

Racist Discourse In Canada's English Print Media

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The present study includes case studies from the English language press taken from several regions of the country but excludes Quebec. Discourse analysis requires intimate knowledge of the nuances of a language and neither author has the level of expertise in the French language. Moreover, there is only one English speaking newspaper in that province and it would have been unfair to have singled it out for analysis.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this research study, the authors have examined the complex linkages between language, discourse and racism in the media. Four case studies provide examples of the way in which racialized discourse is woven into the everyday practices of journalists and editors in Canadian newspapers. The findings of this study demonstrate that the media do not always objectively or neutrally report their facts or stories. Instead, media practitioners regularly socially reconstruct reality based on professional and personal ideologies, corporate interests, organizational norms, values, priorities and news schema formats. Media images and narratives carry powerful but coded meanings and messages.

The report contains a review of the literature on racism in the print media over the last two decades. Included in the literature review are studies by scholars, community-based organizations, and the findings of government inquiries. The analysis of more than twenty Canadian studies documents both the consistent and persistent evidence of racism in the print media, that collectively serves as a major indictment of the way in which the media functions in its treatment of people of colour. This review of Canadian research is supported by the authors' examination of the huge body of literature being produced in other jurisdictions (e.g. the UK, US, the Netherlands, and Australia). Manifestations of media bias and discrimination found in the Canadian Press include:

- People of colour are underrepresented and largely invisible in the media.
- When people of colour do appear in media coverage, they are often misrepresented and stereotyped;
- The corporatist nature of the media influences the kind of news that is produced and disseminated;
- Despite the claims of objectivity and neutrality by journalists, editors, and publishers, their individual and organizational beliefs, values and interests impact on the production of news discourse.
- Most significantly, there appears to be a lack of awareness, understanding or concern of the part of those who work in the media that they may be contributing to racism. While the press feels free to critique other institution, they are resistant to criticism of their own standards and practices.

There are four empirical studies that serve as case studies in the study. They include:

- The coverage of the subject of employment equity in the Globe and Mail editorials;
- The attempt to silence minority voices and protests against racism in the cultural sector as revealed in the coverage of three controversial cultural productions (Show Boat, the Royal Ontario Museum exhibition, Into the Heart of Africa and a conference for writers of colour and First Nations writers called "Writing Thru Race");
- The coverage of stories involving First Nations people which includes a comparative analysis of the Globe and Mail and two Saskatchewan newspapers' coverage of a case involving an Alberta Parliamentarian who was accused of assaulting a Native teenager when he was a RCMP officer several years ago;
- A case study of the racialization of crime looks specifically at the media's discourse on the Just Desserts case. The incident involved the shooting of a White woman by Black assailants in a Toronto restaurant.

The analysis of these case studies provide a dramatic illustration of how the media articulates and transmits powerful and negative narratives, images and ideas about ethno-racial minorities that can have a significant influence on the collective belief system of Canadian society. The case studies also reveal the depth of backlash to policies, programmes and practices that address inequity in Canadian society, even among journalists and editors who view themselves as "liberal," "open-minded," "objective," and "neutral." They also reflect a hard core of resentment held by the Canadian press to minorities engaging in what is after all the most legitimate of all democratic activities, protest and dissent to injustice and inequity. The

biases, erroneous assumptions, and stereotypical thinking appear to be invisible to journalists and editors who are largely White, male and middle class.

The authors' approach to the study is to bring out some of the unchallenged modes of thought, and unquestioned assumptions that appear to be rooted in the culture of media organizations. A multifaceted methodology is employed in this study, involving both quantitative and qualitative research techniques. However, the report focuses on the more qualitative findings. Several databases were created for each case study by downloading relevant articles from the Canadian News Disc. In each case study the authors read and categorized the media coverage in terms of news reporting, editorials, op ed pieces and letters to the editor. The case studies were selected on the basis of media coverage and the social construction of issues that were of significant importance in terms of their impact on minority-majority relations and systems of inequality in Canadian society.

The focus of the case studies was on identifying media discourses that had a significant impact on ethno-racial minorities in relation to access and participation in various aspects of Canadian life. The authors used the tools of critical discourse analysis in each of the case studies - examining the broad rhetorical strategies and argumentative statements, as well as a more micro-level approach, analyzing the meaning of words; examining the structure and vocabulary and interpreting the rhetorical statements for their core ideas and images. Each case study addresses the question of how the media's analysis of a particular issue or event can create, solidify and reproduce racism. The following are some of our findings:

Racist discourse in the media consists of a repertoire of words, images and texts that threaded together, produce an understanding of the world and position and status of people of colour in that world. There is a set of discourses used by the media that functions as coded language that have very different meanings for the producers of the discourse and different communities of readers. These are some examples of the most common forms of media discourse related to people of colour and the issues that concern them.

The denial of racism is a persistent and common theme in the press. For most media practitioners as well as other groups that form part of the dominant culture, there is a refusal to accept the reality of racism. Despite the huge body of evidence of racial prejudice and discrimination in the lives and on the life chances of people of colour, editors and journalists constantly deny that racism exists outside of isolated instances of racist behaviour by aberrant individuals or the acts of extremist groups. There is a strong resistance to the position of both scholars and the victims of racism (who are sometimes researchers themselves), that racism is deeply embedded in the fabric of Canadian culture and is part of all of social, economic and

political systems. The denial of racism among all opinion makers is so habitual that making the allegation of racism, and raising the possibility of its influence on social outcomes becomes a serious social infraction.

If equal opportunity and racial equality are assumed to exist, as the media suggests, then the lack of success on the part of a minority population must be attributed to some other set of conditions. One explanation used by the media, and most dramatically reflected in the case study on the racialization of crime, is the notion that certain minority communities themselves are culturally deficient. In this form of dominant discourse it is assumed that certain communities (e.g., African Canadian) are more prone to deviant behaviour; these groups lack the motivation, education or skills to participate fully in the workplace, educational system, the arts and other arenas of Canadian society. Those opposed to pro-active measures to ensure the inclusion of non-dominant voices, stories and perspectives dismiss these concerns as the wailing and whining of radicals whose polemics (and actions) threaten the cornerstones of democratic liberalism. Political correctness is a term commonly used today by journalists, editors, and cultural critics, among others. It is often employed to deride the aspirations of minorities.

Policies designed to achieve equality in the workplace and dismantle barriers to access and equity are interpreted by journalists and editors as the "quota law," "preferential treatment," "reverse discrimination," and the abandonment of "the merit principle." In a semantic reversal, the victims of discrimination have become White, able-bodied males, despite the evidence that racial inequality in the workplace remains relatively unchanged.

The case study of the racialization of crime, reveals the complex vocabulary of crime-related language that includes phrases like "cultural deviance," "Jamaican or Black crime." The press creates a sense of moral panic in which isolated cases of violence are represented as an indication of a profound societal crisis that imperils the nation. The linking of race and crime by the media becomes a wake-up call to all Canadians, and especially politicians, to re-evaluate their ideas about authority, control and public policy. The media coverage of the "Just Desserts" case is charged with racial stereotypes and images. These images created by editors, journalists and photographers have enormous strength, power and resilience. When minorities have no power to control, resist, produce or disseminate other real and more positive images in the public domain, these images and generalizations increase their vulnerability in terms of cultural, social, economic and political participation in the mainstream of Canadian society.

On the other hand, as is seen in the case study of a sexual assault of a Native woman by a high profiled public political figure, discussions of White crimes against Natives often focus on the

dysfunction of Native communities rather than the deviance of the perpetrator.

Finally, the language of 'otherness', the fragmentation of 'us' and 'them', pervades the media. The ubiquitous 'we' which finds its way into newspaper reporting and editorializing represents the White dominant culture; 'we' who are law-abiding, hardworking, peace-loving. 'They' refers to ethno-racial communities who are often portrayed by the journalists and editors as possessing different (undesirable) values, beliefs and norms. Those marked as 'other' are viewed as existing outside the boundaries of Canadian national identity.

The authors want to underscore the point that the purpose of this study is not to label as racist any particular newspaper, journalist or editor. Journalists operate within organizational cultures and discursive spaces that transcend them. It is the profession of journalism and the industries of media production that have been the subject of this study and must therefore be the focus of the solutions generated.

Media discourse is not just a symptom of the problem of racism. It reinforces individual beliefs and behaviours, collective ideologies, the formation of public policies, organization practices. Despite the efforts of some newspapers such as The Toronto Star to be more inclusive in their coverage and hiring practices, greater access, participation and equity in the print media continues to be a serious and unmet challenge. Policies to promote fairness and equity are urgently required. Without greater access to employment opportunities, people of colour, will continue to have virtually no influence on how they are represented by others in the media. Journalism schools across this country need to review their curricula in relation to how they have or have not dealt with issues of ethno-racial diversity and how those who are about to enter the field of journalism can be better prepared for the rapid changing realities of both Canadian society and the world.

Our study clearly points to the fact that journalists, editors and publishers are not free of bias. Journalism today in Canada, as in the past, is very much influenced by racialized assumptions, beliefs and practices that remain invisible to both individuals and media organizations. The media elite does not evidence much concern about the habitual construction of minorities as social problems and outsiders that undermine the Canadian way of life.

Thus, our analysis and findings in this study have uncovered a profound tension in Canadian society: a conflict between the belief that the media represents the cornerstone of a democratic liberal society and the key instrument by which its ideals are produced and disseminated, and the actual role of the media as purveyors of racist discourse, supporters of a powerful White political, economic and cultural elite, and a vehicle for reinforcing racism in Canadian society. It is hoped that by presenting the evidence of racism in the Canadian print

media, specific examples of how racist discourse functions, and tools for engaging in discourse analysis, this study will accomplish a number of objectives:

- To encourage a heightened sense of critical consciousness on the part of all those who work in the media and a greater willingness to examine how their own experiential frameworks - values and norms - influence their everyday journalistic practices;
- To support a stronger commitment by regulatory agencies to respond to racism;
- To further research, particularly in the areas of the electronic media and the issues of representation of people of colour in media industries;
- To undertake a systematic review of the curricula in journalism schools;
- To support mechanisms for monitoring the media;
- And to promote a greater degree of accountability and answerability on the part of media organizations.

The media is a powerful institution and a critical force in helping shape the future of Canadian society. For a society concerned with social justice and equity, the media need to engage more fully and more competently in the issues of racial and ethnic diversity and equity. A truly democratic liberal society requires a more inclusive, responsible and less biased media.

Reporting on Diversity: A CHECKLIST

This Checklist was developed by journalists, journalism professors and diversity advisers at a workshop at Carleton University in June, 1995. They exchanged information about diversity initiatives and how to sustain them; they shared experiences both positive and negative; they debated with vigor the difficulties and the merits, the problems and the advantages of greater diversity in both hiring and coverage; they worked at case studies based on real events; and they drafted this set of principles to help newsrooms respond better to the changes in Canadian society. They would like to share these principles, condensed and formatted as a checklist, with other newsrooms.

This workshop was a joint venture of both Carleton and the Canadian Daily Newspaper Association (CDNA).

Reporting on DIVERSITY

Reporting on DIVERSITY means reflecting all members of the community in a fair and accurate manner, and applying equal standards of scrutiny for all groups.

FOR BEAT AND GENERAL REPORTERS

- Am I covering all aspects, including positive and negative, of diverse communities?

- Am I aware of the power of images, and do I avoid furthering stereotypes by seeking a diverse representation when interviewing people, no matter what the story?
- Are the « labels » I use to describe people appropriate and necessary, and do they meet the guidelines of my news organization?
- Do I regularly consult a variety of widely representative community newspapers, radio and television programs and their editors and producers?
- Do I involve all resources in our news organization as a way to enrich our coverage?
- Do I help keep the diversity dialogue alive in the newsroom through questions, source suggestions and requests for explanation about news decisions?
- Do I research diverse groups thoroughly, to avoid perpetuating stereotypes?
- Do I include questions/allegations of systemic racism as context to specific stories, whenever I can do so fairly and responsibly?
- Am I aware of factions and agendas within groups so that I do not fall prey to manipulation by prominent sources?
- Do I get my assignment/city editors onside-show them how allowing me time to do background research will pay off with better coverage?
- Do I take the time to consult peers and editors to gain a balanced overview when in doubt about the tone of a story?

FOR DESK AND ASSIGNMENT EDITORS

- Am I giving reporters the time to develop diverse contacts and pursue a wide range of stories?
- Am I creating a newsroom atmosphere that encourages reporters to move beyond traditional news gathering?
- Am I personally exploring all sources of news, and open to non-traditional views and voices?
- Do our story and photo ideas and our content perpetuate cultural or other stereotypes? Am I assessing whether our photographs and visuals accurately reflect the entire community?
- Am I watching our use of language for bias?
- Am I aware of minority sensitivities before setting and reviewing a style to describe groups or communities?
- Are we under-playing or over-playing a story because of its diversity content?
- Is our coverage of the actions of a few stereotyping an entire group?
- Am I regularly reviewing the accumulative impact of our coverage?

FOR SENIOR MANAGEMENT

- Are we hiring the most qualified people? And are we making clear what those qualifications are?
- Are we seeking to hire people who can bring diverse perspectives into our newsroom?
- Are we looking for candidates in non-traditional places (e.g., ads in community papers; staff of community papers or cable television and community radio stations; and community groups or organizations)?
- After hiring, are we supporting and training new employees?
- Are we telling schools of journalism what we need?
- Are we thinking long-term about recruitment (e.g., organizing job fairs, participating in high school media literacy programs)?

...SUSTAINING IT

- Is there commitment from the top that diversity is important?
- Are we clear what we're prepared to invest to make it happen (e.g., outreach, assigning, mentoring)?
- Are we telling diverse communities that we want their business?
- Are we creating opportunities for reporting diversity?
- Are we measuring progress regularly?