MEDIA, DIVERSITY AND IDENTITY:
Recommending Routes for Research on Media and Diverse Identities in Canada

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THE PORTRAYAL OF MINORITIES IN CANADIAN MEDIA SERVES TO PLAY A FORMIDABLE ROLE IN SHAPING THE FORMATION OF CANADIAN MINORITY IDENTITIES. THIS PAPER PROVIDES A CRITICAL REVIEW OF STUDIES THAT EXAMINE THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CANADIAN MEDIA AND MINORITIES.[1] MEDIA RESEARCHERS HAVE INSISTED THAT IT IS IMPERATIVE TO RESEARCH MEDIA-MINORITY RELATIONS BECAUSE THE MEDIA PLAY A CRUCIAL ROLE IN THE CREATION OF SOCIAL IDENTITIES (HENRY 1999). THE MEDIA PROVIDES AN IMPORTANT SOURCE OF INFORMATION THROUGH WHICH CITIZENS GAIN KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THEIR NATION, AND OUR ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS ARE SHAPED BY WHAT THE MEDIA DISCERNS AS PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE. SIMPLY PUT, THE MEDIA IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE WAYS THAT CANADIAN SOCIETY IS INTERPRETED, CONSIDERED AND EVALUATED AMONG ITS RESIDENTS.

Decisions about representations of cultural diversity ought to be envisioned within a series of competing discourses taking place within media institutions. Despite what we would like to believe, Canadian media is not fair, democratic nor objective in nature (Hacknett, Gruneau, Gutstein, Gibson and NewsWatch Canada 2001). The media has the power to choose which images of minorities dominate the public domain. As researchers have demonstrated (Fleras and Kunz 2001; Henry 1999), the media propel certain traits, most often negative, about minorities into the spotlight, whilst others are downplayed or completely absent from representations. How does this affect identity formation among minority groups?

Negative depictions of minorities teach minorities in Canada that they are threatening, deviant, and irrelevant to nation-building. Non-reflective media personalities and recurrent stereotypes impact negatively upon the identity of minority Canadians because these portrayals suggest who we are as Canadians, who is allowed to belong, and who is located on the peripheries of Canadianness (Bullock and Jafri 2001). They also affect non-minority Canadians' understandings of minorities through the replication of negative stereotypes of minority groups.

This paper progresses in the following fashion: The first section provides a comprehensive literature review of studies completed in Canada about media-minority relations. It then explores some other areas of research related to work on media and minorities, including the research that has examined ethnic media, audiences, media ownership and the role of media workers in depicting ethnic minorities. Finally, it examines some of the key theoretical and empirical challenges to the field by posing some potential research questions that have been determined after discussions with professionals in this area.

ETHNIC MINORITY PORTRAYAL – UNDER-REPRESENTATION AND MISREPRESENTATION

From its inception in the late 1960s to the 1980s, research on media-minority relations was largely preoccupied with examining the two main ways in which ethnic minorities are problematically treated in media accounts. Firstly is the under-representation (or absence) of ethnic minorities. The second refers to the misrepresentation (or negative portrayal) of ethnic minorities. Both of these forms of partiality – under-representation and misrepresentation – ultimately have much the same impact: they limit citizenship and provide justification for the continued oppression of minorities in Canada. Under-representation and misrepresentation will be explored in turn.

a) Under-representation

The under-representation of a range of cultural groups in Canadian media has been suggestive of their unimportance or their non-existence. Most of the early research on ethnic representation was concerned with unveiling their absence in the media in order to demonstrate this claim. Various researchers have found that despite the culturally diverse nature of Canadian society, that very diversity is regularly absent from media representations (Fleras and Kunz 2001; Fleras 1994). This is particularly disappointing given that Canada has capitalized on multicultural principles as a framework for governing ethnic diversity.

Early studies pointed out that the problematic media depiction of immigrants is by no means a recent phenomenon. Anderson has demonstrated that newspaper accounts in the late 1800s were vehemently anti-Chinese. Minorities remain largely absent from magazines and soap operas in Canada (MediaWatch 1994). MacGregor's study of visible minority women in the magazine Maclean's over a thirty-year period (MacGregor 1989) unveiled the invisibility of women of colour in the national magazine. As Fleras (1995) points out, the lack of minorities in the Canadian media is the rule, rather than the exception. Media researchers have indicated that the impact of minority marginality in the media only serves to further entrench the invisibility of ethnic minorities in society (Fleras 1995). The very invisibility of minority issues and minority communities in Canadian media contribute to a sense of "otherness" for minority Canadians.

b) Misrepresentation

A beneficial result of these early studies was that it provided an impetus for media researchers to examine how the media portrays ethnic minorities when they are actually represented. Researchers have suggested that the representation of non-dominant cultures generally expanded in recent decades (Fleras 1995). However, most studies have concluded that such expansion has been very careful not to challenge Eurocentric cultural hegemony (Crawford 1998; Jiwani 1995; Fleras 1994). One of the ways in which Eurocentric hegemony is retained is by limiting the kinds of portrayals of ethnic minorities in the media to negative or exotic stereotypes.

Ethnic minorities have insisted that media portrayals of their constituents reveal an unrelenting negativity in their portrayal. Media researchers have pointed to the negative depictions of ethnic minorities in a variety of studies (Tator 1995; Fleras 1995; Miller 1994; Ungerleider 1991). Many researchers agree that in mainstream media in Canada, ethnic minorities are presented as threats, with overt positionings of "us" and "them" in which the former is an assumed mainstream audience and the latter is the ethnic minority (Fleras and Kunz 2001; Daley 1997). Non-white groups are portrayed as "mysterious, inscrutable or incompatible" with the dominant culture (Sun 1997-98).

To summarize this section, Canadian studies of ethnic representation in the media have been concerned with unveiling the trivialization of minority experiences in order to point out the media's inability to effectively hold up a mirror in which Canadian society can see its wide array of ethnic diversity accurately depicted. The narrow range of images of ethnic minorities has effectively decreased the ability of minorities to be seen as positive contributors to Canadian society.

BEYOND CONTENT ANALYSIS: OTHER AVENUES OF RESEARCH

As is evidenced by these studies, much of the critical focus upon media representations of ethnic minorities tend to come to fairly pessimistic conclusions. Researchers also make the valid

point that absence and negativity confirm the non-normality of ethnic minorities and make up the majority of studies of ethnic minority representations in the media (Dunn and Mahtani 2001). It has been suggested that this reliance on a binary conceptional framework for analysis – either evaluations that focus on under-representation or misrepresentation of minorities in media – does not necessarily create ample room for media researchers to consider other sophisticated theoretical frameworks to understand media-minority relations. As Fleras has suggested, "Studies to date have emphasized descriptive accounts that rarely delve into causes, impacts and solutions" (Fleras 1992:340). Other researchers have agreed, coming to "the growing realization that pointing out wrongs and abuse does not necessarily solve the problem" (Fraser 1994:15). This perspective was echoed in interviews with media researchers (see the recommendation section of this paper).

Thus, in the past ten years, research has moved beyond these two modes of analysis towards a more nuanced discussion of minority-media relations. Media researchers have started to direct their attention away from simply citing examples of under-representation or misrepresentation in the media towards attempts to understand why these images are tolerated and produced at all. The following section will show how researchers have moved beyond content analysis as the sole methodological tool. First, it examines research that unravels the relationship between media ownership, economic imperatives and minority representations. Second, it explores the research on the role of the audience in consuming these media portrayals and where the audience has the power to select and interpret these images. Third, it uncovers the growing literature on ethnic media. Media representations of ethnic groups are not accepted uncritically by audiences. The so-called 'ethnic lobbies' have a track record of scrutinizing media representations. Some ethnic minority groups now have dedicated 'news watchers' or media watchdogs. Finally, there is a body of literature focusing on media workers – those who create the representations themselves.

a) Media Ownership

Fleras (1994) has suggested that much of the existing research on media and minority coverage has underrated the challenges of restructuring media-minority relations. In their attempts to tabulate all the wrongdoings of media representations, Fleras says that



researchers have downplayed the "commercial logics" underpinning these portrayals, and ignored the constructed nature of media reality and corporate commitments. He recommends a reconstitution of researchers' analytical sites by exploring the mass media as a contested site for control among competing sectors (Fleras 1994). Canadian media researchers have posited about the role of economics in media representations of ethnic minorities (see Miller 1998). It has been suggested that fair representation of ethnic minorities is simply not possible in mass media because such efforts cost too much in a world where the bottom line is profit, and cutbacks thrive. Some researchers have disagreed with this supposition, claiming that a fair depiction of visible minorities in the news is achievable through changes in leadership in media organizations – changes that would not be costly in the slightest (Miller 1998; Canadian Newspaper Association's Diversity Committee 1994). As Hackett et al. demonstrate, what is not reported is as significant as what is reported and the reasons behind those decisions are in part influenced by the growing monopoly of media ownership in Canada.

b) Audiences

There is a concern that these media analyses tend to assume that audiences are merely passive consumers, unable to participate in developing challenges to stereotyping or the invisibility of ethnic minorities in the media. In the last decade, some media researchers have begun to explore the ways that ethnic minorities are developing particular strategies to resist their problematic media portrayal by acting as media "watchdogs" or creating their own discourse analysis studies. Goodall et al. (1994:174) insist that such audiences are "active participants in the creation of meaning and argue back at the media in their continual dialogue (often unvoiced) with them." For example, following decades of exclusion and insensitive representation, people of colour have become almost completely disenchanted with mainstream media (Goldfarb Consultants 1995).

c) Ethnic Media

In Canada, ethnic media are often referred to as the "third media" – a title that includes a wide array of media outlets, including ethnic presses and non-English and non-French programming (Fleras and Kunz 2001; Fleras 1994). There are mixed feelings among Canadian researchers about the role of ethnic media in challenging problematic minority representation. Lawrence Lam

(1980) provides one of the key research projects in this arena. He found through an analysis of ethnic media consumption that ethnic media are not important sources of help and information for immigrants. Surlin and Romanov (1985) suggest that ethnic papers create safe places for ethnic cultures to thrive whilst at the same time providing an entree for newly arrived immigrants who wish to adapt to their new environment. Black and Leithner (1991; 1987) note that the integration of ethnic minorities into the country's political process has not decreased, despite the fact that there had been a decline in ethnic media consumption. Suggesting that ethnic media studies are concerned with the process of immigrant adaptation versus institutional accommodation and racial discrimination, Fleras (1994) has pointed out some of the limits with explorations of ethnic media. In particular, he makes the claim that ethnic media has been dismissed as "largely inconsequential in one way or the other as sources of assistance or information about Canada" (Fleras 1994:271).

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d) Media Workers

The practices and routines of the newsroom and other sites of cultural production are increasingly being recognized as spaces where methods of research can be directed (Mahtani 2001a; Fleras and Kunz 2001; Greenberg 2000; Henry and Tator 2000; Bredin 1993). Research into media worker selections of what are considered to be newsworthy stories has been significant. Researchers have argued that what constitutes news values is judged according to the dominant culture's interests, using established frameworks of interpretation that reveal the institutional flaws of the business (see Dunn and Mahtani 2001; Miller 1998; Siddiqui 1993). Resources and time pressures that demand decisions-on-the-run only exacerbate the reliance upon such narrow frames.

Despite the slowly increasing presence of 'journalists of colour' in the 1990s (Mahtani 2001a) researchers have found that senior media workers (sub-editors, news directors, executive producers, etc.) have remained almost exclusively middle class males of the dominant cultures (Carter, Branston and Allan 1998). These media gatekeepers mitigate against attempts by non-white media workers to represent diverse cultural experiences (Dunn and Mahtani 2001). Numerous research reports have argued that most media workers make decisions about stories and images depending upon their own understandings of audience composition (Mahtani 2001a; Joynt 1995; Miller 1998). Newsmakers work on the premise that the "national audience" shares the same values as they do and that they are programming for "national" interests, even though this "national audience" is nowhere near as homogeneous as the upper echelons, where stories related to ethnic groups are not considered mainstream stories (Dunn and Mahtani 2001; Miller 1998; Ungerleider 1991). Most media workers assume a mainstream white audience who is like them (Miller 1998) as the majority of media workers are white, although this number is slowly increasing (Mahtani 2001a; Henry and Tator 2000). The experiences and events of ethnic minorities are often considered to be too specific to be of general interest, unless there is a story of normative deviance to tell (Henry 1999). Researchers and media workers themselves have called for a greater number of non-white media workers and media and journalism students in order to challenge these prevailing viewpoints (Dunn and Mahtani 2001; Chideya 1995).

This paper provided a general summary of the literature on media representations of minorities in Canada. While these studies have carefully cited and tabulated kinds of portrayals of minorities, I believe that they have provided largely descriptive accounts which do not necessarily explore the causes of such problematic representations, their impact upon understandings of the nation-state, nor potential solutions towards challenging absent, negative and stereotypical images. In interviews with experts in this field, it was suggested that future research situate the sites of resistance available to visible minorities to combat such portrayals. There are several areas that merit research potential. The next section raises several research questions emerging from this literature review, as well as interviews with media professionals and academics working in this field.

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL QUESTIONS: POSSIBILITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

I conducted interviews with media researchers in Canada between January and May 2001 to gauge potential research avenues in the area of media-minority relations. These interviews took place via email questionnaires with academic researchers who were interested in issues of minority representations, and appointed in various departments ranging from Communications, Sociology, Geography, Journalism and History among other disciplines. I also interviewed professionals who worked in the media – including media directors in advertising, television and radio producers and reporters. Drawing from these interviews, and my own critique of the literature, I suggest some arenas for future research.

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There was a general call to alter the focus from previous studies, where we have witnessed a preoccupation with

tabulating media's wrongdoings. Without dismissing the importance of these earlier studies, there is an interest in developing other kinds of proposals and recommendations that move beyond criticism of media images of minorities towards a greater understanding of why these stereotypical images are in fact tolerated at all. In particular, there seems to be a heightened call to engineer changes within media institutions themselves through quantitative and qualitative studies that analyze media representations of ethnic minorities in the media. The recommendations are as follows:

1. The literature review of the work on media-minority relations gleans some important omissions. Many researchers and media workers made it clear that they want to see more content analysis for a start. Although it is true that our studies have thus far relied upon discourse analysis as the key methodological tool, we do require more detailed studies that employ this method. Apart from the repeated interest in more detailed content analysis studies of Canadian entertainment (including sitcoms, dramatic series and film), the key omissions include an analysis of Aboriginal media (see Fraser 1994) and ethnic minority representation in Francophone media.

2. As evidenced in the literature review, studies about audience response are rare (although see Goldfarb 1995; CAF 1992; Lam 1980). Many of the media researchers insisted we require a greater understanding of ethnic minorities' comprehension of their treatment in the media. What do ethnic minorities expect of the mass media? How do they perceive their treatment? Furthermore, we cannot stop at those questions. We need to further question how negative images impact their self-identity and esteem.

3. We require studies that explore the relationship between identity formation, minority images and the variations within different minority communities. Given the variety between members of various minority groups, we also need to consider how people who identify as members of more than one minority group contemplate their portrayal in media accounts. We have yet to complete a study about the ways in which "mixed race" Canadians contemplate their portrayal in the Canadian media, for example, or Francophones who also identify within various minority groups, like Greek-Francophones or South-Asian Francophones.

4. We require a more precise examination of the role of ethnic media in combating negative portrayals of minorities in the media. In particular, how do ethnic media affect the mainstream press? Many of the stories in the ethnic press rarely make it into mainstream media newspapers or television reports and are effectively ghettoized and segregated. We need to discover ways for these stories to "break" in larger mainstream organizations like the Globe and Mail, the National Post, and CTV and CBC. In interviews for this paper, many mainstream media workers suggested that they rarely use ethnic media as a source of information. Why are ethnic newspapers and programmes not of interest to mainstream media workers?

5. Do mainstream media organizations in Canada continue to perceive their audience as white mainstream, or is there an acceptance of a multifarious audience? Mahtani (2001a) has explored this topic with Australian (SBS) and New Zealand broadcasters. We may well want to complete similar research here in Canada. How do the mainstream media think about their audience? Who do they think are watching and consuming their media? What do they see as the impact of their perceptions of their audience versus their actual demographic? What are the steps being taken to address this diverse audience? If advertisers are beginning to realize that minorities have growing spending power, we need to find out if other Canadian mass media sources are recognizing the consuming potential of minority groups.

6. Researchers have effectively pointed out the media wrongdoings. We have yet to explore the ways the media "does it right." Our history of research in this area bears out this claim. Many of our content analyses have focused upon citing negative images. Our discourse analyses may well become more nuanced through a tabulation of positive images as well. We should conduct case studies and interviews with producers and reporters at programmes that have made their focus targeting a diverse audience, making it their mandate to accurately portray minorities – namely, CITY-TV and CHUM-TV.

7. Several media researchers observe the need to examine the discourses about ethnic minorities that prevail in newsrooms in Canada. Unfortunately, few of us have had the opportunity to conduct interviews with media workers, primarily because of the difficulty in acquiring access, and because many media workers have expressed concerns over confidentiality (Mahtani 2001a). More than any other area, researchers insisted the importance of anchoring studies about ethnic minority representation through a situated analysis of organizational and behavioural practices within the media's sites of production. In interviews with media researchers, it was

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suggested that we go straight "to the source" – the media organizations themselves – in order to better comprehend why these negative portrayals proliferate. We need to extend existing studies by interviewing media professionals – especially journalists – to understand the mechanisms through which distorted and stereotypical representations are produced. Who makes decisions around media representations of minorities? What is the relationship between institutional representation and media representation of minorities? Are ethnic minorities involved in the production of these images? Does it make a difference if there are more ethnic minorities working in media production, or are they effectively silenced in the newsroom, as some suggest (Mahtani 2001a; Henry and Tator 2000; Henry 1999). In other words, what are the experiences of media workers of colour? A media researcher suggested "focusing upon the experiences of minority newsmakers who work in relatively homogeneous workplaces...does the question of ethnic identity figure more strongly for minority media practitioners than for white practitioners?" John Miller recommended conducting a similar study to his own 1994 analysis of institutional representation of minorities. Others agreed, proposing quantitative analysis projects that would help us acquire more statistics on the number of minorities behind the scenes at various media organizations. One media worker asked: "How many senior executives, programmers, directors, editors, etc; are visible, ethnic, religious minorities? Assuming that these numbers are small, how do we change them?"

8. Drawing from the previous recommendation, there is a need for media researchers to work more closely with media organizations themselves. Of course, this is no easy task, given the "closed shop" mentality of various media organizations. However, we must encourage liaisons with media workers and stress that their representations do have an impact on curtailing cultural citizenship in Canada. A key problem is that media professionals often do not realize that their representations misrepresent or under-represent minority groups (Dunn and Mahtani 2001; Mahtani 2001a). When they do realize that representations are problematic, there is often a "laissez-faire" attitude expressed – that the very problem of minority representation is so entrenched within the structure of the media organization itself, and thus almost impossible to combat. Therefore, we need to find ways to reach media workers and present our findings in an accessible format – outside of our academic journal papers – in order to encourage other kinds of representations and to propose the possibility of diversity training that will be useful to them. Henry and Tator (1999) have been particularly effective on this front, producing summary reports and one-page analyses for various mainstream media organizations.

9. Several media researchers who were interviewed recommended more theoretical examinations in the field. As mentioned earlier, a dualistic framework of under-representation or misrepresentation has dominated the majority of the literature on minority relations and media. One media researcher suggested a thorough excavation of communication pedagogy in Canada: "What kind of framework does communication education assume in Canada? What kinds of issues might this give rise to, in relation to critical communication scholarship? An examination of television production courses and textbooks, complemented by interviews with white and non-white media practitioners, would facilitate this type of scholarship."

10. How does the growing monopoly of media ownership affect equitable representations of minorities? This is a particularly salient issue in this country, given the tightening of media budgets from coast to coast and continual layoffs at various newspaper presses. How does this affect the stories Canadians see and hear about ethnic minorities? What are the ramifications for rural towns when the stories they read about in the local paper are only available from mainstream Canadian Press (Mahtani and Mountz 2001)? What is the relationship between minority representation and mass ownership of media organizations (Winter 1997)? It has been suggested that the cost of accurate portrayals is not high (Miller 1998; Dunn and Mahtani 2001). We may well investigate this issue through qualitative, in depth, open-ended interviews with media workers in this country. Some researchers suggested projects that examine how our media products sell across the border and around the world. It has been surmised that media products with greater ethnic diversity sell better abroad. We require research that explores the relationship between sales and the portrayal of equitable ethnic diversity in media.

CONCLUSION: MOVING BEYOND BLAME TOWARDS SOLUTIONS AND STRATEGIES

This paper insists that the ways the media portray and report on minority groups in Canada greatly affects the ways the public perceives minority groups in Canadian society. Varied research across disciplines demonstrates that minorities are regularly stereotyped in mass media. Media images can promote attitudes of tolerance and harmony, or fear and negativity. When media representations fail to represent Canada's minorities with sensitivity, the entire country suffers the consequences. Our task as researchers should be to create a "united front" against the preponderance of these stereotypical images by enhancing our current discourse analysis projects, coupled by further studies with media workers to examine the reasons lurking behind the continued proliferation of these images. Media workers need to consider and create alternative representations of minorities, and it may well be our task to develop alliances with them to encourage other sorts of images. Researchers interviewed for this report have recommended routes for research through new methodological approaches that will serve as a means towards more inclusive and equitable representations of minorities in Canadian media, where minorities are no longer marginalized but imagined as an integral part of the Canadian nation-state.

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[1] A clarification of terms seems useful at this point. It is important to note that I am employing the term "minorities" throughout this paper to encompass a wide rubric of racial, cultural, and ethnic and linguistic groups, including "visible minorities," "cultural groups," "racialized peoples," "non-whites," "religious minorities" and "people of colour" in order to mirror the work of other researchers in this field (Fleras and Kunz 2001; Henry 1999). However, employing this identification is contentious. The term can be essentialist, and often fail to recognize the great diversity of ethnicities, cultures, and religious and linguistic differences that come under this definition. I refer the reader to Karim's insightful examination of the struggles between discourses on ethnocultural terminology that reflect different conceptions of majority-minority relations in Canadian society (see Karim 1993).