

## **Projecting their own images: The role of the Black ethnic media in reconstructing the identities and images of ethnic minorities in Canadian society**

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**Abstract:** *Issues that are of concern to immigrant communities in Canada get very little attention in the mainstream media outlets. However negative news, especially the involvement of some visible minority immigrants in criminal activity gets wide publicity. As a result of these negative portrayals of immigrants and less attention to issues of concern to them in the mainstream media, many immigrant communities in Canada have embarked on ambitious projects of creating their own communication infrastructures. These consist of vast social networks of media outlets and organizations, mostly with limited resources, which create and disseminate conversations and news about their communities and people. These initiatives are seen as efforts at projecting their own positive images in the wider Canadian society as well as providing sources of information about their communities and countries of origin to their community members. This study therefore places the proliferation of these ethnic media in a wider social context: the emergence of community, alternative, oppositional, participatory and collaborative media practices in Canada.*

**Key words:** Canada; immigrant communities; visible minorities; ethnic media; citizenship, critical race theory; counter story-telling

### **1. Introduction**

This article explores the social and cultural roles of ethnic print and electronic media, within the prism of Canada's changing demographic composition and official multicultural policy. It begins by examining how ethnic groups, referred to officially in Canada as "visible minorities", are framed in the mainstream national media in Canada. Secondly, it presents critical race theory and its tenet of counter-storytelling as the theoretical framework upon which the study is anchored. Thirdly, the methodology used and findings from the study are presented and discussed highlighting the positive

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contributions that these ethnic media outlets are making not only to the reconstruction of the socio-cultural identities and images of their community and community members, but the significant contributions they are making to the general Canadian society. It then explores how these ethnic media are actively engaged in struggles to reconstruct their own positive identities in contrast to their framed identities in the mainstream national print and electronic media outlets in Canada. Finally, it concludes with recommendations on ways to assist these media outlets whose roles and contributions are critical in nation-building, including expanding the politics of inclusion and recognition of shared citizenship and civic engagement in Canadian society.

### **Ethnic Minority representation and portrayal in Canadian Media**

Ethnic groups are defined as a collective of people with the same race or ancestry and/or have common traits in their cultures that set them apart from other groups, especially of a group that is a minority within a larger society. Usually, this classification pertains to a characteristic of a people, especially a group sharing a common and distinctive culture, religion, language, or the like (Diop, 1978; Hagan et al. 2005). In the light of the rapidly changing demographic landscape of Canada as a result of mass migration from Asia, Africa and Latin American countries, Canadian society is now grappling with issues related to race and ethnicity (Jin & Kim, 2011). It therefore behooves mass media scholars to continue to study the role and limitations of ethnic media, not just as a public sphere offering alternative views to the mainstream news and commentaries, but about the critical roles they struggle to play in countering the often negative images and identities the mainstream media constructs and portrays for the ethnic communities.

Ojo (2006) laments that although the 1991 Canadian Broadcasting Act requires that all licensed broadcasting stations should reflect the racial and multicultural diversity of Canada in their programming and employment, the reality

seems to be quite contradictory. He further argues that the low levels of diversity in Canadian newsrooms could be a factor of this continued bias. In 1999, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunication Commission (CRTC) had reviewed its policy in relation to Canadian television and recommended the formation of an industry task force to examine how television portrays cultural diversity in Canada (Media Awareness Network, 2008b).

In their comprehensive study of the reportage of mainstream Canadian media, Henry and Tator (2000) support this view when they reported that manifestations of media bias and discrimination found in the Canadian media include the fact that, people of colour are under-represented and largely invisible in the media; that when people of colour do appear in media coverage, they are often misrepresented and stereotyped; and that, despite the claims of objectivity and neutrality by mainstream journalists, editors and publishers, their individual and organizational beliefs, values and interests impact on the production of news discourse.

Ethnic minority groups, (or their official Canadian designation, “visible minorities”) are continuously framed and marked by stereotypes in Canadian mainstream media. Ojo (2006) further points out that in the mainstream Canadian media, ethnic minorities are constantly being “othered” simply because mainstream media believes the stereotypes to be easier for their public to grasp and understand. In addition, Ojo (2006) further maintains, when minorities are not “othered” or being under represented, they are ignored altogether. Henry & Tator (2000), also maintain that the absence of racial and cultural diversity in the newsrooms of other major media outlets in Canada could also be partly responsible for the negative representation and portrayal of Blacks and people of colour in the media. It is in response to this negative portrayals of ethnic minorities in mainstream Canadian media and near total absence of ethnic minorities in the mainstream Canadian media that a locally-focused journalistic community has emerged and thriving within Canada’s multicultural and multilingual society (Derry, 2010).

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The changes in the demographic profile of Canadian society have not affected the way the media outlets, both print and electronic, are run in the country. These changes have also not affected the participation or positive portrayal of ethnic minorities in the entertainment media (Jin and Kim, 2011). Members of ethnic and visible minorities are inadequately represented in entertainment and news media, and the portrayals of minorities in these spheres are often stereotypical and demeaning (see Miller, et. al, 1998; Fleras, 1995). In 1993, the Canadian Daily Newspaper Association studied the racial composition of member papers' newsrooms for the first time. At the 41 papers that responded to the poll, only 2.6 percent of newsroom staff, or 67 people, were non-white. That number is not favourable compared to the roughly 13 percent that visible minorities represented in Canada's total population as per the 1991 Canadian Census, and the situation has not changed for any better ten years later (see Henry and Tator, 2000).

The other negative portrayal is about news decisions. Foster (quoted by Joynt, 1995) points out that there are very few stories about minorities, and the ones that run often reinforce stereotypes: Jamaicans afoul of the law, poor Blacks. "Why does it have to be a Black woman that is always portrayed as poor? he asks. "What's wrong with using an English person as the example in some of these stories? Aren't there Whites on welfare?" Foster asks in frustration.

"The Imperfect Mirror," an April 1994 study by John Miller, Chair of the School of Journalism at Ryerson University, Toronto substantiated Foster's view about how minorities are represented in news stories. Miller and Prince (1994) audited a random week's editions of six major daily papers: The Vancouver Sun, the Calgary Herald, the Winnipeg Free Press, The Toronto Star, The Toronto Sun and the Montreal Gazette. They were assessing the amount and tone of the coverage of visible minorities. Only one paper, The Gazette, carried a higher percentage of photos and local news coverage of visible minorities than those groups represent in the local population. While visible minorities and aboriginals made up almost 13 percent of the population

in the Montreal area (Statistics Canada, 1991), *The Gazette* devoted 21 percent of its photos and 18 percent of its news coverage to them. *The Toronto Star*, *The Toronto Sun* and the *Winnipeg Free Press* came close to matching their communities in percentage of photos, though none carried a similar percentage of local news stories.

Stereotyping and negative coverage in these news coverage were common. In all papers, photos of visible minorities were rare in the business and lifestyle sections (three and six percent respectively of the photos featuring minorities) and common in the news and sports sections (43 percent and 36 percent). And, overall, the local stories were 49 percent negative, while 42 percent were positive and the rest neutral. The overall impression was that non-whites are athletes, entertainers or criminals (Miller, 1994).

### **Colour-Coded News**

A study of the demographic profiles of the Black Communities in Canada commissioned by the McGill University Center for Ethnicity and Strategic Social Planning (MCESSP) in 1997 and 2003 found out that Canadian immigrant Blacks were relatively highly educated than their Canadian-born counterparts. The Black community as a whole had relatively higher levels of education than mainstream Canadian citizens. And yet they continue to be over-represented in low-paying jobs in Canada, and they continue to be over-represented in Canadian news stories about crime (Torzcyner, 2003).

Another study of the mainstream media reporting on Canadian ethnic minorities by York University's Dr. Frances Henry in three major Toronto papers for a four-month period in 1997 found that 54 per cent of all articles in the *Toronto Sun* that contained the word "Jamaican" were about criminal activity. Forty-six per cent of stories on drug offences in all three papers referred to East Asian and Vietnamese "drug gangs." Some media watchers and critics therefore claim that this kind of reporting can have an impact on social policy (Miller and Prince, 1994, Henry and Tator, 2000). In their

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2000 study, *Racist Discourse in Canada's English Print Media*, Henry and Tator conclude that the mainstream Canadian press uses isolated incidents of violence involving ethnic minorities to create a sense of moral panic which are represented as an indication of a profound social crisis that threatens the peaceful fabric of the nation.

### **The Impact on Readers/Viewers**

That the media is a powerful tool in Canadian society is not in doubt. By its coverage and reportage of news analysis of issues, the media can grant legitimacy to a group by including people and showing them respect and by portraying them in positive light. Fair and equal representation of various population groups in society can therefore be described as an essential part of a healthy and tolerant multicultural society that Canada claims to be.

I have run a mentoring program for over ten years for male youth in the Black community in Montreal and the stark reality I got from young Black males was that the way Black characters are portrayed in entertainment media affect the ways they (Black children) see themselves and others. Yes, if a group is over-represented, positively, members of such group in society see many opportunities and many choices. The reverse is true if you are under-represented.

### **Diversity Guidelines for Broadcasters and Newspapers**

In its 1999 policy statement on Canadian television, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) emphasized that Canadian television programming should reflect the country's cultural diversity. The Commission made it clear that when broadcasters apply for or renew their licences, they should demonstrate a commitment to cultural diversity through specific initiatives. In response, the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) created voluntary industry guidelines on portraying ethnic and visible minorities. Nearly all broadcasters (96 per cent) are members of the CAB, and they are expected to:

- ensure balanced coverage of issues
- refrain from broadcasting stories, news items or imagery that may incite hatred or contempt of others, based on ethnic or national heritage, color, or religion
- be sensitive to the use of offensive language or stereotypical portrayals

The guidelines also require that broadcasters' commitment to cultural diversity be reflected in their hiring and training practices. The newspaper industry has no specific guidelines on cultural diversity and nobody to hear and decide on complaints from the public. Although the Canadian Newspaper Association's statement of principles does reinforce the need to represent the community, there is no clear commitment to fostering diversity in the nation's newsrooms. Most newspapers belong to provincial or regional press councils, and those in Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta, British Columbia, the Atlantic provinces and Quebec all have policies on portraying ethnic and visible minorities. But since the industry is self-regulated, and membership in the councils is voluntary, there is no formal mechanism in place to ensure compliance.

**Examples of screaming headlines: Toronto Star: February 10, 2007**

*"Asian Gangs in Toronto: Five charged with first degree murder"*. This was in reference to a kidnapping involving a Chinese man who has not been found but whom police believe is dead and was murdered by "Asian gangs". Another headline:

*"Toronto police uncover major marijuana grow-operation run by Asian-Canadian group"*

The Toronto Sun of Sunday October 30, 2005 had a screaming headline:

*"Black Gangs terrorize Toronto Neighborhood"*.

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It suggested that Black gangs have taken over the Toronto neighborhood of Rexdale. The National Post of January 18, 2002 had a headline:

*“Fear, death, rule Doomstown”: (The Jamaican gangs of Toronto).*

“Doomstown” actually refers to the Toronto neighborhood known as Jamestown which the media and police claim have been taken over by Jamaican gangs.

This tendency and pattern of under-representation in newsrooms and the poor reflection in coverage is particularly problematic in a multicultural country like Canada, where the immigrant and visible minority populations are increasing and is projected to reach more than 50 per cent in the large urban centers in the next twenty years (Statistics Canada, 2007). The recently released 2006 Census on Language, Immigration and Citizenship, and Mobility and Migration (December 4, 2007) confirm the growing presence of ethnic minorities in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2007).

Canada loves to pride itself as a vibrant multicultural society where Multiculturalism and the diversity of its demographic landscape are backed by an official policy and legislation (Bannerjee, 2000; Gregg, 2006; Hryniuk, 1992). The Canadian Multiculturalism Policy introduced in 1971 and later expanded into a legislation, the Multiculturalism Act, 1988 recognizes the racial and ethnic diversity of Canada where all cultures are welcomed to be part of the “vibrant Canadian Mosaic” (Gregg, 2006; Hryniuk, 1992; Taylor, 1994).

Canadian politicians love to extol the multicultural make-up of Canada. Since the introduction of the Multiculturalism policy in 1971 to the passage of the Multiculturalism Act in 1988, most Canadian politicians have strongly underscored the advantages of Multiculturalism (see Berry, 1984; Bissoondath, 1994; Hryniuk, 1992).

### **Contextualizing the Ethnic Media in Canada**



Ethnic Media is defined as media directed toward a specific ethnic group and often written or broadcast in a language native to the group. In other words they are primarily regarded as media by and for ethnics in a host country with content either in ethnic languages or in the mainstream language but with a focus on the issues of the particular ethnic community (Hayes, 2006). They are designed to serve ethnic cultural, political, economic, and other social needs of their community (Shi, 2009). There are many different terms that are used to describe the ethnic media in North America and in various parts of Europe. Some researchers refer to it as *immigrant media*, *ethnic minority media*, *diasporic media*, *community media* (Georgiou, 2001; Riggins, 1992). In this sense, ethnic media can be described, as Jin and Kim (2011) posit, “products or services tied to a particular ethnic group to organize themselves and sustain their cultural heritage within multicultural societies, including Canada” (pp. 553).

Derry (2010) refers to Ethnic Media as publications and broadcasts catering to new and third language citizens. The Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, the official regulator of media and communication outlets and institutions in Canada, defines Ethnic Media, as media printed, broadcasted or published in languages other than English or French. There are however a large number of other ethnic media that are published or disseminated in Canada in English and/or French depending on the colonial background and official languages of the countries of origin of these ethnic communities.

The content of ethnic media may be focused on the life and events within a particular ethnic community and news from their original country of origin (Georgiu, 2001). Their audience can be co-ethnics living in one city or cities across a particular country. Across Canada and the United States, there are now many ethnic newspapers, magazines, radio stations, and television channels and programs that broadcast or disseminate news to their community members. Ethnic media producers are also making increasing use of cable networks, satellite networks and the Internet to

distribute their stories and programs (Husband, 1994). Whether they are published or disseminated in English or French or in other languages, the ethnic media in Canada offers interesting and much-needed new communicative civic spaces to ethno-cultural communities (Murray, et. al 2007).

This study focused on the ethnic media in the Black communities in Toronto and Montreal, two of Canada's cities with the largest Black communities in Canada. The Black communities in Canada was purposely selected for this study because they are one of the visible minority ethnic groups that bear the brunt of media stigmatization and negative reportage and coverage.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This study employed Critical Race Theory, especially its tenet of counter-story telling as the framework that guided the study and the lenses through which the findings were analyzed. It utilized CRT as a theoretical anchor because though rooted in legal analysis, CRT insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color or marginalized diasporans and their communities of origins in analyzing society (Delgado, 1995, Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This theoretical framework was also of interest to me in this study because it specifically involves the use of its significant tenet of counter-story telling (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). In effect, CRT gives voice to marginalized peoples to tell their stories and experiences within a theoretical framework where the center of analysis is the narrative.

The study is also conceptually housed in social justice paradigm as social justice could be seen as a way of recognizing, appreciating diversity, promoting equity, advancing broad-mindedness, and encouraging voice and expression (Brooks & Thompson, 2005). As Crenshaw (1995) also succinctly points out, critical race theory has an activist aspect: the end goal is to bring change that will implement social justice. Thus, the use of the ethnic media by ethnic minorities in Canada can be seen as a means of elucidating their stories and experiences which are not often told or

regarded as of any importance by mainstream society and its media.

As will be shown in this article, the participants in this study, African and Caribbean communities in Canada, seek to showcase their culture in activist roles aimed at achieving a form of social justice: the positive portrayals of their images and the recognition of the importance of their issues and cultures to the mainstream society in their new homeland, Canada. Delgado (1989) reminds us that “oppressed groups have known instinctively that their stories [which can take different forms] are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation” (p. 2346). Consequently, the counter story which, in this case, takes the form of the use of the media, can therefore serve as a tool for exploring, analyzing, and questioning the mainstream stories of racial privilege.

### **3. Methodology**

The study utilized a qualitative methodology which relied on personal interviews and narratives on the lived experiences of the respondents. This was the preferred research methodology since the culminating activities of qualitative inquiry are analysis, interpretation, and presentation of findings (Patton, 1990). As Maxwell, 2005 points out, Qualitative Research method is relevant to a study of this nature because of its appreciation as a “window” through which we might “see” and comment on significant social issues. The context of these issues within which this study falls, include theoretical questions about how the social lives of ethnic minority immigrants in Canada are organized. It is also about the ways in which individuals and groups make sense of their lived experiences, in this case, the lived experiences of Africans and Caribbeans in the diaspora (Maxwell (2005).

#### **Research Participants**

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The study focused on the African and Caribbean communities in Montreal and Toronto, two of Canada's largest cities with the largest concentration of Canadians of African and Caribbean origin (Torzcener, 1997). A number of proprietors of African and Caribbean ethnic print media outlets and selected ethnic community programs on university campus radio stations were purposefully selected and used as case studies to explore their overall socio-cultural and political impacts in Canadian society. These were three Caribbean Community Newspapers (print media) in Montreal and Toronto: *The Community Contact* (Montreal), *Caribbean Camera* (Toronto), *Share* (Toronto). There were also three African Community Newspapers in Montreal and Toronto: *The African Times* (Montreal) *The Ghanaian News* (Toronto), *The Nigerian Canadian News* (Toronto). Three African and Caribbean community-oriented programs on campus radio stations (electronic media) were also selected to participate in the study: *Caribbean Rhythms* (Caribbean) on Radio McGill Montreal, CKUT FM 90.3, *Basabasa Soukous Soundz* (African) on Radio McGill Montreal CKUT FM 90.3, *Akwaaba Afrique* (African), York University Radio, Toronto FM105.1.

Other participants were some executive members of the National Ethnic Press and Media Council of Canada. Some members of the African and Caribbean communities who are also readers of the ethnic print media and listeners and patrons of the Caribbean and African-focused radio programs were also randomly selected from the African and Caribbean communities in Montreal and Toronto.

With the assistance of African and Caribbean community leaders identified in Montreal and Toronto, a number of community members were contacted to participate in four focus group discussions, two in Montreal and two in Toronto. One focus group each was conducted with the African and Caribbean communities respectively in the two cities. The objective was to first gauge the communities' views on their representation and portrayal in mainstream media. It was also aimed to get an idea of the importance they attach to the media created in their communities by

their own members, both in the print and electronic media. The third objective was to obtain their views on how their community media was helping to combat the negative portrayals and perceptions of the images created about their communities in mainstream media and society. Next, interviews were conducted with proprietors of three Newspapers each in the African and Caribbean communities in Montreal and Toronto, as well as personal interviews with programmers of three ethnic radio shows in the African and Caribbean communities in Montreal and Toronto. Further personal interviews were conducted with some executive members of the National Ethnic Press and Media Council of Canada to solicit their views on the role and importance of the ethnic media in Canada. These focus group discussions and interviews were later transcribed and analyzed for discussion. With the exception of participants in the focus group discussions, some of the other participants agreed that their identities be used in the report if needed.

## **4. Findings**

### **Ethnic Community responses**

The realities of the mainstream media portrayals of the ethnic communities in Canada enumerated above have enhanced the importance of the Ethnic Press in Canada. The emergence of the ethnic press houses and media are aimed at combating these stereotyping and encouraging healthier, more realistic portrayals of ethnic and visible minorities in Canadian society. The concentration of the ethnic press though is the print media. The ethnic minority communities in the major cities in Canada, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Winnipeg, Edmonton/Calgary and Vancouver abound with various ethnic community newspapers mainly within the Caribbean, Asian and African communities.

The ethnic and visible minority communities that are easy targets for the mainstream media in terms of negative portrayal and stereotyping are the Black communities. It is no wonder that these communities have responded with very vibrant community newspapers. In Montreal, Quebec, the

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Black community boasts of **The Community Contact**, a bi-monthly English language newspaper which carries stories and feature articles about the life of the community in Quebec as well as events happening in their Caribbean homelands of origin. Another is **The African Times**, in the African community in Montreal. **The African Times** in its maiden edition announced its intentions to portray a positive image of the African communities in Canada as well as a positive portrayal of events coming out of the African continent. The Caribbean communities in Toronto have three major weekly newspapers, **Pride, Share** and the **Caribbean Camera**.

The African communities in Toronto have among them about five newspapers: **The Ghanaian News, The Ghanaian Mirror, The Africa-Caribbean Connection** and **The Nigerian Canadian News**, all monthly publications. An examination of the editorial columns, feature articles and news reporting of these newspapers reveals the motives for the establishment of these newspapers: the attempt to counter the stereotypes and negative portrayals of their community and members in the mainstream media. The following extract from the editorial column of the maiden issue of **The African Times** (April, 2003) summed up the intentions of the publishers:

*The African Times makes its debut on the newsstands today with an avowed mission to fill a vacuum on the community news front. Our community, the African community in Canada, although recent is growing. There are significant numbers of African immigrants and Canadians of African origin in every major city in Canada. And our compatriots are contributing their quota in every meaningful way to the development of Canadian society. Our efforts, however, for the most part go unnoticed or unrecognized by mainstream media or society. Mainstream media houses love to focus on a few misfits amongst us who commit anti-social and criminal acts. This results in negative attitudes towards Canadian residents of African origin. This attitude is neither surprising nor strange to us. It is a continuation of the negative stereotypes and*

*distorted image that the Western mainstream media have shaped their citizens to have about Africa and its people. Our communities continue to showcase the best in African culture to enrich the Canadian cultural mosaic. These virtually go unnoticed in the media. The African Times is being launched with a mission, an avowed mission, to help in projecting the positive image about the African continent here in Canada and most importantly to showcase the positive contributions that our community members are making to Canadian society.*

*(The African Times, Montreal, April, 2003)*

To buttress the importance and need to project the positive images about their communities in Canada and showcase their contributions to Canadian society, the Caribbean and Black communities have embarked on other initiatives aimed at portraying their communities in positive light to the mainstream society with the institution of annual Achievement Award Programs. These programs showcase the best and brightest in their communities in various fields of endeavor.

**The Ghanaian News** launched an Annual Community Achievement Awards Ceremony in 2000 which has been running for over ten years. In a speech at the maiden launch of the Awards ceremony which was carried in its program booklet, the Publisher of **The Ghanaian News** and Chairperson of the Awards Committee summed up the objectives of the Awards ceremonies:

*“In deciding to organize this event, we were guided by the realization that many people in our community were excelling in various aspects of Canadian society and in our own community that needed to be showcased and officially recognized. It is often sad and unfortunate that immigrants are seen in this country as just parasites who only take away from Canadian society. We need to send a powerful message to mainstream Canadian society that we contribute effectively to the development of this mosaic society.*

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In appealing to the Ghanaian-Canadian community members to turn out in large numbers to support the sixth edition of the awards ceremony in 2006, **The Ghanaian News** in its August 2006 editorial admonished the community to not only support and applaud the award recipients but also to:

*“take advantage of the opportunity to part of history, the developing history of our community as we showcase the best and brightest amongst us. Most importantly, it is an opportunity to show the wider Canadian public that our community has come of age. And we are contributing our fair share in efforts at building Canadian society. The achievements of our previous Award winners speak volumes of our contributions to the Canadian mosaic and we will continue in that direction. (The Ghanaian News, vol. 9, no. 8, 2006)*

The following are some extracts from personal interviews with community newspaper editors, columnists, and reporters and other individuals.

*The Caribbean Camera, Toronto*

*We felt years ago that the ethnic immigrant communities ...especially Black, were being negatively portrayed by the mainstream media which fed and played into the stereotypes about our communities. We aimed at counteracting these stereotypes by showcasing achievements and business developments within our communities. We were determined to show that our community is upwardly mobile. Our major achievement is that we have pushed the mainstream media to pay attention to issues in the ethnic community. We have moved from the point where ethnic community media only looked at “ethnic issues”. We now break serious news, cover major stories that are then picked up by mainstream major news media. We have made our community visible and also changed the image of the Caribbean in Canadian minds to a place of multi-ethnic communities.*



### *The National Ethnic Press and Media Council of Canada*

*Foundations of this Council started nearly 30 years ago. The mainstream media saw the emergence of strong ethnic media as a threat to their industry and survival. Many therefore embarked on “divide and rule” approach to the ethnic media. Some bought up some ethnic media and collapsed them. Others just ignored us. As a result of the activities of the Council and the increasing strength of the Ethnic Media in Canada, top politicians from all levels of government in Canada take the Ethnic Press very seriously. From 1989, every Canadian Prime Minister has made serious effort to court the ethnic media. The political and social environment of Canada has changed significantly because of the activities of the Ethnic media and the Council. The ethnic press and media is now in the consciousness of the political establishment in Canadian society. They can no longer ignore our issues and our presence. Police Chiefs and other mainstream power brokers now see the need to reach out to the ethnic media. The Head Office of the Ethnic Press and Media Council has been located inside Toronto City Hall since March 2007. The ethnic media have put pressure on Provincial and Federal political parties to field ethnic minority candidates at elections.*

### *Radio Programmer on Ethnic Radio Program, Montreal*

*We have revolutionalized the radio airwaves in Montreal. I run a two-hour once-a-week music program on African music on the radio. I can say confidently that I have whipped up the interest of White French Quebecois in African music. My listening audience has a large section of mainstream listeners. But most importantly, we have brought indigenous “home” music from Africa to our people right here in Canada.*

A three-hour Caribbean music show, *Caribbean Rhythms* on a university campus radio station, Radio McGill FM90.3 in Montreal on Saturday afternoons is one of the most popular radio music shows in that city listened to widely not

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only by Canadians of Caribbean origin but by a wide section of the mainstream population. Responses from study participants in personal interviews and focus group discussions in Montreal attested to the popularity of this show. One excerpt:

*I always clear my agenda of any activities on Saturday afternoons to listen to Caribbean Rhythms. The music and the discussions connect you way back home. Anytime I hear Kalypso and Soca on the radio, I get goose bumps; memories of home come forcefully to me. Yea, this is our own in Canada*

Excerpts from individual participants on the mainstream media coverage of issues affecting members of the Black community:

*Anytime I hear of a shooting or some crime on the radio or see a headline of these on*

*TV, I hold my breath and pray that the suspect may not be a Black person because the way the media will blow it breaks your heart. It is as if we are the only ones that commit these crimes.*

Another:

*I do not read the main Canadian newspapers anymore because they don't say any good things about our people anyway. I feel good reading the Community Contact because it will say the issue as it is, no clouring..."*

## **5. Discussion**

The media is a powerful institution and force that help to shape the consciousness of citizens of society. The mass media in Canada, particularly the ethnic media, have now become the medium through which the images representing various groups in society are shaped in positive or negative

terms. With the radically changing demographic landscape of Canada which has transformed it to a pluralistic society, the presence of ethnic groups and the rise of their media outlets can no longer be ignored. As Henry and Tator (2000) point out, the Canadian media needs to engage more forcefully and more competently in the issues of racial and ethnic diversity and equity if they are genuinely concerned and committed to social justice and equity.

This study examined the role the Canadian mainstream media plays in interpreting and disseminating information and messages about ethnic minorities which include racist discourses and biased interpretations. Henry and Tator (2000) describe “racist discourse in the media” as consisting of a repertoire of words, images and texts that threaded together, produce an understanding of the world and position and status of people of colour in the world (see also, van Dijk, 1987, 1991). The findings from this study therefore challenge the mainstream theories of self-alienation of visible minority immigrants to Canada that are usually reported by mainstream media who complain of ethnic minorities concentrating in “ethnic ghettos”. It disputes the focus of mainstream media on ethnic minorities as the source of the problem of alienation and “ghettoization”. It challenges the reluctance or failure of mainstream scholars and media houses to identify and confront the stark reality of racism, stereotyping and discrimination that visible minorities face in Canadian society which denies them a sense of belonging (Miller et al. 1998; van Dijk, 2001).

It can be argued that the realities in the daily lives of visible minority groups in Canadian society is the principal cause and source of the so-called self-imposed alienation of visible minorities (Reitz and Banerjee, 2007). This study places the proliferation of these ethnic media in a wider social context: the emergence of community, alternative, oppositional, participatory and collaborative media practices in Canada with avowed objectives and mission of counteracting the negative images created by mainstream media about their communities.

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This study clearly points to the fact that journalists, editors and publishers of mainstream media outlets in Canada are complicit in bias, racialized assumptions and beliefs directed at ethnic minorities, especially members of the Black communities. The mainstream media continue to show, from the foregoing evidence, without providing sound empirical evidence, that ethnic minorities are social problems and unwanted outsiders who undermine the Canadian way of life.

The way mainstream Canadian media interpret and disseminate messages that include negative racist discourses help to reinforce racist values in the larger Canadian society. News reporting is essentially an exercise in story-telling which means that a crucial part of news coverage consists of casting people as heroes, villains and victims. By either ignoring minorities or casting them in the role of villains, journalists unconsciously tell us stories about who is important, who is trustworthy, who is a troublemaker, and who is likely to endanger the security of the nation. As these negative stories are repeated in the news, they become the accepted understandings among those to whom alternative interpretations are not evident (Ungerleider, 1991).

Wood and Wortley (2010) noted that when diversity results in inequality, it undermines the sense of fairness and inclusion among individuals and groups. To ethnic minority groups in Canada, the ideals of Multiculturalism have not resulted in either fairness or inclusion. They feel left out and ignored by not only mainstream media and policy makers, but stereotyped and “othered” as well. Bissoondath (1994) points to what he calls an “insidious effect” of the Canadian approach to Multiculturalism which amounts to ‘provincial citizenship’. He cites an interesting case to support his assertion: when 100-metre sprinter Ben Johnson won a gold medal at the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, he was hailed in the media and by then Prime Minister of Canada, Brian Mulroney, as the great Canadian star and hero. Days later, when he was stripped of the gold medal because of a positive

drug test, Johnson instantly became the Jamaican immigrant: recognized as Canadian when convenient, a *foreigner* when not. It amounts to being *tolerated* but not truly accepted as part of society. Johnson quickly descended from being one of *us* to being one of *them*. In the light of all these challenges, the only solution, or at least a significant part of what ethnic minorities in Canada feel, is to chart their own course of stemming the continuous tide of “othering”, stereotyping, stigmatization and exclusion. As Nourbese (1993) |\*\* succinctly puts it:

*Freedom of expression in this society is underwritten not by the free flow of information, but by the fact that there are those who are powerful enough in society to make their voices, their version of history; and their viewpoints heard (p. 66)*

From the findings unearthed in this study, those that are powerful enough in Canadian society to make their voices, their versions of history and their viewpoints heard are those that control and run the mainstream media outlets. The good news though, as shown in this study, is that the ethnic minority communities through their own media outlets, albeit not so powerful, are also making efforts to make their voices and their viewpoints heard as well.

## **6. Recommendations**

The emergence and development of ethnic media in Canada over the past twenty years have really changed the media landscape of the country. The ethnic minority communities have managed to push their issues to the fore and policy makers and politicians now pay attention to their issues. As the President of the Ethnic Press and Media Council of Canada, succinctly put it in his interview for this study:

*We (the ethnic press and media) are now in the consciousness of the political establishment in Canadian society. They can no longer ignore our issues and our presence. And we will ensure that our presence is always*

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*felt by the powers that be.*

It is about time that mainstream media practitioners got the message that reflecting diversity is not only a duty, it is also a delight. Disseminating news and stories only from the vantage viewpoint of the majority in society contributes little or nothing to social cohesion, equity and social justice. Media outlets, whether print or electronic, are expensive businesses to run. Most of the ethnic media outlets operate with meager resources generated within their own communities mostly from advertisement from their local community businesses, free-will subscriptions and highly dependent upon volunteer writers, columnists and staff to circulate their newspapers and produce their radio programs.

All the ethnic newspapers who participated in the study complained of lack of advertisement dollars from government and public bodies that are found constantly in the mainstream media. They lamented that the only time government departments will place advertisements in their newspapers is when they target the ethnic groups for votes during election time. Since the money that is used by government departments to place large expensive advertisements in mainstream media is public money, it is only fair that they are distributed and apportioned fairly to include the ethnic media outlets whose proprietors and readers are also taxpayers in Canada. In my view, this is the crucial way to expand the politics of inclusion and recognition of shared citizenship and civic engagement of all citizens of Canada.

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