# THE MEDIA GAZE
## Representations of Diversities in Canada

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# Preface

To say that Canada is a society of diversities and difference is surely an understatement. Canada represents an extremely diverse society in terms of new Canadians and racialized minorities, including over two hundred different ethnic groups, as well as some eighty distinct Aboriginal nations. In addition to its racial, ethnic, and Aboriginal differences, Canada is home to class diversities, ranging from ruling to working to underclass; diversities in gender, including the transgendered and intersexed; and diversities associated with religion, sexual orientation, and age. Difference is no less prevalent a reality. In contrast to the descriptive terms "diversities" and "differences," both of which denote human variation along physical, cultural, social, and psychological lines, references to "difference" connote a more politicized concept that contextualizes diversities within a contested framework of inequality and power. To the extent that mainstream media have proven diversity-friendly by embracing superficial differences yet difference-aversive in rejecting deep differences and politicized diversities, the distinction is critical.

The profusion of diversities and difference in Canada cannot be denied. Expressions of politicized diversities (i.e., difference) include, among others, the politics of aboriginality, the proliferation of identity politics around race or gender, and the politicization of sexuality in claiming public space. Nor should we refute the reality of both government and institutional initiatives for accommodating diversities and difference. On one side are equity-based initiatives for levelling the playing field, including those under the Employment

Equity Act or a gender-based analysis as policy-making framework. On the other side are diversity-inspired models for accommodating different ways of accommodating difference(s) related to the status and rights of Aboriginal peoples, the place of Quebec within an English-speaking Canada, and the increasingly politicized demands of immigrants and racialized minorities (Fleras 2010). On yet another side are the human rights statutes and Charter provisions that purport to protect and empower those whose differences are disadvantaging.

Principles are one thing; practices are proving to be something else. However valorized as a relatively open and tolerant society that abides by the multicultural principle of inclusiveness (Ibbitson 2005; Adams 2007), Canada's commitment to institutional inclusion has left much to be desired. Good intentions notwithstanding, institutions have generally fumbled the challenge of inclusiveness, largely because prevailing notions of "how things should be done around here" remain deeply etched within (1) institutional design and organization, (2) working assumptions, (3) operational protocols and procedures, and (4) organizational outcomes. In that the foundational principles of mainstream institutions are likely to remain structured in dominance, the prospect of transformative change is iffy at best.

Mainstream media are no inclusionary exception to this exclusionary rule. Yes, compared to the past, mainstream media are generally more inclusive in representing diversities and difference (Gauntlett 2008). Both the quantity and quality of media representations have improved to the point where critics (McGowan 2001) now vilify these improvements as a political correctness gone wild. Yet there is also a less flattering spin. Lip service to the contrary, too many media messages remain stuck in the past. When not ignored as irrelevant or inferior, those demographics considered diverse and different are routinely framed as "troublesome constituents" who constitute problems in their own right or who create problems involving cost or inconvenience. Even initiatives for accommodating diversities and difference continue to be mired in controversy or marred by inconsistencies – thanks to an array of conflicting priorities and stubborn agendas. Not surprisingly, the interplay of institutional biases with organizational priorities continues to advance dominant interests and agendas, often at odds with those of diversities in Canada, with the result that audiences rarely get what they want but end up wanting what the media want them to have.

In acknowledging a need for challenge and change, this book addresses (describes, analyzes, and explains) the logic behind media (mis)representations

of diversities and difference against a backdrop of Canada's evolving media-scape. The book is anchored in a simple yet powerful theme: that mainstream media exist primarily as channels of persuasion whose primary objective is implicitly consistent yet expertly concealed – namely, to convert and co-opt audiences into "*seeing like the media," as if this media gaze was untouched by bias or perspective.* The implications of this media-centred (mediacentric) gaze are inescapable. In decoding how mainstream media encode (frame) images of diversities and difference, institutional designs and media processes are exposed as raced, gendered, and classed, as well as sexualized, secularized, and ageist. This book also addresses how the fundamental principles of the media's foundational order remain structured in dominance because of media gazes that extol the normalcy and normativeness of whiteness, Eurocentrism, secularism, heterosexism, and androcentrism. Even the popularity and power of social networking media, with all its democratic and liberating potential, may not have as much transformative clout in challenging a mainstream media gaze as many have anticipated (Hackett and Anderson 2010).

The goal of this book is both constructive and deconstructive: to analyze media constructions of diversities and difference by deconstructing the logic and dynamics of a blinkered media gaze. This critically (de)constructive tone is predicated on the premise that there is nothing normal or inevitable about what we see, hear, or experience, despite media efforts to naturalize their representational gazes. To the contrary, mainstream media messages continue to reflect, reinforce, and advance discourses in defence of dominant ideology. The agendas, interests, and priorities of those who own or control media are embraced as desirable or inevitable, yet are expertly concealed so that the resultant media gaze comes across as natural and normal rather than constructed and contested. The explanatory value of a media gaze for understanding the what, why, and how is crucial not only in securing an analytical framework for seeing through a seeing like the media, but also in pinpointing the politics and dynamics of a media-centred gaze as demonstrated below:

- We live in an information society. In the absence of personal experiences for understanding social reality, media secure a preliminary and/or primary point of contact with the world out there, often without individual awareness or resistance. In that sense, media are primarily a socializing institution of social control (Critcher 2006; Kimmel 2008).
- How do mainstream media construct images of race, ethnicity, and aboriginality; women and gender relations; the poor and the working classes; and

the historically disadvantaged, including gays and lesbians, youth and elderly, and religious minorities? Are constructions based on a relatively accurate appraisal of reality or, alternatively, are images refracted through the prism of preconceived notions that privilege whiteness, masculinity, and hetereonormativity. But what kind of information is yielded when media messages about diversities and difference are raced, classed, and gendered as normal and acceptable?

- On the assumption that media representations of diversities and difference constitute mainstream projections rather than minority realities (M.J. Miller 2008), do media images of race, gender, and class say more about the fantasies or fears of those doing the projecting than about the experiences and aspirations of those projected?

- Are mainstream media too accommodative of differences or not accommodative enough? Is there any truth to the accusation that news media embrace a corrosive political correctness that recoils from criticizing either minority actions or diversity initiatives for fear of courting accusations of racism (McGowan 2001)?

- The verdict on media inclusiveness is inconclusive, with signs of progress alongside patterns of resistance. Why, then, are some media processes such as advertising inclusive of diversities and difference, whereas other media processes – for example, newscasting – seemingly stagnate?

- Why is it that mainstream media are diversity-friendly (i.e., they accommodate superficial differences – an empty pluralism) yet difference-aversive (i.e., they reject deep difference unless it is depoliticized or whitewashed)? Is it because of attitudes or structure? Can fundamental change be advanced by tinkering with the conventions that refer to the rules? Or is the onus on challenging those foundational rules that inform media conventions?

- What responsibility do mainstream media have in facilitating the integration of diversities and difference? If responsibility prevails, what is the appropriate role? Should differences be ignored by emphasizing commonalities, even at the risk of glossing over identities? Should differences be foregrounded despite risks in reinforcing stereotypes?

- Many concur that mainstream media are raced, gendered, classed, ageist, and Eurocentric. Is it logically or existentially possible for mainstream media to become de-raced, de-classed, and de-gendered? What would such a media look like in a world where, ideologically speaking, there is no position from nowhere?

- What are the implications of seeing like the media in a wireless world where the new media are competing with mainstream media for placement and

primacy in Canada's mediascape (Lee 2010)? Does a "power to the ordinary people" implicit within populist and social media portend the possibility of a more democratic gaze (G. Turner 2010)?

There is much of value in the belief that true insight arises from asking the right questions. But as this book amply demonstrates, responses to these questions are neither readily forthcoming nor wholly accepted. Each of the themes yields an astonishing range of often conflicting responses that elude any consensus or certainty. And yet, exploring these issues in a mediated world both rapidly changing and increasingly diverse is necessary and relevant – *necessary* because everybody must become more critically reflective of what it means to live in our richly saturated media world; *relevant* because the blueprint for living together with our diversities and difference relies on the media to do their part in empowering Canadians accordingly. Perhaps *The Media Gaze* will equip Canadians with the insight and initiative for advancing the prospects of living together with our differences, equitably, and in dignity.

# part 1
## Seeing Like the Mainstream Media

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Canadians live in a mediated world. Few would dispute the centrality of mainstream media as an information source with persuasive powers to motivate or manipulate. But many believe that while others are susceptible to media's intoxicating brew of persuasion and fantasy, they themselves are largely immune to media messages – a mistaken belief that, paradoxically, bolsters the industry's powers of persuasion. Rather than a frivolous diversion for amusement or distraction, mainstream media are influential in framing who we think we are, what we think about, the nature of our experiences, how we relate to others, and how they relate to us. Media coverage draws attention to some aspects of reality as normal and necessary – primarily by focusing on what issues to think about, how to think about these issues, and whose voices will prevail in public discourses. Other aspects of reality are framed as inferior or inconsequential and dismissed accordingly. In short, far from passively reflecting a so-called objective world "out there," the media actively contribute to constructing public discourses about this mediated reality. When mainstream media provide a relatively accurate rendition of social reality, they are doing their job. But when conflict-driven and celebrity-obsessed coverage prevails over wisdom and insight, mainstream media may be doing a disservice to Canadians.

Nowhere are the politics and provocations more evident than in the framing of diversities and difference. Evidence overwhelming demonstrates how mainstream media have faltered in depicting women, racialized minorities, youth and the elderly, working classes, and homosexuality (Wilson, Gutiérrez, and Chao 2003). Those outside the framework of a preferred demographic have been either ignored as irrelevant or stigmatized as inferior. Alternatively, they have been portrayed as troublesome constituents who posed a threat to society because of their problematic status. Media coverage of marginalized demographics has embraced a set of binary oppositions ("us" versus "them") that has compromised their status in society (van Dijk 1995; Cushion 2004). To the extent that media have been reflective of reality, the prevailing media gaze has reflected the realities of those who owned or controlled what people consumed and communicated.

But yesterday's agendas are today's challenges (Gauntlett 2008). An exclusive reliance on monocultural frames as prevailing media gazes are relinquishing ground to depictions more reflective of and responsive to diversities and difference. Both the quantity and quality of representations in new and conventional media have improved to the point of guarded optimism (Hier 2008, 2010). However commendable these moves toward inclusivity are, contradictions prevail, as demonstrated by the following inconsistencies:

1   In theory, media institutions are under pressure to incorporate minority inclusiveness in line with Canada's multicultural principles, provisions of the Broadcasting Act, and human rights protocols. In reality, however, patterns of inclusiveness have proven erratic, shallow, and tokenistic in challenging traditional representations of minorities.

2   The gendered nature of mass media communication persists as well. Women and men continue to stand in a different relationship to media because of a privileged male gaze as the unquestioned media norm that defines acceptability and legitimizes normalcy.

3   In that media institutions remain in the hands of big business and corporate interests, depictions of the working classes, labour unions, and the undeserving poor tend to be slanted accordingly.

4   Other minority sectors of society are marginalized as well. Young men are routinely discredited as a problem demographic in need of monitoring and control. Their interests, realities, and accomplishments are routinely discarded in favour of delinquency frames. References to the elderly are no less unflattering because of their diminished status as nonproductive members of society.

5   Both gays and lesbians are finally receiving the kind of exposure that historically eluded their grasp. Nevertheless, depictions of homosexuality remain problematic, with seemingly progressive coverage undercut by the superficial and stereotypical – in part to placate the squeamishness of audiences and advertisers in seeing what was once unsightly.

6   The politics of religion at both national and international levels has leapt to the forefront in challenging the prospect of living together with differences. But this emergent reality is poorly reflected in media depictions of religiosity, religion, and religious differences for reasons that are not yet fully understood.

Does it matter? Should we care? Can anything be done? Regardless of the response or assessments, the cumulative effect of mixed media messages exacts a cost. Because media gazes are known to conceal as much as they reveal, media representations are pivotal in defining what is normal, acceptable, or desirable. For audiences who lack meaningful first-hand contact with diversities and difference, these representations are taken at face value, despite their potential to distort or inflame. They are no less powerful in circumscribing the lives and life chances of those framed as dangerous or diminished. The images conveyed by media gazes may be constructed; nevertheless, the construction of these images constitutes the lived realities for minorities

and diversities whether they like it or not. The conclusion seems inescapable: media representations of diversities and difference persist with respect to women, racialized minorities, Aboriginal peoples, and the poor and working classes, in addition to youth, homosexuals, and faith-based communities. These so-called demographics continue to be under-represented in areas that count, overrepresented in areas that don't count, and misrepresented on both accounts. That alone should be cause for concern, a commitment to action, and a catalyst for change.

Chapter 1 addresses these core questions: (1) What are media? (2) What do the media say they are doing? (3) What do the media really do? and (4) How do media matter in (mis)representing diversities and difference? Canada's mediascape comprises four sectors, each of which is animated by a different logic that informs content, relationship to audience, and corresponding patterns of media gaze. Particular attention is devoted to the idea that media gazes in general, and news media coverage in particular, may be interpreted as though they are systemically biasing because of consequences rather than intent. Chapter 2 theorizes the concept of a media gaze. By decoding those media gazes that frame (or encode) representations of diversities, the chapter focuses on deconstructing (decoding) the conventions behind a seeing like the media. Accounting for representations of diversities in this book taps into a recurrent theme. Biases that inform the media gaze are shown to be structural rather than attitudinal, institutional rather than individual, patterned rather than random, and consequential (systemic) rather than deliberate (systematic). That insight provides a sobering reminder of the obstacles that await in deconstructing media gazes for seeing through a seeing like the media.

# 1

## Disassembling Media Representations 101

Mainstream media are thought to communicate by providing information and entertainment. However trite but true that may be, mainstream media do more than tabulate and transmit. More accurately, they communicate by manipulating patterns of persuasion while suspending belief to achieve the desired effect of drawing audiences into seeing like the media. Nor is there any validity to claims that mainstream media are neutral and dispassionate conveyors of information. To the contrary, they are laced with commercial values, systemic biases, and hidden agendas that draw attention to mainstream aspects of reality as normal and necessary. Other aspects are discredited as irrelevant or inferior or problematic because they fall outside normative standards. Inasmuch as media cannot not communicate (in part because communication is receiver dependent), media representations of diversities are filtered through a prevailing media gaze.

The end result of such one-sidedness is entirely predictable, if unnerving: mainstream media not only constitute tools of persuasion in articulating right from wrong, acceptable from non-acceptable, normalcy from the deviant, and what counts from who doesn't. They also reinforce vested interests and priorities by consolidating patterns of power and privilege contrary to democratic principles (Hackett and Anderson 2010). The representational content of media persuasion is not necessarily deliberate (systematic); rather, the largely slanted coverage of media content tends to be systemically biasing owing to its predominantly negative messages. In that mainstream media portrayals can be

interpreted as discourses in defence of dominant ideology, a mediacentric gaze is critical in framing audience understanding of diversities and difference.

Reference to the concept of media in the singular is misleading. Media themselves differ in terms of what they look like, what they set out to do, and what they really do. Failure to acknowledge these distinctions does a disservice. Nevertheless, patterns and commonalities can be discerned, thanks to shared similarities in terms of rationale, structure, and dynamics. This chapter is focused on deconstructing mainstream media by disassembling their inner logic with respect to tacit assumptions, unanticipated outcomes, operational dynamics, and latent functions. The chapter compares the different media sectors (private, public, populist, and participatory/social); conceptualizes mainstream media as discourses in advancing dominant ideologies; frames news media as "soft" propaganda; and explores the concept of media impact and effects by reference to media hype and moral panic. In promoting a critically informed understanding of what, why, and how, the chapter goes beyond what the media say they do. Emphasis instead is focused on what the media are really doing in advancing hidden agendas while securing vested interests.

## Defining Media Sectors

It's commonly known that definitions differ in focus and scope, with points of emphasis ranging from what something looks like to what it says it does and to what it really does. Media too can be differently defined along these lines, that is, what media look like, what they say they are doing, and what they really do. As well, media themselves are internally varied because of underlying assumptions (elitist or populist), content (information or entertainment), structures (content or delivery focus), intended audiences (mass or niche), revenue source (direct or indirect), and anticipated outcomes (enlighten or entertain). The logic behind each definition also reflects differences in what is being communicated, why, and how, and with what purpose. Four major media sectors can be discerned for purposes of analysis: private, public, populist, and participatory/ social. In reality, simple typologies cannot accurately describe the current media environment given its complex interdependencies and blurring of distinctions between "new" and "conventional" media (Miel and Faris 2008).

*Private (commercial) media* are privately owned enterprises, concerned primarily with profit making on behalf of shareholders (usually through advertising or subscriptions/ticket sales). As money-making machineries through advertising or subscriptions/ticket sales, they are focused on providing consumers with safe and formulaic content that appeals to the lowest common

denominator that advertisers can tap into. According to their underlying logic, private commercial media per se do not exist to inform, entertain, or enlighten. Nor do they see their role as one of progressive social change unless the bottom line is involved. Their primary goal is to generate revenue by providing a commodity (or programming) that connects the preferred demographic with profit-driven advertisers. The preferred media gaze is aligned accordingly, so that commercial media rarely give people what they want but persuade people to want what the media have to give (see Ash 2007).

*Public media* are viewed as public service institutions. Their mandate is to provide audiences with a broad range of programs for advancing the goals of citizenship, belonging, and participation. Public media are government- or taxpayer-owned, focused largely on the enlightenment of individuals as citizens across a broad range of programming, and geared to maximizing the public good or advancing national interests. Like the commercial media, public media too are concerned with making audiences want what the media want them to have. To be sure, references to public media embrace a wide range of arrangements, from the publicly funded BBC to the mixed-funding model of the CBC in Canada and PBS in the United States to the state-owned and government-controlled system in China (Lincoln, Tasse, and Cianciotta 2005). Nevertheless, public media operate on the somewhat elitist premise that they know what is best for you.

The concept of *populist media* encompasses a broad range of printing and broadcasting enterprises, including *alternative, community, ethnic (multicultural), and Aboriginal media.* The term "populist" itself is generally employed to incorporate everything from right-wing conservative ideologies to radical polemics, with references in between that pit common folk against ruling elites. Here, however, the concept is used primarily in the latter sense of people-oriented media – media by, for, and about those demographics that public and private media tend to ignore or distort.

The customizing of content for specific audiences ensures that populist media differ from mainstream (public and private) media in terms of underlying logic, operational procedures, content, structure, and distribution (Skinner 2010). In occupying space abandoned by mainstream media, populist media provide a much-needed service for those poorly serviced because they lack financial clout and political power. Despite significant differences in form and function, populist media appear to share common attributes. They tend to be independently owned and operated, reflect localized interests by providing information of direct relevance to the communities they serve ("news they can

use"), embrace news values that supplement or challenge mainstream news media (Howley 2010), operate largely along horizontal lines rather than through top-down hierarchies, and encourage community-wide participation consistent with their grassroots orientation (Rennie 2006). Populist media also are highly partisan in defending the interests of those communities either ignored or marginalized by unflattering mainstream representations (M.J. Miller 2008; Roth 2010b). As Skinner (2006, 217) writes:

> Rather than tailor content, organizational structure, and production practices to maximize return on investment, alternative media foreground special social issues and values. In terms of organizational structure, they often purposefully shun traditional hierarchical models of organization to facilitate as much input as possible into the production. And in terms of production, in order to countermand the tendency to have professional values dictate the subjects, structures, and sources of content, they often seek participation and contributions from the communities they serve rather than rely on professional journalists.

Clearly, then, populist media fill a gap. They offer an alternative to mainstream media's indifference to country-of-origin issues, provide useful information for settling down and fitting in, promote public dialogue and exchange of ideas for the mobilization of audiences into social action, and challenge a highly corporatized media status quo (Rennie 2006; Downing 2009). Populist media may also prove pro-transformative. In acknowledging that social justice rarely originates within government circles or existing power structures, but rather from networks of resisters and agitators, populist media provide a mobilizing wedge for activists to foster dissent, challenge and resist power structures, and generate social movements on both the right and the left (Cultural Survival Voices 2008; J.D. Atkinson 2010; see also Chapters 13 and 14).

The expansion and popularity of digital, interactive, and mobile communication have ushered in a *social/participatory* media sector. Emergence of user-generated online content suggests the possibility of a new participatory media model, one based on ordinary citizens creating, distributing, and consuming media products outside of conventional channels (Ojo 2006; Rennie 2006; G. Turner 2010). "Participatory media" describes those online tools, spaces, and practices through which people interact, connect, and share information online. They include social network sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, in addition to information-sharing platforms such as blogs and wikis. The participatory nature of online media reflects what Mark Deuze (2006) refers to

as "people becoming the media," that is, a worldwide trend in which actors – formerly known as the audience – become increasingly engaged in active media making of their own.

The implications of this communication shift cannot be underestimated. Unlike conventional media, which tend to treat content as a thing (a product to be consumed), social media reflect a process or activity that significantly shifts the balance of power from producer to consumer (or "produser," to borrow Graeme Turner's terminology). They not only create personal online space but also construct virtual communities by exchanging stories, experiences, and shared meanings (K. Anderson 2009). Macro-level changes are no less significant (Kumar 2010). Or to rephrase Manuel Castells (2009, 8), in a networked society where digital technologies figure prominently in contemporary organizational forms, social reality is fundamentally a mediated social reality.

Shifts toward the participatory and social reflect – and are reflected in – changes to Canada's mediascape (Shade 2010). Of particular note in this shape-shifting dynamic are the following emerging themes: the fragmentation, globalization, and deregulation of markets for media products; increased competition for smaller or niche markets; and the decline of mass audiences (the largest possible audience all of the time) (G. Turner 2010). Media audiences are migrating from conventional broadcasting models toward the more interactive models of participation. Digital platforms have also altered the logic of media production, distribution, and marketing through social networking of user-generated content. In short, the explosion of digital and mobile media has proven transformative, not only in taking the "mass" out of the mass media but also in challenging mainstream media gazes (see Chapter 12). Table 1 compares the different media sectors. The far left-hand column provides the criteria for comparison. The other four columns secure the content, albeit in ideal-typical terms that reflect categorical rather than contextual differences.

As the table demonstrates, each media sector differs in underlying assumptions, operational logic, articulated and assumed goals, preferred channels of communication, institutional processes, and anticipated outcomes. To be sure, some degree of caution must be exercised because of inconsistencies in boundaries and content. After all, ideal-typical descriptions are abstract constructs that do not necessarily exist in reality, rarely claim to be exhaustive in their descriptions of reality, and can hardly claim internal consistency in a world that is contextual rather categorical. Nevertheless, there is much to commend in a typology that provides a heuristic tool for organizing a wide range of media institutions and their corresponding gazes.

TABLE 1

**Typology of media sectors**

| | Private (commercial) | Public (public service) | Populist[a] | Participatory/social[b] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Logic | Escapist (Give consumers what they want.) | Elitist (Give citizens what they need.) | Empower (we-media) (Give the community the power/ voices they lack.) | Egalitarian (me-media) (People creating, circulating, and consuming what they want, when, and how.) |
| Goal | Profit (market-driven) | Common good and national interests | Partisan – for the people, by the people, about the people | Social networking: create online communities + identity construction |
| Means | Entertain | Enlighten | Embolden – inform, adapt, challenge | Engage (interact) by bonding (internal) + bridging (external) |
| Scope | Mass commercial-casting + niche markets[c] | Universality (broadcasting) | Narrowcasting – untapped "minority" group | Egocasting/me-media (customized) |
| Perception of audience | Consumer: Passive consumption + interactive users[c] | Citizen | Community/minority | Netizens (Internet citizens) (People/citizens becoming the media.) |

| | Corporate-owned | General public, taxpayer-funded | Locally owned/controlled/produced | No one and everyone because everybody is connected but no one is in charge + corporate-owned |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ownership | Corporate-owned | General public, taxpayer-funded | Locally owned/controlled/produced | No one and everyone because everybody is connected but no one is in charge + corporate-owned |
| Information flow | • top-down<br>• hierarchical/authority<br>• one to many + interactivity[c] | • top-down<br>• hierarchical/authority<br>• one to many | • top-down – bottom-up<br>• hierarchical/interactive<br>• one to many/many to one | • anarchic – people becoming the media + power to the interactive person<br>• bottom-up<br>• fluid/decentred<br>• user-generated<br>• many to many/P2P |
| Contents | Safe/routine/familiar | Broad range, with emphasis on high-brow/high culture | Based on alternative media values and norms (Give the people what the mainstream media ignore.) | Whatever you want – anytime, anywhere, anybody (communicating without filters/publishing without editors) |
| Metaphorical description | "thing" (commodity) | "thing" (citizenship) | "thing-process" (inclusion) | "process" (conversing, connecting, mobilizing) |

a  The populist sector can be alternative, ethnic, Aboriginal, and/or community media.

b  The participatory/social sector includes citizen media and social media (Web 2.0/wikis/blogs/Twitter, Facebook/YouTube).

c  To create a more participatory and interactive format, mainstream media have adjusted their business style by capitalizing on digital media.

## Mainstream Media: Discourses in Defence of Dominant Ideology

Mainstream media have long been equated with the Althusserian notion of ideological state apparatus. They are thought to be complicit in colluding with the powerful and the rich to maintain the ideological hegemony of contemporary capitalism (Winseck 2008; Winseck and Pike 2008; Hackett and Anderson 2011). Ideas and ideals are promulgated whose intent is to channel people's thoughts and behaviour into a dominant ideology. This indoctrination process is not necessarily deliberate or malevolent. Mainstream media may invoke claims of neutrality and objectivity yet conceal vested interests behind a smoke-screen of platitudes and polemics, while embracing a tacitly accepted agenda of power and privilege without seeming to do so. This passage from John Fiske (1998, 307) astutely captures how ideological neutrality can skew media discourses:

> Social norms are realized in the day-to-day workings of the ideological state apparatuses. Each of these institutions is "relatively autonomous" ... yet they all perform similar ideological work. They are all patriarchal; they are concerned with the getting and keeping of wealth and possessions; and they all endorse individualism and competition between individuals. But the most significant feature is that they all present themselves as socially neutral, as not favoring one particular class over any other. Each presents itself as a principled institutionalization of equality: the law, the media, and education all claim, loudly and often, to treat all individuals equally and fairly.

How do media reinforce their sociological status as discourses in defence of dominant ideology? First and foremost, mainstream media are ideological because of a tendency to embody (reflect, reinforce, and advance) the agendas (the interests, perspectives, and priorities) of the dominant sector. Their ideological assumptions draw attention to preferred aspects of reality by normalizing dominant ideas and ideals as natural or superior while problematizing as irrelevant and inferior those who challenge or resist (Abel 1997; Henry and Tator 2002; Lambertus 2004). Consider the news media: as discourses of domination that conceal as they reveal, news media legitimize and naturalize social and ethnic inequality by focusing on the spectacular (from coups and quakes to drug cartels and ethnic conflict) at the expense of stories that make society look bad, including (a) poverty and its causes in rich countries, (b) everyday racism and cultural ethnocentrism, (c) imbalances because of globalization and world trade, and (d) legacies of colonialism within the context of neo-colonialism (van Dijk 1995). In reflecting and advancing the interests of the

## FYI: Framing Matters

The concept of framing is critical in constructing media gazes. That should come as no surprise; after all, few would dispute the centrality of media frames in influencing how people interpret the world and act upon that interpretation. Framing represents a process for organizing information by drawing attention to some aspects of reality as normal and desirable, but away from others as irrelevant or inferior – in the hopes of encouraging a preferred reading consistent with seeing like the media. The framing experience is anything but neutral. The interplay of deeply embedded news values and norms with institutional routines and organizational imperatives imposes limits on the boundaries of discourse (Lakoff and Ferguson 2006). Furthermore, according to Robert Entman (1993), the framing process itself is inherently communicative. Implied within each frame is a particular problem definition, a causal interpretation or diagnosis (what), a moral evaluation or judgment (why and who), and a proposed solution or remedy. For example, as widely noted, news media coverage of 9/11 was framed along these lines: (1) defining the problem (thousands killed by terrorists), (2) diagnosis (terrorists caused it),

elite through the power of distraction or divisiveness ("us" versus "them," hegemonic news media circumscribe the limits of legitimate debate by normalizing conformity while problematizing dissent [Bales 2003; for discussion, see Henry and Tator 2006]). Those who conform and comply receive favourable coverage; those who provoke or protest are framed as troublesome constituents in need of control or correction. Noncompliance is "otherized" as deviant or dangerous – not necessarily through overt expressions of racist discourse but through narratives, images, and rhetorical devices that demean or deny behind a facade of neutrality or objectivity (Mahtani, Henry, and Tator 2008). Clearly, then, how issues and persons are framed is crucial in advancing a preferred reading, as is explained in the accompanying sidebar.

Media are ideological in a second way. In addition to securing dominant ideologies in defence of mainstream interests, they themselves are loaded with ideological assumptions that influence the framing of which stories and whose voices. For example, consider how the concept of newsworthiness reflects a patterned yet unintentional institutional bias. News is essentially biased as a "medium of the negative" in embracing abnormality, negativity, crime, or conflict (as exemplified by a raft of clichés, such as "the only good news is bad news," "if it bleeds, it leads," and "if it scares, it airs"). Incidents and issues are routinely chosen for their conflict value or, alternatively, framed in ways that hype the "hot" by playing the angle (e.g., "race card") or spinning a conflict (e.g., "gender wars"). The former editor of the *Globe and Mail*, Edward Greenspon spoke frankly of a profession obsessed with the abnormal: "Let's not be coy here. Journalists thrive on the misery of others. It's not, as some have supposed, that the media dwell on the negative. It is that we dwell on the unusual and extraordinary ... If it happens everyday, it ain't news. Which creates a natural bias toward the negative

since most of life actually unfolds as expected" (Greenspon 2003).

The centrality of conflict and negativity as newsworthy encourages an adversarial format as a preferred media gaze. Disproportionate coverage is accorded to extremists with loud voices, contrary perspectives, strange appearances, and bizarre behaviour (Weston 2003). Incidents involving mass protest and civil disobedience are pigeonholed into a confrontational framework, with clearly marked positions and protagonists, from heroes to villains to victims (van Dijk 2000). Isolated and intermittent events are spliced together into a spiced-up story that inflames as it frames, thereby implying a looming crisis where none actually existed (Henry and Tator 2002; Hier and Greenberg 2002). Compounding this negativizing process is the growing tabloidization of news. Not only is reality morselized into biteable bits for easy consumption, but a "gotcha" journalism mentality is also promulgated that sacrifices substance for the scoop or the scandal.

Clearly, then, a paradox is at play. News discourses uphold a commitment to notions of public good, common values, and social order, yet they overwhelmingly emphasize negativity and conflict as newsworthy. Instead of tapping into the "silent majority" as news source, those on the margins capture the bulk of coverage precisely because of their inherent newsworthiness. News items consistent with prevailing media norms receive ample placements, regardless of their triviality. By contrast, stories outside conventional frames are peripheralized, despite their significance. As a result, important events in society may be under-reported because they lack striking visuals or catchy hooks, whereas relatively unimportant but visually arresting incidents monopolize news media attention. As Sauvageau, Schneiderman, and Taras (2006, 29) concede: "Stories that feature sharp conflict, can be easily explained and condensed, involve

(3) evaluation (terrorists are evil), and (4) solution (eliminate terrorism by fighting against terror). Finally, in framing both problem and solution, what is excluded from the "frame game" may prove just as informative as what is included. As Entman (1993, 54) writes, "Most frames are defined by what they omit ... Receivers' responses are clearly affected if they perceive and process information about one interpretation and possess little or incommensurable data about alternatives."

Clearly, then, frames are critical in constructing people's understanding of social reality. With frames, attention is drawn to some aspects of reality (but not others) as meaningful or memorable — thus reflecting political power and reinforcing boundaries of acceptable political discourse (what is and can be discussed and how). Without frames, effective communication is impossible, since there is no clue as to how to define the situation and respond or interact accordingly. Finally, reference to framing is closely aligned with the concept of hegemony. Media and political elites control the framing of issues for influencing public opinion and societal discourses by (1) creating consensus and cooperation without coercion, (2) changing people's

attitudes without their awareness that attitudes are changing, (3) bolstering the status quo as natural and normal, and (4) securing power over others without provoking resistance (Rosas-Moreno 2010).

In short, the power of frames arises from their perceived status as natural and normal rather than constructed and conventional. Their potency is secured by a gloss of invisibility, an absence of visible intent, and an uncanny knack to work in hidden ways — not only in shaping the media gaze as if it were no gaze at all but also in ensuring people's complicity in seeing like the media without their explicit consent (N.J.G. Winter 2008).

people in positions of authority, or who are compelling in some other way, either as villains or victims, and have eye-catching visuals are the stories that contain the ingredients most sought after by journalists."

The paradox is unmistakable: what should be newsworthy (however that may be defined) does not necessarily become the news; conversely, what becomes news would not be newsworthy if judged by standards of importance or relevance. This paradox is especially evident when privileging deviance as significant, while routinely attaching significance to the deviant (Shoemaker and Cohen 2006, 337). Maude Barlow (2004, 35) captures this anomaly by recounting her experience with a reporter who had internalized only too well the prevailing news norms: "I was congratulated by a reporter from a national newspaper who said, 'You know, it was really good that there wasn't violence from your side. But you know, one or two more peaceful demonstrations like that and we won't cover you anymore.'"

A conflict of interests is apparent. However illogical by conventional norms of morality and justice, a news media commitment to conflict and abnormality dovetails with the principle of newsworthiness. Inasmuch as what passes for newsworthiness is driven by the news norms of a prevailing news paradigm than by the needs of a democratically informed citizenship, the news media are fundamentally mediacentric. Reality is shoehorned into a media-centred point of view as natural and normal; other perspectives are dismissed as inappropriate or dangerous. The logic behind this mediacentricity is driven by the institutional, not the personal; by the consequential, not the intentional; by the routine, not the random; by the cultural, not the conspiratorial; and by the structural, not the attitudinal (see Weston 2003). Not surprisingly, there is a cost in framing news around a mediacentric perception of reality. A capacity to convey accurate and impartial information is sharply compromised,

to the detriment of fostering a democratically informed citizenship. The next Case Study demonstrates how news media coverage of Aboriginal peoples' protest actions reinforces their discursive status as problem people who protest.

As discourses in defence of dominant ideology, news media constitute systems of soft or systemic propaganda (Fleras and Kunz 2001). This is not propaganda in the conventional sense of deliberate and organized brainwashing; after all, negative depictions of aboriginality are not necessarily reflective of a racist news media that deliberately amplifies negativity through exaggerated and sensationalized coverage. Rather, repeated coverage of First Nations peoples as troublesome constituents exerts a softer propaganda effect. This negativity is conveyed not through biased coverage but by coverage that is systemically biasing. A one-size-fits-all formula of newsworthiness (conflict, negativity) is applied to all situations and groups, although some are more vulnerable than others to this one-sided coverage. Instead of something deliberate and malevolent, the typecasting of Aboriginal peoples as a troublesome constituent reflects the nature of news media to negatively frame (or problematize) those who challenge or fail to conform.

In short, media do not set out to deliberately create propaganda or wilfully control people's thoughts. But coverage can be interpreted as soft propaganda when it reflects the inevitable consequence of creating one-sided messages that privilege one point of view to the exclusion of others. The politics of propaganda is further explored in Chapter 15.

## case study

### Framing Aboriginal Protest

Mainstream news coverage of Aboriginal issues is subject to intense scrutiny and criticism (Fleras and Kunz 2001; Weston 2003; J. Miller 2005; Wilkes, Corrigall-Brown, and Myers 2010). Newscasting media are accused of perpetuating errors of omission or sins of commission by refracting Aboriginal realities through the prism of mainstream whiteness (Fleras 2003). Images of aboriginality continue to be refracted through the prism/prison of a white cultural paradigm that asserts the normalcy of white dominance while precluding alternative narratives. Few Aboriginal news stories are situated within a historical context; fewer still incorporate Aboriginal concerns from Aboriginal perspectives (Abel 1997; Sheffield 2002; Glynn and Tyson 2007; M.J. Miller 2008). Coverage is conveyed from an outsider's

point of view without much Aboriginal input. This oversight is due in part to fear, laziness, inexperience, or just plain ineptitude. The end result is profoundly regressive: media representations of Aboriginal politics and protest are unbalanced, decontextualized, focused on the extreme, deviant, or threatening, and likely to foster tensions or promote divisive politics (RCAP 1996; Weston 2003; David 2004; see also Kupu Taea 2007).

Such pejorative coverage paints a villainous picture of Canada's First Peoples as a population with a plight who have lost control of the plot (Weston 2003; Harding 2010). Paradoxically, Aboriginal efforts to bring about social change through blockades and occupations are no less problematized, as demonstrated in this Case Study on the news media's framing of Aboriginal protest. An assessment of this nature should come as no surprise. Aboriginal issues are much too complex, contradictory, and contextual for capture by the quick-fix mandate of junk food journalism (see Lasica 1996; Meadows and Molnar 2001).

## Packaging Protest

Protests and demonstrations are thought to play a critical role in advancing a healthy democracy (Cottle 2008). They constitute a bridge for overcoming disconnects between publics and policy makers, while helping to revitalize moribund parliamentary democracies. The issues that animate protests and demonstrations are conveyed by the media, which can make or break them, depending on the quality of coverage. However, to take advantage of the media's agenda-setting reach for getting across their message, mobilizing wider support, and gaining legitimacy for these actions, a price must be paid. Increasingly driven by their pursuit of media attention, dissidents and protesters must sensationalize their tactics by spiking the drama (from flamboyant theatre to open violence to fiery rhetoric) to attract news media attention to their cause. Yet the packaging of protest as spectacle rather than substance reinforces news routines that dwell on the superficial instead of the substantial (Wilkes, Corrigall-Brown, and Myers 2010). In the end, the underlying message is lost in the shuffle (Boykoff 2006) by a media tendency to trivialize protests or to criminalize protesters. Emphasizing violence or law breaking defines (frames) a situation in a way that delegitimizes challenges while reinforcing dominant interests (see Cottle 2008).

## Mediating First Nations Peoples: Images That Injure

Media coverage of Aboriginal peoples may be charitably described as uneven at best, criminal at worst (Harding 2010). Such an ambivalence reflects media

**case study**

pigeonholing of Aboriginal peoples as pathetic victims, noble environmentalists, or angry warriors (RCAP 1996). On one side, Aboriginal peoples are defined as pure, innocent, vulnerable, and deserving of government protection. On another side, they are depicted as ruthless thugs who must be firmly controlled. On still another side is their portrayal as hapless victims in dire need of government assistance or protection from internal lawlessness. By tapping into a cultural and historical reservoir of stereotypical negativity, namely, the motif of cowboys and Indians, news media coverage fixates on the confrontational rather than the normative, typical, or cooperative (Weston 2003; Lambertus 2004). The stereotyping of Aboriginal peoples as problem people is further compounded by funnelling Aboriginal protest and resistance into the framework of conflict, crisis, or crime. Finally, the linking of Aboriginal disputes across Canada tends to generate a moral panic over fears of Aboriginal peoples on a twenty-first-century warpath (J. Miller 2005).

Aboriginal protests are highly varied in terms of purpose, duration, and tactics, with corresponding difference in media coverage of these collective actions. Five major frames prevail, each with several themes: (1) political (from unrest to militancy), (2) social justice (defence of rights), (3) racial (discrimination to stereotypes), (4) legal, and (5) economic (costs or benefits). For the most part, however, Aboriginal protest or civil disobedience is routinely framed by a confrontational theme: one side is deified as good while the other is demonized as bad in the ensuing struggle between competing forces. Protesters are branded as dangerous or irrational because their prevarications fall outside the Eurocentric norms of engagement; by contrast, lawful authorities are framed as above the fray (Abel 1997). As Professor John Miller (2006) of Ryerson's School of Journalism in Toronto writes in lampooning journalists for framing the Ipperwash Ontario protest around negative stereotypes: "They framed the story as a bunch of First Nations people who were causing trouble instead of a land dispute that has not been resolved for 52 years." The intensity and repetitiveness of Aboriginal resistance (from Oka to Caledonia) has proven both puzzling and infuriating to many Canadians who "just don't get it" (D. Miller 2004), prompting this blistering indictment by Dan David (2004) over media coverage of a crisis at Kanehsatake, near Montreal:

> In mid-January [2004], Kanehsatake exploded in the national consciousness once more. Looking back at the media coverage of the events, familiar patterns

emerge. Major Canadian news organizations immediately pumped up the volume by resurrecting images of the 1990 Oka crisis, masked Mohawk warriors and all. They soon transformed the story into one of criminals versus a crime-fighting chief. Then journalists painted Kanehsatake as a community with never-ending problems, doomed by petty family squabbles ... Few journalists looked much deeper into the story or deviated from these easy stereotypes.

In short, news media contextualize protests as acts of criminality and threats to Canada's social order while simultaneously promoting a lawful and ordered Canadian establishment. They also tend to isolate Aboriginal discontent by framing protests as relatively independent of one another, ignoring a diversity of multifaceted Aboriginal voices in the process (Ricard and Wilkes 2007). But framing protest outside any socio-political context not only trivializes Aboriginal struggles for righting historical wrongs but also criminalizes the very problem under protest (Lambertus 2004; Harding 2006). With its ominous overtones of a people on the brink of violent revolt (J. Miller 2005), coverage of Aboriginal peoples as troublemakers masks their realities as complex individuals with legitimate grievances. It also overrides more fundamental issues related to Aboriginal constitutional rights unless themselves framed as conflict, a problem, or a threat to Canada (ibid.). And although space for dissenting views is not altogether absent when drawing attention to Aboriginal protest, news discourses continue to endorse dominant interests and unequal power relations (Harding 2006).

## Coverage: Informing or Inflaming?

Stuart Hall in his landmark 1978 work *Policing the Crisis* argues that times of crisis yield insights into how an ideological frame works. Conventional frameworks are rendered problematic because of counter-discourses that challenge a business-as-usual mindset (Henry and Tator 2005). For example, news coverage of the Atlantic lobster-fishing crisis exposed deep fissures between Canada's Aboriginal peoples and the mainstream news media. In late 1999, Canada's Supreme Court ruled that some Aboriginal groups in Atlantic Canada (including the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet) were entitled by virtue of unextinguished Aboriginal and treaty rights to hunt and fish without a licence and out of season for subsistence purposes or in pursuit of a modest livelihood (Coates 2000). The exercise of Aboriginal customary rights over the harvesting of lobster proved to be a flashpoint. In an industry in which a licence to fish for lobster was tantamount to printing money, lobster-fishing licences

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have proven tricky to come by, in the process excluding Aboriginal fishers from access to this lucrative industry.

Not surprisingly, tensions between Aboriginal peoples and lobster fishers escalated, especially when non-Aboriginal fishers smashed hundreds of Aboriginal lobster traps in the aftermath of the Supreme Court ruling. A subsequent Supreme Court ruling bowed to public pressure by conceding federal authority over managing fisheries on behalf of national and environmental interests, but not before Aboriginal fishing fleets were pillaged and burned, four thousand Aboriginal lobster traps were destroyed, and graphic video footage of open violence undid Canada's much-touted reputation as a kinder, gentler society (Toughill 2000). Eventually, calm was restored through negotiated compromises with most but not all the Aboriginal groups involved, only to be shattered again by violent episodes, including the pelting of federal fishing officers with fish entrails, federal boats ramming Mi'kmaq fishing vessels, and reported exchanges of shotgun fire.

How, then, did the news media respond to these crises in cutting up the catch? Mainstream news coverage of the Burnt Church lobster crisis proved no less myopic than that during the Oka crisis in 1990, which also attracted both national and international media attention (Kalant 2004; Conradi 2009; Swain 2010). The overall thrust of the news media's Oka coverage was framed around the theme of criminality ("law and order") and conflict instead of a struggle over land or Aboriginal rights. With confrontation as the preferred slant, the saga was recast into a morality play invoking a titanic struggle between the forces of order and those of disorder, with the police and government squaring off against Mohawk factions (York 1991). Media preoccupation with criminality might have prolonged the dispute. Focusing on the spectacle most certainly distracted public attention from the more substantial issues pertaining to Aboriginal rights. Admittedly, insightful articles were published that put the controversy into a historical context from an Aboriginal perspective. But most coverage hid behind catchy headlines or photogenic visuals that titillated rather than taught.

Similarly, news media coverage of the crisis at the "Maritime Oka" proved to be equally lopsided. In its fixation with conflict and confrontation, the news media's references to Burnt Church conjured up images of armed conflict involving a rump of white fishers against a rabble of lawless Aboriginal peoples. On one side were Aboriginal peoples who endured criticism for recklessly defending an indefensible position foolishly espoused by the Supreme Court. On the other side were non-Aboriginal fishers who too defended their interests, violently at

times and by taking the law into their hands, against a backdrop of protecting their livelihood from environmental ruin. A double standard prevailed: Mi'kmaq were demonized as hot-blooded thugs who offended Canadian law and clashed with authorities. Their criminality was also framed as contrary to core Canadian values and national interests. By contrast, overfishing and illegal poaching by non-Aboriginal fishers tended to be underplayed, while police violence to crush Aboriginal resistance was condoned by the simple expedient of criminalizing Aboriginal behaviour (see Lambertus 2004).

Admittedly, news coverage did not recoil from emphasizing non-Aboriginal aggressiveness. Nevertheless, emphasis was tilted toward the righteous anger of non-Aboriginal fishers, many of whom were portrayed as law-abiding conservationists in defending their interests against special Aboriginal privilege. Through language and presuppositions implicit from reading between the lines (van Dijk 2000), a coded subtext was clearly implied: for openly breaking the law by fishing without a licence and out of season, Aboriginal fishers deserved what they got from white vigilantes. The framing of Aboriginal fishers as environmental predators could not be more ironic, given long-standing stereotypes of Aboriginal peoples as environmental custodians, but it is precisely this contradiction that constituted newsworthiness.

## Criminalizing Aboriginality, Aboriginalizing Crime

Equally disconcerting in packaging protests were the preferred sources of information. Whether by intent or inadvertently, media coverage of Aboriginal protest was largely aligned with the position of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, whose news releases could hardly be defined as either neutral or even-handed. Mainstream media uncritically accepted a federal communications strategy that pounced on Mi'kmaq as law-breaking renegades, both greedy and irrational and hell-bent on illegally plundering depleted resources without much thought for the rule of law or rights of conservation. By contrast, the government position was praised as balanced, just, and reflective of national interests in restoring peace, order, and good government. But the framing of Aboriginal resistance as a law-and-order issue tended to downplay the broader context that sparked the struggle. References to the legitimacy of Aboriginal and treaty rights were dismissed as a smokescreen to rationalize a host of criminal activities at odds with the so-called Canadian way. An Aboriginal perspective rarely appeared as a counterbalance, in effect glossing over the competing perspectives that informed the crisis.

*case study*

To sum up: one of the core functions of the news media is providing news that people can use, that is, it is to construct a common sense view of the world for interpreting what is going on (Harding 2005). Once the news media establish a commonsensical agenda, a closed form of thought is entrenched that resists challenge or change (Nesbitt-Larking 2001). But the commonsensical coverage of Aboriginal peoples' protest misses the point of the struggle.

First, the demonizing of Aboriginal activism and Aboriginal protesters as dangerous militants or irrational ideologues is critical. Such a slant not only marginalizes the legitimacy of dissent, it also trivializes Aboriginal concerns by distracting from the issues at hand. Aboriginal peoples are framed as ill-prepared to exercise control over their lives by portraying them as childlike and in need of state benevolence and care (Harding 2010). In cases where agency is displayed, Aboriginal actions are framed as militant (overdemanding and unreasonable), as might be expected of the petulant and emotional. Members of the dominant society are framed as reasonable and law-abiding.

Second, the struggle was not about breaking the law, nor was it about violence between the lawbreakers or law enforcers. Rather, the fundamental issue revolved around the politics of jurisdiction in determining who owned what, and why. Whose rights – those of Aboriginal nations or the Canadian state – would prevail when contesting competing claims to the same territory? Was it possible to balance constitutionally guaranteed Aboriginal and treaty rights to forage and fish with that of the government's responsibility to regulate on behalf of all Canadians and for conservation purposes? Who would decide, and on what grounds? Do rights in Canada entail a one-size-fits-all formula, or can entitlements be customized to fit the distinctive status of Aboriginal peoples? Was the conflict about redividing the existing resource pie (cutting up the catch), or was it about challenging the colonial foundational principles that govern the constitutional order of settler society (Maaka and Fleras 2005)? In that the news media did not address these concerns – after all, the confrontational aspects monopolized media attention while more fundamental issues drew a blank – the struggles at Burnt Church were depoliticized by reducing the resistance to the level of a classic cowboys and Indians dust-up.

Third, the news media do not appear to have learned their lesson. In yet another all-too-familiar storyline, Aboriginal peoples are confronting non-Aboriginal Canadians over competing agendas and contested land claims in a case involving a housing development site in Caledonia, Ontario. With the site now into its fifth year of occupation, images of provocation are equally familiar, including Aboriginal

flags, irate citizens, masked warriors, police in riot gear, the obligatory plumes of black smoke, barricades that inconvenience, government waffling, and a cacophony of apoplectic voices. No less predictable is news media coverage of the issues at hand in Caledonia. A focus on conflict and enforcement and spectacle and superficiality superseded the political and prosaic, resulting in coverage that is systemically biasing because of its one-sided negativity. Not surprisingly, constitutional issues behind the dispute rarely make the six o'clock news since they lack exciting visuals and cannot be morselized into biteable bits.

But there is a cost in emphasizing the episodic and dramatic at the expense of the contextual and thematic. Instead of information and enlightenment, entertainment values prevail so that the crisis is dumb-downed to the level of a video game in real time (Fleras 2006; see also Austerberry 2008). Inasmuch as a few hotheads on both sides of the confrontational divide drive the frenzy that feeds the news media beast, little is done to probe the what and the why, with the result that many Canadians – both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – remain frustrated and angry (M. Campbell 2006; *Christchurch Press* 2006).

### Critical-Thinking Questions
**How and why do mainstream news media frame Aboriginal protest the way they do?**

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### Do Media Matter? Media Impacts, Media Effects
People's fascination with media communication is piqued by the topic of effects (on individuals) and impacts (on society). What influence do media have on people's attitudes and behaviour (J.P. Murray 2008)? Are media impacts and effects powerful, direct, and long-lasting? Or are they indirect, diffused, short-term, highly variable, and conditional on context, criteria, and consequences? Why are some seemingly susceptible to media messages, whereas others appear to be relatively immune to the lure of media messages? Which dumbing down came first – of audiences or of media? Do the media give an already dumbed-down people what they want? Or have audiences become conditioned to accept less than they deserve by commercial media that cater to the lowest common denominator? Answers to these questions are sharply contested and rarely yield consensus. Even notions of audience are problematic: with the introduction of social-networking sites like Facebook or Twitter, problems arise with any proposed distinction between active producer and distributor as well as between consumer or critic (Gauntlett 2008).

Reference to media effects on individuals are highly varied, even contradictory, ranging from maximal to minimal (Gunter 2008). For some, excessive exposure to media breeds passivity; for others, aggression is the result. For some, such exposure contributes to crime by glamorizing criminal role models; for others, it contributes to collective consensus by fostering shared values for doing the right thing. For some, media trivializes reality; for others, public debate and social action are fostered. For some, the media do little more than pander to the lowest common denominator; for others, the effect is cognitively empowering (as Rob Salem, TV critic for the *Toronto Star,* once pointed out, a forty-four-minute episode of the TV series *24* involves the lives of twenty-one distinct characters and nine primary narrative threads). Or consider a *New York Times* article's claim that by featuring strong black male leads in positions of authority (from James Earl Jones to Morgan Freeman to Denzel Washington), Hollywood prepared America for the election of a black president – a case of life imitating art (Rosas-Moreno 2010).

Explanatory frameworks remain polarized. On one side, the magic bullet theory points to media as powerful and persuasive because audiences are thought to uncritically absorb media messages and blindly act upon them. On the other side are skeptics and media scholars who reject this claim. According to the latter, audiences do not resemble empty wheelbarrows that can be loaded up with media content and pushed around with impunity (Fleras 2003). To the contrary, audiences are generally perceived as active and interactive agents taking the initiative to negotiate and interpret media messages. Moreover, media effects cannot be seen in isolation but within the broader context of other influences (Potter 2005). Canada is a complex society involving a variety of forces at work, often at cross-purposes to one another, with the result that media are but one of many important players in accelerating the pace of social change. Not surprisingly, mainstream media are increasingly seen as contested sites of struggle between prevailing media gazes and the oppositional messages of critics or audiences.

Media effects are not just restricted to individuals. Institutions are also affected in ways both direct or indirect and immediate or delayed, as well as in the short run or long term. Political institutions have changed dramatically because of new media dynamics. Instead of old-fashioned speech making and good ol' backroom deals, politics is increasingly driven by opinion polling, slick and expensive negative ads, and media-savvy spin doctors to massage the narrative (McChesney 1999). The impact of media on society can be analyzed in another way. Media outputs do not directly impact on society as much as

they generate public discourses about what is normal and necessary. Attention is drawn to some dimensions of reality as acceptable or superior, whereas other aspects are glossed over as inferior, irrelevant, or a threat. This agenda-setting activity is interpreted differently within various sociological perspectives. For functionalists, media messages contribute to the smooth functioning of society; for conflict theorists, media are complicit in reinforcing domination and control; and for symbolic interactionists, the agenda itself is under negotiated construction. These discourses and debates become the basis by which individuals become informed – or misinformed – about the society they live in.

### Interrogating a Media Gaze: Encoding Media Hype/Decoding Moral Panic

> *Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods*
> *of moral panic: a condition, episode, person or group emerges to*
> *become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its*
> *nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the*
> *mass media. (S. Cohen 1972, 1)*

With so much power at their disposal, media possess the potential to expose, conceal, or transform. Media power stems in part from patterns of private ownership or corporate linkages. This power also reflects an ability to shape agendas by emphasizing some aspects of reality while disregarding others. Media preferences for news items that encompass the bizarre or diabolical are well established. Audiences are no less captivated by this menu of danger and disgust, if for no other reason than a yearning for novelty and distraction. In that media possess the power to generate as well as control public reactions to deviant acts, such selective exposure may prove galvanizing (Critcher 2003). But when media coverage appears disproportional to the significance of the event or the risk involved, according to David Altheide (2002, 2009), a dynamic of fear is activated that incites panic or paralysis.

It is commonly known that, when the unthinkable happens, news media are prone to exaggeration (Killingbeck 2001). Often unrelated incidents involving unnerving challenges to society are packaged into a crisis frame that imparts the worst possible spin. Unrelated stories may be pastiched together to manufacture scare stories related to personal safety or national security. Since an isolated event is rarely problematic until *constructed* as such by news media reworking it as a profound societal crisis that imperils the nation (Hier

and Greenberg 2002), the accumulation of negative and often unsubstantiated claims may spiral out of control. A media-hyped moral panic materializes when people experience a loss of control over conventional rules, cherished values, or threats to the social and moral order. A generalized fear is activated by the perceived decay and collapse of civilized society, especially when the apparently random danger shows no respect for the age, social standing, or gender of victims (Critcher 2003). The fear mobilizes around a seemingly exaggerated overreaction toward perceived threats to societal values or interests by persons who can be easily demonized (folk devils). Actions thought to be repugnant, unpredictable, and uncontrollable generate a generalized sense of dread or outrage, thus prompting calls for action and intervention. Paradoxically, an official (over)reaction to the moral panic often reinforces perceptions about the severity of the threat, thus justifying media hype (coverage) in the first place (S. Cohen 1972).

But the hyping (exaggerating) of news events comes with a cost. A crisis of confidence is triggered that escalates into a moral panic, namely, a belief in a dissolving moral order. Hyping the panic not only elicits an irrational public reaction but also distorts official responses to the incident. Mainstream media are inextricably involved in generating moral panics by labelling and publicizing certain actions as a threat, amplifying their danger, and uncovering scapegoats (folk devils) to blame. Political response to this media-hyped and publicly driven moral panic is no less problematic. Laws, policies, and programs may be introduced to appease a panicky public rather than to carefully analyze the problem. Frenzied public and political reaction may justify yet additional media exposure, which, in turn, further incites public anxieties – and so on and so forth in a circular process. In that both media coverage and public/political responses constitute a symbolic projection of people's worst fears of the "other," media hyping and moral panicking often say more about society at large than about those under scrutiny (Fleras 2003).

In short, neither the incident nor the threat per se is the issue. Attention must focus instead on how media frame the defined threat into an easily recognizable trope with a highly connotative label, together with appropriate remedies aimed at isolating or removing those demonized as scapegoats. A rapid escalation of public unease or outrage (moral panic) is further reinforced by an elite exaggeration of the scope and seriousness of the situation. This focus on societal reaction to such media dramatization and sensationalism (hype) demonstrates the demonizing (labelling and stereotyping) of those events or persons responsible for the panic (hysteria). Often, these panicky insecurities far

exceed the actual threat or danger; nevertheless, they are real in their conse-
quences, especially for those most vulnerable, thus confirming the sociological
axiom that things do not have to be real to have real effects.

Admittedly, there are problems in operationalizing concepts related to hype
or panic. For example, if moral panics are by definition disproportionate
responses to perceived threats (Critcher 2006), what constitutes a proportion-
al response? When does a legitimate concern qualify as a moral panic, and who
says so and why? When is the irrational rational, and vice versa? What is the
relationship between those who do the hyping and those targeted by this hype?
Moreover, accusing both the media and the public of excessive and dispropor-
tionate reaction to the threat is a luxury afforded in hindsight. In that these
panics tend to say more about the public in terms of its anxieties than anything
about the world out there, their socially constructed nature cannot be under-
played. Despite these conceptual conundrums, there is sociological value in
studying how intense media coverage (hype) can contribute to a public dis-
course of panic. The next Case Study offers an illustration of how exaggerated
media discourses can distort people's understanding of social reality to the
point of unsettling a society.

## case study

### Toronto Terror Scare: Moral Panic as Media Hype?
### Media Hype as Moral Panic?

> *The media commands immense influence on the development of*
> *public discourse on most subjects and its influence on the subject*
> *of ethnic diversity is profound. The public relies on the media to*
> *provide them with information in particular about events taking*
> *place outside of their direct experience. This places journalists and*
> *editors in a powerful position and it is vital, therefore, that the*
> *practices and beliefs of news organizations are held to account*
> *and subject to contestation and debate. (Samir Shah, chair,*
> *Runneymede Trust, Foreword to Sveinsson 2008, 2)*

Occasionally, incidents occur that are so disturbing that they mobilize political and
public debate over a complex web of contentious issues. The Toronto Terror Scare

is one example of how a sensationalistic news media hyped issues and created a moral panic – or capitalized on an existing moral panic – with wide-ranging repercussions that say a lot about the politics of seeing like the media.

Reference to media hype and its relationship to moral panic received a thorough workout when Canadian authorities in June 2006 apprehended an Islamist terrorist cell in the Greater Toronto Area. If the British air terror scare and the suitcase bomb fright at a Dortmund train station are included, the Toronto sweep expanded the number of terror plots exposed that summer by those born on native soil, speaking the vernacular, protected by rights of legal citizenship, and claiming Islam as a justifying ideology (Frum 2006). News coverage tended to border on the hysterical: news media hype capitalized on an existing moral panic to accentuate the conflicting and confrontational without much in the way of context or evidence. The conflict theme prevailed, as might have been expected, in the process demonizing the entire Muslim community by conflating the criminality of a few with the commonality of the many. In other words, media coverage of this embryonic plot proved both sensationalistic and misleading: sensationalistic because episodic coverage superseded the thematic or contextual; misleading because of a systemic bias against religiosity unless framed as negative, confrontational, or problematic. To the extent that the quantity of coverage superseded the quality of coverage, both Canadian Muslims and non-Muslim Canadians were done a disservice.

In early June 2006, Canada joined the global big leagues when seventeen (later increased to eighteen) relatively young men in the Greater Toronto Area were apprehended by police and security agencies for an alleged plot to stage a terror strike on home soil – forever changing the theory that terrorism could not happen here. True, nothing did happen; nevertheless, the suspects were charged under anti-terrorism legislation passed by the Canadian government in December 2001 in the aftermath of 9/11. The arrests sparked a blaze of media attention and national debates over a range of issues, from stereotyping to national security to Canadian-American relations. Two news media narratives emerged (Kay 2006). One reading took the terror scare as a deadly threat – Canada's equivalent to the 7/7 London bombings and a sign that Canada too was under siege from a militant subculture within the Islamic community. The other reading preferred to frame the scare as little more than a youthful hoax concocted by a bunch of mixed-up adolescents with too much testosterone on their hands – less hard-core terrorists than amateur poseurs enthralled with the quixotism of youthful rebellion. This brash plot, with its bracing mix of bombings and beheadings, was exposed as

amateurish and bungled from the start. Authorities had long monitored the suspicious activity; heck, they even supplied the suspects with the potentially explosive ammonium nitrate (the same material used in the 1995 Oklahoma blast) as part of the sting operation – prompting some critics to suggest that authorities deliberately misled ("entrapped"?) the suspects for political reasons (Friscolanti, Gatehouse, and Gillis 2006).

Whether the crisis was orchestrated or coincidental, the news media took the terrorism bait – hook, line, and sinker. Any sense of balance quickly dissipated as newsroom decorum gave way to speculation and sensationalism. Admittedly, many acknowledged the difficulty of balancing objectivity with fairness without stigmatizing the overwhelming number of law-abiding Muslims or denying the accused the right to a fair trial (Burnside 2006). Still, Canadians were gripped with coverage so saturated in conjecture and hyperbole that it nearly bordered on overkill. Countless pages were devoted to deconstructing the chain of events, dissecting the possible causes, speculating on the connections to overseas terrorism, and debating what, if anything, could prevent a repeat occurrence. Fingers were pointed in all directions, including the clash of civilizations, the belligerence of Western foreign policies, the impact of global politics, the failure of Canada's immigration and multiculturalism policies (Ryan 2010), youthful indiscretion or radicalization, and the Islamification of terrorism (see Elmasry 2006). But although the news media cast about for a single cause or explanatory framework, reality is rarely so accommodating. According to Jessica Stern (2003), understanding the causes of terrorism and terrorist motivations involves a thoughtful and multi-layered approach at different levels: global, national, intergroup, and personal.

The crisis also exposed the perils of assuming a linear mono-causality between media hype and moral panic. Could the crisis be attributed to a media-driven scare that terrorized Torontonians? Or was an already panicked public primed to be frightened by an opportunistic media? Moral panic can be defined as a public reaction (from a spontaneous outburst to an organized social movement) to a perceived and often exaggerated threat that, by challenging its values and norms, imperils the very moral fabric of society (S. Cohen 1972). For the most part, these mass panics (or hysterias) are fuelled by intense news media coverage, resulting in what Stanley Cohen calls a "deviancy amplification spiral" (118). That is, the very process of labelling those who pose a threat to public morality tends to amplify their status as problem people. Once labelled as problematic, the stigmatized may act in ways that amplify the crisis. The resultant media-hyped moral

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panic also yields another effect: a misperception of the magnitude of the threat. Unrelated stories involving religious-inspired extremism may be pastiched together to launch scare stories about possible national threats. In that terrorism is about intimidating the hearts and minds of the general public (Stern 2003), the actions of a few are amplified out of proportion, thus intensifying public panic over the possibility of an apocalyptic insurrection (Walkom 2006).

It is widely accepted that news media hype generates moral panic. Can this causal relationship be inverted by suggesting the opposite, namely, that an existing public or moral panic – based on previous news media hype – may trigger excessive coverage as consumers clamour for more information about the dangers at hand? To what extent does the threat of terrorism drive the dynamic rather than public fears based on media misperceptions (Huysmans 2006)? For example, with the acquittal of the suspects in the 1985 Air India bombing still in the public mind, Canadians remained uneasy over the capacity of faith-based groups to wreak havoc (McLeod 2006). The act of violence of 9/11 and the events of 7/7 in London also bolstered the dread factor by catapulting terrorism to the top of the security agenda. In other words, there was so much anxiety and fear in the air that reality was already spinning out of control (see Altheide 2009). The media simply took advantage of a public in moral panic mode.

To be sure, the risks of victimization by terrorism are low when measured against facts, probabilities, or statistics. But perception *is* reality when coping with risk. In that public perceptions of threat rather than statistical evidence drive public opinion (Leroy 2005), the combination of unpredictability and uncontrollability triggers a generalized sense of dread, especially when inflamed by relentless media coverage over security breaches (both real and imagined). An obsession with security is not surprising; after all, the external world has become more frightening in a vaguely dangerous manner because of strange viruses (like SARS) or geopolitical instabilities (Graves 2005; Altheide 2009). Governments may be equally complicit in transforming a culture of privatized fear into a public panic (Giroux 2006). By projecting the worst fears into a terrifying nightmare, hidden agendas masquerading as national interests can sway a suspecting public. In short, terrorism will succeed even when it fails, as noted by terrorism expert Roland Jacquard (quoted in Crumley 2006). Terrorist-inspired fear mongering may generate such a societal paranoia about future attacks that a heightened vigilantism begins to erode the very freedoms and rights under attack by terrorists.

In a frightened society, then, the real war against terrorism should be the war against fear. Vigilance, yes, but a vigilantism that purges any freedom that remotely

threatens security can make a bad situation even worse (Trudeau 2006). Both terrorists and the news media know exactly which mass panic buttons to push for maximum impact. In the final analysis, the real problem is not a failure of imagination by the news media. More to the point, it's about an imagination of failure by the consuming public (see Harvey 2006).

### Critical-Thinking Question

**How do the concepts of media hype and moral panic apply to media coverage of the 2006 Toronto Terror Scare?**

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Terrorists have long acknowledged the importance of media (especially CNN and the Internet) as an effective vehicle for disseminating their message. Without the global reach of media communication, terrorism would be a shadow of itself. The terror in terrorism reflects its symbolism as political theatre; after all, terrorist acts are designed as a media spectacle to maximize fear and panic. Mainstream media, in turn, like to report on terrorism because of its intrinsic newsworthiness in providing graphic visuals, easy-to-identify protagonists, and the corresponding suspense. In that terrorism is about theatre for intimidating the hearts and minds of the general public (Stern 2003), the actions of a few are amplified out of proportion, thus intensifying public panic over the possibility of a catastrophic scenario (Walkom 2006). Not surprisingly, coverage takes on a life of its own, pushed forward by a self-reinforcing process or self-referential feedback loop: more coverage = more panic = more coverage = more reaction = more coverage. Several insights into seeing like the media can be gleaned by examining the politics of media hyping and panicky publics:

• Moral panics are increasingly intrinsic to a media that thrives on negativity and conflict. As J.M. Gray (2006) wrote in his *Globe and Mail* column, "[Given] North American media's structural inclination to ratchet up the tension and fear in any story ... Inflated drama is in the genetic code of TV news." The media may have an uncanny knack for creating stories that culminate in public hysteria. Yet they also possess the ability to criticize or even mock those who take the paranoia seriously – in the same way media put celebrities on a pedestal, only to topple them, while criticizing the public for its obsession with a media-driven cult of celebrity worship. Finally, the relatively muted coverage of local media stands in sharp contrast to the international

media's commitment to sound bites, sensationalism, and exaggerated angles (Appelbe 2003).

- Rather than an unintended and isolated consequence of a well-meaning if pressured media, such hype may not be entirely random. Media-driven moral panics are not simply discrete episodes that randomly flare up but are part of a broader media dynamic (Thompson 2005). Vested interests may deliberately generate panics about relatively harmless issues as a way of diverting attention from more serious problems (Hall 1980). Media-hyped moral panics are increasingly attractive to (1) politicians, to orchestrate consent, (2) authorities, to rationalize excessive control or intrusion, (3) businesses, to promote sales, and (4) media, to bolster profit levels and market shares (McRobbie and Thornton 1995). Not surprisingly, governments will inflate marginal nuisances into a colossal bogeyman to distract the masses while capitalizing on these threats to pass unpopular legislation or impose social controls in the name of national security (Dyer 2003).

- The politics of media hyping reveals a lot about the exercise of power in society. In defining who is a social problem and what is the appropriate solution (Critcher 2006), the media are especially adept at hyping the panic. Conventional wisdom contends that a lack of information feeds public fears. A dearth of information may create a vacuum whose void is rapidly filled with rumour and innuendo, in turn leading to fear, anxiety, and paranoia. The public respond to this void by acting (ir)rationally as a coping mechanism to assert control (or at least the illusion of control) – however simplistic – over a bewildering and complex scenario. Yet there is no evidence that better information would dampen the jitters. The very act of expanding space for crisis stories is as likely as withholding information to amplify public anxieties. Proposing solutions is just as likely to inflate people's worries as are stories about government indifference or complacency. In short, there are no grounds for assuming that panic is created by keeping people in the dark. To the contrary, both informed and misinformed doomsday talk is likely to have a panicking effect on the audience. And there is little the media can do because of the public's seemingly insatiable capacity to be simultaneously alarmed and assured.

Are media and terrorism partners in crime? Yes and no. No because the media are neither complicit nor accomplices. There is no evidence to suggest the media act in collusion with terrorists as a pipeline to the spectacular and the menacing. Yes because media coverage unwittingly supplies terrorists

with the oxygen of publicity. The paradox is inescapable and cruel: just as the Israelis learned long ago, the greater the force of retaliation to terrorist attacks, the greater the lure of the terrorist cause. Such as Faustian bargain can be applied to news media. In publishing articles that panic the public to the point of paralysis, the media may inadvertently advance the terrorist agenda.