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Level: Grades 9-12

About the Author

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Lesson Plan

Diversity Audit

Overview

This is the fifth and final lesson in a unit designed to teach students to think critically about the way aboriginal peoples and visible minorities are portrayed in the press.

"Diversity Audit" is a summative activity that ties together all the information students have learned during this unit about newspapers, and the presence of bias, fact and opinion in the news. In this lesson, students will conduct a "diversity audit" on a local paper – providing a "snapshot" of the way various racial/ethnic groups are portrayed.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- recognize bias and value judgements in written work
- become aware of the ways in which ethnocultural minorities are represented in newspapers

Preparation and Materials

- For one week prior to class, students should collect complete copies of the local newspaper.

Photocopy student handouts:

- [Ethnic and Visible Minorities in the News](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/ethnics_and_minorities/minorities_news.cfm) (Also available online at: <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/ethnics_and_minorities/minorities_news.cfm>)
- [Ethnic and Visible Minorities in the News, Question sheet](#)
- [Diversity Audit](#)

Procedure

Class Discussion

The heart of good journalism is providing an objective, independent and balanced perspective. But despite best intentions, members of ethnic and visible minorities aren't always fairly or accurately represented in news media.

In today's class we're going to look at some of the issues surrounding racial representation in the news.

Distribute copies of Ethnic and Visible Minorities in the News to students. (If computers are available, students can read this essay online.)

As you read the essay, answer the following questions:

1. According to Charles Ungerleider, how is news reporting similar to story telling?
2. Which news stories are most likely to feature immigrants? Which are least likely to do so?
3. What is the negative backlash when racial identification is used in stories about crime?
4. Why might white Canadians believe news coverage of minorities and minority issues is sufficient?
5. What stories are immigrants most interested in? Why do you think these stories are underreported?
6. According to this essay, has ethnic and racial diversity within the newspaper industry improved since the 1990s? Explain?
7. How does Canada compare to the United States?
8. If you were responsible for creating a diverse workforce in the news industry, what suggestions would you make to improve the situation?

Once students have completed these questions, discuss their answers as a class.

Activity

With the newspapers that have been collected by students, divide the class into seven groups and assign one day's edition to each group.

- Using the Diversity Audit handouts, each group is to count the stories, columns and opinion pieces that appear in their issue of the paper, recording the totals onto the sheets. (Do not count advertorials.)
- Students will then circle all the stories, columns and opinion pieces that talk about, or feature, aboriginal peoples or visible minorities.
- Using only these articles, students will fill out the remainder of the audit sheet.
- Once this has been completed, select students to compile the audit sheets for all of the groups. On the board, tally the results and determine:

1. How many stories appeared in the paper in one week?
2. How many of these stories talk about, or feature, aboriginal peoples/visible minorities?
3. How many of these stories were positive/negative/neutral? How many were based on fact? How many were based on an opinion?
4. Did these stories fall under one common news category?

Discuss the results with students.

1. Which members of Canadian society are under-represented or not represented at all in these stories?
2. Who are the spokespeople for the most important issues in the news?
3. What is your evaluation of the newspaper's coverage with respect to ethnicity/race?

What conclusions can you draw from this audit?

Evaluation

- Completed Diversity Audits

Extension Activity

Have students visit and write a review of the Ryerson University School of Journalism's Diversity Watch initiative. (See sidebar for link.) This extensive Web site features current stories in the news about minority groups and racism issues, and provides links to ethnic media outlets and grassroots, affiliate, advocacy and political groups promoting cultural or diversity issues.

Ethnic and Visible Minorities in the News

Ask any journalist and he or she will tell you that good journalism is about objective, independent and balanced reporting. But study after study confirms that members of ethnic and visible minorities are underrepresented and stereotyped in the news.

In his landmark 1991 study of Canadian news media, Charles Ungerleider examined the gulf between objective reporting and the distorted image of ethnic and visible minorities so prevalent in most news coverage. Ungerleider argues that news reporting is essentially an exercise in story telling which means that a crucial part of news coverage consists of casting people as heroes, villains and victims.

Of 12,000 evening news stories aired annually by the three major American Networks, only 1% is about Latino people or issues. When Latinos are included, they are portrayed negatively 80% of the time.

Source: National Association of Hispanic Journalists, 2000

By either ignoring minorities or casting them in the role of villain, journalists unconsciously tell us stories about who is important, who is trustworthy, and who is a troublemaker. As these stories are repeated in the news, they become the "accepted understandings among those to whom alternative interpretations are not evident."

Colour-Coded News

In fact, immigrants are less likely to break the law than Canadian-born citizens. A federal study of serious crimes in 1989 and 1991 found that foreign-born citizens were "very significantly under-represented" in the Canadian prison system. (They are also, according to Statistics Canada, more likely to have higher levels of education and social stability.) And yet immigrants continue to be over-represented in Canadian and American news stories about crime.

York University's Dr. Frances Henry surveyed articles in the three major Toronto papers for a four-month period in 1997. She found that 54 per cent of all articles in the *Toronto Sun* that contained the word "Jamaican" were about criminal activity. Forty-six per cent of stories on drug offences in all three papers referred to East Asian and Vietnamese "drug gangs."

Some academics claim that this kind of reporting can have an impact on social policy. In their 2000 study *Racist Discourse in Canada's English Print Media* Frances Henry and Carol Tator conclude that the press creates a sense of "moral panic" in which "isolated incidents of violence are represented as an indication of a profound social crisis that imperils the nation."

Minority stereotyping is in no way limited to crime. The Canadian Nation of Immigrants Project reports that newspapers over-represent immigrants in stories about sports and entertainment, and under-represent them in politics and business coverage.

On the other hand, most mainstream media position white males as authority figures, while marginalizing the expertise of members of minorities. Approximately

90 per cent of all experts featured in U.S. news stories are white. When minority experts are called upon, it's typically in response to minority community matters, drugs and crime.

Changing Lenses - News Seen Through Minority Eyes

Research indicates that white Canadians tend to think that news coverage of ethnic and visible minorities is adequate, and that not much is wrong. The picture seen through minority eyes is quite different.

In 1995, the Canadian Newspaper Association commissioned a research study to explore the views of minority readers. They found that members of ethnic and visible minorities have "a positive view of Canada and their communities" and a "great sense of patriotism." However, a majority felt that Canadian newspapers treat visible minorities like foreigners, unfairly link race and religion to crime stories, and fail to provide balanced coverage of their communities.

Canadian journalist Haroon Siddiqui agrees:

Issues of interest to [visible minorities]—indeed to most Canadians these days, such as immigration, integration, equality of access to jobs and services, race relations, multiculturalism, cross-cultural understanding, multiple identities—have a low priority with the media. When they do cover these contemporary topics, their narratives tend to be outdated—hostile or primitive, or both.

Minorities in the Newsroom: Hiring Practices

In 1993 the Canadian Daily Newspaper Association (CDNA) surveyed the ethnic and racial diversity of the newspaper industry. Questionnaires were sent out to 82 of the largest daily newspapers. The 41 papers that replied—representing 2620 reporters, copy editors, photographers, artists and supervisors—had only 67 members of ethnic or racial minority groups on staff. More than half of the papers said that increasing the number of non-white journalists was not an immediate priority and publishers placed "managing and covering diversity" nearly last on a list of concerns.

Seven years later, in 2000, a study by Florian Sauvageau and David Pritchard at Quebec's Laval University revealed that 97.3 per cent of Canadian journalists across all media are white. An earlier study by the Quebec-based Centre de recherche-action sur les relations raciales (CRARR) reported that none of the Quebec television stations (other than Radio-Canada, the French-language public broadcaster) had an employment equity program—despite the fact that these stations recognized that the makeup of their newsrooms did not reflect the population they served.

The most recent Canadian inquiry into minority representation comes from an informal survey conducted by Federico Barahono for the April 2001 issue of *Thunderbird Magazine*. The managing editors Barahono interviewed felt that the shortage of minority journalists is attributable not to any conscious effort to keep people of colour out, but to institutional barriers that are largely systematic and unconscious.

Ryerson professor John Miller agrees. "People hire people who they're comfortable with, who look and think like them," he says. A Canadian Race Relations report from 2000 attributes the lack of minority representation in newsrooms to:

- networking barriers

- referrals for hiring from white producers, writers and editors
- the lack of recognition for qualifications and experience gained from outside Canada
- the lack of employment and training for people of colour

American newsrooms have been similarly slow to make diversity a priority. Although the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) pledged in 1978 to make their staffs representative of the general population by the turn of the century, they have failed to do so. Only 11.6 per cent of U.S. newsroom staff in 2000 were members of ethnic or visible minorities, compared to 27.3 per cent of the population as a whole. ASNE's 2002 survey produced similar numbers—twenty-four years after ASNE first committed itself to diversity, 88 per cent of newsroom staff were still white.

According to the Center for Media and Public Affairs, 88 per cent of evening news stories televised on ABC, CBS, and NBC in 2001 were reported by whites. There were no African Americans in the year's top 25 reporters and a study by Professor Joe Foote reports there were no Hispanic or Asian news correspondents on the big three American networks.

Promoting a Diverse Workforce

In Canada, since the early '90s, governments, schools of journalism and professional associations have made a concerted effort to increase the number of journalists who are members of visible minorities. Radio-Canada instituted a program in 1990 and by 2000, members of all minority groups had increased to 4.8 per cent and Aboriginal people to 1.3 per cent of all employees—an improvement, but nowhere near the 15 per cent of the overall population these groups represent.

There have also been gains in the number of visible minorities who report and anchor news programs for the CBC and other national networks, though there has been no study to quantify these gains.

A number of media organizations, like the Canadian Newspaper Association and the Canadian Association of Broadcasters, have committed themselves to promoting a more diverse workforce. And progress is being made.

However, as publisher Nicolas Hirst warns, it is not a simple problem to solve. When Hirst's newspaper, the *Winnipeg Free Press*, started a scholarship for students of colour and aboriginal students in the journalism program at Red River College, no one applied. Hirst was advised that minority students, "did not wish to enter into a competition where they were chosen because they were members of visible minorities."

Creating a diverse workforce will require a continuing commitment from the industry to examine its own biases. There are no quick fixes. In Hirst's words, "I need to think."

Ethnic and Visible Minorities in the News – Question Sheet

1. According to Charles Ungerleider, how is news reporting similar to story telling?
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Diversity Audit

Date of issue: _____

Total # of stories, columns and opinion pieces in paper: _____

Total # stories, columns and opinion pieces that talk about or feature Aboriginal peoples / visible minorities: _____

Using only the stories that talk about or feature Aboriginal peoples or visible minorities, fill out the following form.

	Article 1	Article 2
Headline		
Page/Section where story appears		
Writer: -staff -wire service		
Topic: -politics -business/ economics -sports -education -culture -health -humaninterest		
Portrayal of Aboriginals/visible minorities in the story: -positive -negative -neutral		