific RSE workers were living in regional communities. "To me, the importance of understanding the first five years of the scheme is crucial as it was a time when the discourse was established into particular patterns around the scheme."

"I wanted to identify the media themes in the communities where the workers were living: what was being said and who was getting a say. This gives an insight into the ideas and voices circulating in the places the workers call home while they are here.

"I also feel that our Pacific communities in New Zealand have always been under the research microscope. The same could be said about Pacific workers in the RSE scheme, so I decided to look into the media portrayal of it and put the media under the microscope to assess their analysis and depiction of our Pacific people," Dr. Enoka says.

Her research included a review of the depiction of Pacific people in New Zealand media dating back to their arrival in NZ in the 1950s and 1960s. She also looked at how Pacific people were racialised in the early 1970s and compared that to media coverage of the influx of Pacific

seasonal workers in 2007.

"I found that the portrayal of the RSE workers from 2007 uncovered a more affirmative portrayal and carried fewer stigmatising discourses in comparison to the historical depictions of Pacific peoples by the NZ media. The labelling of Pacific immigrants as a racial and economic threat by the media was completely different in the RSE period to how it had been in, say, the infamous Dawn Raids period in the 1970s."

Her biggest finding was that the share of voice is imbalanced. "There was a big absence of the RSE workers' voice in most news coverage unless journalists made strenuous efforts to include them. Most articles I sampled cited representatives of the horticulture and viticulture industries, who were predominantly European, followed by government officials, city council representatives and politicians. The least quoted sources were the Pacific RSE workers themselves," Dr. Enoka says.

Watching the watchdog

Dr. Enoka's doctoral investigation raised questions about how well the media were performing their "watchdog" role in scrutinising the scheme. "It was interesting for me to unravel aspects of the RSE scheme being selected by the media for coverage, how they reported on it, and to build a more thorough picture of the kinds of representations RSE Pacific workers were facing in NZ regional communities."

"The media did not ask the right questions so the public didn't get a full picture. We were not privy to workers' views on the work and conditions and the extent to which they gained skills that they took home with them. We don't know local unemployed communities' views on why they wouldn't accept the work and conditions at offered pay rate because they were never asked.

Issues the media could have covered when reporting on the RSE scheme include the underlying causes of why domestic workers were unwilling to work despite growing unemployment, and policy issues related to international labour migration from temporary to permanent, according to Dr. Enoka.

"There are also unanswered questions around human rights protection, access to union membership and representation, access to rights under employment laws that apply to New Zealand citizens and permanent residents, access to training, apprenticeships or education, social and cultural integration, and the rights of temporary workers to become high skilled, permanent citizens. I feel these are the sorts of questions that the media should have and still be asking."

Dr. Enoka hopes her research will have implications for the media profession. "I hope this encourages the media to think critically about the implications of their institutionalised practices, and the extent to which they repeat government agency policies without scrutiny. This would enable them to consider the implications of these representations for Pacific communities and their sense of self and their place in New Zealand."

Born in Samoa and now a resident of Wairarapa, Dr. Enoka is hopeful her research can contribute towards better portrayals of Pacific people in the media. "As a daughter of my community I think it's important to understand why there is a bias in the mainstream media when it comes to Pacific Island people. It is important to understand these discourses, as they impact upon our communities and our relationships with a range of Pacific groups, such as seasonal workers."

Her research is the first doctoral study to look at media coverage of the RSE scheme and one of the few Pasifika-researcher-led studies on any aspect of the scheme. "I believe my findings will contribute to an under-

researched area, filling a gap in our knowledge of media, perception, identity and representation, to illuminate for the first time how Pacific Island seasonal workers are depicted in the New Zealand [media](#)."

More information: Under the gaze : a study of the portrayal by the New Zealand print media of Pacific Island workers in the Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme, 2007-2012.

hdl.handle.net/10179/15358

Provided by Massey University

Citation: Putting the microscope on Pacific workers' scheme media coverage (2020, June 30) retrieved 3 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-06-microscope-pacific-workers-scheme-media.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.