

Educating journalists for reconciliation

In a submission to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) in 1993, the Canadian Association of Journalists noted, “The country’s large newspapers, TV and radio news shows often contain misinformation, sweeping generalizations, and galling stereotypes about Natives and Native affairs.... The result is that most Canadians have little real knowledge of the country’s Native peoples, or the issues that affect them.”²⁴⁶ In 1996, the RCAP report had noted,

Public opinion polls in the past few years have consistently shown broad sympathy for Aboriginal issues and concerns, but that support is not very deep. More recent events have brought a hardening of attitudes towards Aboriginal issues in many parts of the country.... This growing hostility can be traced in large part to recent negative publicity over land claims, Aboriginal hunting and fishing rights, and issues of taxation.²⁴⁷

More recent studies indicate that this historical pattern persists.²⁴⁸ Media coverage of Aboriginal issues remains problematic; social media and online commentary are often inflammatory and racist in nature.

In August 2013, the Journalists for Human Rights²⁴⁹ conducted a study of media coverage of Aboriginal issues in Ontario from June 1, 2010, to May 31, 2013. The study found that:

- 1) “the Aboriginal population is widely underrepresented in mainstream media”;
- 2) “when Aboriginal people choose to protest or ‘make more noise’ the number of stories focused on the community increase”; and
- 3) “as coverage related to the protests and talks between Aboriginal people and government became more frequent, the proportion of stories with a negative tone correspondingly increased.”²⁵⁰

Media coverage of residential schools was low. From June 1, 2011, to May 31, 2012, media coverage of Aboriginal issues in Ontario accounted for only 0.23% of all news stories, and, of these, only 3.0% focused on residential schools. From June 1, 2012, to May 31, 2013, news stories on Aboriginal issues amounted to 0.46% of all news stories, and, of these, 3.0% focused on deaths in residential schools.²⁵¹

The report included expert opinions on its findings, including those of CBC journalist Duncan McCue, who observed that editorial opinions “are often rooted in century-old stereotypes rather than reality.”²⁵² He pointed out:

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