

Buried Voices:

Media Coverage of Aboriginal Issues in Ontario

Media Monitoring Report: 2010 – 2013

Journalists for Human Rights

August 2013

Robin Pierro, Lead Writer

Jorge Barrera, Contributor

Cindy Blackstock, Contributor

Robert Harding, Contributor

Duncan McCue, Contributor

Mike Metatawabin, Contributor

Introduction

Journalists for Human Rights (JHR), Canada's leading media development organization, conducted a quantitative analysis of media coverage in Ontario of Aboriginal people, culture and issues between June 1st, 2010 and May 31st, 2013. This study examines the trends, news spikes, and tone of media coverage focused on Aboriginal people during the examination time period.

Reviewing the results of this study, several experts, academics and journalists in the area of Aboriginal media and issues in Canada provided analysis of the findings. JHR offers final conclusions and recommendations following these expert analyses.

In June 2013, JHR launched its first media development program in Canada, the *Northern Ontario Initiative*. The program focuses on improving non-Aboriginal Canadians' understanding of Aboriginal issues and creating job opportunities for Aboriginal people in media.

JHR began developing the program in 2011, in consultation with Aboriginal community partners in Northern Ontario. The *Northern Ontario Initiative*, now running for three months, trains Aboriginal people in reserve communities and the city of Thunder Bay, Ontario, to produce quality journalism and sell it to mainstream and Aboriginal media outlets. The program also trains non-Aboriginal journalists in Thunder Bay to cover Aboriginal issues with greater context and sensitivity. JHR is planning to expand the program to other provinces.

During the *Northern Ontario Initiative's* two-year planning and development process, JHR found it difficult to find quantitative measurements on the number of news stories in Ontario that focused specifically on Aboriginal people. Further, no studies existed that broke down, through quantitative analysis, the tone of coverage of Aboriginal issues and people, and when particular events generated spikes in media coverage.

Although studies do exist on the representation of Aboriginal people in Canadian media, no quantitative research had assessed recent media coverage for the time period of this study.

In order for JHR to accurately track the *Northern Ontario Initiative's* impact on media coverage of Aboriginal people, it was important to establish a baseline study examining recent media coverage.

JHR will reassess media coverage for the duration of the *Northern Ontario Initiative* and will analyze the overall impact of the program at its conclusion.

Since 2002, JHR has trained over 12,000 journalists, in 21 countries in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East and North Africa regions to report ethically and effectively on human rights issues. JHR's support has helped local journalists create change in their communities by exposing injustices and calling governments to account. Stories produced by JHR-trained journalists have resulted in corrupt ministers being sacked, water wells built in dry communities, doctors being brought to doctor-less hospitals. JHR's work has helped ensure safe and transparent elections in post-conflict countries such as Sierra Leone.

Findings

This study sampled media coverage of Aboriginal people in Ontario since June 2010, analyzing stories focused on Aboriginal issues and people between:

- June 1st, 2010 to May 31st, 2011
- June 1st, 2011 to May 31st, 2012
- June 1st, 2012 to May 31st, 2013

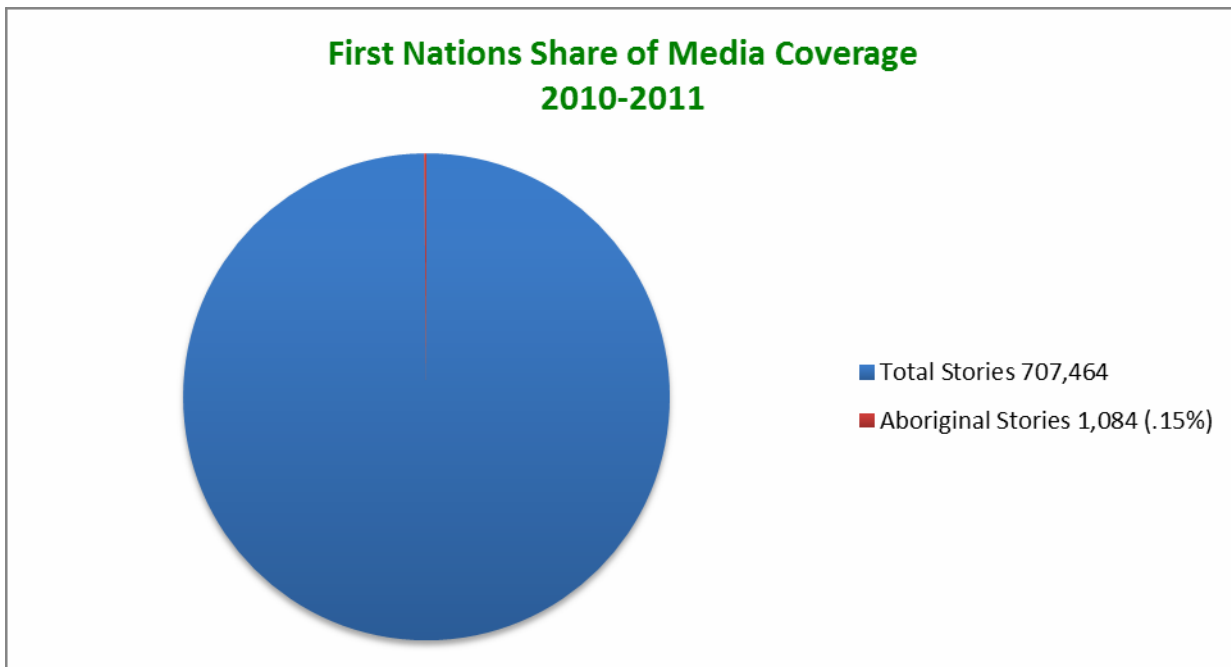
Further, the study broke down the most commonly reported stories for each time period and the tone of those stories: positive, negative or neutral, as well as news peaks or "spikes" (heightened media interest) that correlated with particular events over the three year period.

The study examined all stories originating from 171 print and online news outlets based in Ontario. A keyword search captured stories that included the following terms: "Aboriginal, First Nations, Northern Ontario reserve and Indigenous." The JHR *Northern Ontario Initiative* commenced in June 2013, therefore the examination period for this study ends on May 31st, 2013 in order to measure media coverage prior to JHR's intervention.

JHR commissioned Infomart, Canada's leading media monitoring agency, to carry out the quantitative components of the study in order to accurately measure coverage of Aboriginal people in Ontario.

Period 1: June 1st 2010 – May 31st 2011

During the first examination period, 1084 stories focused on Aboriginal people, culture and issues of the 707,464 media stories produced in total. This indicates that only 0.15 % of all news stories produced during this period focused on Aboriginal people, cultures and issues, an average of 4.8 stories per day across the province.

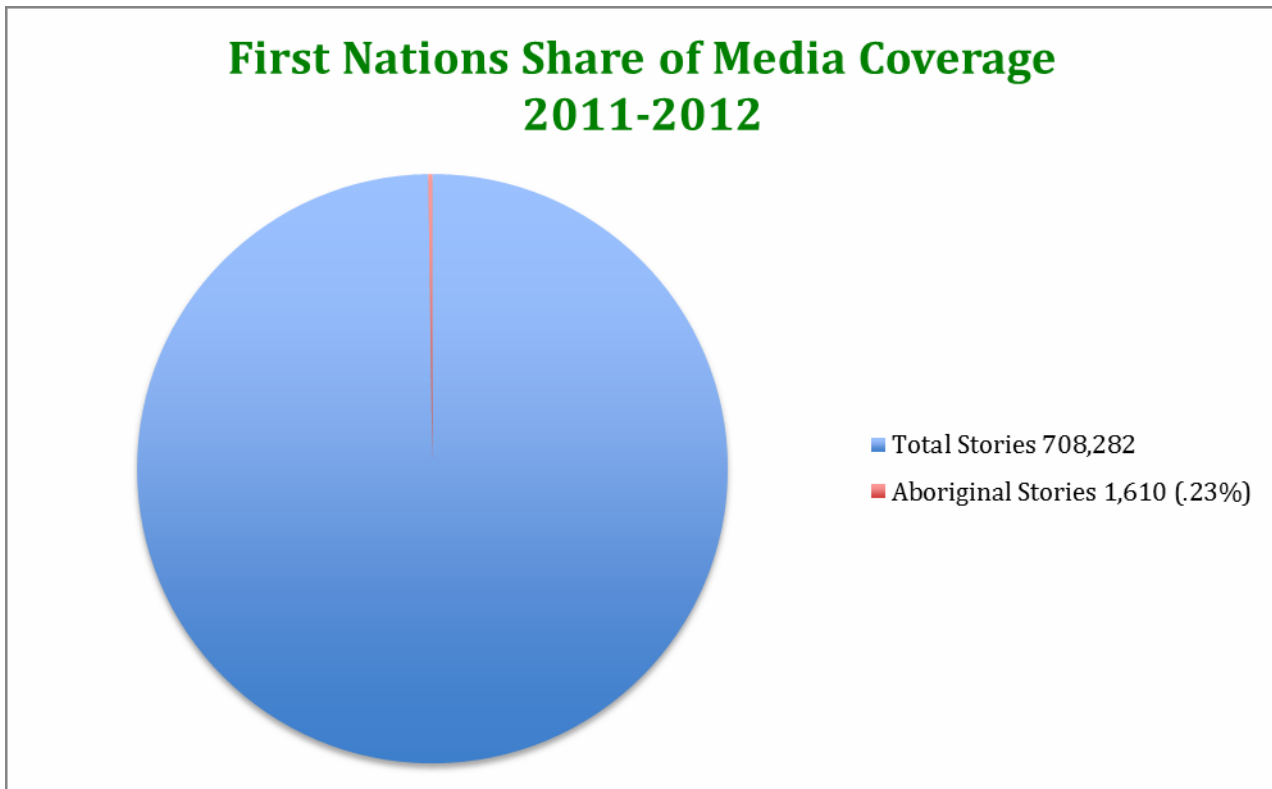


The top themes in Aboriginal-focused media stories were:

- Contraband tobacco: 6%
- Missing Aboriginal women: 5%
- Indian Act negotiations: 4%
- Salaries of Aboriginal chiefs: 4%
- Prime Minister Stephen Harper asking the RCMP to investigate First Nation reserve contracts: 3%
- Land claim conflicts: 3%

Period 2: June 1st 2011 – May 31st 2012

During the second examination period, 1610 stories focused on Aboriginal people, culture and issues of the 708,282 media stories produced in total. This indicates that only 0.23% of all news stories produced during this period focused on Aboriginal people, cultures and issues, an average of 6.2 stories per day across the province. This is an increase of 29% compared to the previous examination period.

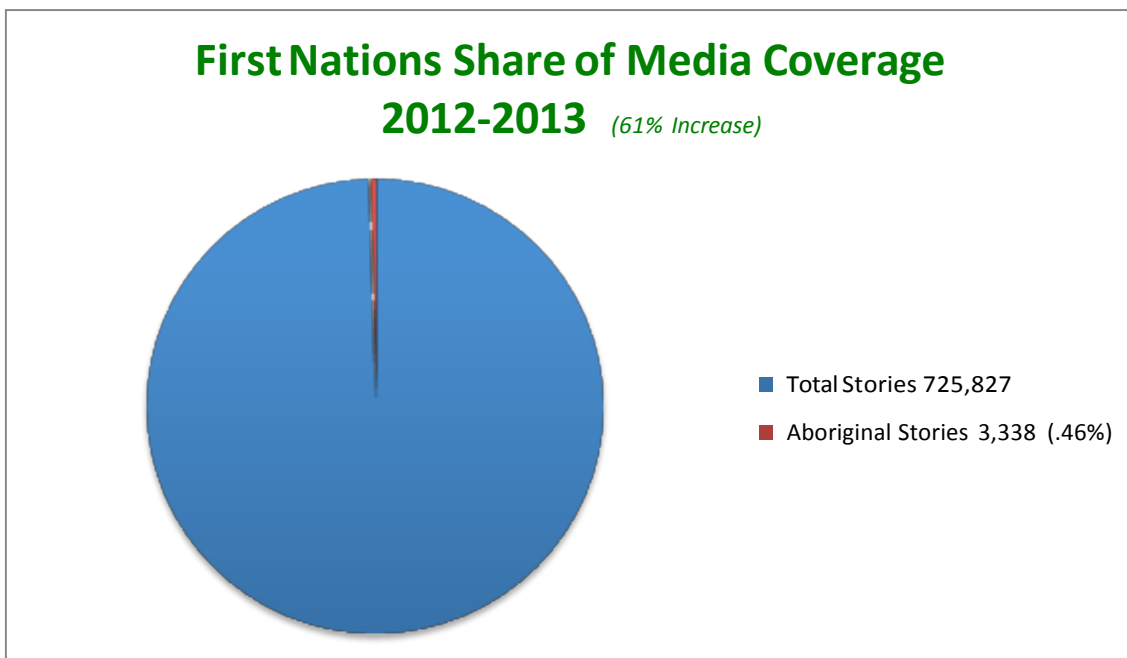


The top themes in Aboriginal-focused media stories were:

- The Attawapiskat Housing crisis: 22%
- Prime Minister Stephen Harpers meeting with First Nations: 6%
- Residential schools: 3%
- The Ring of Fire mining project: 3%
- National Aboriginal day: 1%

Period 3: June 1st 2012 – May 31st 2013

During the third examination period, 3338 stories focused on Aboriginal people, culture and issues of the 725,827 media stories produced in total. This indicates that only 0.46% of all news stories produced during this period focused on Aboriginal people, cultures and issues, an average of 9.8 stories per day across the province. This is an increase of 61% compared to the previous examination period.



The increase in stories is largely related the Idle No More movement; a total of 48% of all news stories focused on Aboriginal people since June 2010 were reported in this examination period.

The top themes in Aboriginal-focused media stories were:

- The Idle No More Movement: 31%
- The Attawapiskat housing crisis: 25%
- Prime Minister Stephen Harpers meeting with First Nation Chiefs: 19%
- Deaths at residential schools: 3%
- Shawn Atleo's election as chief of the First Nations Assembly: 2%

Tone of Coverage

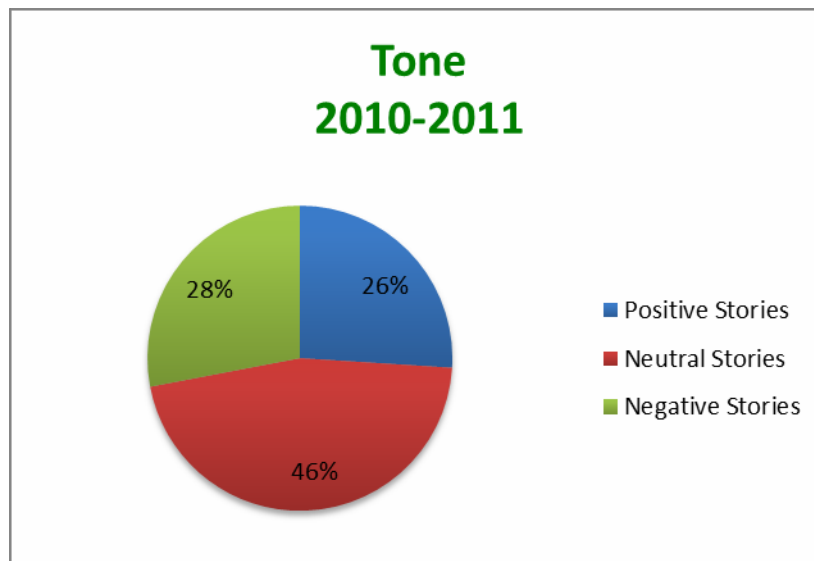
Analysis of how media stories depicted Aboriginal people, culture or issues from June 1st, 2010 to May 31st, through tone: positive negative or neutral.

Period 1: June 1st 2010 – May 31st 2011

26% of stories portrayed Aboriginal people and issues in a positive light

46% of stories portrayed Aboriginal people and issues neutrally

28% of stories portrayed Aboriginal people and issues in a negative light



During this period, positive stories on Aboriginal people and issues focused on the following topics:

- Canada endorsing the declaration of Indigenous rights,
- The Mining Act: stories largely portrayed the Act as an effective measure to foster development in Aboriginal communities,
- Land claim conflicts: stories predominantly supported and defended First Nation's land rights,
- National Aboriginal day: stories acknowledged Aboriginal culture.

Negative stories on Aboriginal people and issues focused on the following topics:

- The Indian Act: stories criticized Northern Affairs for ignoring the actual situation on reserves and portrayed reserve communities as inhabitable,
- The selling of contraband tobacco outside reserves: stories criticized Aboriginal people for their responsibility,

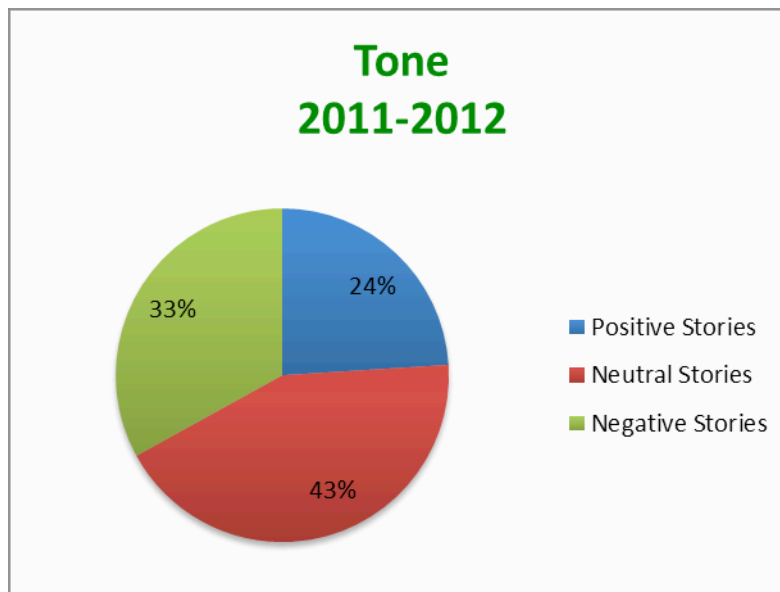
- Prime Minister Stephen Harper asking RCMP to investigate corruption on reserves: stories often portrayed reserves at hotspots for corruption,
- Chief salaries: stories criticized the salaries of chiefs on some reserve communities.

Period 2: June 1st 2011 – May 31st 2012

24% of stories portrayed Aboriginal people and issues in a positive light

43% of stories portrayed Aboriginal people and issues neutrally

33% portrayed Aboriginal people and issues in a negative light



During this period, positive stories on Aboriginal people and issues focused on the following topics:

- The “Ring of Fire” mining project: stories supported this as an employment opportunity for Aboriginal people,
- Attawapiskat housing crisis: stories supported and defended Aboriginal rights, and encouraged rapid action,
- The Indian Act: stories supported negotiations between Prime Minister Harper and First Nations chiefs,
- The Northern Gateway Pipeline: stories supported Aboriginals and their rejection of the project,
- Land claim cases: stories highlighted and defended Aboriginal rights.

Negative stories on Aboriginal people and issues focused on the following topics:

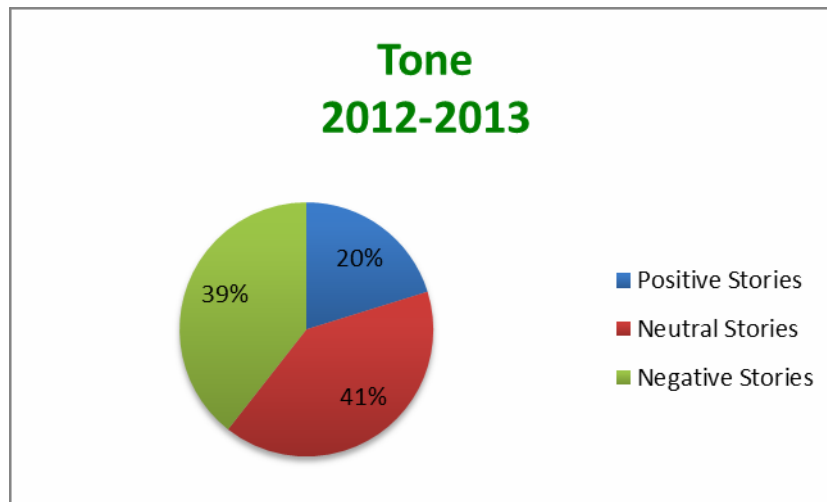
- The Attawapiskat housing crisis: stories portrayed the community as impoverished and Aboriginal people as helpless,

- The Indian Act: stories criticized the First Nations Assemblies’ desire to abolish the Act,
- Drug abuse crisis in northern Ontario reserves: stories portrayed Aboriginal people as drug addicts and drunks,
- Northern Gateway Pipeline: stories criticized Aboriginal peoples opposition to the pipeline expansion,
- Six Nations members convicted of attacking a Caledonia builder: Aboriginal people were depicted as violent criminals.

Overall, controversial issues such as the Attawapiskat housing crisis and Northern Gateway Pipeline divided media opinions, with positive and negative coverage of key Aboriginal institutions and the federal government on both topics.

Period 3: June 1st 2012 – May 31st 2013

- 20% of stories portrayed Aboriginal people and issues in a positive light
- 40% of stories portrayed Aboriginal people and issues neutrally
- 39% of stories portrayed Aboriginal people and issues in a negative light



During this period, positive stories on Aboriginal people and issues, focused on the following topics:

- The Idle No More movement: stories supported Aboriginal protesters and blockades in Ontario,
- Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence’s hunger strike: stories supported and encouraged her during and after the strike,

- Support and approval of negotiation outcomes after meetings between Attawapiskat's Chief and Prime Minister Stephen Harper,
- Shawn Atleo: stories expressed support after his re-election and during negotiations with Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Negative stories on Aboriginal people and issues focused on the following topics:

- The Idle No More movement: stories criticized protests and blockades, they were portrayed as extreme and unnecessary,
- Attawapiskat's Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike: stories criticized Spence's posture as irrelevant,
- Shawn Atleo: stories criticized Atleo during his campaign and after his election as the First Nations Assembly's chief,
- Aboriginal prisoner population on the rise: stories depicted Aboriginal people largely as criminals.

Overall, the Idle No More movement received some positive media coverage; however, it largely increased negative coverage of Aboriginal issues. Protests and blockade tactics were often portrayed as sabotage of Federal government negotiations. The majority of stories that portrayed Aboriginal people in negative light stemmed from editorials and opinion columns.

News Spikes

Below is a breakdown of key events since June 1st, 2010, that have influenced the news coverage of Aboriginal people in Ontario.

- Jun. 22-23, 2010: The announcement that some First Nations would be exempt from harmonized sales tax. **28 stories.**
- Mar. 17-18, 2011: Prime Minister Stephen Harper asking RCMP to investigate corruption in relation to First Nation reserves. **31 stories.**
- Nov. 1-10, 2011/ Dec 1-3, 2011: Attawapiskat First Nation housing crisis and the Federal government's decision to place Attawapiskat under "third-party management". **75 stories.**

- Jan. 24-25, 2012: Prime Minister Stephen Harper's meeting with First Nations chiefs. **52 stories.**
- Jul. 18-20, 2012: Shawn Atleo's re-election as the chief of the First Nations Assembly. **79 stories.**
- Jan. 2-5, 2013: The Idle No More movement coinciding with Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike. **138 stories.**
- Jan. 9-12, 2013: First Nations meeting with Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Governor General David Johnston, coinciding with the ongoing hunger strike by Chief Theresa Spence. **211 stories.**
- Jan. 16-17, 2013: Aboriginal protesters blocking traffic across the country. **101 stories.**
- May 9, 2013: The release of the StatsCan 2011 Census on Aboriginal People. **25 stories.**

Expert Analysis

Cindy Blackstock PhD, is the Executive Director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada and an Associate Professor at the University of Alberta. A member of the Gitksan Nation, Blackstock has worked in the field of child and family services for over 20 years. An author of over 50 publications, her key interests include exploring and addressing the causes of disadvantage for Aboriginal children and families, and promoting equitable and culturally based interventions. She holds fellowships with the Ashoka Foundation and the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and has received numerous awards and distinctions, including a National Aboriginal Achievement Award.

According to this report, revelations that at least 3,000 Aboriginal children died in residential schools accounted for only 3% of all media stories [focused on Aboriginal people] in 2013. No doubt, Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce, founder of the Canadian Public Health Association, would be greatly disturbed. In

1922, Bryce published the results of a study he did on the health of Indian children in 35 residential schools in a booklet entitled “A National Crime.” Bryce found that 24% of residential school students died each year from treatable diseases and, shockingly, the Government of Canada did very little to help them. Bryce noted the “public knows nothing” and his report makes clear he hoped its publication would cause public outrage pushing the government to implement the necessary reforms. Unfortunately, Bryce’s report received only fleeting coverage despite its publisher, James Hope and Sons, being located only meters away from the Parliamentary press gallery.

If reconciliation means not saying sorry twice, what assurances do we have that today’s journalists would cover a story like “the National Crime” with urgency and vigor? The findings of this report suggest that there is reason to worry. Reports on Aboriginal peoples account for less than one half of a percent of all media coverage despite the Auditor General of Canada finding inequities in Federal Government provision First Nations child welfare and education in 2011.

As the report suggests, the little media attention there is on Aboriginal peoples focuses on the actions of protest (i.e.: Idle No More and Chief Spence’s hunger strike) versus the reasons for the protests. This may partially explain the disturbing **11% increase in the number of negative stories about Aboriginal peoples over the last three years**. Realistically, protesters look better on film and in print than large stacks of unimplemented solutions to longstanding Aboriginal rights violations. While the public appetite for sensationalism may explain the pervasive lack of context in reporting on Aboriginal peoples, it is not an excuse.

A free press has a responsibility to report on matters the public needs to know not just what the public wants to hear. While it is important to recognize positive examples of balanced and informative reporting on Aboriginal peoples, if the trend in negative reporting goes unaddressed it raises the prospect that legitimate Aboriginal rights violations will be whisked aside by ill-informed stereotypes (being unable to manage money) or the wrongful codification of inequitable opportunity (i.e.: lower education funding) as a cultural deficit (high unemployment rates).

There is a lot of talk about reconciliation now. Clearly, treating First Nations, Metis, and Inuit children equitably has to be a basis for any meaningful progress. Journalists have a historic opportunity to set the bedrock of truth telling from which reconciliation and the full realization of Canadian values can grow. Let’s hope they don’t miss it.

Jorge Barrera has been a journalist for over a decade. Throughout his career, Barrera has reported from places like Ottawa, Iqaluit, Haiti and Venezuela. He currently works at the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. Before joining APTN, Barrera worked for Canwest News Service and Sun Media. He was the 2012 J-Source newspaper person of the year.

While not surprising, the results of this media monitoring report on Ontario media coverage of Aboriginal issues between June 2010 and May 2013 show a persistent pattern of under-coverage unless events fit certain narrative streams.

A caveat is necessary here. It is likely that Aboriginal issues receive more coverage in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia given the demographic and political situations in those provinces, though that is based on a gut assessment, not data.

This report, however, shows that in Canada's most populous province media coverage of Aboriginal issues remains anemic.

At the height of the Idle No More movement – with its round dances, protests, and rail and road blockades in reaction to the drama surrounding the hunger strike of Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence – these flashpoints, accounting for 26% of all hits for the year, managed to nudge the share of Aboriginal issues coverage between June 2012 and May 2013 to 0.46%.

Between June 2010 and May 2011, Aboriginal issues only garnered 0.15% of coverage, and between June 2011 and May 2012 it netted 0.23% of coverage.

Given the low level of pre and post Idle No More/Chief Spence coverage, chances are high the media-consuming public may not have noticed media coverage of Aboriginal issues until the spike.

The general public, and even editors and reporters, may have been unaware of the rising (and ongoing) tensions that led to the sudden explosion of protest activity. To many, the sudden flash mob round

dances and a chief hunger striking in a teepee on an island in the Ottawa River would seem to have materialized out of the blue.

Without any reference points, or noticeable narrative arcs, the emergence of the Idle No More movement and protests led to predictable public reactions, which were highlighted in the tone of the media coverage, with most of it tilting to negative tones as the protest and hunger strikes continued.

The public dialogue becomes mired in debates about whether protests are justified, or if the government has done enough, or not enough. What gets lost is that the events of January 2013 are part of a longer continuum, and that fact should lead to deeper questions as to why these events continue to manifest themselves in such dramatic fashion (Hwy 401 blockade in 2007, Caledonia 2006, ect.).

But this rarely gets probed in depth by mainstream media or informed public dialogue. Yesterday's stand-off is soon forgotten and the next flare-up is covered as if nothing preceded it. What follows is usually superficial and repetitive coverage that spawns the same public criticisms and conclusions.

Then everyone goes back to sleep, until the next round.

If an Oka-like crisis exploded again, which is possible, will the coverage be any different than it was two decades ago?

Duncan McCue *has been a reporter in Vancouver for over fifteen years. He is an adjunct professor at the UBC School of Journalism, and has taught journalism to Indigenous students at First Nations University and Capilano College. McCue recently went "back-to-school" at Stanford University in California, as the recipient of a Knight Fellowship, where he created an online guide for journalists called Reporting in Indigenous Communities (www.riic.ca). Before becoming a journalist, McCue studied English at the University of King's College, then Law at UBC. McCue is Anishinaabe, a member of the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation in southern Ontario.*

It's disappointing to have a study which confirms that Aboriginal issues in Ontario are less than half of one percent of total media coverage – even in 2013, when Idle No More protests "spiked" media attention.

Simply put, if Aboriginal peoples represent approximately 2% of the population of Ontario, it is shameful that Aboriginal issues still only occupy less than 0.5% of online and print media in Ontario.

But it's not a surprise.

There have been similar studies analyzing different time periods, different regions of Canada and different media outlets. All demonstrate Aboriginal peoples are consistently under-represented in traditional mainstream media.

What should concern every news editor in Canada is what this study really shows: today's Ontario media outlets have failed to increase Aboriginal content, despite knowing full well that Aboriginal under-representation in the media is a longstanding problem.

It can only lead to the conclusion that senior news editors and producers don't know how to fix the problem, or, more troubling, don't really care.

Diving deeper into this study, it is reasonable to further conclude senior newsroom managers are not always objective when it comes to the ways they assign coverage of Aboriginal issues.

This study shows that news media generally make efforts to balance the "positive" and "negative" tone of Aboriginal coverage – for example, publishing articles that both support and criticize First Nations' rejection of the Northern Gateway pipeline proposal.

But, during the heightened coverage generated by Idle No More protests, there was twice as much "negative" as "positive" coverage – much of which "stemmed from editorials and opinion columns."

In other words, during periods of conflict and tension, **what shapes the tone of media coverage is not necessarily journalists on the ground reporting facts, but senior writers based in urban newsrooms proffering opinion.** Sadly, analysis of media coverage during flash points such as Oka,

Ipperwash, and Gustafsen Lake has shown similar trends, and suggests these opinions are often rooted in century-old stereotypes rather than reality.

A final note about the study: while Canadians may get frustrated when First Nations use road blockades to voice political concerns, this study plainly illustrates such “direct action” tactics lead to significant increases in mainstream media coverage, which in turn leads to some type of response from Ottawa.

The squeaky wheel does, indeed, get grease.

Robert Harding worked in child welfare in Manitoba and Québec, and then moved to New Zealand’s public health care system as a community development consultant and senior policy advisor. Three years later, he taught Cree students enrolled in a 3-year college diploma program in special education in James Bay, Québec. In the mid-1990s, Harding moved to the University of the Fraser Valley in British Columbia where he helped the university and the Stó:lō Nation develop an Indigenous helping program based on traditional principles. He teaches in the Bachelor of Social Work and the Master of Social Work programs there, and his research focuses on media discourse on Indigenous self-governance issues at the local, national and international levels. Publications include “The demonization of Aboriginal child welfare authorities in the news” in the *Canadian Journal of Communication* (2010) and “News reporting on Aboriginal child welfare: Discourses of white guilt, reverse racism and failed policy” in the *Canadian Social Work Review* (2009).

The most striking feature of this study is the correlation between annual increases in the volume of coverage of Aboriginal issues and in the proportion of news stories deemed to have a negative tone.

In 2010-11, 28% of 1084 news stories were negative, while in 2011-12 and 2012-13, the proportion of articles with a negative tone was 33% of 1610, and 39% of 3338, respectively. More than half of the reportage of Aboriginal issues in the final year surveyed (2012-13) focused on two related civil disobedience initiatives: the Idle No More movement and the Attawapiskat First Nation protests and hunger strikes. It is not particularly surprising that much of this news coverage was negative since these events represented a challenge to the status quo in their insistence that governments restructure their relationships with Aboriginal peoples in ways that have implications for resources, structures of governance, and government spending.

Negative media coverage of the Idle No More movement and the Attawapiskat protests may diminish the likelihood that the public will lend its support to other vital self-governance initiatives such as treaty negotiation, land claims, and the devolution of authority to Aboriginal people in health, education, justice, and child welfare. A lack of public support for these processes may make it easier for governments to justify procrastinating in negotiations with Aboriginal people and obstructing the attempts of Aboriginal communities to gain more autonomy over their lives. News media representations of Aboriginal people in Canada place them outside the mainstream vision of "our" community, and quality of life indicators clearly show that they are not enjoying the same benefits and lifestyles as other Canadians. The news media are implicated in this exclusion of Aboriginal people from the imagined community, an exclusion that has very real consequences for Aboriginal people.

The news media, in their vaunted role of *public watchdog*, could play an important role in challenging misrepresentations of Aboriginal people, and educating Canadian people about Aboriginal issues. Sadly, it seems, the reverse is often true. Much of the coverage of Idle No More, Attawapiskat and the salaries of First Nations Chiefs, and other Aboriginal issues in Ontario, and indeed, in the rest of Canada, focuses on the so-called "special treatment" Aboriginal people are receiving or on the "vast sums of taxpayer money" being spent on them. This may create the impression that Aboriginal people are already being more than fairly treated. **However, this portrayal of Aboriginal people contrasts sharply with the harsh realities of daily life for most Aboriginal people, the high levels of social problems they experience, and their very low socio-economic status.** Clearly, negative news coverage of Aboriginal protests and initiatives harms the interests of Aboriginal people.

The contrast between the image of Aboriginal people that emerged in reportage in Ontario from 2010 to 2013 and the actual living conditions of Aboriginal people suggests that the news media themselves pose a significant obstacle to Aboriginal people's attempts to mobilize public support for positive change in social policy affecting their lives. By depicting Aboriginal protests and calls for self-governance in a negative light, the news media serves to protect the status quo and perpetuate the existing social and material inequality between Aboriginal people and other Canadians.

Conclusions

The findings in this report suggest three overarching conclusions regarding coverage of Aboriginal people in Ontario media.

1. The first conclusion is not a surprise: ***the Aboriginal population is widely underrepresented in mainstream media.*** With a cumulative average of just 0.28% of all news stories produced by news outlets in Ontario from June 1st, 2010 to May 31st, 2013, it is clear that Aboriginal-related stories are barely on the radar of most media outlets.

As Barrera points out, “Without more knowledge about Indigenous culture, current and past history and perspectives, the general public's concept of Canada will remain tragically incomplete.”

This lack of coverage leads to a much more severe problem on a societal level. When media fails to provide an accurate picture of what is happening in Aboriginal communities, or no information at all, it skews public opinion and allows people to rely on hearsay to form judgments about an entire population. Simply put, a lack of stories prevents news consumers from making informed opinions or from truly understanding Aboriginal people and issues.

According to Blackstock, “Understanding Aboriginal peoples is fundamental to understanding Canada and preserving important human values. **Canada, after all, is a First Nations word meaning village, it is time for the country to act like everyone in the village counts and should have their culture, languages and rights respected.**”

In examining the lack of coverage of Aboriginal people and their issues, through an extensive two year needs assessment carried out by JHR, JHR discovered three primary reasons for this recurrent gap. Firstly, many journalists have never studied and do not understand Aboriginal people or the system governing Aboriginal people, so they avoid the topic entirely. Secondly, news editors and producers deciding daily news agendas avoid archetypal ‘Aboriginal stories’ because they feel that news consumers are tired of hearing ‘the same old stories’ raising ‘the same old issues’. Finally, journalists don’t have easy access to Aboriginal communities, due to the cost of visiting remote reserves and the lack of readily available Aboriginal sources for stories, or their own lack of effort to find new Aboriginal sources for stories. Therefore many journalists are not abreast of what is happening in Aboriginal communities.

Harding agrees with the challenges journalists covering Aboriginal issues face. “Many reporters lack the knowledge of history and context that is essential for understanding complex issues that have long historical antecedents,” Harding explains. “Furthermore, they often lack the tools to work with Aboriginal sources and issues in an effective and culturally sensitive way.”

2. The second conclusion from these findings is that ***when Aboriginal people choose to protest or ‘make more noise’ the number of stories focused on the community increase.*** Aboriginal people often resort to direct action initiatives because they result in much needed media attention, followed by a response from government.

Since June 2010, the number of news stories on Aboriginal issues increased dramatically, coinciding with major events such as the Idle No More movement and Chief Spence’s hunger strike. Nearly half of the media coverage the Aboriginal community received since June 2010, focused on the Idle No More movement.

As an Aboriginal reporter, McCue identified the same conclusion through his own experiences, and questions why these stories receive so much attention.

“Yes, protests often meet the test of whether a story is ‘newsworthy,’ because they’re unusual, dramatic, or involve conflict. Yes, Aboriginal activists, who understand the media’s hunger for drama, also play a role by tailoring protests in ways that guarantee prominent headlines and lead stories. But, does today’s front-page news of some traffic disruption in the name of Aboriginal land rights actually have its roots in a much older narrative – of violent and “uncivilized” Indians who represent a threat to ‘progress’ in Canada? Are attitudes of distrust and fear underlying our decisions to dispatch a crew to the latest Aboriginal blockade? Is there no iconic photo of reconciliation, because no one from the newsrooms believes harmony between Aboriginal peoples and settlers is ‘newsworthy’?”

3. The third conclusion from these findings is that ***as coverage related to the protests and talks between Aboriginals people and government became more frequent, the proportion of stories with a negative tone correspondingly increased.*** The largest proportion of negative stories were opinion columns and editorials wherein Aboriginal people were criticized for their protests or direct action initiatives. Over three years, there was an 11% increase in the number of stories that portrayed Aboriginal people in a negative light.

Through her own analysis of media, Blackstock has identified the same problem, “Media coverage in Canada on Aboriginal peoples is increasing in terms of quantity but the quality of coverage is still

uneven. While there are positive examples of journalists who do fair and balanced reporting, there are still far too many stories that are based more on stereotypes than on reality.”

Harding equates much of this negative coverage to journalists not finding appropriate sources for stories, “In covering highly-politicized issues such as the Attawapiskat and Idle No More events, reporters tend to rely heavily on government sources (possibly because they may not have cultivated contacts/relationships with local First Nations). The result is news stories that are couched in familiar and marketable stereotypes such as the Aboriginal Warrior or the Violence Prone Protestor.”

McCue believes that this negative coverage has lasting impacts. “News stories from Indian Country, so often negative in tone and subject matter, aren’t unlike that evil Hollywood Indian. Who would blame Aboriginal peoples for being weary of “disaster coverage” from their communities? What impact does a relentless stream of negative news have on the self-esteem of Aboriginal youth? If non-Aboriginal audiences form their impressions about Aboriginal peoples from the news, who would be surprised if they develop unfavorable opinions?”

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this report, and JHR’s experience developing programs to improve the coverage of Aboriginal people in Canada, we have four recommendations to help ensure that non-Aboriginal Ontarians are more informed on the provinces issues facing the Aboriginal community and that the Aboriginal community is more fully represented in mainstream media than is currently the case.

1. Expand journalism school curriculum to include courses that teach effective and ethical reporting on Aboriginal issues and people.

Several programs in Canadian universities offer emerging journalists an opportunity to study Aboriginal people and issues. The University of Western Ontario offers a course in First Nations in News Media. First Nations University, in partnership with the University of Regina, offers courses in journalism for Aboriginal reporters. In 2012, McCue launched a program at the University of British Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, that focused on how to report on Indigenous communities. JHR is working with other journalism schools to develop similar courses as our program develops.

“Curricula in journalism schools could be adjusted so that students learn about media racism as well as the context of Aboriginal issues and the history of their representation in the news. Furthermore, journalism graduates could be held accountable for their reporting on Aboriginal issues by their profession through proactive codes of ethics that not only require reporters to be ‘culturally sensitive,’ but also that they actively combat racism,” Harding suggests.

Blackstock also believes that focusing on the next generation of journalists is a way to help prevent problems with coverage in the future. “Journalists need to be better informed on Aboriginal peoples generally including our historical and contemporary experiences. I would like to see journalism schools in Canada require students to take a course on Aboriginal peoples and another on Canadian history.”

2. Working journalists must make more efforts to foster relationships with Aboriginal people and communities, by seeking out new sources for stories, actually visiting communities they are reporting on, and forming relationships with Aboriginal people who may have suggestions for new or overlooked stories.

Michael Metatawabin, Chair of the Boards of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network Wawatay Native Communications Society, believes that forming relationships must come from in-person encounters with Aboriginal sources. **“Some of the best articles that have been printed have been by the reporters who made the trek to visit the First Nation territories or communities and had a live glimpse of what’s happening on site. They took the time to see first-hand and actually sat down with real life people who provided real life experiences.”**

McCue’s advice to journalists also stresses building relationships with Aboriginal people. “Success on any beat revolves around building strong, reliable relationships. This goes doubly so for reporting in Aboriginal communities, given the historic concerns Aboriginal communities have about theft and appropriation of culture.”

Engaging with an Aboriginal person or community should also go beyond just getting the interview, suggests McCue. “Once the story is published or broadcast, offer your story subjects a transcript of interviews or a copy of raw footage. Many Aboriginal communities lack time or capacity to gather information from community members – your work may serve as valuable information long after you’ve moved on to a different story. Further down the road, if you ever get a call from that Aboriginal person

who gave you the interview you so desperately needed, and he or she has a story idea of their own, remember the importance of reciprocity. If you can't make a news story out of the tip, try to help that person find a reporter who can."

3. Journalism schools and media outlets must make an effort to create more opportunities for Aboriginal people to work in media by offering training opportunities, fellowships and jobs as reporters.

By including Aboriginal people in the news gathering and production process, individuals with the background knowledge and understanding of the community will be well placed to provide context into stories.

"A more effective way to improve the representation of Aboriginal people in the news is to include them in news production as reporters, op-ed writers, and editors. Previous studies have found that significant Aboriginal participation in news production will lead to some improvement in reportage," notes Harding.

4. Media coverage of Aboriginal people and issues should broaden its scope beyond crisis. Ongoing stories focusing on healthcare, education, housing, and culture need to be brought to the forefront and appear in daily news stories.

"We have many success stories we can all share together and learn from. Let's highlight the many successes we all have in our territories, as individuals, as communities and corporations," says Metatawabin.

McCue's advice to journalists is, "Don't only seek out Aboriginal people for 'Aboriginal' stories, whether those stories are 'good' or 'bad'. Consult Aboriginal people for any sort of local, provincial, national and international story. What do Aboriginal folks think about the weather, the war in Afghanistan, or interest rates? When searching for parents for your annual back-to-school story, can you interview a Wabegijig and a Littlechild, as well as a Smith and a Singh?"

Beyond finding Aboriginal sources for stories, McCue also believes that journalism can be used as a way to provide education to Aboriginal communities by highlighting the successes of other communities when dealing with tough issues. "Solution-oriented journalism, future-focused journalism, development journalism, catalytic journalism. Call it what you like. The key tenet of this approach is for journalists to look for constructive, solution-oriented activities, that inform, intrigue, and inspire an audience.

Because, for every problem faced by an Aboriginal community, there’s likely an Indigenous community somewhere out there (in the province, the country or in other countries) that’s working toward — or has found — a way to resolve that challenge.”

For more information on the work that Journalists for Human Rights is doing to improve the coverage and representation of Aboriginal people in Ontario media, please visit www.dibaajimo.com or www.jhr.ca or email information@jhr.ca.