

CALLS TO ACTION ON RECONCILIATION AND THE MEDIA  
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## Media and reconciliation

The media has a role to play in ensuring that public information both for and about Aboriginal peoples reflects their cultural diversity and provides fair and non-discriminatory reporting on Aboriginal issues. This is consistent with Article 16:2 of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, which says, “States shall take effective measures to ensure that State-owned media duly reflect indigenous cultural diversity.” Canada’s *Broadcasting Act* (1991) sets out national broadcasting policy for all Canadian broadcasters with regard to Aboriginal peoples. The policy states the need to,

through its programming and employment opportunities arising out of its operations, serve the needs and interests, and reflect the circumstances and aspirations of Canadian men, women, and children, including equal rights, the linguistic duality and multicultural and multiracial nature of Canadian society, and the special place of aboriginal peoples within that society. [S. 3.1.d.iii]

The Act then states a more controversial obligation, that “programming that reflects the aboriginal cultures of Canada should be provided within the Canadian broadcasting system as resources become available for the purpose” (S.3.1.o).<sup>241</sup>

A submission to the federal Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures in 2004 pointed out deficiencies in the *Broadcasting Act* related to these service provisions for Aboriginal peoples. It stated:

The Act did not enshrine Aboriginal language broadcasting as a priority: instead it noted that ... [S. S. 3.1.d.iii] means that Aboriginal language programming

is not recognized nor protected to the same extent as English and French programming ... [and that] the phrase “as resources become available for the purpose” [S.3.1.o] has become a stumbling block for many producers and programmers, linking the availability of Aboriginal language broadcasting to the political process.<sup>242</sup>

The report recommended that the *Broadcasting Act* be revised to address these gaps. As of 2014, these provisions of the Act remain unchanged.

As Canada’s national public broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC/Radio-Canada) is responsible for fulfilling national broadcasting policy. For many years, it has been providing a minimum level of Aboriginal radio and television programming and news, in a few specific regions, including some Aboriginal-language programming, especially in northern Canada. In the Commission’s view, the budget cuts to the CBC over the past decade have significantly reduced and further limited its capacity to provide Aboriginal programming and dedicated news coverage on Aboriginal issues, and to increase the number of Aboriginal people in staff and leadership positions. As of March 31, 2014, Aboriginal people made up 1.6% of the CBC workforce, well below the demographic makeup of Aboriginal people, who represent 4.3% of the total Canadian population.<sup>243</sup>

The Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN), an independent, non-profit broadcaster, has taken a leadership role since the 1990s, in part to make up for the programming and scheduling limitations of CBC/Radio-Canada, to provide nationwide programming and news that reflects Aboriginal peoples’ perspectives, concerns, and experiences. The APTN has provided an outlet for Aboriginal journalists, producers, directors, writers, artists, and musicians, and attracts a wide Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadian and international audience.<sup>244</sup> As of 2014, over 75% of APTN employees were Aboriginal, and 28% of its programming was broadcast in various Aboriginal languages.<sup>245</sup> In the Commission’s view, the APTN is well positioned to provide media leadership to support the reconciliation process.

National public and private broadcasters must provide comprehensive and timely information and services to Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian public.

## Calls to Action

- 84) We call upon the federal government to restore and increase funding to the CBC/Radio-Canada, to enable Canada’s national public broadcaster to support reconciliation, and be properly reflective of the diverse cultures, languages, and perspectives of Aboriginal peoples, including, but not limited to:
- i. Increasing Aboriginal programming, including Aboriginal-language speakers.

- ii. Increasing equitable access for Aboriginal peoples to jobs, leadership positions, and professional development opportunities within the organization.
  - iii. Continuing to provide dedicated news coverage and online public information resources on issues of concern to Aboriginal peoples and all Canadians, including the history and legacy of residential schools and the reconciliation process.
- 85) We call upon the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network, as an independent non-profit broadcaster with programming by, for, and about Aboriginal peoples, to support reconciliation, including but not limited to:
- i. Continuing to provide leadership in programming and organizational culture that reflects the diverse cultures, languages, and perspectives of Aboriginal peoples.
  - ii. Continuing to develop media initiatives that inform and educate the Canadian public, and connect Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.

## **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.”<sup>246</sup> 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.<sup>247</sup>

More recent studies indicate that this historical pattern persists.<sup>248</sup> 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 Rights<sup>249</sup> 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.”<sup>250</sup>

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.<sup>251</sup>

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.”<sup>252</sup> 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 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’?<sup>253</sup>

Historian J. R. Miller has observed that when conflicts between Aboriginal peoples and the state have occurred in places like Oka or Ipperwash Park, for example, “politicians, journalists and ordinary citizens understood neither how nor why the crisis of the moment had arisen, much less how its deep historical roots made it resistant to solutions.... [This] does not bode well for effective public debate or sensible policy-making.”<sup>254</sup>

In the Commission’s view, the media’s role and responsibility in the reconciliation process require journalists to be well informed about the history of Aboriginal peoples and the issues that affect their lives. As we have seen, this is not necessarily the case. Studies of media coverage of conflicts involving Aboriginal peoples have borne this out. In the conflict between some of the descendants of members of the Stony Point Reserve and their supporters and the Ontario Provincial Police in Ipperwash Provincial Park in 1995, which resulted in the death of Dudley George, journalism professor John Miller concluded,

Much of the opinion—and there was a lot of it—was based not on the facts of the Ipperwash occupation, but on crude generalizations about First Nations people that fit many of the racist stereotypes that ... have [been] identified.... Accurate, comprehensive coverage can promote understanding and resolution, just as inaccurate, incomplete and myopic coverage can exacerbate stereotypes and prolong confrontations.... Reporters are professionally trained to engage in a discipline of verification, a process that is often mistakenly referred to as “objectivity.” But ... research shows that news is not selected randomly or objectively.<sup>255</sup>

Miller identified nine principles of journalism that journalists themselves have identified as essential to their work. Of those, he said,

Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth.... Journalism does not pursue truth in an absolute or philosophical sense, but it can—and must—pursue it in a practical sense.... Even in a world of expanding voices, accuracy is the foundation upon which everything else is built—context, interpretation, comment, criticism, analysis and debate. The truth, over time, emerges from this forum....

Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience. Every journalist must have a personal sense of ethics and responsibility—a moral compass. Each of us must be willing, if fairness and accuracy require, to voice differences with our colleagues.... This stimulates the intellectual diversity necessary to understand and accurately cover an increasingly diverse society. It is this diversity of minds and voices, not just numbers, that matters.<sup>256</sup>

With respect to the history and legacy of residential schools, all the major radio and television networks and newspapers covered the events and activities of the Commission. The TRC provided regular information briefings to the media who attended the National Events. We discussed earlier how students must not only learn the truth about what happened in residential schools, but also understand the ethical dimensions of this history. So too must journalists. Many of the reporters who covered the National Events were themselves deeply affected by what they heard from Survivors and their families. Some required the assistance of health-support workers. Some told us in off-the-record conversations that their perspectives and understanding of the impacts of residential schools, and the need for healing and reconciliation, had changed, based on their observations and experiences at the National Events.

## Call to Action

- 86) We call upon Canadian journalism programs and media schools to require education for all students on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the *United Nations Declaration on the*

*Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal-Crown relations.*