

Indigenous Canadians' Representation: Mainstream VS. Alternative

During an election campaign in 2015, the Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, publicly announced that he would address the “calls to action” made within the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions Report (Wyld 2017). The “calls to action” formed out of Indigenous social concerns about intergenerational trauma caused by residential school experiences, which have been described as a “painful legacy” (Wyld 2017). Trudeau promised to address concerns of social issues (i.e. missing and murdered indigenous women, the child welfare system, etc.) by developing workable national strategies. News organizations have been reporting on prominent social issues in Indigenous communities since reconciliation. However, while I was browsing mainstream and alternative news media, visible differences stood out. The goal of this paper, therefore, will be to explore mainstream and alternative coverage of Indigenous Canadians in news media coverage in November 2018, by asking, how have Indigenous Canadians been documented in news organizations since reconciliation?

The public is a powerful spectator in influencing social change, and the media is a powerful tool in shaping public attitudes. Hence, it is significant to explore how Indigenous Canadians are represented to the public via news media outlets, and whether this representation has the power to change the future circumstances of Indigenous people. News organizations hold the power to make or break stereotypes in society because of the way people receive and interpret information. For example, positive events may be recognized and acknowledged, whereas negative events may disturb the audience to push for social change, and possibly change future circumstances within Indigenous communities

In this paper, two news organizations were examined: a mainstream news website,

CBC News, and an alternative news website, *APTN National News*. The scope was limited to the month of November 2018 because of the large number of news articles available solely for this month. About 100 articles were analyzed for the month of November 2018 on both news websites. *CBC News* and *APTN News* reported extensively on Indigenous social issues since reconciliation. Both news outlets covered a range of Indigenous issues, all of which will be discussed in order of importance. For analysis, the following three things were considered: tone and use of language, content, and “blind spots” or missing information (Hackett). All 100 articles were not closely analyzed, only news coverage of recurring issues in both news media outlets. Video and audio are omitted from this analysis because an entire paper can be written on them. As was aforementioned, coverage of prevalent issues was analyzed to answer how Indigenous Canadians are represented in news media to the public.

CBC News was the starting site of analysis. By typing “Indigenous” in the search bar, a number of articles popped up¹. The search was filtered to only display November 2018 articles. The second site of analysis was *APTN News*. On this page, news coverage for November 2018 was found by clicking on the “National News” heading, since they did not have an international news section. First, news article headlines were glossed over on *CBC* and *APTN*, and recurring themes were noted down. Thereafter, the prevalent topics were explored in depth to analyze coverage of Indigenous issues. The common and prevalent issues highlighted in both news sources(combined) were child welfare and child abuse, forced sterilization of Indigenous women, and racism/discrimination.

The history of residential schools, missing and murdered Indigenous women, “fire at Northmart store in Iqaluit” in Nunavut (Driscoll 8 Nov 2018), and calls for an investigation into the “police conduct at 2008 Mohawk blockade” (Roache) were mentioned in *APTN*

¹ CBC News homepage had an “Indigenous” heading, under which only Indigenous news were covered. To limit the scope of coverage I looked at the general news section, but realized that by “typing” Indigenous all news popped up

News and omitted from *CBC News*. Youth and women empowerment and/or accomplishments, such as “Indigenous youth focus lens on opioid crisis” (CBC, “We’ve had a lot of tears”) and “first Indigenous women” to earn “engineering PhD” (CBC 26 Nov 2018) were mentioned in *CBC News*, but not in *APTN News*.

The first pattern observed in both news media was of tone and use of language. *CBC News* covered Indigenous issues in a positive manner, as opposed to *APTN News*. In *CBC News*, coverage focused on public education, accomplishments of Indigenous youth and women, whilst addressing the “calls to action.” The most prevalent issues revolved around “efforts to drive down the massive number of Indigenous children in foster care” by giving “control and responsibility [of Indigenous child welfare services] to First Nations, Inuit and Métis governments” (Sterrit, “It's absolutely appalling': Indigenous youth in care vulnerable to exploitation, say advocates”; Sterrit, “Province responds to allegations against employee who allegedly siphoned funds from Indigenous youth”; Tasker; “coerced sterilization of Indigenous women under the supervision of “the child welfare system”; The Canadian Press and Kirkup, “Indigenous women coerced into sterilizations across Canada: senator”) described as a “gross violation of human rights (Kirkup); “culturally safe ceremonies, circles, land-based teachings, and access to traditional healers and elders” (Georgieva); stories about Indigenous youth “[finding] positive outlets through competitive video games” (Eneas); “focusing lens on the opioid crisis” to educate non-Indigenous viewers (CBC “We’ve had a lot of tears”); and the “first Indigenous women” earning degrees or joining politics.

CBC News took “part in active reconciliation efforts” by reporting on the “federal government [handing] over control of child welfare services to Indigenous governments” (Tasker). In addition to this, *CBC News* reported on “pervasive racism” and “fear of experiencing racism in health services,” however a “mandatory course in Indigenous health” is provided as a solution (Baker 19 Nov 2018). The *CBC News* tone thus is neutral. They are

not bashing on the government, nor are they ignoring Indigenous issues they find useful reporting. The approach to Indigenous issues is positive, and the use of language is political. From the public's perspective, the government *is* addressing Indigenous social issues and providing solutions. Moreover, positive accomplishments of Indigenous youth and the government are highlighted, meaning there is nothing negative about Indigenous youth or women. Could it be because Indigenous youth and women fall under the “vulnerable” category? Nonetheless, *CBC News* acknowledges the “trauma and loss” (Tasker) suffered by Indigenous Canadians, but provides narratives on moving forward and making amends. It focuses on initiatives that will resolve long-standing reconciliation issues, by politically mentioning the history of residential schools.

In *APTN News*, comparing the tone and use of language of coverage of Indigenous issues was both positive and negative. It was negative in the sense that it did not provide any light or positive coverage. It focused on heavy and intense issues throughout November 2018. Although *APTN News* focused on topics covered by *CBC News* above, their articles went further to talk about “systemic discrimination” in health services and schools (Fennario and Ward) by outlining the “neglected” death of an Inuit woman, Jane Kasudluak, suffering from “botulism” (Fennario). It provided intimate details that have the ability to elicit an emotional response from the readers. *APTN News* extended its coverage to children “scooped away” from their families because of “economic poverty and inadequate housing,” a symptom of “unresolved health issues” (Brake “No more scooping children’: Canada, Indigenous leaders announce plan to co-develop child welfare legislation”).

In addition, *APTN News* called for the “accountability” of “medical and child-welfare workers who bully unwilling women into life-changing surgeries” (The Canadian Press); educated the public on the social worker’s lawsuit by providing details of how he

solicited money from Indigenous youth (APTN National News "B.C. lawsuits allege government social worker took cash from foster children"); and criticized the director of child welfare for "failing to...detect and prevent Saunders misappropriation of funds and benefits" (APTN National News "B.C. lawsuits allege government social worker took cash from foster children"). Similar to *CBC News*, *APTN News* declared Indigenous governments should "change" and "control" the child welfare system (Bernard). The coverage went further to provide information on topics omitted from *CBC News*.

Unlike *CBC News*, *APTN News* touched upon "missing and murdered indigenous women," the experience of a mother whose daughter fell under this group, and the "red dress protest" to raise awareness about the women (Moore "Red Dress Protest" and "Protesters Block Cape"). *CBC News* only allocated one article to missing and murdered an indigenous woman in terms of honouring them through "red dress photography as a form of prayer" (Yarr). In extension, *APTN News* also focused on the emotions of a mother who lost her daughter and "appealed for action" (Brake "Mother speaks out about her daughter's death"). Families of victims "[felt] compelled to speak...about the ongoing epidemic of missing and murdered women" (Brake "Mother speaks out about her daughter's death") because "police...continue to fail indigenous people" (Pimentel "Police need to work harder"). Interestingly, *CBC News* did not cover any stories on a "series of fires" in Iqaluit, Nunavut for which there was no "insurance against fire damage (Driscoll "Five fires under investigation" and "A third of Government") or calls for investigation into "police conduct" during 2008 Mohawk Raid (Roache). Nor did *CBC News* cover any specific stories on "130 residential schools across Canada...[that] forced more than 150,000 Indigenous children [away]...from their families and culture" (Troian) in efforts to 'kill the indian, save the man' (Ward). Although there was an overlap in issues covered by both news media, *APTN News* focused on emotional and heart-touching stories of "trauma

and loss” (Tasker), demanding accountability of ill actions, and providing information to those witnessing historical trauma through written articles; and on Indigenous government action, next steps, and public responses. Conversely, *CBC News* acknowledged the damage of tarnished relationships between Indigenous Canadians and Canadians, provided positive coverage on Indigenous youth, women’s accomplishments, and referenced solutions to “past mistakes.”

Rosemary Nagy and Emily Gillespie, authors of "Representing Reconciliation: A News Frame Analysis....," add onto this representation by arguing "news media coverage" can either "undermine attempts at peace-building" or "function as a tool of conflict resolution" by promoting "peace" and "deconstructing naturalized representations of conflicts" (6-7). Nagy et al. argues that news organizations frame "truth and reconciliation" in terms of "truth telling as therapy, witnessing and public education" (7). However, from the results of the analysis, *CBC News* can be seen “omitting” certain truths and stories.

Although *CBC News* articles surrounding child welfare mentioned “similarities to residential schools by “taking children away from their families,” it was political and positive when compared to *APTN News* (Sterrit “It's absolutely appalling”). *CBC News* coverage compared the child welfare system to residential schools by referring to the latter as “discriminatory policies of the government” and “mistakes of the past” (Tasker). Nagy et al. argue that although news media provide "ongoing evidence of racism" they also "contain seeds of progressive reform" (9). This is clearly evident here as *CBC News* is trying to leave the topic of residential schools “in the past”, hoping to move forward.

APTN News, on the other hand, is more focused on the sovereignty of “storytelling” to educate the public about the traumatic history. *APTN News* focused on residential school survivors calling for action on “mishandling claims” (Fiddler), suing the government, and details of the abuse. A perfect example of this would be the article called, “A very painful

artifact': Strap used at residential school moves from family home to archives." It is hard to not mention the use of images for this article. The images authenticate claims of the horrifying incidents that took place in residential schools and provide the reader with a sense of reality along with descriptive language. The strap is old and worn out, "the end of the strap appears to be stained with dried blood" and has "1951 to 1962" written on it (Troian). It was discovered by a residential school survivor who recognized the strap because "he was regularly beaten as a child by at least one of them" (Troian).

Moreover, personal narratives of residential school survivors and their present status, including the struggle of "alcoholism," were talked about. These stories can be seen as "negative" because they are unpleasant to read about. The language in *APTN News* was less political and more personal.

Susan Forde's discussion on alternative journalism can be linked here to describe alternative media giving people a voice "who maybe [didn't get] a voice in the traditional media" (83). *APTN News*, a platform to raise concerns and ongoing problems of colonialism, gives the voiceless a voice. Perhaps this is the reason they cover Indigenous issues in a powerful and non-political manner (Nagy et al.). They are transparent and honest.

Nagy et al. strengthen the difference in coverage of Indigenous historical trauma by stating "Indian residential schools [are not seen] as "historic abuse", however it can be "located in the present by linking IRS legacy to underfunding of...child welfare [and] missing and murdered aboriginal women..." (12). It is visible that "colonial context" and "language of genocide" was ignored in *CBC News*, and "racism and oppression were explained away" (13). However, "missing and murdered indigenous women" were not mentioned in *CBC News*, whereas *APTN News* portrayed residential schools as "historic abuse" and "racism and oppression were not explained away" (13).

The second scholarly article is titled, "Nationalism and Media Coverage of Indigenous People's Collection Action in Canada" (Corrigall-Brown, Ricard and Wilkes). Through a process called "framing" where language and tone is considered, Corrigall-Brown et al. argue that news coverage plays a significant role in changing or shaping public opinion. The media plays an important role in shaping social identities (Corrigall-Brown et al.). A significant change in social identities occurs when issues are accurately and honestly presented to the public to understand present day issues and calls to action. *APTN News* is a form of alternative journalism that plays a key role in countering misrepresentations and providing the "blind spots" or "missing information" in *CBC News*. *CBC News* is found educating the public and moving forward, whereas *APTN News* articles leans towards eliciting emotional responses from their readers. Since media is an important source of information for the public, they become responsible for how minority groups are treated (Corrigall-Brown, Ricard and Wilkes).

Indigenous issues are represented in the context of present-day colonialism in both mainstream and alternative media. Alternative media coverage is unpleasant and emotional when compared to mainstream news media because the voices behind the news platform are of people directly affected. Together, both organizations provide a complete picture of both sides of the story where similarities and differences are visibly noted. If the stories evoke emotional or disturbing responses from the audience, they would push for change in social issues. Nagy et al. describe *APTN News* as "episodic reporting," which "[focuses] on an individual or individual [events]...to capture interest and stir emotion", and "therefore decontextualize, dramatize [or] individualize a social issue" (16). In contrast, both news media can be seen adopting "thematic reporting" which locateds "social [issues] or [problems]within its systemic context" (16). The differences between these two have been outlined above in the patterns discovered.

CBC News represented Indigenous issues in a positive light where steps were being taken to ensure a bright future for Indigenous people. *CBC News* presented Indigenous people and the government as tackling Indigenous issues head on and providing an image of transformation and change in Indigenous societies. They are depicted as resilient and ambitious fighters of justice. On the other hand, *APTN News* represented Indigenous issues in a powerful and intentionally unpleasant manner. Although they are depicted as fighters for justice, *APTN News*' coverage depicted Indigenous issues as an ongoing and recurring struggle for better circumstances and a hopeful future. As a result, readers of *APTN News* were "witnessing" the historical abuse caused by the federal government.

Moreover, providing Indigenous people with a platform in alternative media is a powerful tool for sparking public discussion or dialogue. The differences in omitting particular details and stories raises questions. Why were articles about police conduct omitted from *CBC News*? Could it be because it involves taking accountability for present day acts of colonialism inflicted on Indigenous people? Or could the lack of attention on police conduct be characterized as a form of colonialism in terms of "ignoring" another form of abuse? When Indigenous people release counter-narratives or in-depth narratives with brutal details of the oppression and suppression they face, and personal narratives, they diminish negative stereotypes and provide the readers with more context. It is important to note that by omitting news like police brutality, the fire, history of residential schools, and missing and murdered Indigenous women, mainstream news media are silencing voices.

News media also play a crucial role in creating stereotypes and consequently shaping public attitude towards minority groups. By providing the context of Indigenous history, could present day Indigenous issues be better understood? Yes - mental health; drug and alcohol abuse; high youth suicide rates; disproportionate rate of women in prison;

high rates of violence correlated with sexual abuse; and many other issues in Indigenous communities, can be better understood if background information is provided. Thus, the narrative becomes a tool and adds meaning to the sequence of events (Corrigall-Brown et al.).

It is significant to study these issues because Indigenous people are on the path to reconciliation. For Indigenous people to have a bright future, their story needs to be heard. Since the government plays a crucial role in improving Indigenous conditions by addressing the “calls to action,” as per the Canadian Association of Journalists, the “public has the right to be informed.” The public has the right to know about the actions of the members of their government. Moreover, since the public’s attitude shapes responses to individual groups and/or events of issues, their involvement is important. As Corrigall-Brown et al. and Nagy et al. write, media is a form of communication. It keeps the public informed and if mistreatment or neglect occurs, it can be reported on. If the neglect or mistreatment is severe, news media can play a role in influencing the public to push for social change or improvement and seek accountability. Therefore, the media plays a crucial role in the representation of Indigenous issues by inspiring social change. Both mainstream and alternative media are powerful tools in shaping public attitudes, but the manner of reporting can reshape public attitudes, break stereotypes, and change government responses to Indigenous circumstances.

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