PUBLIC OPINION AND MEDIA TREATMENT OF THE "REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION" CRISIS IN QUEBEC

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INTRODUCTION

In pluralist societies, the coverage of issues related to minorities and ethnic relations too often perpetuates certain bias that can fuel stereotypes, prejudices and "racist slips" in opinion discourses. Even with a great concern for objectivity, the media sometimes transforms public debates on ethnic or religious issues into "societal crises" that can contribute to a state of "moral panic" amongst the population. This might be described as what took place from 2006 to 2008 in the province of Quebec during what was widely and unduly referred to as the crisis over "reasonable accommodation," a legal Canadian concept defining the room for manoeuvre of public institutions faced with requests from religious and other minorities for adapting their norms and practices to their specificities (BouchardetTaylor 2008).

The escalation began in March 2006, after a decision from the Supreme Court of Canada (the Multani judgment) authorizing a baptized Sikh student to wear the Kirpan in a Quebec public school. In January 2007, the debate was transformed into a crisis. On February 8th, 2007, the Premier announced the creation of the *Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences* (Bouchard-Taylor Commission), amid an election campaign, a media tsunami and an increased number of racializing discourses.

What happened in Quebec in this debate on so-called "reasonable accommodations"? Did the media blow things way out of proportion or was it the citizens and politicians who did that? Does media coverage reflect the tensions and contradictions already present within a society or do they provoke them?

This article is based on the studies we both conducted during this period: an expert's report ordered by the Bouchard-Taylor Commission, on media treatment and opinion discourses on reasonable accommodation in 2006 and 2007 (Potvin, 2008, 2010), and many polls on the subject during this period (Jedwab, 2007, 2009). The first adopts a qualitative approach to analyze, day after day, the practices of the print media and the contents of 1,105 articles on event based coverage and 654 columns and letters published in five major Quebec daily newspapers, from March 1st, 2006, to April 30th, 2007. The second presents data from a survey conducted in August 2007 by Leger Marketing for the Association for Canadian Studies that offers general opinions of the media's treatment of the debate.

The aim of this comparative analysis is to highlight the differences and the complementarity of both approaches to the analysis of media coverage and opinion discourses in the context of a highly emotional debate.

THE QUALITATIVE STUDY ON MEDIA COVERAGE AND OPINION DISCOURSES

Factual treatment and media practices

The first part of the qualitative analysis demonstrates the centrality of the media's role in transforming the debate into a crisis. It reveals that this crisis was created by a series of processes (Agenda Setting, Framing and Priming) and commercial strategies of the major print media, that are far from simply playing the role of "providing a public space" for reasonable debate among citizens.

The study highlights the constant presence – artificially sustained – of the debate in the print media's daily coverage and the recurrence of "cases" (anecdotes revealed as "exclusive investigations") presented on front pages that provoked a crescendo effect and led to the creation of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission. More than 75% of the "cases" described by media as "reasonable accommodations" were in fact private agreements, hypothetical situations or anecdotes. Some newspapers went out of their way to break one story after another, thereby elevating a collection of anecdotal events to

the rank of a "societal crisis." Using a sweeping array of public opinion polls about "racism among Quebecers," daily spot polls and "exclusive news investigations," these newspapers began constructing issues, "storytelling," and "agenda setting" for public debate, forcing politicians and citizens alike to take a stand on these questions. Their over-the-top magnification of events had a huge influence on the political agenda during this period. The opinions expressed by columnists or readers were often founded on an impressionist vision of the reality.

The way journalists framed their stories and the importance they attributed to some points of view allowed them to influence the public's understanding of the issues. Two ways of framing were unmistakably used by them: a legal-juridical frame and a dramatic-conflictual frame. The first misled the public by erroneously associating private agreements with reasonable accommodations. Requests for accommodation were often presented from the angle of "privileges" or abuses rather than citizens' right to equality or negotiated agreements. The second frame was used in polarized interpretations of events. It intimated that some minorities enjoyed privileges and threatened common values, thereby engaging readers of the majority in a victimizing reading of events. It was associated with commercial competition between the large Quebec media companies, leading to a race for fresh content, a distortion of reality, an amplification of minor stories, and the use of recurring images of the most "visibles" within religious minorities (Hassidic Jews, niqab or burqua wearing Muslims).

Opinion discourses and discursive mechanisms

The second part of the qualitative study analyzed opinion discourses—editorials, columns, and letters to the editor—and revealed that half of the texts included explicitly or implicitly one of the following racist "discursive mechanisms" of our analytical framework (Potvin, 2008): 1) *negative dichotomization* between "us and them" (separating the true from the false ones, the good from the bad); 2) *generalization* of behaviors to all members of a minority group; 3) *inferiorization* ("they do not evolve, they are marginal, they live in the Middle Ages"); 4) *self-victimization*, the "us" being the "norm" compared to the deviance (they do not respect "our" standards, loss of power or identity of the majority because of "privileges" granted to minorities); 5) *catastrophism* (state of emergency, apocalyptic scenarios); 6) *demonization*, fear of being the target of violence, of a demonic conspiracy or perverse manipulation ("they are strange, unpredictable, worrying"); 7) *desire to expel* "them" ("go away"); and 8) *appeals to political legitimization*, which constitutes a higher level of racism, in terms of institutionalization, or "crystallization" of racism in the public sphere (voting for a right wing party, calling upon the responsibility of the elected representatives to do whatever is needed or to "take a hard line"). Those eight discursive and "socio-cognitive" mechanisms, often unconscious, act as different "levels" of racism expressions, and often operate together to create a spiral effect. Where there is co-occurrence and a passage from one mechanism to another, the discourse is crystallized and hardens. We highlighted that 14% of the editorials/columns and 52% of the letters from readers of our corpus contained at least one of these following mechanisms. Among the discourses of editors, columnists, and intellectuals, these mechanisms were most often found in articles about Hassidic Jews. Negative dichotomization was used predominantly to oppose the values of the majority (defined as "people" or "society") to those of the minority, particularly on gender equality. Inferiorization inferred that they had not adapted to modern lifestyles. Many associated requests for accommodation with fundamentalism.

Many letters from readers slipped from one mechanism to another. *i.e.* from negative dichotomization imprinted with subordination ("Do we have to go back to the Middle Ages because one particular group wishes to?") to inferiorization, demonization and self-victimization: ("they come to us to impose their values," "they don't integrate," "they exploit their privileges," "they wish to bring us to our knees"), to the desire for expulsion ("The immigrants who want to live in Quebec must adapt to our way of life and not the opposite. If they do not accept this, they can go back home") and political legitimation (ex. the appeals from a small town to abolish the Charter municipal councillors and citizens). The racializing discourses went through various levels between 2006 and 2007, as if their trivialization in the media sphere had legitimized their progression and hardening.

THE SECOND STUDY: MEASURING PUBLIC OPINION THROUGH SURVEYS

This section considers whether the public approved of the general approach adopted by the media. The public opinion survey employed here offers insight into the general impressions of the media's treatment of the debate. Conducted just prior to the Government announcing the creation of the reasonable accommodation commission, the survey revealed that 73% of Quebec Francophones agreed that their society has been strengthened by the diversity of cultural and religious groups. However, 59% of the Francophone population agreed that Quebec immigrants should give up their customs and traditions to become culturally closer to the majority of Quebecers.

Table 1 reveals that a majority of Quebecers believe that the media acted in an exaggerated way about the issues associated with reasonable accommodation, with 63% of persons under the age of 35 in agreement with that statement compared with 45% of those persons over the age of 55. Some 67% of those with a university degree believe that the media exaggerated, compared to a little bit less than 40% of persons with a high school degree or less.

Table 1: Minority cultural and religious practices have received considerable attention in Quebec recently. Do you think the following groups have exaggerated, reacted appropriately or did not take the matter seriously enough?

	REACTED IN AN EXAGERATED WAY	REACTED APPROPRIATELY	DID NOT TAKE THE MATTER SERIOUSLY ENOUGH
News Media	55%	30%	12%
Quebec Minorities	45%	31%	17%
Quebec's Majority	26%	46%	24%

The survey points to a correlation between the percentage of those agreeing on the fact the media exaggerated and the extent to which individuals value the contribution of diverse cultural communities to Quebec society. As revealed below in Table 2, the survey data confirm that those Quebecers most likely to feel that the media exaggerated were most inclined to value the societal contribution of Quebec's diverse cultural groups.

TABLE 2 QUEBEC SOCIETY IS ENRICHED BY THE DIVERSITY OF CULTURAL GROUPS	THE MEDIA EXAGGERATED THE ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION			
	Strongly Agree	**Somewhat Agree**	**Somewhat Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**
Strongly Agree	37.5%	19.7%	10.8%	9.7%
Somewhat Agree	42.6%	60.0%	43.6%	23.9%
Somewhat Disagree	13.0%	14.4%	36.0%	40.9%
Strongly Disagree	5.6%	4.5%	5.2%	23.3%

Yet further insight into the mind-set of Quebecers is offered in the correlation of the views around the perceived exaggeration of the media and the degree to which Quebecers felt that immigrants should give up their customs and traditions and become more like the majority. Those who were strongly or moderately in agreement that the media exaggerated the issues associated were least likely to agree that immigrants should give up their customs and traditions.

TABLE 3 QUEBEC IMMIGRANTS SHOULD GIVE UP THEIR CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS AND BECOME LIKE THE MAJORITY OF THE POPULATION	THE MEDIA EXAGGERATED THE ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION			
	Strongly Agree	**Somewhat Agree**	**Somewhat Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**
Strongly Agree	15.3%	18.8%	24.8%	36.4%
Somewhat Agree	23.3%	27.2%	32.0%	36.9%
Somewhat Disagree	38.1%	39.3%	34.0%	21.6%
Strongly Disagree	22.8%	11.2%	6.8%	3.4%

Nearly seven in ten Quebec Francophones supported the idea that Muslim women should be allowed to wear the Hijab in public. As to the idea of Muslim women teaching in a public school wearing the Hijab some 33% of Francophones agreed with the idea and Muslim girls wearing hijabs in public schools is agreed upon by 36% of Francophones. There is also a variation in the views on accommodation issues relating to the Muslim population based on the degree to which the media is perceived to have exaggerated.

TABLE 4	THE MEDIA EXAGGERATED THE ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH REASONABLE ACCOMMODATION			
	Strongly Agree	**Somewhat Agree**	**Somewhat Disagree**	**Strongly Disagree**
Muslim girls should be all allowed to wear the Hijab in public schools	54.6%	38.2%	30.5%	17.6%
Teachers wearing Hijabs should be allowed to teach in public schools	47.4%	36.0%	24.5%	12.5%

While a majority of those who felt that the media exaggerated agreed that Muslim girls should be allowed to wear the Hijab in public schools, that view is held by less than 20% of those who believe that the media coverage did not go far enough. Similarly those who feel the majority coverage went too far are split when it comes to whether teachers in public schools should be allowed to wear Hijabs.

CONCLUSION

Both studies demonstrate that there is a gap between inclusive and pluralistic "official discourse" on the one hand, and the persistence of public debates tinged with fears over identity and of racializing discourses on the other. In effect, they both illustrate that the media played an important role in the manner in which Quebec's public understood the debates about reasonable accommodation.

On one hand, the qualitative study identified the main strategies and practices of the print media in dealing with the highly emotional character of the debate and analyzed how the opinion discourses – expressed by editors, columnists, intellectuals and readers in their own texts and words – sometimes "slipped" and used "racializing mechanisms" in a time of crisis. The analysis of discursive practices by the actors in the debate through the examination of the terms they employ permits to define how elected officials, journalists and citizens defined the issues and influenced one another in the context of a social debate. These influences become more apparent in the analysis of daily media coverage.

On the other hand, the opinion surveys allow measurement of the influence of certain opinions and attitudes in the context of an intense social debate, but it would be difficult for surveys to identify the strategies and practices of the media on a daily basis that contributed to transforming a debate into a "national crisis." Opinion polls are increasingly used by the media to reflect the dominant social or political issue of the day and to offer empirical support for the opinion discourses issued by media outlets. Moreover, the survey data illustrated that the qualitative findings arising from a content analysis of opinion discourses from readers or columnists on the issue of reasonable accommodation reflected an important segment of public opinion. But, if it remains clear that the media and the views expressed directly or indirectly in "public opinion" often served to reinforce each other, the media was able to control the agenda on a daily basis with their selection of letters from the public, the placing of information at the top of the agenda and the ability to "frame" it for "sales objectives." If the media exaggerated during the crisis over reasonable accommodation, according to many citizens and journalists, it had less to do with the opinions of columnists or readers on that subject than with the media practices of "putting the subject on the front page" on a daily basis, of setting it to the agenda and of framing it under a sensationalist and controversial angle.

The relationship between the views expressed in "direct opinion discourses" and public opinion surveys is a fertile ground for further developments. The qualitative approach permits a better analysis of various discursive mechanisms leading to racialization of minorities and could inspire more sophisticated questions in surveys and polls Both approaches, but especially the qualitative one, need to take upon consideration the influences of context factors in the expressions of racism. A crisis context gives legitimacy to the expression of intolerance, but whether this phenomenon is generalized and persistent is better assessed by quantitative, after the fact, surveys. Thus, both approaches should be used in a complementary manner to assess the state of ethnic relations and intergroup perceptions, especially that of majority groups in crisis contexts.

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OPINION PUBLIQUE ET TRAITEMENT MÉDIATIQUE DE LA CRISE DES « ACCOMMODEMENTS RAISONNABLES »

La plupart des analystes des médias constatent que le traitement médiatique des événements liés aux minorités et aux rapports ethniques n'est pas entièrement exempt de biais pouvant alimenter les stéréotypes, les préjugés et les « dérapages ». Même avec le plus grand souci d'objectivité, il arrive que les médias transforment des débats publics en « crises sociales » et en état de « panique morale », comme ce fut le cas lors de la « crise des accommodements raisonnables » au Québec de 2006 à 2008.

Les médias ne font-ils que refléter les tensions et les contradictions présentes au sein d'une société ou les provoquent-ils ? Il est difficile de mesurer avec exactitude l'impact des médias sur l'opinion publique et de nombreux travaux depuis des décennies se sont penchés sur cette question. Commune dans le discours populaire et journalistique, cette image des médias

comme simple « reflet » de la société a été mise en cause de toutes parts.

Toutefois, le passage du « journalisme informatif », qui valorisait l'objectivité et l'impartialité, à l'ère du journalisme communicationnel (et aux médias sociaux), qui rend central le contact des médias avec le lecteur ou l'auditeur, ou qui place ce dernier au centre du discours médiatique, nous ramène encore plus à la question de la « relation dialectique » entre les médias et les publics.

Dans ce texte, nous illustrons d'abord les principales « stratégies » et pratiques des médias, avec l'exemple du débat sur lesdits « accommodements raisonnables » au Québec en 2006 et en 2007, et ensuite, les discours d'opinion « directs », c'est-à-dire ce que les gens ont dit eux-mêmes, dans leurs propres mots, en écrivant dans la presse écrite et les « blogues » au cours de ce débat (que ce soit des éditorialistes, chroniqueurs, intellectuels ou simples « lecteurs »), et les opinions dites « indirectes », soit les perceptions et attitudes des gens, mesurées par les sondages, à partir de questions construites par des firmes ou des chercheurs. Les sondages participent aussi, évidemment, des diverses « stratégies » et pratiques courantes des médias dans un contexte de convergence de plus en plus prononcé.

Dans un contexte de surenchère médiatique et de multiplication des discours racisants, le Premier ministre a créé le 8 février 2007, en début de campagne électorale, la Commission de consultation sur les pratiques reliées aux différences culturelles (ou Commission Bouchard-Taylor). La « crise des accommodements raisonnables » a constitué un débat médiatique intense et tendu sur les rapports ethniques, de 2006 à 2008. Il n'y a aucun doute que les medias ont joué un rôle capital dans le façonnement du débat sur l'accommodement des différences religieuses et culturelles. La cristallisation de ce débat dans les médias commence à partir de mars 2006 et se transforme en « crise » en janvier 2007.

Plusieurs journalistes ont contribué à nourrir la confusion, en amalgamant l'accommodement raisonnable, qui est une obligation et mesure réparatrice en raison d'une situation discriminatoire, avec l'ajustement volontaire ou les ententes privées, qui ne résultent pas de la violation d'une liberté fondamentale. Plus de 75 % des « affaires » rapportées par les médias comme des « accommodements raisonnables » entre mars 2006 et avril 2007 étaient des ententes privées ou des faits divers anecdotiques montés en épingle par des journalistes. La couverture a non seulement été disproportionnée par rapport aux cas réels d'accommodements, mais plusieurs journaux ont multiplié les affaires « dévoilées » dans une logique de concurrence, menant à une surenchère et à un emballement médiatique Les données des sondages d'opinion utilisées dans notre étude révèlent que les résultats qualitatifs reflètent un segment important de l'opinion publique. Pourtant, il n'est pas évident si les médias ont dirigé l'opinion populaire ou s'ils l'ont simplement suivie. Une conclusion plus précise serait que les médias et un segment important de l'opinion se sont renforcés mutuellement.

Les analyses des enquêtes d'opinion sur l'ensemble de la période commençant avec la création de la Commission jusqu'à son rapport final (2007-2008) montrent relativement peu de changements dans les points de vue tenus par les Québécois autour des questions dites de l'accommodement. Ceux qui ont été fortement ou modérément d'accord que les médias exagéraient les problèmes liés à l'accommodement étaient moins susceptibles de convenir que les immigrants doivent renoncer à leurs coutumes et traditions alors que ceux qui étaient plus favorables au traitement médiatique sont plus enclins à vouloir que les nouveaux arrivants renoncent à leurs coutumes et traditions.

Les écarts étaient considérables, avec 74 % de ceux moins portés à croire que les médias exagéraient et qui désirent que les immigrants renoncent à leurs coutumes et traditions contre 38 % en accord que les médias exagéraient et qui préfèrent que les immigrants renoncent à leurs coutumes et traditions. Ces résultats endossent la thèse selon laquelle les médias ont eu moins d'impact sur l'opinion publique que certains observateurs supposent. En fait il est possible que les québécois étaient plus concernés par le ton des médias que par le traitement de fond (c'est-à-dire les conclusions) des rapportages, même si nombreux québécois ont exprimé le sentiment que le traitement médiatique des débats sur l'accommodement était exagéré. Pour leur part, les commissaires ont évoqué plusieurs exemples où la couverture médiatique des questions de l'accommodement était erronée. La relation entre les opinions exprimées dans les reportages et les sondages d'opinion et le comportement de la population en matière d'accommodement est un terrain fertile pour la recherche future autour des débats entourant l'immigration, intégration et l'identité.