Marginalized Voices in a Changing Media Environment:

An Analysis of Aboriginal News Strategies

By

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Abstract

Aboriginal perspectives have historically been under-represented and marginalized in mainstream Canadian media. When native people do receive news coverage, it is often within the context of crime or conflict. In a rapidly evolving media environment in which fewer specialized beat reporters exist and newsrooms face increasing staff and resource constraints, there is an even greater risk of aboriginal perspectives being marginalized. One critical issue that has been under-reported in the media is the disturbing number of aboriginal women that have gone missing or been killed. This thesis argues that through a strengthened online presence, aboriginal media could generate more coverage on a wide range of issues, including missing and murdered native women.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Shortly after Seattle's broadsheet daily newspaper, *The Post-Intelligencer*, folded its print version to go online in February of 2009, a column about it appeared in the online magazine *The Root*. The writer, Michael E. Ross, declared that the shift among newspapers like the P.I. to web-only publications would have a dire impact on minority journalists in the newsroom.

"While the plight of such high-profile newspapers obviously affects journalists across the board, the situation for black and minority media professionals is likely to be even more dire," Ross wrote. He interviewed Tahirih Brown, an African American who had been an editor at the Seattle P-I for more than five years. She said that in the United States, newspapers have reduced their opportunities for journalists who are not white: "When I started in journalism in the early '90s, the big change was diversity—making the newsroom look more like the community they were covering... And I feel that in the past couple of years, that's kind of gone by the wayside. There are some stories that just aren't going to ever get told because of a lack of diversity in newsrooms in general" (Ross, 2009, March 19, para. 12).

Ross went on to suggest that:

As newspapers downsize or transform themselves online, it's crucial for minority journalists to elevate the issue of wider coverage of their communities before the process of change runs its course. And it's just as important for those journo's to be the multitasking chameleons they'll need to be to have a place in the new order, thriving not because of the turbulence but in spite of it... For them, getting through today's rapacious media Darwinism comes down to making sure they

don't lose their hard-won seat at the table—even as the table changes right in front of them” (Ross, 2009, March 19, para. 16).

The kind of scenario just described may not be unique to the newsrooms of the United States. This thesis will examine the current state of the mainstream news media in Canada to determine whether shrinking newsroom budgets and a transition from print to online media are negating the inclusion of aboriginal viewpoints in the mainstream media. This study will also look at what aboriginal journalists are doing to develop their own alternative media in an online forum, and what steps can be taken to expand news coverage of First Nations issues.

Methodology

The media examined in this thesis will include both major commercial media organizations, such as daily newspapers, and alternative media such as aboriginal blogs. The research was conducted through literature reviews, interviews and content analysis. Literature reviews were conducted to determine how media theories on the public sphere of communication, alternative and online media, and research on media coverage of aboriginal issues, can inform the study of aboriginal media today. Interviews were conducted using open-ended questions to determine the challenges and constraints facing reporters covering aboriginal issues, and to determine the strategies behind new online aboriginal media initiatives. A content analysis of Ottawa media coverage of a missing women case was conducted to determine the frequency and type of coverage – including use of particular frames or stereotypes – and to determine whether staffing constraints in

Ottawa newsrooms played a role in the coverage the case received.

A limitation to this thesis research was the short history of online aboriginal media initiatives. In the conclusion of this thesis, further research is suggested as online aboriginal media initiatives expand to gauge their success in attracting a diverse audience.

Theoretical Framework

Scholar Jurgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere of media communication informs this study through the examination of the media as a public sphere, as does the work of many contemporary theorists on the notion of multiple public spheres defined by characteristics such as ethnicity (Squires, 202, p. 446). Indigenous studies scholar Gail Valiskaskis' concept of the sub-altern also guides this thesis through the concept of aboriginal communities as 'sub-altern' to non-aboriginal society. The study of other key theorists, such as Shannon Avison and Michael Meadows and Augie Fleras, on news coverage of aboriginal issues in the mainstream media will be useful in understanding why aboriginal media were originally established.

The work of media critics such as Cass Sunstein also informs this thesis by illustrating how increasing online news consumption and a rapidly evolving media environment could be affecting the way that aboriginal media communicates its perspectives. The examination of alternative media and its evolution online will also be useful to this study.

Aboriginal Media as a Public Sphere

In their study of aboriginal newspapers in Canada and Australia, Shannon Avison and Michael Meadows (2000) noted that: “Aboriginal newspapers since the late nineteenth century in Australia, and early twentieth century in Canada, have played a crucial role in the symbolic reclamation of space for an Aboriginal public sphere” (para. 1).

Habermas described the public sphere as a “realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” (as cited in Avison and Meadows, 2000, para. 12). Public spheres, according to Avison and Meadows, are “at the centre of democratic life” and include various settings such as classrooms, community meetings and newspapers. They point out that, while most Canadian citizens take these spaces for granted, “a great many ‘other’ citizens are systematically excluded” (Avison and Meadows, 2000, para. 46).

According to their study, aboriginal voices in Canada are vastly outnumbered by non-indigenous sources in stories about native affairs, and aboriginal voices remain suppressed in news coverage of events about their communities. A study cited by Avison and Meadows from 1999 showed that in both Canada and Australia, aboriginal people were used as sources about 20 per cent of the time in coverage of indigenous issues (p. 360). The aboriginal response to this lack of voice, as well as prevalence of negative stereotypes, lack of context and mis-representation in the media, has been the development of indigenous media, including aboriginal print publications (p. 354).

Avison and Meadows (2000) wrote that aboriginal print media have contributed to a “re-conceptualizing” of the public sphere (p. 348). They said that instead of the

notion of a single public sphere, theorists should adopt the idea of a series of “parallel and overlapping spheres” (p. 348). These spaces allow participants with similar cultural backgrounds to communicate in their own styles and to establish their positions on issues, which are then brought to a wider public sphere encompassing diverse cultures.

These multiple spheres, or “subaltern counterpublics,” are comprised of members of society who are subordinated or ignored. The aboriginal public sphere, therefore, operates in a separate, unique context from the mainstream public sphere. The authors stated that aboriginal public spheres can provide opportunities for people who are subordinated or ignored by mainstream public spheres to develop their own counter-discourses and to interpret their own experiences (as cited in Avison and Meadows, 2000, p. 352).

Squires (2002) also referred to this concept of multiple, coexisting counterpublics formed by marginalized groups (p. 446) in reaction to exclusionary practices from the dominant media. The author’s study of African American media as a subaltern public sphere demonstrated how “safe spaces” (p. 459) formed by marginalized groups, such as African American newspapers, can be brought into the dominant public sphere through increased communication between the marginal and dominant groups, becoming counterpublics. “Here they can test previously hidden discussions and make their opinions known to the dominant public,” she explained (p. 459).

Indigenous scholar Gail Valaskakis’ (2005) similar concept of the “subaltern experience” (p. 284) also addressed the idea of the exclusion, or “stereotypical inclusion and appropriation” of native people in the media, or their representation as “the other” or as an outsider to mainstream society (p. 284). “...We remain caught in the nexus between

competing narratives, between what some call the narrative and the counter-narrative, in trying to find ways to express and act upon the cultural and political reality of difference,” wrote Valaskakis. “It is through the prism of parallel voices, of competing narratives, expressed in public text – in literature, art, music, ceremony, and media – that we can access the subaltern experience, expand our concepts of inquiry, and approach our points of connectedness” (p. 285).

Squires (2002) stressed that counterpublicity requires an increase in independent media (p. 461): “Mass production and dissemination of indigenous media not only means more exposure to a wider public, but also allows and encourages participation in wider discussions. Anderson’s concept of an ‘imagined community’ and participation in debates via shared information and opinions can be realized across space and time with the mobility of mass media” (as cited in Squires, p. 461, 2002).

Avison and Meadows noted that aboriginal public spheres can be incorporated into larger public spheres to influence public opinion:

The Aboriginal public sphere is a space that can accommodate non-mainstream discursive styles and non-traditional perspectives... The ideal Aboriginal public sphere promotes the realization of social equality as a basis for ensuring that self-determination includes all community members, especially less powerful constituencies like women and children. Finally, the Aboriginal public sphere ideally engages in public dialogue where cultural values, political aspirations, and social concerns of its participants are introduced into larger public spheres where they might influence discussions there. (Avison and Meadows, 2000, para. 18)

The examination of the ability of aboriginal public spheres to influence discussions in the broader public sphere is critical to this thesis. Here, Avison and Meadows' notion of a separate aboriginal sphere can be applied to new, online media in Canada to examine how these online aboriginal forums are being incorporated into the broader mainstream public.

Conception of Alternative and Online Media

Media theorist Chris Atton (2004) broadly defines alternative media as "...those media produced outside the forces of market economics and the state. They can include the media of protest groups, dissidents, 'fringe' political organisations, even fans and hobbyists" (p. 3). Alternative media online have their own unique potential. According to Atton, the Internet is "...a more efficient way of maintaining subcultural activity," and "it is potentially a space for its creation and recreation on a global scale" (p. xiii). This potential to expand the voice of the marginalized is key to alternative media, as Atton explained: "The opening up of media spaces to a wide range of voices – to minority or marginalized individuals and groups... is the wellspring of alternative media" (p. 157).

As authors Croteau and Hoynes explained, more and more alternative media, including newspapers, magazines and radio stations, are going online. By using an online format, they can expand the range of materials they provide, including links to further information, and information on how to obtain a hard copy of the publication. The ability of alternative media to link to other sites will make it easier for individuals to obtain their news from alternative sources that may be "hampered by the costs and logistics of distribution" (Croteau and Hoynes, 2005, p. 256).

However, the Internet “is not a panacea for alternative media” (Croteau and Hoynes, 2005, p. 256). The drawback to this increased accessibility of alternative news sources is an over-concentration of their own perspectives and lack of appeal to broader audiences: “It is likely that most alternative sites will be invisible to most citizens and rarely visited by those who are not familiar with the offline version,” the authors said (p. 256).

This thesis will examine whether the accessible online forum provides a more effective medium for aboriginal spheres to break into the mainstream public sphere and to influence discussion there, due to the prevalence of online media among news audiences. Also examined will be the idea of whether the online forum is forming a new aboriginal public sphere for its own community members, some of whom rely on more traditional modes of communication that do not incorporate the Internet. As media theorist Mark Poster (2001) asked, “If there is a public sphere on the Internet, who populates it and how? ... Since there occurs no face-to-face interaction, only electronic flickers on a screen, what kind of community can there be in this space?” (p. 263).

This study will also look at aboriginal public spheres within the current Canadian media context of increased media convergence, and whether this creates additional challenges to aboriginal media. Avison and Meadows argued that aboriginal print media in Canada “cannot compete in a highly concentrated press sector in which even well-backed non-Aboriginal corporations have failed to establish new newspapers” (Avison and Meadows, 2000, p. 361).

In relation to the changing media environment, this thesis will also address whether, as feared by Cass Sunstein (2007), online news readership is causing a

fragmentation of audiences – or whether it is allowing for an expansion of multiple-connected public spheres, including aboriginal public spheres, that can inform public opinion.

Structure of Thesis

The theoretical framework described above will collectively inform the study of this thesis. In Chapters 2 and 3, more theorists will be introduced in the analysis of the current, highly concentrated media environment in Canada and to inform the study of mainstream news coverage of aboriginal issues. Chapter 2 will discuss how new technology is having an impact on the kinds of news stories that are being covered today, and whether the new media will, by their nature, erase the limited gains minority perspectives, particularly aboriginal ones, have already made, or if they will present new opportunities.

Augie Fleras explained that multicultural media originated as the minorities' reaction to mainstream journalism's "mistreatment" of them and their issues (Fleras, 2009, p. 726). This "mistreatment" will be outlined in Chapter 3, with examples of what critics say are prevalent negative stereotypes in media portrayal of minority groups, particularly aboriginal peoples. Multicultural media publications stem from a reaction to this kind of negative framing, according to Fleras. Minority journalists strive to capitalize on alternative media to "reflect their needs and realities" in a language they can relate to (Ahmad and Ojo as cited in Fleras, 2009, p. 726) and to celebrate successes, promoting a "collective community confidence and cultural identity" (Fleras, 2009, p. 726).

Chapter 3 will also discuss the portrayal of aboriginal issues in the media and the perspectives of reporters who cover them. Chapter 4 will examine a missing persons case involving two young aboriginal women to determine whether resource shortages in mainstream and aboriginal newsrooms in Ottawa were a factor in how much coverage the issue received. This case study is used to illustrate the challenges of covering aboriginal issues today. The final chapter of this thesis will examine the efforts of independent journalists as well as mainstream and aboriginal media publications to use the web to communicate news stories, and the potential of this online forum to create a broader awareness among the public of aboriginal issues. The conclusion will suggest strengthened online coverage from aboriginal media to raise awareness of critical issues such as missing and murdered native women.

Chapter 2: The News Industry and Marginalized Voices Today

Canada's media organizations share a number of the same challenges facing the news industry in the United States. The situation is complicated by an economic downturn that has shaken the fundamental stability of media corporations such as CanWest Global. According to Chris Waddell, the director of Carleton University's journalism program, 2009 was "the year the Canadian media realized it was in trouble... It took the sharp drop in ad revenue from the recession along with the prospect that the lack of cash to make interest payments on a debt of almost \$4 billion would finally force CanWest into bankruptcy protection, finally to draw attention to a media landscape that has actually been changing for quite a while" (Waddell, 2009, p. 1).

In March 2009, Sinclair Stewart and Grant Robertson detailed for *Globe and Mail* readers what they described as "the carnage" at Canadian newspapers. "In Canada, every major newspaper company (including *The Globe and Mail*) has undertaken significant layoffs in the past year and the *Halifax Daily News* has folded" (Stewart and Robertson, 2009, March 14, p. 1).

The Halifax Daily News was replaced in February of 2008 with the free daily paper *Metro*, published by Torstar. Following the change, the Canadian Association of Journalists president Mary Agnes Welch said that: "Halifax is left with an empty shell—a victim of publishers' current penchant for stripping news outlets of their content and delivering 'news lite'" (Tutton, 2008, February 11). The major daily newspaper *The Chronicle-Herald* is still publishing in Halifax.

In 2008, the national daily paid circulation of newspapers was at 4.3 million copies on an average publishing day, according to the Canadian Newspaper Association. This was down about 8% from 2007 circulation levels, which were at nearly 4.7 million. Ontario dailies saw the most losses with a 12.2% decline in circulation. Ontario's 29 newspapers make up 42% of the total weekly paid circulation levels across Canada (Canadian Newspaper Association, 2009, p. 3).

The falling advertising revenue and circulation levels represent a decreasing Canadian news readership. In a recent study by the Canadian Media Research Consortium, researchers found a declining interest in the news. The results showed that only about one third of those under 35 are very interested in keeping up with the news, and more than half of Canadians are currently regular news consumers, which is slightly less than 2003. Only one in three Canadians thinks that the news is usually fair and balanced (Canadian Media Research Consortium, 2008, p. 3).

Some of the changes the Canadian news industry is now experiencing began with the increased concentration of the country's news media in the 1990s. In the mid-1990s, Canada was known as having the "highest degree of press concentration in the advanced industrial world," according to media scholar Robert Hackett (as cited in Soderlund and Hildebrandt, 2005, p. 11). Ten years later, little had changed. Statistics showed that in 2004, "the five largest chains (measured by number of newspapers owned) controlled 72% of all daily newspapers" (Soderlund and Hildebrandt, 2005, p. 17).

The CanWest chain of newspapers, which includes 11 large dailies and 35 community papers, was recently sold to a group of investors for \$1.1 billion. Veteran media executive and prominent Canadian businessman Paul Godfrey is now at the helm

of the chain, which was \$950 million in debt and in creditor protection. Apart from CanWest, other major media corporations in Canada include Torstar, CTV, Globemedia and Quebecor. According to political science scholar Kelly Blidook (2009), the relatively concentrated level of media ownership in Canada “can be viewed as threatening to democratic ideals. While newspaper ownership may not be as concentrated as it was approximately 10 years ago, the degree of cross-ownership of media, and of single ownership of competing news sources, has increased” (p. 57).

As circulation numbers in conventional media decline, the interest in online news increases. According to “The Credibility Gap,” a study by the Canadian Research Consortium (2008), there has been a steady increase in those who seek their news on the web. Online news appeals to consumers due to factors such as the immediacy and convenience, and the opportunity to follow links to more detailed information.

According to the study, nearly one in three of those who check online news at least daily have stopped using conventional media sources because of loss of trust in them, including readers who belong to minority groups. According to the authors of the study, “these data suggest that quite a number of online news users are refugees from the mainstream media” (Canadian Media Research Consortium, 2008, p. 16).

Narrowing Perspectives?

Many theorists have voiced concerns that a highly concentrated media can have detrimental effects on the range of perspectives to which audiences are exposed. According to Walter C. Soderlund and Walter I. Romanow, “Given the importance of newspapers’ role in providing information that citizens need to make intelligent decisions

regarding their democratic governance, no one should remain comfortable with the current level of ownership concentration in Canada's newspaper industry. Let us be clear on this issue: there is simply too much power concentrated in too few hands, and to believe that all is well would be foolhardy in the extreme" (as cited in Soderlund and Hildebrandt, 2005, p. 10).

The 1970 report by the Davey Committee, which was commissioned by the federal government to study the concentration of ownership of Canadian media, noted that: "many voices may be healthier, but fewer voices are cheaper" (Soderlund and Hildebrandt, 2005, p. 19). And as argued by Vince Carlin, "despite the plethora of services, we may actually be hearing a narrower range of views from fewer people" (as cited in Soderlund and Hildebrandt, 2005, p. 93).

Chris Waddell echoed the concern that the calibre of Canadian news coverage has been injured by media concentration:

There's no question that the increasing standardization of the Canadian media under conglomerate control has hurt the quality of newspapers and television newscasts. In newspapers and television newsrooms across Canada fewer journalists are covering fewer stories and spending less time in their communities and have less flexibility for innovation and experimentation in presenting information. The product is not as good as it was, thanks largely to years of cuts, and it no longer reflects the breadth of what's happening in communities the way it once did. (Waddell, 2009, p. 19)

Does the Beat Still Exist?

Increased media concentration has also had a detrimental impact on newsroom staff resources. The process of media consolidation was the beginning of staff reductions in Canadian newsrooms. Recent statistics show that a drop in advertising revenues has caused *The Globe and Mail* to eliminate between 80 and 90 jobs. Quebecor Inc; which owns the Sun Media chain, has cut 600 jobs from its newspaper staff, CanWest Global Communications has cut over 500 positions in both print and television operations, and CTV has eliminated 105 positions (Chiasson, 2009, Jan. 26, para. 4).

As Waddell explained, while reporters were once expected to know a lot about one thing, they are now expected to know a little about a lot of things:

Those layoffs in the good times directly affected content in several important ways. First, local and national print and television newsrooms responded to demands from owners to cut staff by eliminating specialist reporters. Beat reporters disappeared, and increasingly everyone became a general assignment reporter, never covering the same issue on consecutive days. The result has been a loss of expertise, critical analysis and context in reporting. When combined with increasing demands to file for multiple outlets, multiple times during the day (as all news organizations have become wire services on their web sites), the result is that reporters know less and less about more and more. Those who want to research have no time to find much background about the story they have been given that day. (Waddell , 2009, p. 17)

Media organizations in the United States are facing similar challenges, and critics south of the border have also voiced concerns about how media cutbacks harm the quality

of news coverage. Former New York Times newspaper reporter and author Alex S. Jones (2009) said that staff cuts in the newspaper industry are the most discouraging sign for the quality of news reporting: “The most obvious signal of the erosion of a commitment to serious news is the depressing reports from all over the country of news staffs being slashed... The people who are being encouraged—or forced—to leave include many of the best and most experienced journalists, who have grown depressed and despondent about their futures” (p. 172). He points out that despite a clamour for new and innovative content, in particular for online journalism, fewer and fewer staff are on board to create this new kind of content:

Those who remain on the reduced news staff are increasingly being asked to provide all the manpower for the new web site, the new hyper-local focus of the paper, the new advertising-driven special sections, the new niche publications, and ancillary businesses. Newspapers, in other words, are trying to reinvent and significantly expand, but with a reduced staff. (Jones, 2009, p. 172)

New media inventions and social networking sites, such as Twitter, are one way for journalists to keep up with industry news. Updates on the status of newsroom staff are so frequent that a Twitter feed titled “The Media is Dying” (Twitter) has been created to keep media members apprised of morbid news from the industry.

There is an ongoing chatter around the need to develop a new business model, and what the new direction of the media industry is destined to be. A report commissioned by the Canadian Media Research Consortium in May of 2009 determined that while newspapers are affected, as is nearly every other sector, by the economic crisis, the changes go much deeper: “The current turmoil may be accelerated by economic

downturn, but it is not caused by the recession. What is happening now is nothing less than a fundamental restructuring of the economic model for the media. It is systemic. It is structural. And it is not likely to go back to the way it was before” (Canadian Media Research Consortium, 2009, p. 29).

While several different business models have been mentioned, no media organization has yet taken the lead. As the study points out, “We are coming to the end of a 100-year-old economic model for the media industry. And that has profound implications for how, and where, we will get our news in the future. Some may argue that none of this is important; that something new will automatically take the place of traditional journalism. But what kind of journalism will that be?” (Canadian Media Research Consortium, 2009, p. 29).

Newsrooms and Minorities

There are fears that these kinds of changes will mean that minority perspectives will not be included at the constantly changing journalism table.

According to a study conducted between 1994 and 2004 by professor John Miller of the Ryerson University School of Journalism, 59 out of 96 newsrooms that participated in his survey have entirely white staffs. Aboriginal journalists were the most under-represented in that group; with just one out of 2000 employees surveyed identifying as aboriginal. Aboriginal beat positions at the two major dailies in Alberta, *The Calgary Herald* and *The Edmonton Journal*, were eliminated in 1995. In the current media environment, the aboriginal beat is often left to general assignment reporters who already have a number of other beats on their plates (Craats, 1998, para. 5). Significantly, no

journalism organization has undertaken a study of the presence of minority journalists in Canadian newsrooms since Miller's 2004 report was released, and even in that case, CanWest made a corporate decision not to participate.

Miller's study also showed that the gap between minorities in the newsroom and the communities they serve widened during the 10-year period of research, and that significant gaps in minority employment exist in all circulation groupings. "On average, at any given daily newsroom in the country, minorities are more than six times under-represented," he stated (Miller and Court, 2004, p. 1).

This is compared to a continuously increasing number of aboriginal people in Canada. According to the 2006 Census, the aboriginal population increased by 45 per cent between 1996 and 2006, a rate nearly six times faster than the rate of growth for the non-aboriginal population during the same time period (Statistics Canada, 2008, para. 5).

In his presentation to the Standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communications for its 2006 Final Report on the Canadian News Media, Miller suggested the importance of ensuring minority journalists are present in the newsroom. Yet he wondered how successful any goals to hire equitably have been:

The question is, are they [minority journalists] getting absorbed into the process and being allowed to develop, to train, and to be mentored... I do not want to say categorically that they are not given the same attention, but it is a difficult thing, when the news organization is trying to trim, and they do not have enough time and personnel to be mentors as well to people coming in. (Senate of Canada, 2006, p. 62)

The Senate committee ultimately recommended that news organizations attempt to

achieve a demographic balance reflective of the larger society: “Ensuring progress in the employment of minority journalists in the mainstream media benefits all Canadians. It helps to increase the available diversity of views and unifies communities by making minority groups an integral part of Canadian society” (Senate of Canada, 2006, p. 62).

Communications scholar Paul Manning echoed the need to have a newsroom that demographically reflects its community:

The gender, class background and whiteness of the newsroom make a difference to the patterns of interaction between journalists on the various specialist beats and news sources. For example, organisations seeking to represent the interests and news agendas of ethnic minority communities will find their task that much harder if specialist correspondents lack appropriate cultural knowledge and understanding of contextual detail. (Manning, 2001, p. 73)

The author did not offer a positive prediction for improving this situation. “From the perspective of the politically marginal seeking access to the mainstream news media, on balance, recent changes in the social profile and occupational culture of journalism do not offer many more grounds for optimism,” he stated (Manning, 2001, p. 75).

The Mainstream Goes Online

With the proliferation of online news, there are also growing concerns about how many perspectives will be included amidst increasingly trimmed newspaper pages, staff and budgets. Several studies and media commentators have painted a dim picture of the potential impacts of shrinking budgets and shifting business models on the quality of reporting and on the range of perspectives in the news.

According to a Canadian Senate report on the state of the Canadian media in June 2006: “It is often the case that structural changes in the industry and shareholder pressures lead to cost-cutting measures, including reductions in the number of journalists. Taken one step further, fewer journalists could mean less or no coverage of a particular topic” (Senate of Canada, 2006, n.p.).

The cutbacks and changes that continue to develop in newsrooms across the country risk magnifying an existing concern that the day-to-day pressures, time constraints and deadlines of the newsroom limit the sources that journalists use. Paul Manning addressed the pressures facing daily news reporters, and the impact that the growth in online news may have on the quality and range of reporting:

The spread of electronic newsgathering means that deadlines for copy are brought forward... The danger is that some of the most important procedures in producing authoritative news journalism – gathering background or contextual information, verification from independent sources, and informed analysis of evaluation – are likely to be the first casualties when news deadlines accelerate. (Manning, 2001, p. 79)

Under deadline, Manning argued, journalists will return to official and powerful sources, such as government departments, parliamentary sources, the police or other public agencies (Manning, 2001, p. 55) for comment. This risks creating a “hierarchy of credibility” (p. 71) in which only the politically powerful have access to the media, while the politically marginal are not seen with the same credibility by journalists. This discrepancy in access, argued Manning, is growing even more severe due to increased

technology, online news and ever tighter deadlines for reporters: “In this atmosphere of heightened interaction and faster news cycles, there is little time for sustained investigative reporting. Instead, new angles on stories are secured through human-interest themes, exclusive interviews with elite members, or speculative interpretation offered by other elite members or authoritative commentators” (p. 59).

Fragmented Audiences

Other experts have also expressed concern about the effect that a growing interest in online news may have on the range of perspectives and topics to which individuals are exposed. This concern can be applied to the average news consumers’ exposure to aboriginal perspectives.

In one camp of the online news debate are theorists who argue that the emphasis on online news can create a fragmentation of audiences who only tune into perspectives and viewpoints with which they are already familiar. Some say that a declining focus on reading the newspaper and an increasing demand for online news could lead to fragmented audiences and polarized groups in society who may not be exposed to the same range of viewpoints they would have if they had picked up a physical copy of the newspaper.

Authors Romanow and Soderlund wrote that “in today’s society, with a multiplicity of competitive media, audiences seek out the media and media content that display life spaces with which they are familiar” (as cited in Soderlund and Hildebrandt, 2005, p. 94).

According to Sinclair Stewart and Grant Robertson, audiences are one of the factors at the centre of the newspaper debate: “Although online content can be easily accessed and shared, its audience is highly fragmented. It lacks the “mass” element of

mass media, making it harder for single stories to generate the impact they might in a city paper” (Stewart and Robertson, 2009, March 14, p. 3).

Writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Megan Garber called the shift from print to online a broad movement from “amalgamation to atomization.”

The net effect of that shift—which is also, of course, the ‘Net effect—is that consumers are increasingly presented with, and made to choose among, an expanding variety of ever-narrowing news sources. Which means in turn that, with greater ease than ever, we can limit our informational intake to facts that mirror and in many ways foster our own realities, without the necessity of externality—which is to say, without the inconvenience of being challenged in our beliefs. (Garber, 2009, p. 1)

This information cocooning can have dangerous consequences, as Garber argued: “An infrastructure of information consumption that fosters homophily—that allows us to cocoon ourselves in our own worldviews—undermines our ability to relate to each other, discursively, as citizens of a diverse nation. It fosters distance and dissonance” (Garber, 2009, p. 5).

Cass Sunstein, in his book *Republic.com 2.0*, theorized that the shift to online news creates what Nicholas Negroponte called the “The Daily Me” intake of news (as cited in Sunstein, p. 4), in which audiences are only exposed to the viewpoints that they seek out in advance, and that already reflect their political perspective and personal viewpoints. He argued that chance encounters “involving shared experiences with diverse others” and exposure to topics that readers did not seek out in advance are akin to running

into a range of community members on a street corner. This kind of chance, unplanned exposure to a range of perspectives is critical to social good, he said.

Sunstein argued that as the newspaper as “general interest intermediary” plays an increasingly smaller role among news readers, audience viewpoints risk becoming increasingly polarized as they log on to hear only those perspectives with which they are already familiar. This, he argued, could create a social fragmentation that could have wider-reaching societal impacts:

“...Citizens should have a range of common experiences. Without shared experiences, a heterogeneous society will have a much more difficult time in addressing social problems. People may even find it hard to understand one another. Common experiences, emphatically including the common experiences made possibly by the media, provide a form of social glue. A system of communications that radically diminishes the number of such experiences will create a number of problems, not least because of the increase in social fragmentation.” (Sunstein, 2007, p. 5)

This notion of “social glue” allowed by chance encounters with new topics and perspectives can also apply to exposing individuals to different cultural perspectives:

Media can enrich public life by promoting the notion that public dialogue matters and by providing spaces where people can both see parts of their own experience and be exposed to ideas, experiences and cultures that they do not encounter in their day-to-day lives... the public interest is enhanced by a media system that presents a diversity of views and stories, giving citizens a window on their world

that is multicultural and offers many different perspectives. (Sunstein, 2007, p. 20)

Internet as a Voice for the Voiceless?

In the other camp from critics like Sunstein are theorists who argue that the online media have the potential to create a variety of unique and dedicated platforms for marginalized or ethnic minority groups. They say new media and online journalism will in fact offer an opportunity for marginalized groups to eliminate the middleman of the editor, reporter or source selector, and go straight to the news and sources that they wish to report on.

As articulated by the former Canadian minister for Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Lloyd Axworthy, “Technology is changing the equations of power, challenging the conventional channels of communication, distributing and disseminating influence in the broadest possible fashion, to the point of democratizing the channels and getting rid of the gatekeeper” (as cited in Juniper, 2002, p. 145).

Some argue that online media can in fact be a better forum for marginalized viewpoints such as those of aboriginal communities, that cyberspace can be harnessed as a tool for portraying these perspectives. In the article “Marginal Voices in Cyberspace,” Ananda Mitra (2001) noted, “the technology of the web offers any member of a group an opportunity to raise a questioning voice as well as produce a community. Eventually the convergence of such voices can make marginal cyber communities grow large and vocal enough to question and challenge traditional structures of cultural and financial capital” (p. 38).

This new voice for the marginal in cyberspace, said Mitra (2001), makes it possible to be heard “not only as a singular voice but a hyperlinked heteroglossic voice of a cyber community that often tells the same alternative story” (p. 38). In other words, online stories can link to other stories, web sites and forums that give more exposure to the perspectives of marginal groups. Mitra argued that this new cyber discourse could make it unnecessary for marginal groups to depend on the dominant media to tell their story. “With the expansion of the web,” she argued, “it is quite likely that the story will be heard, thus calling into question the image that the dominant apparatuses of mass media have presented to the world” (p. 43).

Author David Kim Juniper (2002) wrote that online discussion forums, web sites and mailing lists used by aboriginal groups are “bringing the Native voice to the world stage.” Juniper said that the online structure allows wired activists to “circumvent traditional media and state censorship and to tell their stories directly to members of the growing civil society” (p. 150).

Conclusion

The media landscape in Canada is rapidly changing, forcing newsrooms to deal with staffing constraints, declining circulation numbers and dropping advertising revenues, and presenting media organizations with difficult decisions in deciding on a new business model. Some of these changes facing the industry began with increased concentration of Canadian media ownership in the mid-1990s.

This changing media context has implications for the diversity of voices included in the media, as fewer reporters are expected to cover a wider range of subjects. In

Canada, this could mean less coverage of aboriginal issues in the mainstream media, as fewer reporters are assigned to do it.

Parallel to the changing business model for Canadian media is an increase in online news consumption, and an increasing focus on web content. This has theorists like Sunstein worried that a multitude of perspectives could lead to a fragmentation of audiences, as news readers tune into only the news in which they were previously interested. With respect to aboriginal perspectives, this could mean that an even smaller percentage of online news readers are exposed to issues impacting First Nations communities than prior to the shift to online coverage. This could have the troubling impact of creating information cocoons among news readers, and fostering distance rather than greater understanding (Garber, 2009).

Other theorists, such as Ananda Mitra (2001), are optimistic about the Internet's ability to provide a more connected online community for marginalized perspectives (p. 38). This notion can be applied to the idea of aboriginal media capitalizing on the power of Google and links from other sites to raise greater awareness of critical aboriginal issues among the general public.

The next chapter will examine theory on the historical representation of aboriginal people in the mainstream media, including trends of under-representation, a focus on crime and conflict, lack of context to complex events and use of stereotypes and negative frames in the portrayal of native people. The chapter will also present the views of reporters who have covered aboriginal affairs as a beat, and those who currently cover the topic for mainstream or aboriginal media, to assess the challenges of reporting on these issues, and the problems that typically plague current coverage.

Chapter 3: An Overview of News Coverage of Aboriginal Issues

Significant study has been devoted to the portrayal of aboriginal people in the mainstream media. This chapter will examine problems that critics have argued are pervasive in news reporting, such as gaps in coverage of important native events, simplistic racial stereotypes, a focus on conflict with white authorities, and a lack of context to what are often complex issues, such as land claims. Despite efforts to rectify these problems, the current economy of the news industry is creating more problems, according to journalists who have been assigned to aboriginal stories in the past or who are currently trying to report on them. Others argue that the fundamental problem lies not in the resources allocated, but in changing attitudes towards what is considered news and how aboriginal news is covered.

The Absence of Aboriginal Issues in the Media

In 1991, the government launched a series of hearings into the relationship between Canada's aboriginal and non-aboriginal population. In a November 1993 appearance before this Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), the then-president of the Canadian Association of Journalists, Charles Bury, delivered an extremely poor review of the Canadian media's coverage of aboriginal issues:

The country's large newspapers, TV and radio news often contain misinformation, sweeping generalizations and galling stereotypes about natives and native affairs. Their stories are usually presented by journalists with little background knowledge or understanding of Aboriginals and their communities. The large media outlets include shamefully few Aboriginals either on their staff or

among their freelance journalists. As well, very few so-called mainstream media consider Aboriginal affairs to be a subject worthy of regular attention... The result is that most Canadians have little real knowledge of the country's native peoples or of the issues that affect them. (as cited in Switzer, 2002, pp. 232-233)

This passage echoes the concerns of other academics who have studied mainstream news coverage of aboriginal issues, and who have pointed to significant gaps in media coverage of these communities, especially when native people are in conflict with federal or provincial governments.

Switzer argued that selection of the news is linked to political agendas.

“Governments don’t want to deal with native issues, so there have been far more headlines in this country about Helms-Burton legislation than there have been about, say, the report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples” (Switzer, 2002, p. 231), he said, referring to the U.S. legislation that strengthens the U.S. trade embargo on Cuba. He said that without sufficient reporting on these kinds of stories, aboriginal people are rendered invisible among the Canadian public. “The onus is on journalists to make native Canadians a visible minority,” he wrote (p. 234).

Conflicts, Stereotypes and Lack of Context

Valerie Alia pointed out that when aboriginal people do make headlines, it is only when conflict arises. In *Un/Covering the North*, Alia (1999) outlined findings from a media study she conducted for the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing. One of her observations was that aboriginal people are only covered in national, regional or urban media in times of crisis or when negative issues are involved.

Alia talked about how the shortage of coverage of aboriginal issues in Canadian media affects the public's perception of those issues. She points to a trend of "disaster coverage," in which stories on aboriginal issues are restricted to "singular events of extraordinary tragedy" (p. 158). She writes that this kind of under-representation and marginalization of aboriginal issues in the mainstream media "exaggerates the worst tendencies of journalistic practice and perpetuates colonial thinking about northern issues, lands, and peoples" (p. 158).

Mary Ann Weston (1996) also argued that the American news media have long perpetuated inaccurate stereotypes (p. 7), despite criticism from academics that dates back decades. She argued that historically, traditional news values have actually served to perpetuate inaccurate perceptions of natives and have relegated them to the periphery of the news agenda, unless a conflict or unique event occurs. The same situation applies in Canada, according to Meadows, who has called mainstream news coverage of aboriginal issues a "monocultural blot" on a multicultural society (as cited in Fleras and Kunz, 2001, p. 80). Fleras (2009) argued that just as aboriginal people are often rendered invisible by the shortage of coverage on issues affecting these communities, they are also over-represented in stories relating to crime and conflict (p. 313). He cited the findings of the 1996 RCAP report, which concluded that most news coverage frames aboriginal peoples as "pathetic victims, noble environmentalists, or angry warriors" (as cited in Fleras and Kunz, 2001, p. 80). Further to this trend, he argued, is a focus on tokenism or "ornamentalizing" of ethnic groups (Fleras, 2009, p. 315), in which minorities are not depicted as regular citizens, but trivialized into stereotypical roles.

Fleras has also written about the tendency of media to frame aboriginal peoples as “problem people.” While mainstream media are not overtly or intentionally racist, systemic racism is still evident through the use of particular news frames: “Racism may be manifested in the racist premises of unquestioned assumptions pertaining to what is included in news. Frames may be imposed that, despite a lack of malevolent intent, lead to interpretations that disparage or diminish aboriginal people” (Fleras and Kunz, 2001, p. 80). Fleras wrote that aboriginal people are repeatedly misrepresented as: a threat to national interests, a risk to Canada’s social order, an economic liability, “a thorn in the side of the criminal justice system” or as “unscrupulous manipulators who are not averse to breaking the law” (Fleras, 2001, p. 315). According to Fleras, this kind of miscasting of minority groups is not out of the ordinary, but rather “systemic and institutionalized within the very nature of contemporary mainstream media” (Fleras, 2009, p. 309).

In September of 1995, native protester Dudley George was killed by an Ontario Provincial Police sniper in Ipperwash Provincial Park. George was part of a group of unarmed protesters who had constructed a barrier and occupied the park over a land dispute stemming back to 1942, when the federal government expropriated the land from the Stony Point band (CBC News in Depth, 2010, May 31).

In 2004, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty launched a public inquiry into the incident. The two-year investigation, which resulted in a \$26-million settlement and compensation for members of the Kettle and Stony Point First Nation, included an analysis of the media coverage of the dispute. Former journalist and Ryerson professor John Miller conducted this analysis. In his report, he noted that following the aboriginal man’s shooting, the media tended to seek broader explanations for what happened, by

“linking it almost gratuitously to other disputes, usually violent ones that had no common link other than the fact they all involved First Nation people” (Miller, 2005, p. 11).

He also observed that stories that fit common stereotypes, such as First Nations people as troublemakers, unruly or violent, tended to get picked up by other newspapers, whereas those that challenged these stereotypes, such as those depicting unarmed aboriginal people or those with a legitimate grievance over land, did not (Miller, 2005, p. 11).

Many critics have turned to the Oka crisis as an example of how the media can go wrong when it comes to coverage of aboriginal issues. The 1990 conflict centered around the proposed expansion of a municipal golf course in Oka, Quebec, that the Mohawk community of Kanesatake said encroached on their land, specifically their burial grounds. The highly publicized conflict drew world-wide media coverage. The Mohawk community erected a barricade to block access to the area in protest of the proposed golf course expansion. The army erected their own barbed wire barricades to keep the Mohawk people on their land.

The RCAP report concluded that stereotypes were pervasive throughout the Oka media coverage: “In all of the television, radio, and newspaper coverage, one image was repeated again and again: that of the ‘warriors’-bandanna-masked, khaki-clad, gun-toting Indians. The image bore a remarkable resemblance to the war-bonneted warrior – the dominant film and media image of Aboriginal men in the last century” (as cited in Switzer, 2002, p. 232).

Switzer said the incident was an example of how aboriginals are only news subjects when conflict occurs: “The eruption of media attention aboriginals received

surrounding Oka began to dissipate almost as soon as the barbed wire and barricades came down, and native issues resumed their familiar position at the bottom of both the House of Commons order paper and newsrooms assignment rosters” (Switzer, 2002, p. 233). As Lorna Roth, Beverly Nelson and Kasennahwai Marie David (1995) note in an essay about the Oka crisis, “In contrast to the immediacy and flashiness of Warrior coverage in 1990 are the routine absences of native issues and journalists from present mainstream media” (p. 78).

In her book *Wartime Images, Peacetime Wounds: The Media and the Gustafsen Lake Standoff*, Sandra Lambertus (2004) examined media coverage of aboriginal people during major conflicts. She argued that the media have a history of promoting a deficit of stories or of threatening images of minorities in mainstream society, and that this exclusion or misrepresentation can encourage an “us against them syndrome in the mainstream” (p. 10). One of the primary ways to legitimize violence in response to minority resistance, such as the case of the violent conflict over land that emerged at Gustafsen Lake, near 100 Mile House in British Columbia, is to “criminalize minority behaviour without examining the history and the context of the issues from the minority perspective” (p. 10). The 1995 conflict at Gustafsen Lake involved a month-long armed stand-off on disputed lake-side territory between band members and the RCMP. The conflict occurred after an agreement to use Crown land for native sun dances was challenged by the rancher who had jurisdiction over the land.

Lack of context is another major criticism outlined by theorists when it comes to mainstream media coverage of aboriginal issues. While many of the issues affecting these

communities are extremely complex, some critics have said that news stories do not provide enough background on the historical factors that may have led to current events.

Fleras indicated that few mainstream news stories are situated within a historical context, or incorporate aboriginal concerns from aboriginal perspectives: “Media depictions of aboriginal initiatives that seek to challenge [inequities within and outside the system] tend to focus on the confrontational aspects of any ensuing conflict rather than on the historical and social context underlying the issues involved” (Fleras and Kunz, 2001, p. 80).

In her book *Indian Country*, Gail Valaskakis (2005) defined the Oka crisis as part of a continually emerging “politics of remembrance” (p. 36). She wrote that Oka raised questions about reporting and the media itself, including the “exigency of news backgrounding and historical context” (p. 38). She indicated that for the media, “Quebec’s Indian summer of 1990 was an uncontextualized link in a chain of isolated, militant Indian episodes. And like most academic writing on militant Indian events, the press misread or ignored the relationship between media representation, cultural appropriation, and the emergence and reporting of Native resistance” (p. 38).

Roth, Nelson and David say misrepresentation of aboriginal people in the media such as during the Oka crisis is caused by a lack of cross-cultural understanding and by a failure of journalists to spend more time and resources understanding the issues (p. 78).

Miller also addressed this issue in his study of the Ipperwash incident, in which he determined that the reporters sent in to cover the crisis lacked the background necessary to understand the historical context of the issue:

Although there were exceptions, the story was covered by reporters who would have benefited from more understanding of First Nation customs and behavior. That, combined with the limitations of ‘parachute journalism,’ when reporters are sent in without preparation to cover a sudden outbreak of violence under tight deadlines, served to produce stories that lacked historical context and relied heavily on the most available and convenient sources (outside First Nation leaders, politicians, the OPP, and local residents). (Miller, 2005, p. 11)

The consequences of this failure to provide context are serious. As Miller (2005) noted, “Context represents a vital component of conflict journalism, as it ensures audiences understand the issues involved and prevents them from becoming confused or, worse still, indifferent” (p. 25). He also pointed out that “how a crisis is reported, the sources that are used or ignored, and how those stories are ‘framed’ can impact the actions of governments, participants, police and onlookers, who frequently act according to how the media set the agenda” (pp. 13-14).

The next section of this chapter will examine whether these problems of under-representation of aboriginal people in the media, lack of context, use of stereotypes and a focus on conflict are prevalent in the changing media environment at Canadian newspapers. As some experts argue, one of the first things to look at is the newsroom.

Budgets and Resources in Today’s Newsrooms

As outlined in the first chapter of this thesis, mainstream Canadian media have been facing unprecedented pressures in recent months due to declining circulation and advertising revenues. Some journalists are concerned that these dwindling financial

resources are leading to even more severe gaps in news coverage of aboriginal issues, even in their own media.

Maureen Googoo, a grad of the Columbia School of Journalism, works as a freelance journalist and teaches journalism at King's College in Halifax. She commented on the current state of aboriginal news coverage:

With the cutbacks to a lot of newsrooms, you have a lot more generalist reporters covering general news. So what's happening is... there's fewer beats to cover now because of that... and aboriginal news in mainstream newsrooms has never been a priority beat to begin with. So a lot of the coverage in aboriginal news kind of falls by the way side, but even more so now that there's cutbacks. (M. Googoo, personal communication, January 20, 2010)

Googoo has started up her own news blog, radiogoogoo.ca, which she hopes will lead to more stories on aboriginal communities in Atlantic Canada. She said part of her motivation in starting this web site stemmed from a sense of frustration with the resource constraints when she worked for a major media organization, the Aboriginal People's Television Network (APTN): "I've always wanted to cover Atlantic aboriginal news, and I kind of wanted to do it my own way and in my own terms, and give lots of context, and I found even when I was working at APTN, budget constraints really prevented me from going and really delving into stories the way I wanted to, because television's really expensive" (M. Googoo, personal communication, January 20, 2010).

Budget concerns are affecting all media outlets, whether it's mainstream media organizations or independent media. However, Paul Macedo, the director of publishing operations at *Windspeaker*, a national aboriginal newspaper published out of Edmonton,

said that while major Canadian media outlets have recently seen extensive resource cutbacks, publications like his have always faced these kinds of budget constraints because of their smaller market:

For us, because of the communities we serve and the product we have, it's always been a challenge economically for us to survive and prosper. So we're used to the environment that mainstream publishers are facing recently. That's kind of our standard operating procedures. Convincing advertisers that aboriginal people are consumers, that they have dollars to spend, that they have services that they need. That's been a difficult, uphill battle. We've done well at it because we're still here after 27 years, but it's been a struggle. (P. Macedo, personal communication, January 15, 2010.)

Macedo noted that in comparison to the major media outlets, *Windspeaker* hasn't been faced with nearly the same budget pressures:

The economic downturn last year hurt mainstream publishers quite substantially, and it hurt us too, but in evaluating what the impact on us was, we're looking at maybe a two or three per cent decrease in revenue. Where, when I look at what CanWest is facing and some of the other mainstream, that would have been a successful year for them, they're looking at 15 to 20 to 25 per cent, whereas our downturn wasn't that significant. (P. Macedo, personal communication, January 15, 2010)

Steve Bonspiel, the co-publisher and editor of *The Eastern Door*, a weekly newspaper in the Mohawk community of Kahnawake, Quebec, said his publication has been faced with increased economic pressures, but is coping with the small staff typical

of community newspapers. “We’re making do with what we have, and that’s the reality of a small newsroom. Everybody does multiple things. Our reporters are not only reporters, they take photographs, they do a lot of research, they find ideas on their own to propose to me for stories, they represent the paper everywhere they go, whether they’re working or not,” he said, noting that community newspaper reporting is unique in that reporters live amongst the same people they report on (S. Bonspiel, personal communication, February 12, 2010).

He said that about five or six years ago, *The Eastern Door* had a high number of subscribers. They have since had to raise the prices due to costs of mailing out print copies of the newspaper, and as a result they have seen subscription rates drop. His strategy is to boost subscription rates by offering online subscriptions for people who want to read the publication online or who live outside the community. Some mainstream media have started subscribing to his newspaper as a way to develop story ideas or get an in to the community.

Debbie Mishibinijima, a reporter and multimedia producer at *Wawatay News*, an aboriginal news organization in northern Ontario, said the budget restrictions at a small news organization like hers are limiting, especially when the local population is scattered.

“We don’t have that kind of money to travel to the remote areas,” she said, noting that the Cree, Ojibway and Ojicree communities are distributed over a vast region. More than 28 of the communities are so remote, she said, that they are only accessible by plane, or by winter road during the coldest months of the year. As a result, she does most of her interviews over the phone, and is limited to producing short videos on stories in the most accessible communities (D. Mishibinijima, personal communication, January 19, 2010).

In an interview for this thesis, John Miller of Ryerson University said that in a way the aboriginal beat never really existed in the first place – an absence that is even more marked with resource constraints on newsrooms. He argued that the ‘beat’ formerly covered by reporters at major newspapers consisted of particular reporters taking an interest in these issues. With fewer staff in newsrooms, this means less time to allow reporters to pursue these stories: “If they existed, it was only because of the enormous commitment of an individual reporter who was able to convince editors that there were stories... In an era of more resources in the newsroom they were able to give them that leeway, but of course that doesn’t exist today,” he said (J. Miller, personal communication, February 26, 2010).

Some experts say the main solution for ensuring improved coverage of aboriginal people is not necessarily increasing resources, but hiring more aboriginal journalists at news organizations and ensuring that reporters who do cover aboriginal issues are equipped with sufficient awareness and background information on these communities.

The Aboriginal Beat

As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, the aboriginal beat has been virtually eliminated at most major Canadian newspapers. Reporters covering aboriginal affairs for mainstream news organizations often juggle the file with various other beats. The number of aboriginal reporters working in Canadian newsrooms is also drastically disproportionate. John Miller’s 2004 census of newsrooms showed that minorities, including aboriginal people, are more than six times under-represented in daily newsrooms (Miller and Caron, 2004, p. 1). In his survey, just one out of 2000 employees

identified as aboriginal. Those interviewed for this thesis say the ratio of aboriginal reporters working for major print media is still low.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal People's 1996 report determined that greater access to media by aboriginals was essential for promoting a broader understanding of native issues among the Canadian public. The report indicated that:

Aboriginal people are not well represented by or in the media. Many Canadians know Aboriginal people only as noble environmentalists, angry warriors, or pitiful victims. A full picture of their humanity is simply not available in the media. Mainstream media do not reflect aboriginal realities very well. Nor do they offer much space to Aboriginal people to tell their own stories – as broadcasters, journalists, commentators, poets or story-tellers. (as cited in Switzer, 2002, p. 233)

Former journalist and Carleton University professor John Medicine Horse Kelly said that more aboriginal reporters are needed in newsrooms to ensure more fair and adequate coverage of native issues: “The rhetoric is better, but we’re still not hiring aboriginal reporters in the newsrooms. The percentage is extremely low” (J. Kelly, personal communication, December 3, 2009).

Kerry Benjoe is a journalist who learned her skills in the Indian Communication Arts (INCA) certificate program at First Nations University in Regina. She now teaches journalism courses there in the summer. She has been working as a reporter at the *Regina Leader-Post* for four years, after being hired on a two-year internship created for aboriginal writers.

Benjoe said that having reporters of aboriginal background in the newsroom could help to ensure culturally sensitive reporting. She said her colleagues at the Leader-Post often seek her advice on appropriate terminology and for translation of Cree words. It appears to be an asset in her dealings with local aboriginal communities as well. Benjoe said that while initially some aboriginal community members were reluctant to talk to her, many became more comfortable sharing information once they knew that she was of Cree background:

When I first got there, no one knew my name, they didn't know who I was, what I was doing. I've had a lot of people just like flat out say no, I'm not going to talk to you... I think I've built up kind of a reputation, a rapport with a lot of the people in the community. A lot of people know I'm aboriginal now, whereas before nobody knew because my last name is not easily recognizable as aboriginal. That's kind of helped. (K. Benjoe, personal communication, January 21, 2010.)

Benjoe said that establishing trust among community members was also made easier the longer she worked on the beat, and the more the local people became familiar with her writing. Establishing that trust has also helped to produce story ideas—she pitches most of her stories, based on her own research and on tips sent to her by sources she has built up during her time working the beat. One thing that has helped to win over trust is the amount of coverage she has devoted to positive news within the nearby communities: “It's taken a lot of work, building up that whole relationship. It's not that I do all positive stories, I do do the harder stories as well, but I've found that once you've

made that connection, people are a little more willing to open up and give their side” (K. Benjoe, personal communication, January 21, 2010).

Her familiarity with the customs of the local community and her awareness of the sense of apprehension that she said many have towards the media has also helped her to establish trust among sources:

One of the roadblocks I first encountered was like what are you going to say, how are you going to twist my words? And I’d be like, I’m not going to twist your words – what you’re telling me is what I’m writing... They thought I was going to misinterpret or misrepresent or say something that they didn’t intend to say... I grew up on a reserve so I’m familiar with communications between people and how they will say something that often they don’t want to... something private mixed with something that they actually want to say... So I think that’s helped me develop those communication skills with a lot of people who are not used to dealing with media on a daily basis. (K. Benjoe, personal communication, January 21, 2010)

Macedo also stressed the need for more culturally sensitive reporting. He argued, however, that reporters don’t need to be of aboriginal background, they simply need to be willing to spend the time getting to understand the broader issues and local customs before entering the community:

There’s always this fear that mainstream is coming into the community, they’re going to get kind of the negative news, they’re going to get the headline, and then scurry back to their press offices and submit the story without really understanding the background. And that’s what we try to do – we look at an issue

and we try to describe what some of the historical context has been that's led to this, to give kind of a broader perspective on things. (P. Macedo, personal communication, January 21, 2010)

Kelly also echoed these concerns, noting that non-aboriginal reporters can be particularly blind to local customs when it comes to dealing with the media:

One of the reasons that reporters often do not get good stories from aboriginal communities is because they approach it the way their culture would do it. They come in with cameras blazing, looking for someone to talk to. That's entirely against our culture, and that's universal for all aboriginal people in North America, probably South America too. People won't talk to you until they know you. And there's a process of coming in and following a protocol for example, of talking to the chief, whoever the village chief might be and stating your case. The aboriginal way has never been rushed, and on reserve it still isn't. So when reporters rush in, sure there's going to be one or two native people who are going to come up and jump in front of the cameras, but these aren't the ones that represent the community. The ones that represent the community need to be approached in a more traditional fashion. (J. Kelly, personal communication, December 3, 2009)

Maurice Switzer, who is currently the editor at the *Anishinabek News*, a weekly paper published by the Union of Ontario Indians, was the first aboriginal person to act as a publisher of a mainstream newspaper when he was at the *Winnipeg Free Press*. He was also involved in starting up one of the first aboriginal-specific post-secondary journalism programs in the country at First Nations Technical Institute on Tyendinaga Mohawk

Territory, near Belleville, Ontario, where he developed a course on the aboriginal beat. The program has since been suspended due to low enrolment.

Switzer echoed Kelly's concern about journalists entering communities without some sense of local customs. He has observed that journalists will head straight to the official spokespeople and skip the voice of the average community members altogether: "That's the criticism I have of media in general –they often look for an official spokesperson with a title, instead of just the plain people, assuming that if you're just an ordinary citizen you somehow don't have the credentials to know what's going on. So the media end up by choice often speaking with spin doctors" (M. Switzer, personal communication, January 24, 2010).

Irkar Beljaars, a freelance journalist and community radio host based out of Montreal, concurred that often the real stories will come from community members: "The best way to deal with First Nations issues and to really get to the meat of it, is to talk to the people. Don't talk to the chiefs, don't talk to the rabble-rousers, talk to the people. More often than not, all they want to do is talk about it" (I. Beljaars, personal communication, January 18, 2010).

Macedo and Kelly both note that taking the time to understand the context behind issues or taking the time to build up trust among community members is something that is not always possible for journalists. Reporters at *Windspeaker* have the luxury of working for a monthly publication, where daily deadlines are not a factor, and where taking the time to establish trust and get multiple perspectives within a community is possible. At major newspapers, it is a different scenario – newsrooms face not only resource but also constant time pressures, and building up trust is not particularly

conducive to a 5 p.m. deadline. But as some argue, sometimes all it takes is a little bit of research and common sense.

Alex Roslin is an investigative journalist who has freelanced stories on aboriginal issues to the *Montreal Gazette*, *Canadian Geographic* and other major media publications. He also helped to create a bi-monthly Cree news publication called *The Nation*. He said that respecting the customs of the local community while going in to cover stories basically just boils down to common sense:

If someone wandered down the street here and was just wandering around with a pen and a paper, everybody in our area here would be suspicious of them. But as soon as they made clear their good intentions I think, and if they were reporting on something that was of concern to us as a neighbourhood, here where I live, people would probably be much more open to them... You just think about any small community where you'd want to tell a story – you have to just think about it a little before-hand and have the right approach. (A. Roslin, personal communication, February 2, 2010.)

Rudy Platiel covered the aboriginal beat for *The Globe and Mail* for 27 years. While he is not of aboriginal background himself, he said his familiarity with native communities helped him in covering these stories. He grew up near a First Nations reserve near Owen Sound, Ontario, and as a teenager befriended a family there: “When it came to the late 1960s and the emergence of Indian issues, these were not strange people to me, these were people that I had dealt with and had been friends with. So I didn’t sort of view them in any other way than the way I would view any group,” he said (R. Platiel, personal communication, February 2, 2010).

The former *Globe* reporter was assigned to the aboriginal beat in 1970 following the emergence of the native rights movement. He was told to travel across the country for a year and write about what was going on in First Nations communities. His nearly three decades of work on the file evolved out of this year-long trip. He began keeping up with aboriginal stories, building up contacts and establishing trust among aboriginal people during a time when many communities were still very apprehensive of media:

There was a time back in the early 20th Century when they had to get permission from the Indian agent to leave the reserve. I mean it was a very restrictive thing, so when that breeds kind of... a sort of mentality in which you sort of are... very suspicious of people coming around asking a lot of questions. So it was a matter of me going on reserves and trying to break through this to get people to talk to me and trust me, and essentially it seemed to eventually work. I didn't really have too much trouble that way. It's just a matter of going in and listening to people.

(R. Platiel, personal communication, February 1, 2010.)

Platiel worked the beat, and also covered other general assignment news, until he retired in 1997. "Significantly," he said, "there was never anybody assigned to do native affairs after I left." He said he was never protective of his beat and would have been happy to share with other reporters interested in covering the file, but that he came to realize that if he was not covering these stories, no one else would be: "I became very conscious especially later on, that here's this grey-haired guy doing a story on Indians. The problem was, when I looked around, I knew perfectly well that if I didn't do it, it wasn't going to get done; it was as simple as that. So that's why I simply continued

because I knew these things would not be particularly covered” (R. Platiel, personal communication, February 1, 2010).

Having a reporter take an interest in covering aboriginal issues does not necessarily mean these stories will make it past the editor’s desk. Bonspiel said when he was freelancing for *The Montreal Gazette* before he became publisher at *The Eastern Door*, he was once told by an editor after pitching two aboriginal stories in a week that “that’s enough native stories for this week, let’s put it in next month” (S. Bonspiel, personal communication, February 12, 2010). This example feeds into Sandra Lambertus’ concern that an under-representation of aboriginal people in the media could lead to an “us against them syndrome” (Lambertus, 2004, p. 10) among the public. The example also reinforced Valeria Alia’s point that aboriginal people only make headlines when there is conflict (Alia, 2005, p. 158). The kind of news values that keep aboriginal people off the news agenda unless there is conflict and tragedy can serve to perpetuate inaccurate stereotypes of aboriginal people (Weston, 1996, p. 7). As illustrated by Bonspiel and Platiel’s recent examples from newsrooms, these kinds of problems still appear to be pervasive among the mainstream media.

Aboriginal Affairs in Today’s News Cycle

While mainstream news organizations may be facing increased resource challenges and fewer reporters dedicated to reporting aboriginal issues, some journalists said this should not result in less coverage on aboriginal issues. Many said the amount of coverage on aboriginal issues has actually increased, but that it focuses only on conflict situations involving aboriginal communities. All the sources interviewed for this thesis,

however, agreed that aboriginal issues continue to be one of the most under-reported stories in the country. Switzer described his concern with the gap in coverage:

There is no issue that you can talk about in Canada that doesn't have an underlying aboriginal component—and that's why for the media not to recognize that and not to devote resources or interest to that is really shortsighted... If you think about the logic of it... that the fastest growing demographic in Canada, the aboriginal/First Nations one, is also the one with the worst socio-economic indicators with regard to employment and health and everything else. And for the media not to recognize that unfortunate dichotomy is not to recognize the peril in which that places Canada's future. And to exclude that demographic from comprehensive news coverage about our issues is I think one of the biggest unreported stories in the world. (M. Switzer, personal communication, January 24, 2010.)

Until recently, Jorge Barrera covered aboriginal issues for CanWest News Service. As part of the chain's wire service, his stories appeared in daily papers across the country. He has spent 10 years covering aboriginal issues in Yellowknife, Nunavut, northern Saskatchewan and Kenora. He briefly held the aboriginal beat at Sun Media in 2007. At CanWest, he covered a variety of breaking news stories, in addition to First Nations issues, which was not an assigned beat, but something he said he has established as an interest.

He said that in his time covering native issues, he has actually seen more stories being written on the topic: "I think we have had an increase of coverage... even if you don't have a beat for it you just have to end up covering it. It verges on the violent, and

there are some serious issues like residential schools that have recently bubbled up over the settlement and the apology,” he said, referring to Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s statement of apology on June 11, 2008 to victims of the native residential school system and a \$1.9 billion settlement that was made in 2005 under the former Liberal government in the form of compensation payments for those who suffered abuse. Many children who attended residential schools were sexually, physically or emotionally abused and forced to abandon their language and culture. “The narrative is there and it’s easier to follow because it’s so in our faces now,” he added (J. Barrera, personal communication, February 4, 2010).

He said, however, that is not enough: “I think it’s the most under-reported beat in Canada and I don’t understand why... yes there is more coverage, but it’s more reactive coverage. Something happens, there’s a barricade, the kid dies, and then you react. There’s not a lot of sort of pre-emptive stories, stories that try to get at stuff before it flares up” (J. Barrera, personal communication, February 4, 2010).

Macedo has also observed an increased amount of coverage in the mainstream media on aboriginal issues during the last five to 10 years. He attributed the increase to recognition among mainstream publishers that aboriginal people make up a potential market in their readership area. However, he is concerned with the depth of coverage – which he said often fails to provide important background and context to complex stories:

Some of the concern that we’ve had is the depth of that coverage, the awareness of the issues. It’s sad that two toddlers froze to death Christmas of 2008 in Saskatchewan. So, you know, that’s where the news is, so off they go to that community to put a microphone in their face or take a picture and say how do you

feel about this? Well, how would anybody feel about two toddlers in the community passing away in a tragic way. What we're looking for is – why is this happening? What's the background here? Is this prevalent in other communities? Why is it prevalent in other communities? (P. Macedo, personal communication, January 15, 2010.)

Platiel echoed this idea that while there may be coverage on aboriginal issues during times of violence or tragedy, there is not much context provided: “Nine times out of 10, what's happened is there's a great deal of reporting on conflict, but you don't really get the background on what the heck is going on,” he said, noting that his editors at *The Globe* trusted him with what he wanted to include in his stories (R. Platiel, personal communication, February 1, 2010).

Roslin agreed that aboriginal issues are one of the most under-reported stories in Canada:

There's tons of stories in that area of course that have never got the coverage that they deserve... It's important to cover those stories from a fairness perspective because those stories are vital to our sense of justice, and also to our sense of people and the country and so on... There are almost a thousand First Nations communities out there across the country, and every single one of them has important stories that are crying for justice. You just have to spend a little bit of time there and people will gladly tell you about them... There are also native people in every city as well, who have other issues that are of vital importance to us, and by not covering them, we really hurt the fabric of our society. (A. Roslin, personal communication, February 2, 2010.)

Barrera said the increase in news coverage on aboriginal issues could be attributed to the increasing number of conflicts occurring recently – and he only sees this increasing more over the coming years. He sees the conflict-focused coverage as a broader flaw with the way all news is covered, not just issues impacting native communities. “Nobody cares about Caledonia unless Julian Fantino’s getting charged, or they’re throwing up a barricade,” said Barrera, referring to a 2006 major land claim dispute involving the Six Nations of the Grand River band, near Caledonia, Ontario over proposed development on the land. The conflict became violent and arrests against protesters were made. Ontario Provincial Police Commissioner Julian Fantino was later charged with attempting to influence municipal officials during the dispute (McLean, 2010, January 10).

So it’s one of the things that for some reason it’s only newsworthy if it’s flaring up, it’s not newsworthy if there’s nobody with guns. But you can say that about any beat basically, whether it be politics, or health care coverage or whatever—no one covers it unless someone dies waiting for an operation. It’s the nature of for some reason how we cover breaking news. (J. Barrera, personal communication, February 4, 2010.)

Platiel echoed this observation. He believes that the reason nobody was assigned to the aboriginal beat after he retired from *The Globe and Mail* was likely because the issue does not tend to take much priority in comparison to other news topics. “It’s only an issue if there’s some fire storm somewhere. If there’s a problem, in other words, Caledonia, Oka, one of these things blows up, then everybody wants to know about it. But once that’s over, then it’s back to it’s a non-issue” (R. Platiel, personal communication, February 1, 2010).

Barrera pointed out the importance of covering conflicts before they reach the point of barricades. He said that a shortage of beat reporters and other staff is not to blame, but argued that the news model itself needs to change.

In a lot of ways you can probably avoid conflict by more coverage of stuff.

Caledonia was telegraphed – the chief had sent letters warning that it was going to happen... and no one was really paying attention until it flared up. There's lots of situations like that where you can see stuff unfolding, but there's no interest until it actually unfolds... I don't think the excuse of not having enough people is a good excuse, I think there needs to be a different way of looking at covering news" (J. Barrera, personal communication, February 4, 2010).

Bonspiel has made similar observations after his time as publisher and editor at *The Eastern Door*. The mainstream media recently ran stories relating to a conflict in the community in which letters were sent out to non-natives telling them they could no longer live on the Mohawk reserve of Kahnawake, Quebec. Bonspiel said these seem to be the only kinds of stories the mainstream media pick up on: "Everybody likes a juicy story. If they write about something that's a feel good feature or a human interest story, people might say that's not the Kahnawake I know – because it's been ingrained in them, that Kahnawake's about controversy. Despite the fact that 99% of the time we're not doing anything controversial, we're just living our lives. But they like to paint the community in that light and all the other stories kind of fall by the wayside" (S. Bonspiel, personal communication, February 12, 2010).

Platiel echoed Barrera's argument that it all goes back to basic news values: "the saying is that news is always what bad things have happened yesterday. It's what is

wrong with society, rather than what is right with society” (R. Platiel, personal communication, February 1, 2010).

While Switzer pointed out how under-reported aboriginal stories are, he also said these issues are gaining a growing place on the news agenda, even if it is most often focused on conflict or laden with inaccurate stereotypes. He sees it as a mixed blessing.

Because there’s more coverage, I think we actually tend to see more bad journalism. But I’ve always said that I would rather be on the agenda, than not be noticed... It’s kind of frustrating to see newspapers all across the country filled with pow-wow photos. That’s the stereotype of Indians being people of the past and beads and feathers and all that, but as much as I find that kind of repugnant, the fact is that I’d rather be getting that coverage than not... Now that may even reinforce some of those stereotypes, but at least we’re there... It’s a step in the right direction, but what we have to do now is get them to recognize that we’re deeper than that and that the issues are not so superficial. (M. Switzer, personal communication, January 24, 2010.)

Miller pointed to a need for a better news procedure when it comes to news coverage of aboriginal issues. Through his analysis of the media coverage of the Ipperwash inquiry, he concluded that reporters were not following journalism standards. In cases where journalists do not have any background on the issue, such as aboriginal news, “We abandon all of the principles of journalism,” he said. “Let’s find a better procedure so that doesn’t happen. It starts with suspending judgment about the story” (J. Miller, personal communication, February 26, 2010). The former journalist and recently-retired professor taught a class at Ryerson for 10 years about diversity reporting, in

which he talked to students about news judgment and how often what is seen to be newsworthy is what fits common stereotypes. “Stereotypes play an enormous role in deciding what’s news. If it fits a pattern, it’s news,” he said. “This whole power of stereotypes kind of sidetracks news judgment” (J. Miller, personal communication, February 26, 2010).

Conclusion

Research for this thesis has shown that a focus on conflict and a lack of context on complex aboriginal issues, as outlined by theorists such as Valerie Alia and Augie Fleras, continue to dominate coverage of aboriginal issues in Canadian media. As Fleras argued, aboriginal people continue to be rendered invisible in the mainstream media by a shortage of coverage, and when they are featured in the news, they are over-represented in stories of crime and conflict (Fleras, 2009, p. 313). This exclusion of aboriginal people in the media, and their representation as the “Other” or as an outsider to mainstream society is what Valaskakis (1993) describes as the “subaltern experience” (p. 284). It is also what has led to the creation of aboriginal media, or counter-spheres, as explained by Avison and Meadows (2000). Journalists who have covered or currently cover aboriginal affairs have indicated that a lack of interest from many reporters and editors in aboriginal issues continues to impact the amount of coverage native communities receive.

Comments from journalists and editors indicate that a journalist “parachuting” into complex conflict situations often fails to provide an accurate picture of the broader issue (Miller, 2005, p. 11). Lack of representation of aboriginal people in Canadian newsrooms can also impact the amount and type of coverage on aboriginal issues.

Clearly there are still pervasive problems in mainstream news coverage of aboriginal issues, and as newsrooms continue to be faced with staffing and resource constraints, these problems could potentially grow more severe. There are, however, a number of solutions that could improve current coverage and generate increased public awareness of indigenous issues. These solutions will be outlined later in this thesis.

Maureen Googoo predicted that aboriginal affairs will evolve into more of a niche area for freelance and citizen journalists, with greater collaboration between major newsrooms and freelance journalists. This idea supports the position of theorists such as Avison and Meadows (2000), who argue that multiple spheres can allow participants who are normally subordinated in the dominant media to bring their perspectives to a wider public sphere encompassing diverse cultures.

The next chapter will examine Ottawa news coverage of a missing persons case involving two young aboriginal women, the challenges involved in covering the case for reporters at both mainstream and aboriginal media outlets, and whether a shortage of resources in the newsroom of a mainstream paper played a role in the amount of coverage.

Chapter 4: Missing Maisy and Shannon: An Ottawa Case Study of Missing Aboriginal Women in the News

At a news conference on October 4, 2008, Laurie Odjick vented her frustration about what she perceived as a lack of interest in the case of her missing daughter, Maisy. It had been about a month since Maisy Odjick went missing from the Kitigan Zibi reserve, along with her best friend Shannon Alexander, and it was the first major news conference on the girls' disappearance. "What angers me is that Boomer the lion got more attention and press than these children have had and they deserve more than that," she was quoted in the media as saying (Kennedy, 2008, October 4, para. 15). Boomer was a lion cub owned by a Kitigan Zibi resident that broke loose in the spring of 2008. Whether Boomer received more hits than the girls or not, it was a moment that illustrated the deep concern on the part of families of missing women that their voices are not being heard. The sobering statistics indicate that there are over 500 cases like Maisy and Shannon's across this country – cases of missing aboriginal women or murder cases that remain unsolved (Native Women's Association, 2009). Yet critics say the issue is not garnering the attention it merits from the media. This chapter presents this case study as a way of assessing the challenges of covering aboriginal issues in both mainstream and aboriginal media.

This chapter will examine media coverage in the Ottawa area following the disappearance of Maisy and Shannon in September 2008 to determine whether there were any gaps in coverage of the case. Print news coverage will be analyzed to determine whether any dominant frames or stereotypes were prevalent. An interview with an *Ottawa Citizen* journalist who led with the most coverage on this story, and with the

paper's editor-in-chief, will also be used to determine whether staff shortages in the newsroom were a factor in the amount and type of coverage on the case. An interview with a reporter from Canada's national aboriginal broadcaster, APTN, will also be analyzed to compare the coverage that media organization dedicated to the story. First, some background information, statistics and literature on violence against aboriginal women will be examined.

The Background: Violence Against Aboriginal Women

Indigenous women between the ages of 25 and 44 are five times more likely than non-indigenous women of the same age to die as a result of violence, according to a 2004 report by Amnesty International (Amnesty International). In Canada, the issue of missing and murdered aboriginal women is a severe problem that continues to draw attention from human rights groups. The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) researches violence against aboriginal women through its Sisters in Spirit initiative. As of March 2010, 580 aboriginal women were listed in their database of missing and murdered aboriginal women and girls (NWAC, 2010, p. i). Many of these cases have occurred since the year 2000. Amnesty International, native groups, and parents of missing and murdered aboriginal women have publicly voiced concern over what they perceive to be government inaction on the issue, and indifference from police and the media.

Vancouver authors Yasmin Jiwani and Mary Lynn Young (2006) studied mainstream media coverage of missing and murdered aboriginal women, in particular the coverage of the Robert Pickton trial and the women of Vancouver's downtown eastside. They found that mainstream news coverage of the missing and murdered aboriginal

women of this poor neighbourhood in Vancouver, and the serial murder case surrounding the deaths, was a “sorely neglected story” in the Canadian media (p. 895). They stated that the coverage that did occur gave no broader context to the historical circumstances affecting aboriginal women, such as the legacy of colonialism or the impact of the residential school system (p. 906). They demonstrated that negative stereotypes of aboriginal women frame news coverage of the issue, relegating this group to society’s margins (p. 896).

In news coverage of racial minorities in Canada, there is often a sense of “blaming the victim,” according to the authors, who said that in the case of female victims of violence who are sex trade workers, women are somehow blamed for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or doing the wrong kind of work (Razack as cited in Jiwani and Young, 2006, p. 2). They argued that racial status, such as aboriginality, combined with prostitution, relegates these women to the “lower echelon of the moral order” and that while these women are reported to be missing, it is presented as if this is natural. They also addressed what they called “strategic silences” when it comes to the representation of aboriginal women in the media (Harris as cited in Jiwani and Young 899). This silencing of aboriginal women as victims, they said, contributes to representations of aboriginal sex trade workers as “deserving of violence” (Jiwani and Young, 2006, p. 899).

This idea of the “blaming the victim” news frame is also raised by researchers Valerie Alia and Simone Bull, who argued that this frame is used as an excuse for media not to represent the voices of an aggrieved minority group: “Those outside the bystander’s moral universe may actually be blamed for their predicament...Since we

have no knowledge of the circumstances that might have led to their misfortune, it must have been something they did. Blaming the victim in this way constitutes a positivist victimology that helps release the media from obligations to respond” (Alia and Bull, 2005, p. 84).

This literature will be used in the analysis of media coverage of the case of two missing young women from Maniwaki, Maisy Odjick and Shannon Alexander. The analysis will also draw on literature outlined in earlier chapters of this thesis, such as Augie Fleras’ argument that the media too often make “unquestioned assumptions” (Fleras and Kunz, 2001, p. 80), and Gail Valaskakis’ point that news coverage of native issues often lacks important context (Valaskakis, 2005, p. 38), to determine whether these problems were present in news coverage of Maisy and Shannon’s case.

The Case: Missing Maisy and Shannon

Sixteen-year-old Maisy Odjick and her best friend, 17-year-old Shannon Alexander, went missing from just outside the Kitigan Zibi reserve, 150 km north of Ottawa, on September 5, 2008. The Kitigan Zibi police department and the Sûreté du Québec are jointly investigating the case because one of the girls lived on-reserve, the other lived off-reserve. Recently, the Ontario Provincial Police also joined the investigation. When the girls disappeared, they left behind all their belongings, including their clothes, wallets, money and ID. Shannon Alexander was scheduled to start nursing school just days after the time she disappeared. There were several reported sightings of the girls in the fall in the Ottawa and Kingston areas shortly after the disappearance, although most sightings were proven false by police. No leads have been provided on the

girls' whereabouts since they went missing, although police have said they have reason to believe the girls are still alive.

A Summary of News Coverage

For the purpose of this media content analysis, coverage was analyzed for frequency and prominence of stories, selection of sources, and whether context was given to the broader trend of missing and murdered aboriginal women. Discourse and framing were also analyzed for negative stereotyping, unquestioned assumptions or inconsistency.

The story of missing Maisy and Shannon generated nearly 60 hits in the local media from shortly after the young women went missing to the one-year anniversary of their disappearance. Media outlets that covered the story included *The Ottawa Citizen*, *The Ottawa Sun*, CBC, CTV, A News and APTN. *The Ottawa Citizen* had the most coverage of Maisy and Shannon, with 18 hits over the span of about a year. *The Ottawa Sun* ran 15 stories over the same time period. Some Quebec media outlets also covered the case, including six news stories and one opinion piece published in the French-language paper *Le Droit*, and a story in *The Montreal Gazette* about a vigil that was held in March for missing and murdered aboriginal women. Several national stories throughout this time span publicized the broader issue, particularly after calls were made from federal opposition parties for a public inquiry into the problem.

As a point of contrast to the roughly 60 hits on Maisy and Shannon, the disappearance of runaway Barrie, Ontario teenager Brandon Crisp in October of 2008 merited over 200 hits in news coverage during the three-week search before he was found dead. Many of these hits were CanWest News Service stories that ran in various papers

across Canada. These hits, located through the site FPinfomart.ca, included news of his disappearance, massive ground searches for the boy, news of the autopsy to confirm the dead boy's identity, coverage of his funeral, and op/ed pieces about the dangers of video games, given that Crisp ran away from home after his parents took away his X-box.

Laurie Odjick drew attention to this discrepancy in coverage at press conferences, as well as the discrepancy between the media attention received by her daughter's disappearance and by Boomer, the pet lion that went missing from the same reserve. The animal received three hits in *The Ottawa Citizen* during the span of a month in the spring of 2008, including one front-page story.

While there are many differences between the case of Crisp and of Maisy and Shannon, both cases were possible scenarios of runaway youth, yet one white, middle-class boy who had had a fight with his parents and vanished appeared to have been deemed much stronger in news value than the disappearance of two young aboriginal women. While a major factor in this discrepancy in news coverage was likely the gaming aspect to the story, which received a great deal of attention, perhaps Maisy and Shannon's disappearance was seen as more "natural" (Razack as cited in Jiwani and Young, 2006, p. 896) than the disappearance of a non-aboriginal boy from urban Ontario.

An Analysis of News Coverage

Maisy and Shannon went missing on September 5, 2008. The first press conference to publicize the disappearance was not held by the Kitigan Zibi band council and the reserve police department until Friday, September 19. Three local news outlets covered this news conference. There was a brief four-paragraph story on the CBC Web

site, a story on CTV News, and a piece the following day in *The Ottawa Citizen*. The article indicated that the Kitigan Zibi police notified police forces across Canada of the girls' disappearance after a local search failed to find any trace of them (Rogers, 2008, September 20). The article was under 400 words and ran on page 3 of the city section. It made reference in the lead to a cross-country march, Walk 4 Justice, which was held just days before to raise awareness of missing and murdered women across the country. In this sense, the story did an effective job of placing Maisy and Shannon's case within the larger context of missing women across the country.

Volunteer ground searches were conducted on the Kitigan Zibi reserve on Tuesday, September 30 and Thursday, October 2. CBC News ran a story on their web site on the 30th, while the only outlet that covered the October 2 search was the French newspaper *Le Droit*. The paper reported that about 90 volunteers participated in the search. The lack of coverage on this particular event seems surprising, given the large number of volunteers. The story in *Le Droit* quoted the coordinator of emergency measures for the Kitigan Zibi police as saying there had been no investigation conducted to date into the possibility of murder, given that the police had received a few leads on sightings of the girls (Michaud, 2009, March 19). This also seems like a lead worth further investigation, but it does not appear to have been followed up.

The second *Ottawa Citizen* story ran on Friday, October 3 in advance of a press conference organized by the Assembly of First Nations. This press conference, and a subsequent Sisters in Spirit vigil on Parliament hill, garnered by far the most news coverage on Maisy and Shannon, with a total of eight local print, radio and TV stories. Many of these stories did an effective job of providing context to the broader trend of

missing and murdered women across the country, quoting Alex Neve of Amnesty International and Phil Fontaine, the former head of the Assembly of First Nations, on the severity of the problem.

In *The Ottawa Citizen*, Fontaine talked about what he perceived as inadequate attention from media, government and police when aboriginal women go missing, which he blamed on complacency rooted in racism and discrimination. “The response when First Nations women go missing is often too little, too late,” he said (Kennedy, 2008, October 4, para. 12). Many stories focused on the parents, such as an A News story that ran a clip of Shannon Alexander’s father making a direct plea for his daughter to return. Shannon’s uncle is also shown speculating that they ran away, the only direct quote in local coverage of a family member speculating this.

Six stories ran on the girls between October 9 and 13 in regards to the possible whereabouts of the girls and a ground search that took place in the neighbourhood of Vanier in Ottawa. The CBC reported on October 9 that there had been reported sightings of the girls in the Ottawa area (these have since been proven false). CTV, the *Sun* and the *Citizen* all covered the search in Vanier. The story in the *Citizen* was the most extensive, running on page A3 at just over 500 words. The story ran with the lead “Ottawa police were combing a Vanier neighbourhood known for drugs and prostitution yesterday, after a volunteer search party turned up fresh leads into the whereabouts of the two missing girls” (Tam, 2008, October 12, para. 1). The story then focused on the friend of the family who organized the search. The story was clearly driven by the native women who helped to organize the search, and the fact that Vanier is known for these kinds of activities is not in dispute. However, the story does lead off with what could be perceived

as “unquestioned assumptions,” or “frames that, despite a lack of malevolent intent, lead to interpretations that disparage or diminish aboriginal people” (Fleras and Kunz, 2001, p. 80). Clearly the reporter was only working with the information she had, and was on weekend duty covering a topic she had not dealt with before, but for those who only read a couple of paragraphs into the story, the impression given is that these girls were almost certainly involved in at-risk behaviour, whereas there was no indication from the police that this was the case.

The Sun story on this same search in Vanier lead with what seemed to be a more effective frame, focusing on the family friend who organized the search: “After spending hours on the streets of Vanier Saturday afternoon, Lynda Kitchikeesic has Thanksgiving dinner with her family and by 10:30 p.m. is back out” (Jackson, 2008, October 13, para. 1). The story went on to describe the search from her perspective, and then to give some background on the girls’ case. While this seems to be a more effective way of leading the story, there is also one un-sourced claim in the story that could play into the “unquestioned assumptions” scenario. In the sixth paragraph of the story, the writer indicated: “When Maisy Odjick, 16, and her best friend Shannon Alexander, 17, disappeared they had cut their hair short, typically a sign in native culture for women that something bad happened to them” (Jackson, 2008, October 13, para. 6). This detail is not attributed to anyone and it is unclear from where it originated.

The Sun ran another un-sourced claim in a November 6 article, focusing on Brian Alexander’s plea for his daughter to return home. The story indicated that the families had not heard from their daughters since they disappeared. Then the journalist wrote: “There’s worry someone coerced the girls into drugs and possibly prostitution. They had

cut their hair short about a week before they disappeared—usually a sign, in native culture, that a woman had suffered some sort of trauma” (Jackson, 2008, November 6, para. 6). It is again unclear where this claim originated. Without sources to back up the claim, however, this kind of statement risks playing into negative frames or stereotypes of aboriginal women, such as an assumption that whenever an aboriginal woman goes missing, she was involved in a high-risk lifestyle. A little more time devoted to the story, and confirmation with more sources, could have led to a more informed perspective on this statement.

The Ottawa Citizen ran a story on December 1, focusing on the sorrowful plea of Laurie Odjick for her daughter’s return, and the increase of a reward, generated by friends and family, to \$10,000 (Kennedy, 2008, December 1, para. 6). A search for Maisy and Shannon in the Kitigan Zibi area in December produced news coverage in both of Ottawa’s English-language daily newspapers. This was the first major ground search conducted since the girls had gone missing, and was led by Global 1 searchers and 35 community volunteers. The Sun ran a brief, six paragraph story on it, while the *Citizen*’s Brendan Kennedy went out to the reserve and participated in the search, writing a long, nearly 800 word piece. The story made brief mention in the last line to the broader trend of over 500 missing aboriginal women (Kennedy, 2008, December 8, para. 24).

After the first few weeks of coverage, news coverage continued sporadically in local media. On Monday, March 9, 2009, the *Citizen* ran a feature piece, focusing on Maisy’s mother’s experience dealing with her daughter’s disappearance. The story also devoted a few paragraphs to explaining why the file had been split between two police departments, and made reference to police confusion on the file. The Sureté du Quebec

was quoted as saying it had evidence to suggest the girls ran away. The Kitigan Zibi police disagreed with this, saying they had no such evidence (Kennedy, 2009, March 9, para. 17). It seems that this would have made an interesting angle to follow up on, but no further articles addressed this aspect.

As Kitigan Zibi is in Quebec, some Montreal media have covered the case. On March 18, the Montreal Gazette covered a candlelight vigil and public event held in the city that drew attention to the problem of missing and murdered women. A panel of speakers addressed the issue, including Maisy Odjick's mother, Laurie Odjick. Beverley Jacobs, the former president of the Native Women's Association of Canada, was also quoted as saying that cases of aboriginal women going missing continue to go unreported in the mainstream media (Cornachia, 2009, March 18, p. A7).

In April, *The Ottawa Citizen* ran a story on a new search for Odjick and Alexander. After the young women had been missing for over seven months, Laurie Odjick organized another search of the Maniwaki area. Brendan Kennedy's story in the *Citizen* concentrated on Odjick's renewed plea for help (Kennedy, 2009, April 24).

The Ottawa Sun also ran another story in April about the two missing young women, focusing on the seven-month anniversary. Writer Shane Ross led with a mention of Shannon Alexander's father, Bryan Alexander, and the fact that he waited until 3 a.m. on his daughter's birthday to see if she would call. In the third paragraph, the story turned to Laurie Odjick and her wait for her daughter Maisy to call on her sister Madison's birthday. The story included significantly more quotes from Bryan Alexander than previously seen in coverage. The writer provided a description of Alexander leaving his daughter as he boarded a bus to go paint his son's house. "I waved goodbye to her," he

was quoted as saying. “She didn’t look happy but she didn’t say nothing. I gave her money and a half carton of cigarettes and told her I’d be back in two or three days” (Ross, 2009, April 5).

In April, a different reporter from *The Ottawa Sun*, Beth Johnston, covered the new search organized for the young women in the Maniwaki area. The brief story included the details of the volunteer-led search, a quote from a spokesperson for the Native Women’s Association of Canada and a web site for more information on the missing young women (Johnston, 2009, April 23, p. 14).

In early May, Kennedy again covered the story for the *Citizen*, focusing on a new search of the Kitigan Zibi area. The story led with Laurie Odjick’s comments at the end of the search day, described the details of the search, and also included the family’s criticisms of the way the police had handled the case. Odjick was quoted as saying she believed both police departments investigating the case assumed from the start that the girls had run away (Kennedy, 2009, May 3, para. 8).

In May of 2009, coverage of the Maisy and Shannon case resurfaced in a number of local media after an elderly couple driving through the Maniwaki area reported to the police that they had seen bones by the side of the road. An article written on May 12 in the *Citizen* reported that the bones had been found and sent to the Sûreté du Québec for investigation, and on May 13 a story by Kennedy reported that the bones were analyzed and determined to come from an animal (Kennedy, 2009, May 13, para. 1).

A similar story was featured in *The Ottawa Sun* on the discovery of the bones. Writer Beth Johnston documented the discovery of the bones and quoted Laurie Odjick about her disappointment on hearing of the discovery from reporters (Johnston, 2009,

May 12, p. 3). When the bones were confirmed to be animal, *The Sun* ran a two-paragraph news brief on page 16.

While this kind of event served to put the Maisy and Shannon story back into the news again, Kennedy continued to include references in other news stories to the young women missing from Maniwaki. In a story on July 21, Kennedy reported on a 14-year-old aboriginal girl who went missing from Cornwall. In the brief article, he tied in the broader statistic about the number of missing and murdered aboriginal women across the country, and made mention that Maisy Odjick and Shannon Alexander had been missing since September 6 (Kennedy, 2009, July 21, para. 5).

Just before the one-year anniversary of Odjick and Alexander's disappearance, both of Ottawa's daily newspapers ran stories on the ongoing investigation after a press conference held by police. *The Sun* story, written by Kenneth Jackson on September 4, focused on the fact that police still had no leads as to the teens' whereabouts. *The Ottawa Citizen* story focused on the fact that investigators believed the young women were still alive. Both articles noted that the police held a press conference in the hopes that the media coverage would produce more tips from the public on the girls' whereabouts, after months without any. Both articles quoted Laurie Odjick and her criticism of the way the case had been handled by police, particularly early in the investigation. The articles reveal that the Ontario Provincial Police were added to the investigation as a third police department examining the case.

On the one-year anniversary of Maisy and Shannon's disappearance, *The Ottawa Citizen* ran a prominent two-page spread on the story. It also featured a front page, below-the-fold teaser, leading readers to the spread, and on September 7 they also ran a

box at the top of page A2, referring readers to Brendan Kennedy's investigative piece on *The Ottawa Citizen* web site.

The two-page spread on September 6 featured a 3000-word feature article, a timeline detailing the events surrounding the girls' disappearance, descriptions of the two girls, a summary of upcoming events and vigils, a blurb about the Kitigan Zibi reserve, and a cue to view a photo gallery of Maisy Odjick and Shannon Alexander at ottawacitizen.com. The page features four photos, including a large photo of the girls, one each of Maisy's mother Laurie Odjick, Shannon's father Bryan Alexander, and a family photo of Maisy with her brother.

The story provided a powerful sense of the perspective of the mourning, searching parents. The beginning of the piece focused on Lisa Odjick's reaction to her granddaughter Maisy's disappearance. "Lisa Odjick wakes some nights in tears. She is stalked by nightmares of her missing granddaughter," the story read. This was the first piece that used Maisy Odjick's grandmother as a source. It also made clear the role that the grandmother played in young Maisy's life. Maisy had been living with her grandmother, not her mother, before her disappearance. Lisa Odjick was quoted as saying: "I just want to hear her call me, 'Mama' again" (Kennedy, 2009, Sept. 6, p. A6). The story returned to Lisa Odjick at the end, describing her contemplating the lake from her home on the Kitigan Zibi reserve and talking about how difficult it was to spend a winter worrying about her granddaughter, and how hard she anticipated it would be to get through another winter wondering about her whereabouts.

The story also outlined the events and timeline surrounding the girls' disappearance, from the last few moments they shared with family and friends to the

searches and complicated police investigations surrounding their files. It described conflicting statements from the various police departments investigating the case – with the Sureté du Quebec claiming that Maisy and Shannon had run away, and the Kitigan Zibi police saying they had no evidence to suggest this was the case.

For the first time, Kennedy's story referenced a claim by a teen in the Kitigan Zibi community that Maisy and Shannon said they had just smoked crack. He noted that the teen thought the girls might have been joking about this, but that they did seem drunk or high. The teen also told Kennedy that both teens had cut their hair short and that Maisy had removed her nose and lip rings (Kennedy, 2009, Sept. 6, p. A6).

The story also included the perspectives of both Shannon's father Bryan Alexander and Maisy's mother Laurie and their descriptions of their daughters. Shannon's father revealed to Kennedy that his daughter would sometimes leave home for a few days, but would always call or leave a note. She also spent some time at a foster home. Laurie Odjick told Kennedy that Maisy was an independent and rebellious teen who fought with her mother, and who had begun experimenting with marijuana and alcohol. She had recently moved in with her grandmother. The story also quoted a friend of Maisy's who said the summer before the teen disappeared had been difficult for her—that she had drifted away from some of her closest friends and that she was moodier. "There were also rumours she was into harder drugs," Kennedy wrote. According to Maisy's friends and grandmother, the teen could be too trusting of other people.

Another story at the bottom of the page of the *Citizen's* coverage described the concerns of native organizations, some of the statistics from the Sisters in Spirit project on the number of missing and murdered aboriginal women and the call for a public

inquiry into the matter. It featured an interview with Winnipeg South Centre MP Anita Neville, who is the Status of Women critic for the opposition Liberals and one of the politicians joining the call, along with the Assembly of First Nations, the Native Women's Council, Amnesty International and NDP MP Libby Davies.

The story painted a clearer picture than any previous coverage as to what the teens were going through before they disappeared, and what they were like. While it painted a picture of a somewhat troubled background to the teens' life, the story also provided a detailed account of the perspectives of family members and their concerns of police inaction on the file. Kennedy also effectively portrayed what appeared to be police confusion among the various departments investigating the case.

A few days after the two-page spread feature ran in the *Citizen*, the paper ran an editorial which argued that the lack of the attention to the case did not boil down to simply racism, but to the girls' troubled backgrounds.

"It overlooks the important reality that, like many young aboriginal and Inuit people, the two girls come from terribly disordered environments," the editorial stated. While the piece was critical of what it called "police ineptitude" on the file, it also portrayed Maisy and Shannon within a troubled youth frame, stating that: "the sad truth is that the girls were living a narrative, too common among aboriginal people, that more often than not ends badly" (*Ottawa Citizen*, para. 10).

This editorial stance is an example of what Alia and Bull (2005) described as the "blaming the victim" news frame (p. 84). By emphasizing the fact that these young women came from troubled backgrounds, there is a sense that they are partially to blame for their disappearance. The statement that they were living a narrative common among

aboriginal people also groups them into a negative stereotype of aboriginal people. Other than a claim from some of Maisy and Shannon's friends that the young women were smoking crack before they disappeared, no proof was provided that these young women were in fact living a risky lifestyle or that they came from troubled backgrounds. The kind of unquestioned assumptions prevalent in this editorial are dangerous.

Since the one-year anniversary of Maisy and Shannon's disappearance, some stories have been featured in local news coverage related to missing and murdered aboriginal women. On October 13, 2009, *The Ottawa Sun* ran a story about how Ottawa police are on high alert for young aboriginal women being lured into prostitution. The story quoted Ottawa police, the executive director at Minwaashin Lodge, a health support centre for aboriginal women, and also mentioned the fact that Odjick and Alexander are still missing.

Later in October, CanWest News Service ran a high profile, three-part cross-country series by Randy Boswell describing the broader problem of missing and murdered women. Local coverage from each major city about a local missing woman case was also featured. One story in the series focused on missing and murdered aboriginal women in particular, and the work of the Native Women's Association of Canada on this issue (Boswell, 2010, October 27).

This media content analysis demonstrates that there were gaps in news coverage of the Maisy and Shannon case where certain angles could have been followed up. There was some writing that indicated unquestioned assumptions. *The Ottawa Citizen* had the most frequent and in depth coverage of the case, and stories in this paper were the most effective in highlighting the families' perspectives on the missing women. The stories in

the *Citizen* also provided the most context in terms of the case itself, such as conflicting statements from the various police departments handling the case. *Citizen* coverage provided the most context in terms of the broader problem of missing and murdered aboriginal women, with the statistic from the Native Women's Association of Canada of over 500 missing women quoted in most stories. The *Citizen* was also the only media outlet that had a reporter covering all the ground searches.

The *Sun* provided significant coverage as well, with 15 stories over a year. Coverage of the case alternated between several reporters. An interview request to *The Ottawa Sun*'s Kenneth Jackson, who covered the most stories on Maisy and Shannon, was not returned.

The Newsroom Perspective: A Study of how the Story was Covered by the Ottawa Citizen

The next section of this chapter will outline the perspective of Brendan Kennedy, who pitched almost all the stories on this case, and the challenges he faced in getting the newspaper to cover the story. The perspective of the *Citizen*'s editor-in-chief, Gerry Nott, will also be presented. These interviews will help to demonstrate the barriers that can be faced by reporters covering cases of missing aboriginal women and whether newsroom staffing constraints play a role in how many stories make it into the paper.

The Reporter's Perspective

On October 4, 2008, *Ottawa Citizen* reporter Brendan Kennedy was assigned to cover a press conference about the two young women who had recently gone missing

from the Kitigan Zibi reserve in Maniwaki, Quebec. His editor told him that Phil Fontaine, the national chief of the Assembly of First Nations at the time, would be at the conference. Kennedy was told to bring a point-and-shoot camera and to take his own photos.

Kennedy had never heard of the Maisy and Shannon missing person's story until then – the *Citizen* had only run one story a month previous to the press conference, written by Gatineau reporter Dave Rogers, when the girls first went missing. When Kennedy got to the press conference, it appeared that the story was not high on the radar of other media outlets – only a couple of other news organizations were there.

After that first press conference, Kennedy pitched and wrote the majority of stories covered by the *Citizen* in the next year. He had studied aboriginal issues at Queen's University and said the story was simply something he “took personal interest in” (B. Kennedy, personal communication, December 2009). “I tried at the very least to do a story a month and anytime there was news, so anytime there was a search or if there was any developments,” he said. He also began establishing contacts on the file, including the mother of one of the missing young women, Laurie Odjick. “I would call police periodically, and I called Laurie maybe at times once a week, other times once every two weeks. She would call me sometimes,” he said (B. Kennedy, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Kennedy pitched his stories to the assignment editors who were working the days he was scheduled. As one of the year-long interns hired by the *Citizen*, Kennedy did not have much say in terms of news assignments. Kennedy said the interns at the *Citizen* typically work general assignment, and are often assigned to night shifts when they are

the only reporter to cover emergencies, crime and other breaking news. Some of the stories that Kennedy pitched involved putting in overtime work on his days off, like one assignment he pitched to cover a search on a Saturday when he was not scheduled to work.

Kennedy said that while no editor ever overtly obstructed him from covering the Maisy and Shannon story, there was never a will to make an issue out of the case (B. Kennedy, personal communication, December 4, 2009). He guessed that a number of factors could have been behind this, including the reality that interns are needed to cover breaking news and often can not be spared for other work, as well as the fact that the Kitigan Zibi reserve is about two hours away from Ottawa, making it difficult to travel to, and somewhat outside the *Citizen's* coverage area. He said that there was no interest shown in the issue aside from his own initiative to pursue the story.

Kennedy's year of work on the file culminated in the prominent, two-page feature that ran in the *Citizen* on the anniversary of the young womens' disappearance, complete with photos, sidebars, and several stories, including an in-depth feature. According to the young reporter, however, this feature was done entirely on his own time after editors refused to give him two days off to drive out to Kitigan Zibi. He was told to do it on his own time, which he did, using a *Citizen* vehicle to drive out to Kitigan Zibi two days in a row. Given the workload of the interns working on general assignment, Kennedy said he saw no other option for getting the story done: "On the day shift, I was almost always there longer than my shift, and busy the whole day," he said. "Like the idea of doing something in your spare time was really a joke. There is no spare time. There's not only

no spare time, you're hardly ever getting out on time. So there's negative time" (B. Kennedy, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Staffing Constraints, or a Lack of Interest?

Staff shortages at the *Citizen* have not always been this severe. Kennedy said when he started at the newspaper, there were 10 interns. This decreased to five year-long interns after the summer. By the time he left to take a contract with *The Toronto Star* in September 2009, there were just two interns left. All were depended upon to cover general assignment breaking news. Kennedy said this was not always the case—the intern program at the *Citizen* used to be renowned for giving young journalists the opportunity to cover creative assignments.

"I was there at a time when there was two interns, instead of six. In previous years, an intern walked across the entire United States," he said. "Those luxuries were no longer there. So even on a story that is actually news, and actually gets good play in the paper, they don't even have time for" (B. Kennedy, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Kennedy ended up switching to evening shift for the last two weeks of his contract at the *Citizen*, so he could drive to the reserve during the day, work his evening reporting shift, and work on writing the feature during the next day.

In the end, he said, editors clearly showed an interest, as indicated by the prominent placement of the story and the teasers that were featured on the front page.

They did give it good play, but how interested were they, if it could have easily not happened at all. And no one was asking me about it. It was like I pitched it,

they said ‘no,’ I said can I have a car, I’m going to do it anyway, they said ‘OK.’ Nobody was checking up. And then I just said, ‘I have this story, I think it should run on this date or this date, and here it is, it’s done, here are photos.’ I’m not a photographer; I got lucky with the photo of Shannon’s dad. But I use the auto function on my camera, you know? Nobody called me and said ‘can we get a timeline? Can we get a fact box on Kitigan Zibi?’ It’s because I really wanted it to have good play, and I knew that all that stuff helps in getting it prominence in the paper. But usually on a big story like that, you have multiple editors who are saying, can we get this, can we get that? Things to round out the story... And you sit down at a table and make sure we have this in order, this in order... There was none of that. This was a volunteer job that was a double-truck spread on the Sunday paper.” (B. Kennedy, personal communication, December 4, 2009.)

Kennedy doubts the case would have received any coverage if he had not taken an interest in it. While reporters at *The Citizen* typically stick to particular stories after they have been assigned to the first one, as a kind of unofficial beat, Kennedy said no other reporter ever showed an interest in the story.

“There are some reporters at the *Citizen* who, they don’t file that often, and whose beats are kind of obscure, and they could’ve been put on daily assignments for two days,” he said (B. Kennedy, personal communication, December 4, 2009). Some of the senior writer beats at *The Ottawa Citizen* include religion, architecture and automotives.

Kennedy said he doubts the editor would have assigned any of these more senior reporters to the story. “I don’t think necessarily it’s because my pitch was about two missing aboriginal women. I mean you could argue that. But even if I was pitching a

feature about old rich white guys at City Hall, I'm pretty sure [they] would have given me the same response" (B. Kennedy, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Time Constraints and Context: The Challenges of Reporting the Story

Kennedy said he had other story ideas he wanted to pursue, but he simply did not have the time to do them, such as compiling a feature piece on Kitigan Zibi itself to provide some background on where the young women came from.

"These are complicated social issues that require a lot of time to report on, and that's one thing that newspapers don't have," he said. "It's hard to say, like I can say definitively there was never any active discrimination, but there's not really a willingness to sort of take on the issues either" (B. Kennedy, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Kennedy said that prior to reporting on the Maisy and Shannon case, he was aware of the statistics around missing and murdered aboriginal women in Canada. This was something he attempted to tack onto the end of each story he wrote on Maisy and Shannon to provide context, although sometimes editors cut this statistic from the story:

I think what newspapers do really well is we can look at individual stories and relate them to a larger context. And that's what I saw with Maisy and Shannon, was an opportunity to tell the hard news story, and to have all the right news values of an issue in our community – these two girls are missing, I'm not talking about missing women in general, but every single story I tried to put it in context... Even when I was writing like 150 words, I tried to put that at the bottom. And that's one thing that made me interested in this story is like, you can

do the news hits and still talk about the overall issue. (B. Kennedy, personal communication, December 4, 2009.)

Unless there were ongoing developments in the Maisy and Shannon story, it became difficult to cover the case. This, he said, boiled down to basic news values:

It's hard to keep writing the still missing story... I think you have a responsibility to keep it fresh or you're going to inspire complacency. After a year it's getting into cold case territory. These papers...every few years they'll do a story on unsolved cases or cold cases. But I can't see another story happening exclusively on Maisy and Shannon unless they're found, or there's a major development, like the police name a suspect, or something like that. (B. Kennedy, personal communication, December 4, 2009.)

Kennedy said his familiarity with the statistics around the number of missing women across the country, in addition to his background in aboriginal issues from studying the topic at Queen's University, helped him to do a thorough job of covering the case. "It was definitely an issue that I cared about before and I was aware about before. I'm by no means an expert," he said. "It really is one of Canada's national disgraces that there isn't more done about this."

After a year of keeping in touch with the Kitigan Zibi chief and the families of the missing women, Kennedy was able to get coverage that was unique from any other media outlet covering the case, such as getting the perspective of Shannon's father, or Maisy's grandmother. This was despite initially being conscious of how he might be perceived in the community: "Going to the reserve from the closest big city from a mainstream paper, I'm like the man in some ways, and it took time to build relationships and to get them to

trust me... I had no relationship with Kitigan Zibi before this... I think being a 25-year-old white man doesn't preclude me from writing about this issue, but it certainly does create some cultural barriers. It's not lost on me that I'm writing about missing women and aboriginal culture that I'm not part of" (B. Kennedy, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

In addition to the cultural differences, another challenge was that Maisy and Shannon's case was a complex and time-consuming one for a daily news reporter to tackle. As Kennedy explained, "Once you start, when you have one interview it opens up a whole other thing that you have to chase down. So I can understand why reporters would kind of be reluctant to wade into that" (B. Kennedy, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

Kennedy spent a significant amount of time establishing trust and building sources among people in the Kitigan Zibi community. While Maisy's mother was often quoted in media stories, Shannon's father was rarely quoted. To get quotes and a photo from him, Kennedy said he spent three hours at his home and brought him a traditional tobacco offering as a gesture of respect and thanks for being invited into the man's home.

"I'm not going to claim to be an expert on aboriginal cultures or anything like that, but tobacco's pretty important. So every time I went to meet someone, I'd bring tobacco. It's just a small gesture... You wouldn't be able to get Brian to talk to you unless you spent an afternoon with him at his house, and you can't always do that when you're on pressure for the next day's paper. Especially when he lives two hours away" (B. Kennedy, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

By keeping up regular contact with Maisy's mother, Kennedy was also able to get a powerful interview with Maisy's grandmother for the one-year feature piece. This would have been impossible without spending the time to keep up the contacts on the story, as the grandmother never attended the press conferences or public events.

Kennedy said he was also conscious of any negative implications of what he included in his stories, and that he deliberated over whether to include the statement from a Kitigan Zibi teen that the girls had told him they were smoking crack shortly before they disappeared.

I really hesitated with including that. But I thought it was important for... there wasn't much reported about the times they were last seen, so I thought you know is this going to upset Laurie, is this going to upset Brian, is this going to paint a stereotypical picture of 'troubled' aboriginal youth and you know, play into the hand of people who just think they must have ran away. (B. Kennedy, personal communication, December 4, 2009.)

In the end he decided that was not his role, and that the statement needed to be reported, even if the sources were not named. He said he talked to several people independently who confirmed what the teen said, and that while he didn't include their names in the story, he did know what their names were. "I didn't take that point lightly," he said (B. Kennedy, personal communication, December 4, 2009).

An Editor's Perspective

It appears that almost none of the coverage on missing Maisy and Shannon would have occurred if it hadn't been for Kennedy's interest in the case. However, the editor-in-

chief of *The Ottawa Citizen* disputed the idea that a shortage of resources in the newsroom contributed to the amount of coverage on the story.

When asked in an interview whether staffing played a role in how much the Maisy and Shannon story was covered, Gerry Nott replied: “No. Not at all” (G. Nott, personal communication, March 3, 2010). The editor-in-chief said that regardless of the current media environment, a newsroom virtually never has enough staff: “I’ve been in this business for 30 years and managing for 25 and I can honestly tell you that at anytime if my publisher said to me do you need more people I’d say ‘yes.’ Or if he said do you have enough people, I’d say ‘no’” (G. Nott, personal communication, March 3, 2010).

The result, according to the editor, is that decisions have to be made to cover what’s most important, and most applicable to a local audience. “What it’s forced you to do is look closely at your news operation and determine what your content goals are in terms of your coverage area,” he said.

This change does lead to more of a focus on “hyper-local” content, according to Nott:

I think the *Citizen* is not unlike most major metro newspapers in North America that have realized that the one enduring strength that they have aside from their brand recognition is that they have more feet on the street covering local news. Bloggers and various web sites can set up all over the place, but the fact of the matter is, we’re the ones who are having reporters sit through court cases all day and we’re the ones who are in City Hall 16 hours a day. We’re the ones who are covering education beats. And what we can do better than anybody is cover the things that happen in our backyard. So because of that, I think there’s been a

tighter focus on local content, that's for sure. (G Nott, personal communication, March 3, 2010.)

Nott said that interns at the *Citizen* don't necessarily cover exclusively general assignment news. He said they're slotted in wherever they're needed the most. Other reporters are assisting with general assignment news, including some long-time staff members who were writing long-form feature articles on specific topics. He said this doesn't mean that staffing organization affects what stories get covered. According to Nott, he's never had to turn down a good story pitch. "You can always find a way to do a story that you think is important," he said.

What we're trying to do here is we're trying to balance. We're trying to encourage everyone and convince everyone that they still have the opportunity to write and report what the trade would call sort of long-form journalism. But just not exclusively anymore. Because we need them on hand to help us with our day-to-day coverage. So that's probably changed the balance a little bit, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. It helps focus what your coverage should be. (G. Nott, personal communication, March 3, 2010.)

In the case of the Maisy and Shannon story, Nott said when he arrived at the *Citizen* in March of 2009, he met with Brendan Kennedy and encouraged him to produce a piece of journalism that Kennedy would be proud of, and that he could highlight as a portfolio piece when applying for jobs after his contract at the *Citizen* ended.

Nott said that while the Maisy and Shannon story was technically outside the *Citizen's* coverage area, it was a local story in terms of searches taking place within the city and missing signs posted around Ottawa neighbourhoods:

It was outside our traditional coverage area, but it was very much an Ottawa story in terms of the search and the prominence of the search and the calls for help that you saw at every telephone pole in certain sectors of the city. In Tim Horton's windows and those kinds of things. So while it was marginally outside our coverage area, our readership was exposed in the search for those young women. (G. Nott, personal communication, March 3, 2010.)

The *Citizen* editor said the two-page spread on the anniversary of the young women's disappearance was a "very natural time to re-visit all the issues" (G. Nott, personal communication, March 3, 2010).

The differing perspectives on the coverage of this story portray on the one hand, a reporter who felt there was little effort made to support his work on the story, and on the other hand an editor who said no good story pitches ever get turned down, and that staff shortages did not play a role in how much coverage was allotted to Maisy and Shannon's disappearance.

APTN: The Perspective of a Reporter at an Aboriginal Broadcaster

Nigel Newlove is a reporter and videographer at the Aboriginal People's Television Network. He estimates that he covered between 12 to 15 stories on Maisy and Shannon after they went missing in September 2008. While he cannot remember if he was originally assigned to the story or not, he remembers attending the first press conference in Kitigan Zibi about their disappearance. He said the nature of the story kept him covering the case. "These are two missing girls – they weren't even 18 at the time," he said. "I think those facts alone, you know two young girls, and right away it sounded

very suspicious because they left behind a lot of their belongings and it didn't seem in character for either one of them to just take off like that. So, all those facts just kept us on the story, I guess" (N. Newlove, personal communication, April 19, 2010).

APTN also has a mandate and focus on aboriginal issues, so providing sustained coverage on a story like this seemed natural, according to Newlove. APTN has provided consistent coverage on the missing women story, both in Ottawa and across the country, particularly in Vancouver, with the high-profile Robert Pickton trial and the missing and murdered women of the city's downtown eastside.

He said the Maisy and Shannon story was treated as a high priority story, featured at the top of the newscast whenever APTN ran a story on the missing girls. There were, however, still challenges to covering the story. Newlove said the distance between Ottawa and Kitigan Zibi was a factor, as was talking to police and trying to find out the latest in the investigation:

Obviously that was one of the angles to the story, was you had too many jurisdictions working on it, too many hands in the pot it seemed. You had the local tribal police, and then they also had the QPP in it somehow, the Gatineau police, and the OPP got involved. So the challenge was trying to flesh the story out, and figure out OK well who's in charge – and are you guys working together, are you on the same page? (N. Newlove, personal communication, April 19, 2010.)

While APTN and *The Ottawa Citizen* have different audiences, the Maisy and Shannon case appears to have been treated as a more high-profile story on APTN in terms of its placement in the news.

With plans for the creation of a separate news web site for APTN underway, the coverage of missing aboriginal women could be featured much more frequently and in a more accessible way by the broadcaster. While APTN devotes frequent coverage to cases of missing aboriginal women, the new site could provide a much more accessible way to search for video and web stories on these cases. The new web page will be discussed more in detail in Chapter 5.

The monthly aboriginal newspaper *Windspeaker*, based out of Edmonton, did not run any stories specifically related to Maisy and Shannon's disappearance, but they did run stories related to missing and murdered aboriginal women, such as coverage of the Walk 4 Justice march from Vancouver to Ottawa, designed to draw attention to the issue. Director of Publishing Operations, Paul Macedo, said they did not cover this story in particular due to space restrictions of only two to three pages for the Ontario section distributed in the monthly newspaper. As part of the mandate of the national paper, they tend to cover missing women cases only when they are widely known across the country, such as the Robert Pickton case in Vancouver, or when the story has a national focus, such as the Sisters in Spirit research project on missing women.

Conclusion

Based on interviews with Brendan Kennedy and Gerry Nott, it appears that staffing constraints did play some role in how much coverage was devoted to this case in *The Ottawa Citizen*. Kennedy was clearly facing time pressures as he was juggling reporting work on the Maisy and Shannon story with other general news assignments. In previous years with more interns on staff, perhaps the editors would have been able to

spare more of Kennedy's time to go cover the story. Under current staffing constraints, however, the issue was not made a top priority and Kennedy was left to cover some of the stories on his own time.

Another major factor in how much play this story was given in *The Ottawa Citizen* appears to be the amount of interest it garnered from editors as a newsworthy story. As Kennedy said, if he had not been there to pitch the story and pursue it on his own time and under major time constraints, many of the stories likely would not have been written. This probably would have led to even less awareness by the public of the missing persons case and it would not have allowed family members to share their perspectives on what it's like to be the parent of a missing aboriginal teen. These kinds of first-hand accounts from family members helped to personalize the story and make it real for readers, to put a face on one of the statistics.

Without this kind of coverage, readers might have been left with the sort of common stereotypes that were portrayed in *The Ottawa Citizen* editorial from Sept. 11, 2009, which implied a sense of "blaming the victim" (Razack as cited in Jiواني and Young, 2006, p. 2) and that the troubled backgrounds of the girls led to their disappearance. As Alia and Bull might argue, this could lead to a sense of blame from the media, releasing them from obligations to respond to the tragedy (Alia and Bull, 2005, p. 84).

While the *Sun* and *The Ottawa Citizen* had a similar number of stories on the case, coverage in the *Sun* was not as in depth, did not provide as much context and did not feature as many sources as Kennedy's stories. Perhaps part of the reason for this is the fact that various reporters were assigned to the case, preventing one reporter from

establishing as many sources and becoming as familiar with the case. The *Sun* is also clearly limited in terms of depth of coverage due to its tabloid format.

It would appear that sufficient coverage of missing and murdered aboriginal women stories require two important factors: a reporter with an interest and a determination to make an issue out of the story, and an editor who is willing to give that reporter time and newspaper space to make it an issue. Without these things, missing person cases like Maisy and Shannon's, which had all the values of a typical news story, might not make it into the news pages, where as Jiwani and Young argue, it is typically a "sorely neglected story" (Jiwani and Young, 2006, p. 54).

The next chapter will turn from traditional print media to online media to determine what perspectives currently exist in cyberspace on aboriginal issues, and what potential these kinds of sites have for expansion over the coming years, allowing them to cover issues neglected or underreported in the mainstream media.

Chapter 5: Aboriginal News in Cyberspace

This chapter will outline the current state of online news coverage on aboriginal issues in Canada. The examination will look at how much online news coverage is being dedicated to aboriginal issues by mainstream media such as the CBC. The web sites of major aboriginal media publications will also be analyzed, such as *Windspeaker*, the monthly national aboriginal newspaper, and the Aboriginal People's Television Network, the country's only national aboriginal broadcaster. The chapter will also demonstrate what aboriginal print media are doing to expand their news coverage to online forums to reach both aboriginal and mainstream audiences. Examples of new media being developed by young aboriginal journalists and bloggers will be provided, and the challenges that smaller aboriginal media outlets and independent journalists are facing in terms of online resources will be outlined.

The chapter will also illustrate potential solutions to improving aboriginal news coverage, and examine whether a strengthened online presence could help to improve coverage on critical aboriginal stories, like missing and murdered aboriginal women. One of the key changes to strengthening coverage must be training young journalists – who are learning how to use new media already – to cover issues that concern native people better. Another key change that many journalists and experts identified through interviews for this thesis was the need for a shift in public attitudes towards aboriginal people, through better education and in-depth exposure in the mainstream media.

Current Trends in Aboriginal News Coverage

As discussed in previous chapters in this thesis, the job of the aboriginal beat reporter is nearly extinct in mainstream media newsrooms. Reporters are juggling several beats – and deadlines - at the same time, and other beats tend to rank higher than aboriginal stories. Distinct aboriginal coverage in mainstream newspapers or other media outlets tends to be rare, aside from stories included in general news sections.

One of the few exceptions is the CBC, which features a separate “CBC Aboriginal” page, as well as a “CBC North” page, both of which aggregate stories on First Nations and Inuit issues from CBC newsrooms across the country.

Alden Habacon, the manager of diversity initiatives for CBC television, said the site was created as a way for people to find aboriginal news in one place, for the public to see how much aboriginal news the broadcaster is covering, and as an educational tool for teachers. The CBC Aboriginal page also features a series of profiles of aboriginal journalists at the public broadcaster, which are intended to provide young people with role models in the media. He said the site is a news aggregate rather than a site with unique content because part of the CBC news philosophy is to integrate aboriginal news into everyday news. “Ultimately the philosophy around our coverage has been around reflecting contemporary Canada,” he said (A. Habacon, personal communication, April 26, 2010).

CBC is the only major mainstream media organization that appears to dedicate a section of its web site to aboriginal issues specifically—no comparable section is featured on the other national broadcaster web sites, CTV or Global TV.

In terms of aboriginal media, some of the major media outlets include the Aboriginal People's Television Network, the only national aboriginal broadcaster, and the national monthly newspaper *Windspeaker*. The kind of online coverage these media outlets are currently providing will be outlined below, as well as what they are doing to develop more web-specific multimedia content. Examples of what smaller, First Nations community newspapers are doing to strengthen their online presence and expand their readership will also be provided.

In interviews for this thesis, some journalists predicted that aboriginal publications will strengthen their current web sites to draw in more diverse audiences with multimedia content. Others predicted a move towards more aboriginal bloggers and citizen journalists.

Windspeaker

A major source of national aboriginal news is the monthly newspaper *Windspeaker*. Published out of Edmonton by the Aboriginal Multi-Media Society of Alberta, the publication is distributed to 24,000 people each month across the country and is sent to each First Nations community across the country. The media company also publishes monthly aboriginal newspapers out of Ontario, Saskatchewan, BC and Alberta. Two of those, the Alberta and Ontario papers, have now been reduced to short, two-to-three page inserts within *Windspeaker*, due to budget restrictions. Apart from these sections, the newspaper's focus is on national aboriginal news stories.

Director of Publishing Operations Paul Macedo said they are currently in the midst of expanding their web site, including developing a more extensive online archives

system. He hopes that expanding the archives will provide a critical tool for reporters to gain access to background information on current issues.

What we want to do is be able to deliver not only current news, but also kind of a historical perspective on certain stories. So if you're coming to it and say, why is that protest going on in Ottawa, what's up with that? You'll be able, through our online archive, to drill down and find out, wait a minute, this concern existed in 1995, and before that it existed in 1985, and oh wait a minute, this isn't something new, this is something that is an ongoing concern. Or by looking at this issue maybe they can find out that there's other issues of similar nature that we've covered that aren't part of that story but are part of the general concerns in the native community. (P. Macedo, personal communication, January 15, 2010.)

This kind of quick background search for journalists could be immensely successful in avoiding the problem of mainstream journalists "parachuting" into aboriginal communities to cover complex stories for which they have little background (Miller, 2005, p. 11).

Macedo's hope is that a strengthened web site will attract a wider audience, and allow more news readers to learn about aboriginal issues from an aboriginal perspective.

The way we see online working in our mind is partly it will expose our aboriginal content to a mostly urban, aboriginal audience that has the bandwidth and has the connectivity to access news and information online... But we also see that by us providing that kind of content and being able to be indexed by Google and some of the search engines online, that now there's a possibility of other news organizations, aboriginal or not, being able to pick up on the stories. So instead of

typing it into Google, and getting the Globe and Mail's perspective or the Calgary Herald's perspective, now they might be able to get Windspeaker's or [Alberta paper] Sweetgrass'...so there's alternate sources for news content available online. And that's something we're really striving for. (P. Macedo, personal communication, January 15, 2010.)

Macedo said quite a few mainstream journalists already subscribe to the publication to find story ideas. Strengthening the publication's web presence could have the effect of increasing the profile of aboriginal stories through more mainstream journalists reporting on these issues themselves, or through more viewers skipping the mainstream press entirely and going directly to aboriginal news sources on issues affecting First Nations communities.

Aboriginal People's Television Network

The Aboriginal People's Television Network is the only national aboriginal television station in the country. It is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year, and was designated as an official broadcaster at the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, broadcasting in several aboriginal languages. The organization is also in the midst of a major web site re-design that will feature much more multimedia content. Currently the web site has livestreaming of the daily newscasts and a five-day news archive. The station also uses a Facebook page and a Twitter feed to link to news stories and videos. In June 2010, a separate news web site will be launched, featuring written news articles, videos, photos and audio. It will also feature a longer-term, searchable news archive rather than simply posting newscasts for viewing.

Former CanWest reporter Jorge Barrera, who was also interviewed at his former position for this thesis, is now the new online reporter for APTN. He hopes the new web site will allow the broadcaster to “find a new way to report” (J. Barrera, personal communication, April 19, 2010). He said that while most web sites currently have different sections for copy and video, the new site will allow for more multimedia content to link from print stories to other video, audio or photo content. Barrera said the hope is for the new site to secure a broader audience.

“The thing is with APTN National News, they do break stories quite a bit, but they sort of disappear into the ether, so with this web site we’re going to try and harness that stuff...” he said. “And...eventually once it gets going trying to set the agenda in terms of the news cycle” (J. Barrera, personal communication, April 19, 2010).

With a strengthened web presence comes the increased possibility of being featured on news aggregator sites. Barrera hopes this will draw in a greater and more diverse audience: “If we get the Bourques and the National News Watches linking to us, that’ll definitely open up a different readership.”

APTN reporter Nigel Newlove said the new web site could also help to expand the broadcaster’s audience. “We’re still working on making our presence felt in the media world,” he said. “I think people are starting to pay attention, and we are breaking more stories as opposed to... following up on other people’s initial breaking stories. I think being only 10 years old, one of the goals of APTN is not just attracting aboriginal viewers but attracting mainstream and just the general society. We’re working on it.” (N. Newlove, personal communication, April 19, 2010).

While still in the early stages of development, these web site changes could be successful in communicating APTN's reporting to a much broader audience. With the use of videos and other visually captivating media, the chances of non-regular web site users tuning into APTN's coverage seem more likely.

The Eastern Door

Many First Nations communities have weekly newspapers that are located on reserve and feature stories affecting local residents. Publications like *The Eastern Door*, on the Kanawahke Mohawk reserve near Montreal, have a strong online presence in addition to their print publication. *The Eastern Door*'s web site features a number of bloggers and other unique online content such as reader polls and a "media watch" section, which contains news briefs on indigenous communities around the world. The site also displays a few highlight stories from the print publication, which are intended to draw in viewers. A full online version of the paper is available online through paid subscriptions.

Publisher Steve Bonspiel said the advantage of newspapers like *The Eastern Door* is their position within the centre of the community. Reporters are not just reporting on the residents in their town, but living amongst them. Not only is there a greater sense of familiarity with local concerns, but reporters are also in a sense always on duty. This kind of close connection to the community provides a better understanding of local news and concerns than major media outlets are capable of devoting time to grasping. The mainstream media have already taken advantage of this close connection the paper has with community members. In February of 2010, a story in the paper about eviction letters

being sent to non-natives in the community garnered extensive attention from mainstream media, including the Globe and Mail. Bonspiel said many journalists turned to him for interviews and information on the story, since they faced challenges getting information on the case themselves.

More and more media are subscribing to our paper to see what's going on.

They've been calling me and I've been doing interviews on the subject because they need an in to the community. We started offering online subscriptions maybe three months ago now, and that's definitely one of our goals, is to get people, not only in Montreal, but across Canada and the world, to learn more about us through our online subscriptions. (S. Bonspiel, personal communication, February 12, 2010.)

Bonspiel and his staff are in the process of revamping *The Eastern Door's* web site. He hopes to soon display more multimedia content from members of the community, such as photos and videos. His vision is that expansion of online content and online subscriptions will help to generate more public awareness of issues affecting the aboriginal community: "It's...a good way for us to be able to tell a story of the community... and get it out to other people, other media sources and let people know that you know what, we're a healthy, vibrant community here and there's a lot of things going on and we deserve mainstream coverage just like anybody else" (S. Bonspiel, personal communication, February 12, 2010.)

Wawatay News

Wawatay News is a major source of aboriginal news in Ontario. Run by the Wawatay Native Communications Society and operated out of Sioux Lookout, Timmins and Thunder Bay, the service focuses on news affecting communities in the Nishnawbe Aski Nation in northern Ontario. It includes a bi-weekly newspaper, several radio stations, television production services and a multimedia web site featuring video and audio in traditional aboriginal languages. The newspaper is distributed to more than 80 aboriginal communities in northern Ontario and is published in English as well as Ojibway, OjiCree and Cree. *Wawatay News Online*, the organization's web publication, features stories from the print publication as well as unique multimedia content such as video news stories, photos and links to audio of interviews. According to the *Wawatay News* web site, part of the organization's mandate is to maintain traditional languages and culture of the northern Ontario First Nations communities on which it focuses. The paper, which publishes bi-weekly on Thursdays, has a circulation of 9000.

Debbie Mishibinijima, a reporter and multimedia producer at *Wawatay News*, said she foresees an expansion of the use of the web by aboriginal publications like hers. She predicted that more news organizations will make use of the web to promote awareness and preservation of traditional languages through the use of video and other multimedia content (D. Mishibinijima, personal communication, January 19, 2010).

While more developed aboriginal media like *Windspeaker*, *The Eastern Door* and *Wawatay News* are still in the midst of expanding their web sites, independent aboriginal journalists and bloggers are increasingly starting up their own web sites to disseminate aboriginal news without going through mainstream media. The next section of this thesis

will describe a few of the new media initiatives focusing on aboriginal news and examine whether a strengthened online presence from mainstream or aboriginal media can help to improve coverage and increase awareness of critical issues like missing and murdered aboriginal women.

Citizen Journalists and Bloggers

In the second chapter of this thesis, Nova Scotian journalist and King's College journalism instructor Maureen Googoo predicted an emergence of niche reporting for journalists covering aboriginal news. Given that fewer newspapers have reporters dedicated to covering aboriginal affairs, she sees a gap opening up for citizen journalists or bloggers like herself to fill that void: "It may foster a freelance market, or it may foster more collaboration between niche market web sites and legacy newsrooms," she said (M. Googoo, personal communication, January 20, 2010).

Googoo's web site, Radio Googoo, is dedicated to aboriginal news in Atlantic Canada. She said this is a niche reporting area that has yet to be carved out:

There's a lot of stories that aren't being covered... Everyday there's always something in *The Telegraph-Journal*, or from *The Labradorian*, or the [Halifax] *Chronicle Herald* on something happening... My goal is to eventually contribute at least one story a day to that little feed that's going. Some of the stuff that's covered, it's only a fraction of what's happening in the mainstream, and I'm hoping that eventually... when I file a story, I hope to see other media outlets picking it up. (M. Googoo, personal communication, January 20, 2010.)

Googoo hopes that her 23 years of experience in print, radio and television reporting will help to establish a reputation as a trusted source in aboriginal news. She has worked as a correspondent for APTN and as a reporter for *The Halifax Chronicle-Herald* and CBC radio in Halifax. She also predicts an increase in regional aboriginal web sites like hers. “When it comes to aboriginal news, I think it does come down to regionalism,” she said. “Because you kind of can’t approach an aboriginal beat as pan-aboriginal... not every aboriginal group in Canada has the same issues” (M. Googoo, personal communication, January 20, 2010).

Googoo pointed to a particular new web site, mediaindigena.com, as a good example of an independent site producing news on aboriginal issues. Created by journalist Rick Harp and a team of current and former aboriginal journalists and writers in February 2010, the collaborative blog features news analysis, opinion pieces, interviews and exclusive news stories related to arts and culture, business, politics and other topics.

Harp said he created the mediaindigena.com site with the goal of seeing aboriginal issues approached in a way that he felt was missing from current media coverage, including news analysis from an indigenous viewpoint, and an opportunity for debate on current issues. He said a lot of aboriginal online news consists of aggregate sites which provide links to indigenous coverage. He sees this approach as potentially detrimental to raising awareness of aboriginal issues:

What I’ve seen and I still continue to see is largely aggregational activity – people go ‘hmm’ here’s a wall of links for you to look over. I try to see it through the lens of somebody who has half an hour to spend. You haven’t really served them

well. Ultimately that just undermines greater awareness about aboriginal issues.

Our approach is the so-called curatorial approach. [We're] saying these are the two, three, four, five articles we've found elsewhere. Or here are our original thoughts that we think merit your attention. (R. Harp, personal communication, April 27, 2010.)

Harp hopes to eventually incorporate more multimedia content such as videos and audio podcasts. As the project is still in the early stages of development, he and his colleagues are still finding ways to drive up traffic on the web site, which in late April 2010 had received about nearly 6000 page views. He hopes the site will eventually become self-sustaining through advertising revenues. They also plan to make the web site an interactive forum: "We're trying to genuinely spark a conversation, a debate," he said. "As much as we'd like to sort of be seen as the experts... I want to learn as much from others as I hope others can learn from me" (R. Harp, personal communication, April 27, 2010).

Googoo predicted other web sites like Media Indigena will continue to crop up, and that news consumers will increasingly turn to online resources for indigenous news. She shares a sense of frustration with other independent aboriginal journalists about the mainstream media. She observed that the only non-aboriginal media outlets doing an effective job of regularly covering aboriginal issues are independent media outlets such as *The Tyee* or *rabble.ca*.

Googoo believes that a better strategy than struggling to ensure that aboriginal perspectives are covered by major media is to forego mainstream avenues entirely and target aboriginal readers directly online: "I think a lot more independent aboriginal

journalists out there who have kind of been frustrated [and] jaded with the mainstream are finally realizing all they need to do is set up an account on a blog web site and just start writing,” she said. “And it’s amazing. It begins to fill that hole that’s been there for so long” (M. Googoo, personal communication, April 25, 2010).

In fact, those aboriginal media outlets that do not have a strong online presence risk missing the boat in terms of being picked up by news aggregators that can then distribute their stories to a wider audience: “If you don’t have those stories that are being published online they’re not going to make their rounds and they’re not going to be circulated or picked up,” she said (M. Googoo, personal communication, April 25, 2010).

While the Nova Scotian journalist used to spend her mornings sifting through Halifax newspaper and radio coverage to look for aboriginal-related stories, she now sets up Google alerts and Google news profiles related to key words such as “aboriginal Canada” or “Innu” to get her news tailored to those topics. She sees this kind of new consumption model as the way of the future:

I think more and more people are tending to do that, through Google news or through RRS feeds. There’s so many different aggregators out there that can just capture all of the stuff for you, so when you wake up in the morning and log on, you just have your own tailored news... I think when it comes to aboriginal news, I think it’s the only way to go. If that’s the news that you’re interested in every morning. I mean it’s the only way you’re going to find out what’s going on in aboriginal country (M. Googoo, personal communication, April 25, 2010).

Chris Tyrone Ross has a blog on *The Regina Leader Post*’s web site. He’s also the creator and managing editor of *RezX*, an online magazine focused on arts and

entertainment issues. Ross has a background in media – as a teenager, he started up the first aboriginal youth magazine in Canada, called *Generation X*. Ross has now moved on to *RezX*, which he hopes to expand into a news web site that will be updated daily by writers across Canada and in the United States.

As we venture forth with our web site I think we're going to start covering more mainstream issues too. But we'll always be focusing on an aboriginal perspective, because there's a lot of... aboriginal writers doing aboriginal news, but you don't have a lot of aboriginal writers [reporting other topics] from their perspective. That's what differentiates us from a lot of other people... *RezX*... you read it and hear about what's going on in the world but from our perspective. (C. Ross, personal communication, January 20, 2010.)

Ross said another key step is for newspapers to acknowledge their online publication as a separate forum with unique content: "The only problem is that for those who do have an online presence, they treat their web sites exactly as their print versions, when it comes to content. They need to realize that these are two separate mediums, that a newspaper can reach thousands but if done right a web site can reach millions" (C. Ross, personal communication, January 20, 2010.)

Monica Jacobs, a journalist, blogger and web site developer who lives on the Akwesasne Mohawk reserve, has developed a web site called AkwesasneWomensFire. The site features news produced by local journalists and updates for community members on crises or current events. The site caught the attention of mainstream journalists like Jorge Barrera when he worked at CanWest. He said the blog often breaks stories. The site features news stories as well as photos and videos and provides an opportunity for

community members to post content on community news. It sees a lot of traffic, particularly to the videos posted online. The site's most popular videos average 20,000 or more viewers per month, mainly from Ontario, Quebec and Alberta. During times of crisis in the area, the web site averages about 1500 visitors per six-hour period, and during non-crisis time, it averages about 120 to 800 website viewers per 6 hour period. The site is a good example of the kind of news coverage being done by aboriginal reporters that could generate more frequent and improved coverage in the mainstream media.

As technologies become cheaper and more accessible, publishers like Ross are hoping to capitalize on the new technologies being used by the younger demographic to consume news. Ross said the hope for *RezX* is that eventually more young aboriginal people will be able to download it straight to their smart phones: “[We’re] waiting for more young people to get smart phones, so that they can go on our web site... Because I know with my iPhone I can go to my web site and I can download one of my magazines and I can view it exactly how it is online. So that’s kind of one of the cool things that we want to do” (C. Ross, personal communication, January 20, 2010).

Googoo predicts that over the next few years, more young aboriginal journalists will begin to start up web sites and to establish themselves as freelancers: “In the aboriginal communities, whenever there’s new technology, especially the younger generation, they just grab onto it right away—and with at least half of the aboriginal population being under 25, I see a lot of young aboriginal people communicating through new media” (M. Googoo, personal communication, January 20, 2010).

There are challenges associated with access to online news for aboriginal communities, which will be outlined later in this chapter. There is also some criticism of the validity of blogs as news sites. John Miller stated that bloggers cannot be compared to mainstream media because they're not verifying facts in the same way as journalists.

"It's good that that kind of stuff is being done, but blogs are really just somebody's opinion... They're not really journalists, they're not verifying facts," he said. "It's always useful to have other voices, but what are the voices that people are going to listen to and trust?" (J. Miller, personal communication, February 26, 2010.)

According to Steve Bonspiel, the more people there are reporting on aboriginal issues the better, but they should abide by the same journalistic ethics as mainstream media. "The more native bloggers you have out there, the more web sites that are catering to news in Indian country," he said. "The more the better, but they have to have the integrity as a journalist. You can't just write gossip... there's certain integrity and guidelines that you have to stick by. Be a blogger, do your thing, but do it responsibly." (S. Bonspiel, personal communication, April 16, 2010.)

Strengthening Coverage of Critical Issues – Missing Women and the Web

A strengthened online presence from media outlets like APTN could help to provide greater exposure to under-reported issues like missing and murdered aboriginal women. As more and more people consume their news online, this could be the best way to give exposure to these kinds of critical issues. As aboriginal media outlets develop their web sites, the key question becomes how do they intend to draw in more aboriginal and non-aboriginal readers.

Barrera said the key is putting the story together in a way that will draw in readers. APTN's new multimedia format could provide just the right platform for telling an effective story. "...It's really up to us in how we tell that story," he said. "For example, you could put a piece together with photos of the girls in happier days, and interviews with some family members and some facts about where they were last seen and things like that. When you make it so immediate and personal, it moves people" (J. Barrera, personal communication, April 19, 2010).

Even if news consumers stop at APTN along the way as they are surfing other web sites, Barrera sees this as a success and as a potential for generating more awareness on key issues like the missing women story: "With the web becoming more important in terms of the way people get news... because people take little bits and pieces from all over the place. Your average news consumer, maybe they Google news stuff... I guess the hope is that APTN National News web page will be a place where people who read news regularly online will be a place where they stop. So it'll add to the narrative that I guess they construct as they're surfing through different web pages" (J. Barrera, personal communication, April 19, 2010.)

APTN reporter Nigel Newlove said a strengthened online presence would not hurt in generating more awareness of stories like missing and murdered aboriginal women. He said it mainly boils down to making news more accessible for audiences to find it. "...It's just [about] speed and accessibility," he said. "...You may not care about the other 95% of the newscast—there's only one story that interests you. If you're able to click on that one story, you'll get a lot more participation from readers. So I definitely think it will help" (N. Newlove, personal communication, April 19, 2010.)

Maureen Googoo said a strengthened APTN web site is long overdue, and that a separate news site could be effective in highlighting the issue of missing women. While the station frequently covers cases of missing women, a better online archives system, as well as online news stories, could help to reach a wider audience and provide more exposure to those issues.

Media Indigena is already using its site as a way to generate increased awareness of the topic of missing women, and in a unique format. They recently featured a posting entitled “Mapping the Missing and Murdered” which shows locations on a Google map where aboriginal women have gone missing or been murdered. Each point provides a link to a profile and photo of the missing woman. In the posting, author Rick Harp explained that by designing the map he hopes to “both raise awareness and possibly assist with the investigation of missing and murdered Aboriginal women in this country (Harp, 2010, para. 1). In an interview, Harp said he thought of Google maps as an effective way to illustrate the “gruesome” issue in a way that might resonate with people more than a text story (R. Harp, personal communication, April 27, 2010).

“It just kind of dawned on me that this would be a potentially powerful vehicle in showing that this is a national problem,” he said. Through using photos and locations on a map, “you’re able to put a face to this otherwise all too abstract issue,” he explained. Eventually, he envisions the over 500 bullet points for each missing aboriginal woman across the country filling the map: “I think that will convey the numbers in a way that just text or hearing it won’t,” he said. “It’s all coming together to convey the seriousness. Anything I can do to advance that is critical.” Once that information is online, he points

out, it creates the ability to “instantly become accessible to billions of people at the same time” (R. Harp, personal communication, April 27, 2010.)

Some members of the media question the ability of a strengthened online presence from aboriginal journalists to make a difference in coverage of the missing women topic. “If some of the leading mainstream organizations haven’t covered it, they’re probably not going to at this point,” said Macedo. “Finding our coverage online isn’t necessarily going to change their mind.” (P. Macedo, personal communication, January 15, 2010.)

Bonspiel disputed this point, arguing that mainstream media attention is needed to provide sufficient exposure to issues like the missing women.

We need the mainstream press and we need mainstream eyes to be able to come to our web site and say ok... this is what’s going on in our territory. This is what we’re going to do to either help or raise awareness ourselves. It is our duty to be able to... promote missing women and so many other things – the diabetes epidemic, poverty and poor drinking water. But the mainstream has to be looking, has to come and check those things out in order for it to really make a difference. And that’s not always happening... We have to find a way for them to look in our direction for other things besides just the juicy stuff. (P. Macedo, personal communication, April 19, 2010.)

Chris Tyrone Ross echoed the statement that while a strengthened online presence from aboriginal media could help to increase coverage of missing women, aboriginal media generally only reach native people. For awareness of the issue to make it to the general public, the news coverage also has to reach mainstream audiences. In his view, the key step to connecting with that audience is through aboriginal media reporting on a

wide variety of issues, not just aboriginal issues. “What aboriginal media need to do is broaden their coverage to mainstream issues as well to reach the masses when it comes to our own issues like missing aboriginal woman,” he said. “Having an online presence is the first step, increasing coverage is the second.” (C. Ross, personal communication, January 20, 2010.)

Macedo conceded it is better to post online content on aboriginal issues with the hope of making some impact in terms of public awareness, rather than not doing anything at all. “If you don’t publish it, no one’s going to read it,” he said. Once it is published, it has the ability to have a positive trickle-down effect in terms of aboriginal issues in general: “I see it as just another one of those tiny little hammers beating down the wall of ignorance of what goes on in aboriginal communities” (P. Macedo, personal communication, April 19, 2010.)

Multimedia web sites may not be on the horizon for all aboriginal media. Some smaller aboriginal media outlets still face challenges in reaching the more isolated aboriginal communities. Community papers also face the challenge of dealing with very traditional audiences who may not be willing to make the switch to reading their news online.

Challenges

Expanding the presence of aboriginal web sites does come with its share of challenges, including issues of connectivity and Internet resources among aboriginal journalists and news consumers. Many aboriginal communities still do not have as equal access to the Internet and online resources as non-aboriginal communities. While it is

now dated, a 2000 StatsCan study indicated that 56% of aboriginal Internet users had a connection at home, compared to 81% of non-aboriginal users (Crompton, 2004, p. 8). There also remains a shortage of aboriginal journalists trained to start up online publications.

Chris Tyrone Ross said some of the more remote First Nations communities are still without fast online access. “Internet for reserves has come a long way, and there’s still some reserves that have really slow, turtle speed internet, but I think we’re just waiting for everybody else to kind of catch up, and I think in two to three years you’ll start seeing more reserves with Internet access,” he said. (C. Ross, personal communication, January 20, 2010.)

Macedo echoed this concern about the barrier of slower Internet access in remote communities, noting that many people on reserves still do not have computers in their homes:

Part of the problem is that as you get to some of the more remote communities, access becomes a problem, and bandwidth becomes a problem. Access becomes a problem because the number of computers with Internet access in individual people’s homes is severely limited, versus an urban environment. So a lot of people will access the Internet through work or through school. And when they’re home, they no longer have that access. And then there’s also the bandwidth issue... If you have ...a lot of video content, it may not make an impact, because people don’t want to wait 10 minutes for a download, that kind of thing. (P. Macedo, personal communication, January 15, 2010.)

Bonspiel said some more traditional members of the aboriginal community, such as elders, will likely never switch to reading their news online. The key, he suggested, is striking a balance between the two mediums.

I think in Kanahwake, and elsewhere too, there will always be a paper that you can pick up and read. Because there are people who just don't want to read online. But you also have to mix it up – you also have to add and have available content to be able to satisfy people who read papers that way. Some people say it's the death of the newspaper—but in actual fact if you accept it and you adapt to it and you use both mediums, print and online, I think it can work out really well. (S. Bonspiel, personal communication, February 12, 2010.)

While Internet access in remote communities is still a challenge, the cost of starting up a web site has become much more affordable, making these kinds of resources more accessible than ever before. Maureen Googoo sees this as a positive step forward, and as another sign that aboriginal reporting will increasingly move to online forums.

“Before if you wanted to have media you needed to have money and start-up costs for it– now all you really need is just \$100 to set up your own web site,” she said. “I think that's changing. I think a lot of people are realizing all you really need to have right now is the dedication and the desire to actually start publishing” (M. Googoo, personal communication, January 20, 2010).

Rick Harp said the ‘digital divide’ is still a real problem for aboriginal communities. Just because you build a web site, he said, doesn't mean they can afford to come. “It's an issue because of remoteness and income and poverty. You can have the

slickest, smart phone-ready side you want, but how many indigenous people have them?” he said (R. Harp, personal communication, April 27, 2010).

A strong online presence is seen as increasingly critical to communicating aboriginal news. Increasing culturally sensitive reporting and promoting more aboriginal perspectives are also seen as crucial steps to increasing public awareness of aboriginal issues, such as missing women. A key component to achieving these outcomes is education. The next section will examine some of the steps that journalists and experts say are necessary to ensure sufficient and sensitive indigenous news reporting.

Moving Forward: Solutions to Expanding Aboriginal News Coverage

Googoo said that part of the solution to expanding news coverage of aboriginal issues should be providing young journalists with entrepreneurial skills to encourage them to start up their own web sites.

“I think j-schools can have a role in actually sort of teaching students and maybe young aboriginal students the value of entrepreneurial journalism to tell their stories,” she said, noting that City University in New York offers such a course. “And I think for the young aboriginal population, if they want to get into journalism to do the type of stories that matter to them, maybe that’s a better route. I don’t really see that course emerging here in Canada yet,” she added (M. Googoo, personal communication, January 20, 2010).

Ross hopes more aboriginal journalists will pursue journalism and new media careers: “We need to get more aboriginal journalists graduating and into these newsrooms. But not just that... we need more people like myself who are just saying –

well I'm going to go do it on my own and cover it on my own, because that's where everything is going is online..." (C. Ross, personal communication, January 20, 2010).

This idea of training young aboriginal people in journalism skills is echoed by others interviewed for this thesis. Some said that putting aboriginal journalists in the newsroom is a key step to improving news coverage.

"You need to be proactive to bring aboriginal people into the media," said John Medicine Horse Kelly, noting that many young native people are reluctant to go into careers in journalism, because the press can be strongly stereotyped among many communities. Kelly argued that until there are more aboriginal people in newsrooms, news coverage will not improve: "It's not until we're going to see a significant number of aboriginal faces in the media other than APTN, and thank God that's there, that we're going to see any substantial changes" (J. Kelly, personal communication, December 3, 2009).

Maurice Switzer reinforced Kelly's point that more journalists in newsrooms could go a long way to improving news coverage on aboriginal issues: "My experience tells me that when in any newsroom, you have a person of a different cultural background than their colleagues, that can't help but have an effect on how certain stories are reported. It puts a human presence and face on something that until then has only been something on a page. And I can guarantee that if there was one native person in the newsrooms of all major Canadian newspapers, that that would have had an impact on how some stories were covered" (M. Switzer, personal communication, January 24, 2010).

Switzer said that work is needed on both sides to improve the kind of pervasive problems in media coverage of aboriginal people outlined in Chapter 3, such as stereotyping and negative framing. He said it is important for aboriginal people to tell their own stories through their own media publications, and to build capacity in terms of media awareness among aboriginal communities. He leads media training sessions for aboriginal leaders interested in learning how to deal with reporters, and he also offers cross-cultural training sessions for non-aboriginal journalists. “We can’t just complain about bad coverage, we have to be a part of the solution—and we’re trying,” he said (M. Switzer, personal communication, January 24, 2010).

The only program in the country currently dedicated to educating aboriginal journalists is located in Regina, Saskatchewan, at the First Nations University. The future of the institution remains unstable, however, after provincial and federal funding for the school was recently cut after allegations of financial mismanagement. The province of Saskatchewan reinstated \$5.2 million in annual funding under a four-year deal that requires financial oversight from an accounting firm and the University of Regina, but federal funding is slated to run out at the end of August 2010. (Church, 2010, April 1)

Chris Tyrone Ross is completing the Indian Communications Arts program at First Nations University in Regina. While he has a number of classmates interested in pursuing careers in journalism, Ross has ambitions to work in a senior-level position at a mainstream publication, a goal he said is rare among his peers.

“I think a lot of the people who want to do news, they want to be reporters, they want to be writers, maybe editors... But as far as myself...my goal is to be a publisher of

a mainstream newspaper—that’s one of my goals down the road” (C. Ross, personal communication, January 20, 2010).

In addition to encouraging more young journalists to go into journalism, another key step to improving news coverage of aboriginal issues is promoting more cross-cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity among mainstream journalists.

Miller predicted that no significant change will occur in media coverage of aboriginal issues until news organizations place an emphasis on cross-cultural awareness. After Miller’s analysis of the media’s coverage of the shooting of Dudley George at Ipperwash, the judge of the inquiry urged the Canadian media and the television industry to work together with journalism schools and aboriginal communities to develop better ways of covering aboriginal issues. This single recommendation continues to be ignored. “I was part of a group that tried to do something about it,” noted Miller. “We approached newspaper editors and we were just given the cold shoulder.” (J. Miller, personal communication, February 26, 2010.)

Paul Macedo echoed this point, noting that if more aboriginal journalists can not be hired, perhaps reporters in the mainstream should be better equipped with cultural sensitivity training to ensure adequate and thorough coverage. At *Windspeaker*, they provide all their reporters with cultural sensitivity training, which Macedo said is critical to provide fair coverage:

You don’t just go in there and stick out your media badge and say you know, I’m here to cover a story so open all the doors for me. You have to open the right doors, you have to be introduced to people, if you’re talking to elders you need to bring an honourarium and show them that you care about the information they’re

about to share with you. You kind of build that relationship, and so we've done that with our staff whether they're aboriginal or not... We want to have that connection to the community, that respect for the community. At the same time, not glossing over issues... Doing a good job as a journalist, but doing it in a respectful way. So if mainstream would take some time to do that, then I think that the reporters, whoever they have covering native issues, would have a broader sense of what the issues are, and have a greater connection to the community so that they could cover stories in a more meaningful way. (P. Macedo, personal communication, January 15, 2010.)

Miller said Canada also lacks a broader professional conversation among the journalism community as to how coverage can be improved. In the United States, professional organizations such as the Poynter Institute promote professional development and training for journalists. "There's no industry organization that has taken this on as a mandate," he said (Miller, personal communication, February 26, 2010). He noted that training for journalists, particularly in the newsrooms of large daily newspapers, has become almost non-existent.

John Medicine Horse Kelly suggested that part of the solution to ensuring more thorough, accurate and culturally sensitive reporting on aboriginal communities could be to have First Nations cyber correspondents from reserves: "One possible solution would be, through the Internet, is to have correspondents that are on reserve or in the vicinity of the reserve, and can build those kind of relationships with reserve people," he said. "Then they start, once they're trusted, getting information from the people who can really supply the best information" (J. Kelly, personal communication, December 3, 2010).

While mainstream media exposure or a strengthened online presence might help increase awareness of aboriginal issues, Bonspiel said what is really needed is a shift in the public attitude towards aboriginal communities and issues.

The average Canadian doesn't know enough about us to be able to form an opinion. They're not interested enough because they don't know our stories... they haven't been taught it in schools. They're for the most part pretty ignorant about native people. The ones that do learn are the ones that take it upon themselves to learn... I think it's going to take a shift in society for them to be able to look at our community as an equal community to their community and as important enough to be able to talk about our issues, report our issues, speak about our issues on the same level as their issues. (S. Bonspiel, personal communication, April 16, 2010.)

Conclusion

Whether the future of aboriginal news reporting will follow a print or an online path, or a combination thereof, remains uncertain. The new and innovative aboriginal news sites analyzed in this chapter are an optimistic sign for the future. However, this is a critical time for this kind of online journalism. Many of the sites analyzed in this chapter are just getting started. It will take time for them to establish advertising revenues and build audiences. While many people are increasingly getting their news online, aboriginal communities do not have equal access to these resources. As Chris Atton (2004) argues, however, the Internet remains the best forum for alternative media to maintain “subcultural activity” (p. xiii).

Aboriginal journalists have indicated there is a broader interest developing in the use of online, multimedia content to communicate aboriginal perspectives within the mainstream. An increase in this independent aboriginal media could lead to the kind of effective counterpublicity outlined by Squires (2002), to allow more exposure of aboriginal perspectives to a wider audience (p. 461). Major aboriginal media outlets like APTN are also developing plans to expand their online coverage, which bodes well for expanding the audience of these media outlets and the issues that they cover. The increase of both blogs and major media outlets like APTN could allow for a greater possibility of the incorporation of aboriginal media spheres into larger public spheres to influence public opinion, consistent with the aboriginal public sphere model described by Avison and Meadows (2000, p. 353).

One clear observation emerging from those interviewed for this thesis is that more aboriginal journalists are needed to make a real impact in improving the way that First Nations communities are covered in the media. In addition to this, greater education and cultural sensitivity training are needed for non-aboriginal journalists covering these communities. This increased education and training could begin to address the kind of systemic miscasting of minority groups described by Fleras (2009, p. 309). As argued by Maurice Switzer (2002), “The onus is on journalists to make native Canadians a visible minority” (p. 234).

Strengthening this online presence and encouraging more young aboriginal people to go into journalism or to start up blogs could go a long way to generating increased awareness of critical aboriginal issues such as missing and murdered aboriginal women.

Conclusion

Chapter 1 of this thesis summarized the conceptual framework of this thesis, as informed by theorists such as Jurgen Habermas, Shannon Avison and Michael Meadows, Gail Valaskakis, Chris Atton and others. These theories were used to demonstrate the concepts behind the media as a public sphere, and the aboriginal media as a counter-sphere, as well as the concepts behind alternative and online media.

Chapter 2 outlined the constraints that the current economic difficulties in Canada are placing on newsrooms. With increased concentration of ownership, revenue concerns and tight staffing budgets, fewer journalists are specializing in beats such as aboriginal affairs. The media environment is struggling to find a new, workable business model, as more and more readers turn online to get their news. The increase in online consumption of news has implications for aboriginal media, due to the argument of theorists such as Cass Sunstein that people surfing the web will only seek out stories that they already have some interest in. Those who aren't already tuned into aboriginal issues, for instance, might not be inclined to seek out these stories online. Other media analysts, such as Ananda Mitra, argue that web-based formats might strengthen an aboriginal presence.

Chapter 3 discussed how stereotyping and mis-representation of indigenous people in the mainstream media, as described by theorists such as Fleras and Alia, led to the development of independent aboriginal media outlets. Through interviews, the perspectives of mainstream journalists were represented to demonstrate the challenges associated with being an aboriginal affairs reporter in a major newsroom. These challenges include time constraints, lack of interest from editors and the need to juggle a variety of reporting beats at once.

Chapter 4 used a case study of media coverage of missing aboriginal women near Ottawa to analyze how staffing constraints in a major mainstream newsroom impacted the amount and type of news coverage. Interviews with a mainstream reporter who covered the case, his editor, and a reporter at an aboriginal media outlet, were used to demonstrate the challenges facing reporters on this particular case and the discrepancies in the priority placed on the coverage. These challenges were positioned within the context of what theorists such as Jiwani and Young (2006) argue are “strategic silences” in the mainstream media on the issue of missing and murdered aboriginal women (p. 899) and a sense of “blaming the victim” in coverage of these cases (Alia and Bull, 2005, p. 84).

Chapter 5 analyzed current trends in online coverage of aboriginal issues, including mainstream outlets such as CBC, weekly newspapers in First Nations communities and independent sites or blogs set up by aboriginal journalists. Analysis of these web sites and interviews with journalists were used to demonstrate the potential of a strengthened online presence from aboriginal media to improve coverage of critical aboriginal issues such as missing and murdered women. Examples were described to show positive initiatives that are developing in online aboriginal media, that could lead to a filtering of First Nations perspectives into the mainstream media from alternative public spheres (Squires, 2002, p. 461). Solutions from aboriginal journalists and experts to improving news coverage of all aboriginal issues were also outlined.

Research Findings

Historically, aboriginal people in Canada have been either missing from the mainstream news agenda entirely (Switzer, 2002, p. 234), or mis-represented as problem people (Fleras and Kunz, 2001, p. 80). They have often been portrayed in a stereotypical way that skews public perception of indigenous communities (Weston, 1996, p. 7) or in a way that lacks critical context or background to complex historical situations (Valaskakis, 2005, p. 38). When they do make the news, it is often only when conflict or crime occurs (Fleras, 2009, p. 313). Research for this thesis has shown that a focus on conflict and crime continues to dominate mainstream news coverage of aboriginal issues within today's media context of increasingly constrained staffing budgets and fewer beat reporters. Journalists are too often "parachuting" into complex conflict situations (Miller, 2005, p. 11), which often does not provide an accurate picture of the broader issue behind a particular news event. Some journalists and experts, such as Maurice Switzer and John Medicine Horse Kelly, say that more aboriginal journalists are needed to make a real impact in improving the way that First Nations communities are covered in the media.

The case study of the missing women case of Maisy Odjick and Shannon Alexander in September 2008 showed that the most extensive, frequent and thorough mainstream coverage of this story was from a reporter at *The Ottawa Citizen* who showed an interest in the case and the broader problem of missing women, and pursued coverage on the story despite a lack of support from his editors in giving him the time to cover it. The coverage by the aboriginal broadcaster APTN demonstrated the high priority the news outlet placed on the story by putting it at the top of its newscast. Interviews with both reporters showed that the case came with its share of challenges, including the time

required to drive out to the reserve. *Ottawa Citizen* reporter Brendan Kennedy, and Nigel Newlove at APTN, are examples of reporters who chose to pursue coverage on aboriginal stories despite lack of time, resources and other challenges. Not unlike Rudy Platiel, who covered the aboriginal beat at *The Globe and Mail* for decades, they persisted in writing the story because they were interested in it, even when, in the case of the *Ottawa Citizen*, others in the newsroom were not. It appears that in the current media environment, this kind of personal interest and drive from particular reporters is one of the only things that will keep aboriginal issues, such as missing and murdered women, on the news agenda. This kind of initiative is needed to combat the kind of under-representation and marginalization of aboriginal issues described by theorists such as Alia (1999).

The solution to keeping aboriginal perspectives on the agenda, however, could come partly from a strengthened online presence from indigenous media. Aboriginal journalists have indicated there is a broader interest developing in the use of online content to communicate aboriginal perspectives within the mainstream. New blogs such as mediaindigena.com are hoping to create a new space for unique indigenous news and analysis that aboriginal journalists hope will provide increased exposure to important stories, and allow a space for debate on key indigenous issues. Major aboriginal media outlets are also strengthening their web sites to attract a broader audience and to generate increased awareness of First Nations issues. Having aboriginal story ideas more accessible through online forums to those journalists that are interested in covering aboriginal issues could go a long way to expanding coverage in the mainstream. This is a clear example of Avison and Meadows' (2000) concept of the aboriginal public sphere's

capacity to reach a broader audience and to influence public discussion in mainstream society (p. 353).

As demonstrated through interviews for this thesis, part of the solution to generating increased public awareness of aboriginal issues also has to be better education and training. More young people need to be encouraged to pursue careers in journalism, so they can tell their own stories, whether they are reporting from mainstream media newsrooms or starting up their own independent blogs. Non-aboriginal journalists could also benefit from the kind of cultural knowledge and contextual detail described as necessary by theorists such as Paul Manning (2001). With the kind of sensitivity training recommended by people like Maurice Switzer and Paul Macedo, non-native writers could report on aboriginal communities in a thorough and respectful manner, and in doing so help to re-establish trust in the media.

Information gathered through interviews and analysis for this thesis indicates that through greater use of the web by aboriginal news organizations, freelancers and bloggers, a greater awareness could be created among the mainstream public about aboriginal issues, whether this is through mainstream reporters finding story ideas online, from aboriginal journalists freelancing their own ideas, or from more members of the general public tuning into web sites typically targeted at aboriginal communities.

Implications

One recommendation that resonates loudly and clearly from those interviewed for this thesis is the need to encourage more young aboriginal people to pursue careers in journalism. Without informed and trained aboriginal journalists providing stories from

within the newsroom, or from cyberspace, aboriginal perspectives could face increasing absences on the news agenda.

The fact that more aboriginal media are expanding their online presence, and that new indigenous blogs are starting up, are positive signs that non-aboriginal journalists could soon have faster and simpler resources for filling in the context to complex stories, allowing them to report in a more in-depth and perhaps culturally sensitive manner.

If major media outlets began linking to online archives systems like *Windspeaker's* for further background on issues, or if they began providing links to aboriginal blogs or multimedia sites to get first-hand aboriginal perspectives on issues affecting their communities, major media outlets could quickly and simply provide the kind of in-depth coverage that newsroom resources limit them from providing. John Medicine Horse Kelly's idea of cyber correspondents on reserves could be an effective way of expanding news coverage on aboriginal issues for major newspapers and other media outlets. The cost would not necessarily be a hindrance, if outside links were provided to aboriginal blogs to provide exposure to up and coming First Nations journalists, or if young journalists were paid on an honorarium or freelance basis. Exporting this task to an outside reporter would also ensure minimal resource constraints on the newsroom staff. More mainstream reporters could also begin to use bloggers and independent aboriginal journalists as resources and connections with communities about which they previously knew little, leading to more frequent, in-depth and culturally appropriate stories on aboriginal communities.

The benefits of this kind of model reflect Ananda Mitra's concept of a "hyperlinked heteroglossic voice of a cyber community" (Mitra, 2001, p. 38). The more

stories that are linked to other web sites, articles and forums, the more exposure will be given to the perspectives of marginal groups such as aboriginals. Eventually, this could allow aboriginal media to circumvent the “gatekeeper” of the mainstream media (Axworthy as cited in Juniper, 2002, p. 145) to communicate directly with the public. This could also allow multicultural media like aboriginal news publications to communicate positive success stories, rather than just the negative news items that many argue are all too pervasive.

The increasing prevalence of the online format, therefore, could be a significant asset to aboriginal media publications. Critics like Sunstein have speculated that an increased shift to online news consumption could create polarized groups that only seek out news catering to previous perspectives. The potential, however, of this new online medium would appear to create a much vaster range of possibilities for aboriginal communities to make their perspectives heard among the general public, who from the beginning were never exposed to thorough coverage of aboriginal news in the mainstream media.

Future Research

Further research is long overdue on the Internet usage habits of aboriginal communities and on the digital divide between aboriginal and non-aboriginal users. A new study to analyze the trends in online habits of this population could be immensely helpful in allowing new aboriginal online media to determine the best ways to reach their key audience.

Further study could also be done as more aboriginal news web sites begin to appear in cyberspace. As more aboriginal bloggers and independent web sites develop, further research could determine to what extent these media are reaching both aboriginal and mainstream audiences, and what impact this has on awareness of critical issues in First Nations communities such as missing and murdered aboriginal women. The news consumption model described by Maureen Googoo would allow those already interested in aboriginal news to access these stories in a faster and easier way through their own tailored news feed. This model would not help, however, to spread these stories to a public that already knows too little about aboriginal issues. While new web sites like mediaindigena.com are examples of positive and innovative ways to cover aboriginal issues online, further research as these media develop should demonstrate how much these forums will reach a mainstream audience.

This thesis began with Michael E. Ross' description of an American newsroom that was folding the hard copy newspaper side of its operations, and the worry among ethnic minority staff that this would lead to fewer diverse perspectives in the news. However, the situation is not quite the same when it comes to aboriginal news in the Canadian media.

While budget constraints at major Canadian media organizations have placed pressure on staffing and on the ability to cover a wide range of stories, such as aboriginal perspectives, this thesis has demonstrated that those perspectives were always marginalized, but under the current economic constraints, the situation is becoming more difficult. The initiatives developing among aboriginal media, however, paint a promising picture for allowing indigenous perspectives to be communicated without having to rely

exclusively on mainstream media. While mainstream media picking up stories from aboriginal communities could go a long way to generating better awareness of aboriginal issues among the general public, independent media could also become their own source of information for audiences interested in learning more about indigenous issues, from indigenous viewpoints.

This thesis was completed at a critical time for online journalism, but particularly for aboriginal media. Many news sites are just starting up, and many existing aboriginal media are currently in the process of expanding their web presence. The next few years will demonstrate how successful these initiatives are in allowing aboriginal media to set their own news agenda.

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