

# Coverage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition in the *Koori Mail*

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First Nations peoples across the world experience unacceptable health and social inequalities.<sup>1</sup> Like other high-income, colonised countries, Australia's First Peoples, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, face inequities in many health indicators including life expectancy. It is estimated that a life expectancy gap of ten years exists between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians.<sup>2</sup> These health disparities exist as a result of historical and ongoing colonisation, racism, deficient government policies and inequitable access to the social determinants of health.<sup>3,4</sup>

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, health is conceptualised as "not just the physical wellbeing of an individual but [...] the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole Community".<sup>5(pX)</sup> Food and nutrition play an important role in this holistic view of wellbeing, cultural identity and the prevention of the chronic conditions.<sup>2,6,7</sup> Before colonisation, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples maintained food practices and traditional agricultural methods that provided a nutritious and environmentally sustainable diet and involved high levels of physical activity.<sup>4,8,9</sup>

Since Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make up only around three per cent of the Australian population,<sup>2</sup> many Australians have little or no exposure to the issues that their communities face beyond what they see in the mainstream media.<sup>10</sup> However, there is growing evidence suggesting that mainstream media often

## Abstract

**Objective:** To examine the extent and nature of coverage of nutrition in the *Koori Mail*.

**Methods:** Content and framing analysis were used to examine articles in the *Koori Mail* published between 2013 and 2017 that included the terms 'nutrition\*', 'diet\*', 'food', 'eating', 'weight', 'tucker' or 'sugary drinks'. The analysis focused on the portrayal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people/communities, inclusion of First Peoples' voices and the framing of nutrition issues.

**Results:** A total of 102 articles were included. Most articles (88%, n=90) portrayed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in a neutral or positive way and more than half (53%, n=54) included an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander voice. While nutrition was often framed as an individual or community responsibility, articles predominantly promoted programs or initiatives undertaken in local communities.

**Conclusion:** Despite the limited prominence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition in the mainstream media, the coverage of nutrition issues in the *Koori Mail* demonstrates the salience of this topic for local communities. This study highlights how journalism can better reflect the diversity and strengths of First Peoples.

**Implications for public health:** Including more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and using a strengths-based approach in press releases may improve media advocacy.

**Key words:** media analysis, Aboriginal community media, First Peoples' nutrition

portray Aboriginal issues in a negative and sensationalist way, which has helped to perpetuate racist stereotypes among non-Indigenous people.<sup>11-15</sup> Such racism impacts health and wellbeing through different pathways such as psychosocial stress, low self-esteem and depression.<sup>14,16</sup>

Previous studies have identified that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health issues are often framed by the mainstream media in a negative light and as 'problems' requiring individual responsibility and/or radical policy action.<sup>14,15,17-19</sup> This framing contributes to deficits discourse, racial stereotypes and ongoing colonisation.<sup>20</sup>

Deficit discourse is language that constructs people with a narrative of negativity, deficiency and failure.<sup>21</sup> It is both a product and reinforcement of the marginalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' voices, perspectives and world views.<sup>22</sup> The reproduction of deficit discourses in the media have contributed to shaping health policy that, in turn, has influenced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' health outcomes.<sup>22</sup>

Stories about nutrition and diet frequently appear in the mainstream media and previous research has suggested that these are often framed in terms of individual

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'lifestyle'.<sup>23-25</sup> Browne et al.<sup>15</sup> explored the extent and nature of coverage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition issues in mainstream media over 20 years and concluded that reporting of nutrition issues in major Australian newspapers was intermittent and predominantly negative, and the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices was limited. This study identified six themes linking newspaper reporting and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health policy: highlighting problems, reporting government announcements, promoting programs, advocating solutions, critiquing government and defending policy. The majority of the articles in this study highlighted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition 'problems'.<sup>15</sup>

The media can be used as an avenue to communicate current issues in society and to distribute opinions and perspectives.<sup>26</sup> However, the discourse deployed in the mainstream media is dominated by those in positions of power, such as political leaders, government bureaucrats or media commentators, who articulate and promote particular values and policy positions.<sup>14,27</sup> Alternative media have emerged as a way to counterbalance the power of the mainstream media by elevating minority voices, challenging widely held beliefs and providing perspectives on issues that do not receive mainstream coverage.<sup>10</sup> Alternative media privilege voices that are commonly marginalised and create a space for discussion of specific community interests.<sup>28</sup> Since Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are a minority and marginalised group within Australian society, alternative media sources provide an important platform through which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities and voices are sustained.<sup>10</sup>

These media outlets play a key role in giving voice to urban, rural or remote communities and countering mainstream misrepresentations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.<sup>10,29-31</sup> Despite this, policy debates and media research often focus on the mainstream media.<sup>27,30</sup> The limited analysis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media sources leaves important knowledge gaps for how media advocacy may be used to change health policy.<sup>32</sup>

This article presents an analysis of the extent and nature of coverage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition in the *Koori Mail* over the five-year period 2013–2017. The *Koori Mail* is an independently owned

Aboriginal newspaper that has been produced since 1991,<sup>33</sup> with more than 100,000 readers across Australia in 2018.<sup>34</sup> The *Koori Mail* targets both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous audiences and promotes itself as "The Voice of Indigenous Australia".<sup>33-35</sup>

## Methods

In conducting this analysis, we drew on the theories and principles of constructionism<sup>36</sup> and Durie's concept of research at the interface of Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems.<sup>37</sup> Constructionism posits that knowledge and meaning are constructed by socio-structural processes, particularly language, which in turn shapes actions and power relations.<sup>38</sup> Research at the interface' aims to harness both Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems to produce new understandings based on the principles of mutual respect, shared benefits, human dignity and discovery.<sup>37</sup> As a team of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous researchers, we applied these approaches in a collaborative process of document analysis and interpretation.

In line with previous studies analysing media representations through content and/or framing analysis,<sup>14,15,19</sup> a combination of content and framing analysis was used to examine the extent and nature of the coverage of nutrition issues, the portrayal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples/communities and inclusion of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander voices. The *Koori Mail* was chosen for analysis due to its status as a community newspaper that specifically covers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues.<sup>34,35</sup> As this publication is not included in media databases, such as *Factiva*, we manually searched digital issues of the *Koori Mail* from the collection available on the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies website. Articles published between 1 January 2013 and 31 December 2017 containing at least one of the keywords 'nutrition\*', 'diet\*', 'food', 'eating', 'weight', 'tucker', or 'sugary drinks' in any part of the article and any section of the newspaper were retrieved. The keywords were entered separately in each issue's word search function to identify potentially relevant articles.

To be included in the analysis, articles had to meet the following criteria:

- Focused on Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians; and
- Dealt substantially with food or nutrition-related health issues, either as the central topic of the story or as part of an Aboriginal holistic approach to health.

Figure 1 outlines the sampling process. Included articles were analysed using a combination of content analysis<sup>39,40</sup> and framing analysis.<sup>41,42</sup> Both techniques are useful for evaluating print materials and are frequently used to examine mass media in media analysis studies.<sup>15,19,35,43</sup>

## Content analysis

Content analysis is a method that focusses on examining a text in a systematic way.<sup>39,40</sup> Our analysis was undertaken using a data extraction tool from the study by Browne et al.<sup>15</sup> Definitions of each category for analysis were developed to maximise reliability in the coding process.<sup>44</sup> The coding template included: i) article description categories: date, author, title, first paragraph, geographical focus and area; and ii) interpretative data retrieval categories: nutrition issues covered, representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, problem representation, framing of nutrition issues, most prominent voice, and whether or not Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander voices were included in the article. This coding template was applied to all articles in order to categorise them for further analysis. The coding template evolved throughout the data analysis process as emerging frames were added, definitions were revised and examples were added from the retrieved articles.

## Framing analysis

Frames can be defined as "organising principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world."<sup>45(p150)</sup> Framing analysis helps to evaluate the discourse used in texts, providing new insights and a better understanding of a particular event.<sup>42,46</sup> Our analysis was carried out deductively using the frames identified in a previous media analysis.<sup>15</sup> Browne et al.<sup>15</sup> derived frames inductively from the examination of the language, rhetorical devices, and implied meanings, values and beliefs deployed by mainstream newspaper articles. Throughout our analysis, the main focus was on the language, ideas and context used to frame the nutrition-related issues or representations.

Data extraction and coding were undertaken by two researchers independently (CV and JB) to enhance validity.<sup>47</sup> In line with the research at the interface approach, two Aboriginal co-investigators (TH and EM) reviewed the extracted data and led the coding of articles with respect to the representation of First Peoples, whether the article reflected a holistic view of health, the inclusion of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander voices, and the most prominent voice in the articles. Differences in interpretation were discussed with all team members, including senior researchers (DG and HV), until shared understanding was reached.

## Results

Over the five-year period under investigation, the *Koori Mail* published 125 issues (one every fortnight). Four issues were not available for review (2014, n=1; 2016, n=2; 2017, n=1), thus a total of 121 (97%) publications in the sampling frame were retrieved. A total of 102 articles met the inclusion criteria and were included for analysis. The number of articles reporting nutrition-related issues between 2013 and 2017 varied over the years, with 2013 responsible for the highest number of articles (25%, n=25) and 2017 being the year with the lowest number (13%, n=13). Despite two publications not being available for review in 2016, this year had the second-highest number of articles (24%, n=24). The articles featured stories from different states and territories. Each jurisdiction accounted for at least one article; however, the majority of stories originated from rural and remote communities in Queensland (27%, n=28), New South Wales (20%, n=20) and the Northern Territory (13%, n=13).

### Portrayal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities

Just under half of the articles (48%, n=49) portrayed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities in a positive light. These articles included 'success stories' about improvements in the health and nutrition of community members. Forty-one articles (40%) portrayed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in a neutral way. Often these articles focused on programs or initiatives rather than describing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals or communities. Twelve stories (12%) cast Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in a negative

light. These included articles that suggested that individuals are to blame for their health problems, such as stories focusing on gaps and deficits in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, or problems within communities. An example of this was the headline "Nutrition fears for children" (*Koori Mail*, 29/11/2017), which was used in an alarming way to report the food intake of remote Aboriginal communities across northern Australia. The most prominent voice in this article acknowledged the limited affordability of fresh food but repeatedly pointed out the "poor diet choices" made by Aboriginal people and the responsibility of parents for determining children's diets.

### Prominence and representation of nutrition in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' health stories

Sixty-two per cent (n=63) of articles positioned nutrition, food or diet as the central topic of the story. The remaining 39 articles (38%) included nutrition, food or diet more broadly among other topics or as part of a story about healthy living. Forty-two articles (41%) discussed nutrition in a manner that is consistent with the holistic concept of wellbeing,<sup>5</sup> alongside other physical, social and cultural aspects of health; for example, "Bush tucker popular at busy Heritage Day"

(*Koori Mail*, 19/06/2013). More than half of the stories did not represent a holistic view of health (59%, n=60); these stories discussed nutrition or diet as a stand-alone issue or within the biomedical paradigm.

### Nutrition issues covered

A range of nutrition issues was covered (Figure 2). The largest number of stories were related to overweight, obesity and chronic disease (28%, n=29) and healthy habits (28%, n=29), particularly stories related to nutrition and diet as part of a healthy lifestyle. Just under one-quarter (23%, n=23) of the stories were about food supply or food security, sixteen of which reported strategies and programs to increase access to healthy foods. Ten articles (10%) focused on cultural aspects of health, where the stories shared local knowledge regarding food and nutrition; for example, "Aboriginal knowledge in a book" (*Koori Mail*, 27/02/2013). Few articles covered maternal and child nutrition (9%, n=9); of these, seven were written from a biomedical perspective. Two articles (2%) not did not clearly focus on a particular nutrition topic.

### Framing of articles

Articles were coded according to the way nutrition issues were framed. The largest

Figure 1: Sampling flow chart.



number of articles (38%, n=39) framed nutrition as a lifestyle choice or a personal behaviour that could be modified to reduce the risk of chronic disease. These stories placed the responsibility of improving nutrition or changing to a “healthy lifestyle” on the individual, for example: “Natalie rises to the challenge” (*Koori Mail*, 16/01/2013). Half of these articles (n=19), however, covered the story from a strengths-based approach, using positive and encouraging language and celebrating community members’ achievements.

Articles that focused on improving nutrition through creating healthy food environments in community settings comprised the second largest category (23%, n=23). This frame commonly included initiatives controlled by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander individuals and organisations that aimed to improve nutrition in local communities. These stories reflected self-determination and promoted the recovery and inclusion of traditional foods. Three articles (3%) highlighted culture as a way to include traditional foods and cultural knowledge as part of healthy diets.

Nineteen stories (19%) framed nutrition issues as being due to social or structural inequalities. These articles discussed a wide range of nutrition topics such as food supply and food insecurity in remote communities,

or maternal and child nutrition. Some stories focused on the social injustice related to inequalities in nutrition-related health issues experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and called for policy change to address these inequities. Other articles adopted an ‘expert’ opinion frame on social inequities by using authoritative quotations from health professionals or researchers. Just three articles framed social or structural inequality as being the result of government failure.

Framing of issues in terms of skill development was also common. Twelve articles (12%) reported individuals gaining skills through direct specialised or vocational training. These stories were reported from three different perspectives: i) an ‘expert’ providing an opinion about the importance of learning practical skills; for example, “Dietitians weigh in” (*Koori Mail*, 26/02/2014); ii) programs that involved specialised training; for example, “Challenger students plant seeds for bright future” (*Koori Mail*, 16/01/2013); and iii) individual responsibility regarding becoming educated to make healthier choices; for example, “Cape students are making good choices” (*Koori Mail*, 8/04/2015).

Four articles (4%) positioned an external person such as a celebrity, sports star or health professional as being a ‘hero’ by

promoting health in the community. This ‘hero’ was identified across different stories and was considered a role model; for example, the Aboriginal chef Mark Olive training students on bush tucker cuisine (“Learning the menu”, *Koori Mail*, 10/10/2014).

The aforementioned frames helped to identify the representation of ‘problems’ related to nutrition. The problems represented were related to poor diet (38%, n=39), overweight, obesity, chronic disease (25%, n=25), food supply/security (24%, n=24%), malnutrition (4%, n=4) and other (10%, n=10). The ‘other’ category contained seven stories framed as cultural aspects of health. These articles were not problematising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, instead they were celebrating culture.

### Prominent voices

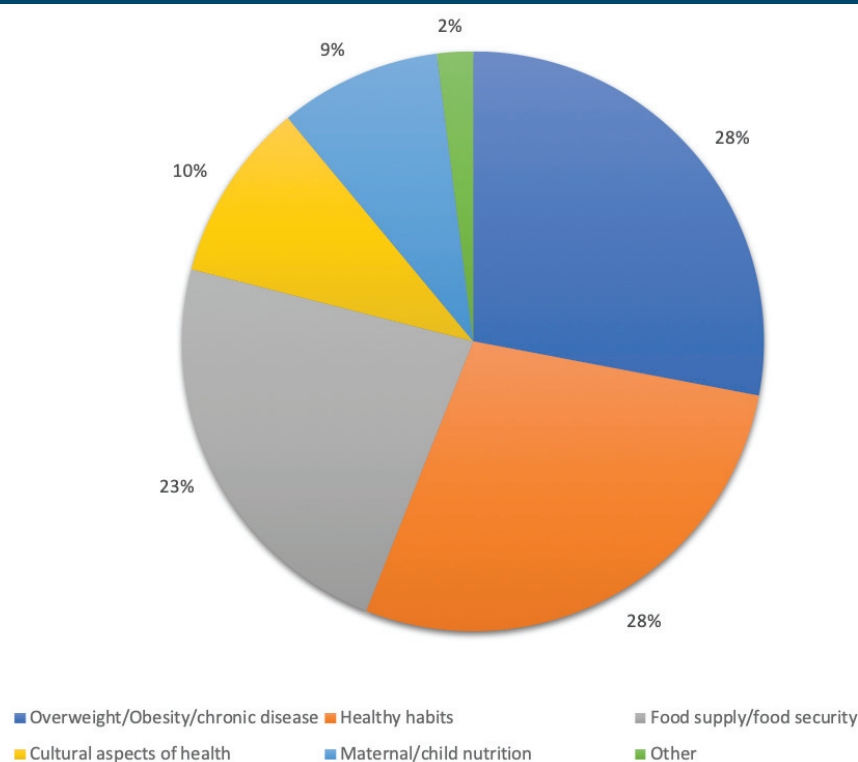
A wide range of voices were represented in the articles. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices were included in more than half (53%, n=54), both through quotations in the articles and opinion pieces written by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. Forty-five articles (44%) did not include an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander voice and in three articles (3%) it was not clear. Over the five-year period, the proportion of non-Indigenous voices increased (i.e. academics, researchers or health professionals), while at the same time Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices steadily decreased (i.e. community members, Aboriginal organisations or public figures). This change was more evident from 2015 to 2017 (Figure 3).

### Discussion

This research presents the first systematic analysis of the reporting of nutrition-related issues in an Australian Aboriginal community print media source. The five-year timeframe (2013–2017) ensured a sufficiently large but manageable sample to analyse the extent and nature of coverage of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander nutrition in the *Koori Mail*.

According to Rigney,<sup>48</sup> the way First Nations Peoples think about and interpret the world and daily realities varies from that of non-Indigenous people due to their different experiences, histories, cultures and values. The *Koori Mail* is an independently owned Aboriginal newspaper, in which diverse correspondents collaborate to produce content in line with the philosophy of

Figure 2: Distribution of articles according to the nutrition issues covered (n=102).



the publication and with the interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in mind.<sup>33</sup>

While Aboriginal community media provide opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to gain a voice, mainstream media play a crucial role in amplifying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interests and voices to non-Indigenous Australians and policy-makers.<sup>27,49</sup> According to agenda-setting theory, the mass media has the ability to elevate issues on the policy agenda by reporting them more frequently and prominently than others, thereby making them appear more important.<sup>50</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition receives limited coverage in mainstream media<sup>15,18,19</sup> and little attention on the national policy agenda<sup>51</sup>; however, the *Koori Mail* published an average of one nutrition-related article per issue. This demonstrates the relevance of nutrition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, yet this focus may not filter through to key spheres of influence that enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in policy-making processes.<sup>27,49</sup>

There is a difference in the way mainstream and Aboriginal community media report nutrition stories.<sup>35</sup> While print media often rely on biomedical framing to report disease and ill-health,<sup>52</sup> health is a more holistic concept for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.<sup>5</sup> The *Koori Mail* frequently drew on the biomedical paradigm to report nutrition or diet; however, it often positioned nutrition, food or diet as part of a holistic view of health alongside social and cultural aspects of wellbeing. Additionally, stories based on both biomedical and holistic conceptualisations of health in the *Koori Mail* were usually framed in a positive or neutral light, even though non-Indigenous voices were more prominent in articles with a biomedical framing. Moreover, although the framing of nutrition as an individual 'lifestyle' issue is similar to other Australian studies examining mainstream media framing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition and obesity,<sup>15,19</sup> the discourse in the *Koori Mail* offered stories from a strengths-based approach, using positive language, rather than through negative representations and deficit views.<sup>15</sup> This contrasts with previous studies of mainstream media<sup>15,19</sup> that revealed a focus on the modification of individual lifestyle as a solution for obesity or nutrition issues.

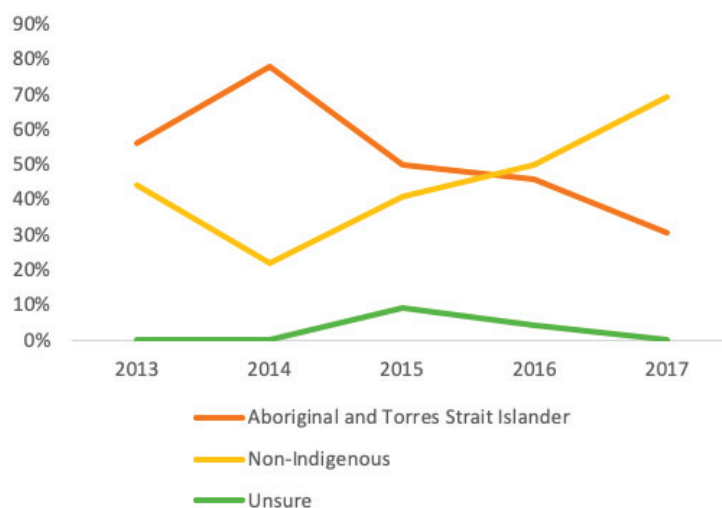
According to Fogarty et al.<sup>53</sup> narratives in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health can be changed or shifted through a strengths-based approach. This approach can also be seen to illuminate and provide alternative ways to address health issues. The majority of articles in the *Koori Mail* focused on promoting initiatives that frequently covered community-directed food and nutrition programs. These stories frequently represented solutions to nutrition/diet issues as the creation of healthy food environments in community settings and the improvement of nutrition in local communities through initiatives controlled by Aboriginal individuals and organisations. Programs initiated and designed by local communities are more likely to be effective.<sup>6</sup> While these types of stories could serve as grey literature to inform successful and effective nutrition programs controlled by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities, it is important that when applying the strengths-based approach individual 'success stories' do not obscure the need to address social and structural inequalities.<sup>53</sup>

Previous studies of mainstream media have identified poor representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' opinions, beliefs and voices.<sup>14,27</sup> In our study, the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, perspectives and worldviews in the *Koori Mail* stories contrasts with mainstream practices, supports a renewed narrative on nutrition issues, and aligns with the community media's goal of giving a new space to specific community

interests and to voices that are commonly not listened to.<sup>10,28,31</sup> The fact that we observed a reduction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices over a five-year period is concerning. However, despite this, the overall framing of nutrition-related news continued to be positive. Positive reporting and privileging of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices supports empowerment and self-determination, as well as potentially countering dominant negative stereotypes in the mainstream media.<sup>10,20,31</sup> Therefore it is important that the high inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices is maintained. The *Koori Mail* has been recognised for offering journalism that reflects the diversity and humanity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.<sup>20</sup>

This study had some limitations. First, the analysis only included one media source and may not accurately reflect the extent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nutrition-related issues and the journalism practice of the entire Aboriginal media sector. Second, not all issues of the *Koori Mail* from the period under investigation were available, thus the number of articles about nutrition published between 2013 and 2017 may be slightly higher than reported in this paper. Third, it was not possible to make a direct comparison between mainstream and Aboriginal community media, due to contextual and methodological differences between the present analysis and previous studies, such as the use of different search terms. Lastly, the five-year study period made it difficult to observe a clear trend over

Figure 3: Inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous voices from 2013-2017 (n=102).



time. Further research on the influence of Aboriginal community media on Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous audiences warrants exploration, as well as the impact that this alternative journalism style might have on media advocacy to change health policy. Future research could build on this study by comparing representations of health issues between different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander media outlets and to the mainstream media.

The findings in this research give a new perspective on how to report Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health stories, which could provide a basis to improve health equity, both directly through reducing racist stereotypes and indirectly through improved health policy. Three important implications for future practice can be drawn from the findings of this study: i) policy-makers should be encouraged to consider Aboriginal community media to better inform policy agendas related to issues concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities; ii) public health and research organisations could frame press releases from a strengths-based approach, a practice that may support media advocacy to improve public policy; and iii) mainstream journalism could be improved by using a holistic understanding of health, including more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices, and by covering 'success stories' that better reflect the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

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