

# Media

## How Canada's daily newspapers shut out minorities

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When three black robbers stormed into a trendy downtown Toronto eatery one evening this April and slaughtered 23 - year - old hairdresser Georgina (ViVi) Leimonis, a whole city was traumatized. So, apparently, were the city's newspapers.

The barbarians are inside the gate," a columnist wrote in The Globe and Mail. The Star and The Sun each splashed grainy, security - camera photos of the suspects across their front pages, and The Star quoted the head of the homicide squad as urging citizens to cut out the photos, "tape them to your car's visor, so that you will recognize them when you see them."

It took The Star three days to realize what kind of vigilante justice this might provoke. An editorial admitted the images were so fuzzy they could be almost anyone -- any young black man, that is. It asked: "How many law - abiding black youths will feel the suspicious glances of passers - by, or police officers, who may wonder: Are they the monsters?"

The Sun never did get it. When a black suspect surrendered peacefully a week later, the paper's three - inch - deep headline said "GOT HIM." And when a second man turned himself in, the paper blared "TWO DOWN." Quite apart from the harm this did to the presumption of innocence of two men, it raised the temperature of black - white fear in Toronto to the bubbling point, and served to stereotype this tragedy as a "black crime."

Responsible journalism surely requires fairness and thoughtfulness in news decisions. If most of those decisions are made by middleaged white men, there are going to be blind spots. That certainly happened in Toronto in April, and it happens regularly across the country. In both their staffing and in how they depict minorities in print, most of Canada's dailies are nearly as white as the paper they're printed on.

Consider the following facts drawn from two research projects done this past year at Ryerson Polytechnic University by me and graduate student Kimberly Prince:

### NEWSROOM STAFFING

In 41 daily newsrooms surveyed across Canada, there are 2,620 professional journalists (supervisors, reporters, photographers, artists and copy editors). Only 67 are non - white. That's 2.6 per cent, or five times less than the percentage of non - whites in the Canadian population.

Just four native Canadian journalists and 16 blacks work in those newsrooms.

No one seems to think these low numbers pose a problem. Ninety - three per cent of the editors feel the climate in their newsroom does not discourage either the hiring or promotion of non- whites. Yet only 11 of the papers say they have a strong commitment to hire minorities. One cites "backlash from whites" as an excuse for not doing more.

### DEPICTION IN PRINT

If you read the largest newspapers in five of Canada's most cosmopolitan cities, it's easy to form the following impression of visible minorities: Half are either athletes or entertainers; if they're in the news otherwise, they're probably in trouble; and few make any contribution to business or have noteworthy lifestyles.

Minorities were depicted in 420 of 2,141 photographs published in a random week's editions of the newspapers we studied -- the Vancouver Sun, Calgary Herald, Winnipeg Free Press, Toronto Star, Toronto Sun and Montreal Gazette. Only six per cent of those pictures ran in lifestyle sections; and only three per cent appeared in business sections. Thirty - six per cent were pictures of athletes.

Only 14 per cent of the 895 local news stories in those papers mentioned minorities or were about issues that directly affected minorities. This is far less than the 20 per cent minority share of the combined populations of the five cities. Minorities also tended to be portrayed more negatively (49 per cent) than positively (42 per cent) in those stories.

Considering that minorities constitute the fastest growing segment of the population, and potentially the best source of new readers and advertisers, you'd think publishers would be taking measures to correct these imbalances. But they're not. In a 1993 survey by the Canadian Daily Newspaper Association, they ranked "managing and covering diversity" 19th on a list of 21 secondary issues affecting the industry, behind "circulation cost control" and "competing with Canada Post."

A hiring freeze at most newspapers means the situation won't change soon. Even in the limited full - time hiring Canada's daily newspapers did last year, minorities were all but ignored. They got only 3 of 47 new jobs.

Experts like Toronto management consultant Dennis Strong feel that non - whites will go elsewhere -- to TV or to their own community newspapers -- if they

do not see their interests reflected in the daily press. And they aren't reflected there now, as the 1993 Ryerson analysis demonstrates.

The two - month study of six newspapers was based on "content audit" techniques developed by the American Society of Newspaper Editors. The audit technique allows newspapers to spotlight gaps in coverage that might reinforce stereotypes or exclude potential readers.

In our test, coverage was deemed positive if it showed achievement, negative if it depicted minorities as criminals or in a stereotypical way, and neutral if it just reflected the participation of minorities in everyday life, such as being included in a person - on - the - street poll.

Here's what we found:

#### PHOTOGRAPHS: FEW ROLE MODELS OUTSIDE SPORTS

If you took away the sports section, the representation of minorities in all the papers we studied would plunge. For example, 67 of the total of 140 photographs of minorities published in The Toronto Sun during the week were of athletes. The pattern was similar, if less dramatic, in the other five papers.

Only one paper, The Montreal Gazette, published more minority pictures than local population numbers suggest; three others lagged marginally behind; and two others, the Vancouver Sun and Calgary Herald, fell significantly behind.

The generally positive tone of these photos -- 45 per cent of the portrayals of minorities were positive and only 19 per cent negative -- was influenced by the large number of sports photos. This can be seen by isolating the figures for the Oct. 5, 1993, editions of the two Toronto papers. On that day, both The Star and Sun ran special sections previewing the playoffs starting that night between the Blue Jays and Chicago White Sox, two teams with substantial numbers of minority players. On that day, 84 per cent of all The Toronto Sun's minority pictures ran in sports, as did 77 per cent of The Star's. Generally, sports pictures tend to be more positive in tone than those appearing in other sections such as news.

The three western Canadian papers and The Toronto Star had the highest percentage of negative portrayals of minorities for the week -- each between 24 and 33 per cent. The Toronto Sun had the lowest negative score at eight per cent. The Calgary Herald was the only paper to have more negative (33 per cent) than positive (22 per cent) portrayals in pictures.

Under - representation was most acute in business and lifestyle sections. When six of English Canada's largest newspapers can only publish a total of 12 photos of minority business people in a week, and when only 27 photos of minorities appear in all their lifestyle sections, they are not reflecting their communities. The Winnipeg Free Press published no pictures of minorities in either section during the

week of our test.

#### LOCAL NEWS STORIES:

#### MARGINALIZING MINORITIES

Again, only The Montreal Gazette published a higher percentage of local news stories about minorities than their share of the local population. By contrast, only 11 per cent of the news stories in The Vancouver Sun concerned minorities, far less than the local nonwhite population of 26.7 per cent.

When we looked at the tone of the news stories, we saw great discrepancies between the papers. Three published more negative than positive news about minorities. The Calgary Herald's margin was 75 per cent negative to 19 per cent positive, The Toronto Sun's was 61 per cent negative to 21 per cent positive. By contrast, The Montreal Gazette wrote positively about minorities 72 per cent of the time, and negatively 17 per cent. The Toronto Star and Winnipeg Free Press tended to be more balanced.

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A story was considered positive if it was about a person of color achieving something, or if the angle tended to represent a minority viewpoint. This would include, for example, a Sept. 25, 1993, Toronto Star article about aboriginal director Alanis Obamsawin winning a film award, and a Vancouver Sun story the same day on an Asian - Canadian launching a human rights discrimination suit against a private school that wouldn't admit her son.

Much of the coverage of the Toronto black community's efforts to ban the controversial musical Show Boat was judged to be positive, but a negative story on that subject appeared in The Toronto Sun on Oct. 5. It highlighted the comments of white councillors who ridiculed the efforts of a black colleague to get school boards to boycott the show. Other examples of negative stories included an April 14 Calgary Herald report on an Alberta cabinet minister suggesting youth gangs are strictly an immigrant problem, and a feature the same day on native sons of alcoholic parents. A Toronto Sun column on August 16 deriding Asian - Canadians for campaigning against racism in immigration policy was also deemed negative, as was a Vancouver Sun story on how unilingual signs in Chinese stores are upsetting shoppers.

The Ryerson study suggests Canadian papers could benefit from policies being adopted by large American papers to promote diversity in everyday news coverage. A "mainstreaming" checklist issued to all news staff at The Seattle Times, for example, suggests that reporters and editors ask: "Have I sought diverse sources for this story? Am I employing 'tokenism' by allowing one minority person to represent a community? Am I furthering or battling stereotypes?"

Change doesn't happen without commitment from the top. So far, most Canadian publishers just don't seem willing to make that commitment.

Newspaper minorities newspaper	% of minority photographs in newspaper	% of and aboriginals in population*
Toronto Sun	24	26.8
Toronto Star	24	26.8
Montreal Gazette	21	17
Vancouver Sun	12.8	15
Winnipeg Free Press	26.7	17.0
Calgary Herald	11	17.0

\* Source: Statistics Canada, 1991 census

Newspaper minorities newspaper	% of minority news stories in newspaper	% of and aboriginals in population*
Toronto Sun	20	26.8
Toronto Star	15	26.8
Montreal Gazette	18	11
Vancouver Sun	12.8	17.7
Winnipeg Free Press	26.7	10
Calgary Herald	11	17.0

\* Source: Statistics Canada, 1991 census