Racializing the Audience: Immigrant Perceptions of Mainstream Canadian English-Language TV News

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Abstract: This paper offers an analysis of a pilot project that examines the perceptions of English-language TV news among two racialized groups: self-identified Iranian-Canadians and Chinese-Canadians. This research indicates that, according to participants, mainstream Canadian English-language TV news does not necessarily offer racialized immigrant audiences a space through which to see themselves reflected accurately as part of Canada’s rich social life beyond the celebration of ethnic events and festivals. Participants explained that they appreciated Canadian English-language television news, with important caveats. They would like to see the Canadian English-language television news media create spaces in which they could see their own ethnic, racial, cultural, and immigrant identities reflected within the backdrop of the Canadian multicultural state.

Keywords: Ethnic audience; Audience analysis; Race in the media

Résumé : Cet article présente l’analyse d’un projet pilote qui examine comment deux groupes raciaux différents perçoivent les actualités télévisuelles en anglais : les Canadiens iraniens et les Canadiens chinois. Cette recherche indique que, d’après les participants, les actualités télévisées grand public en anglais n’offrent pas nécessairement aux spectateurs provenant de minorités visibles immigrantes un espace où ils peuvent se reconnaître en tant que participants dans la riche vie sociale du Canada en dehors du cadre d’événements et de festivals ethniques. Les participants ont expliqué que, bien qu’ils apprécient les nouvelles télévisées canadiennes de langue anglaise, ils ont des réserves importantes à leur égard. En effet, ils aimeraient que ces médias créent plus d’espaces leur permettant de voir leurs propres identités ethniques, raciales, culturelles et immigrantes reflétées dans le contexte du multiculturalisme canadien.

Mots clés : Public ethnique; Analyse de publics; Race dans les médias

Knowing what various ethnic audiences think about the programs I produce would help me in trying to prove to my network that it is important to have diversity within our story choices, and our programming. But we don’t have that kind of information at our fingertips.

—Interview with Radio News Producer

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Research conducted on media and minorities has affirmed the importance of analyzing the role of the media in influencing social identities (Fleras & Kunz, 2001; Henry & Tator, 2002; Hier & Greenberg, 2002; Jiwani, 2006; Jiwani & Young, 2006). It has by now been thoroughly documented that the Canadian English-language news media provide a valuable source of information through which citizens gain knowledge about their nation, including information about immigration patterns and ideologies of assimilation, integration, and segregation in Canada. However, critical literature reviews on Canadian English-language media and minority representation reveal that there is a distinct pattern of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of minorities in the Canadian English-language news media (Fleras & Kunz, 2001; Mahtani, 2008). Racial minorities, and new immigrants to Canada from minority racialized groups in particular, are often presented as threats to the nation-state, and non-White groups are portrayed consistently as mysterious or inscrutable, or linked invariably to crime and deviant patterns of behaviour (Fleras & Kunz, 2001; Jiwani, 2006; Wortley, 2002). These findings have implications for understanding how immigrants experience exclusion and face challenges when attempting to create spaces for inclusive citizenship and belonging in Canada. The findings also serve to expose negative beliefs about immigrants that appear in Canadian English-language media.

Despite literature that exposes the continued problematic portrayal of minorities in the Canadian media through content analyses of various newspapers, films, and radio programs (see Mahtani, Henry, & Tator, 2008) little research has been conducted in Canada on how specific racialized groups—or groups where, according to Miles & Brown, “social relations between people have been structured by the signification of human biological characteristics in such a way as to define and construct differentiated social collectivities” (Miles & Brown, 2003, p. 101)—perceive the way they are portrayed in English-language television news media coverage. In other words, there have been studies that have demonstrated the pervasive problematic coverage of racialized minorities in the media, but very little research shows how racialized groups (or what has been deemed problematically “the ethnic audience,” a term I deconstruct in this paper) feel about these portrayals. This is in sharp contrast with research published recently in several European countries, including the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, where researchers are developing a significant body of literature on racialized-group perceptions of television news (see Gillespie & Cheesman, 2002; Philo & Miller, 2000; Thurman, 2007). This paper offers an analysis of a pilot project that examines the thoughts, perceptions, and beliefs of two racialized groups’ perceptions of Canadian English-language news media to begin to address this omission.

The changing demographics of Canada due to shifts in immigration policies and practices have resulted in widespread recognition on the part of international media managers and gatekeepers that media audiences are no longer monolithic. Increasingly, globalizing processes and international media ownership have meant that racialized audiences have access to a wider array of news sources than ever before, from the Internet to satellite television (Gillespie & Cheesman, 2002; Srebreny, 2005). As the earlier quotation from a producer for a radio news show...
demonstrates, there is a need to understand who is watching and listening to pro-
grams, especially among senior media managers who are trying to track down the
viewing patterns of their audience, which is ever-elusive and more ethnically
diverse than ever before. There remain many unanswered questions about audi-
ence reception and perceptions of television news in English-language Canadian
media. Do racialized minority audiences feel that the news coverage is fair and
equitable toward their racialized group? Are they tuning in—or tuning out?
Where are they turning to for their news and current-affairs information?

To begin to answer some of these questions, this paper analyzes two focus
groups conducted with two racialized minority groups—Iranian and Chinese
immigrants—about their news media consumption patterns. This is com-
plemented by ongoing qualitative, open-ended interviews conducted with journalists
and media gatekeepers in Canada. It will suggest that some participants in this
study are sceptical of what they call “ethnic news media” in Canada. They also
demonstrate a level of distrust in American media. Emphasizing cynicism toward
American networks, the majority of research participants compared and con-
trasted Canadian and American programming regularly, displaying a rich and var-
iety “media diet” of sources for information.

**Audience research on racialized groups**

> Texts need audiences in order to realize their potential for meaning.
> 
> —Hart, 1991, p. 60

The literature in cultural studies and communication studies related to racialized
audiences is dispersed and ranges across various interdisciplinary fields. I hope
only to provide a brief introduction to the broad range of research in the context
of this particular study.

Early research on audiences focused on an analysis of how a message is com-
municated to a “mass” audience (Blumer, 1946) without differentiating between
members of that audience. By the 1950s, however, researchers began to analyze
how the assumption of a “mass” audience was incorrect (Friedson, 1953). Draw-
ing from qualitative research, Friedson suggested that the social environ-
ment largely influences what audience members will expose themselves to and
how messages will affect them. It was not until the 1980s that researchers consid-
ered how the notion of “audience” reflects a static and homogenous group of peo-
ple and attitudes—as if such a thing could exist. A landmark study by Elihu Katz
and Tamar Liebes (1990) analyzed the responses of particular ethnic audiences—
 Israeli Arabs, Jewish immigrants to Israel from Russia, Jewish immigrants from
Morocco, Israeli kibbutz members, and second-generation Americans in Los
Angeles—and gauged their responses to an episode of the then-popular CBS
drama *Dallas*. Katz & Liebes’ findings indicated that the Arabs and Moroccan
Jews in their study interpreted the program referentially, relating the storyline
back to their own lives, whereas the Russians apparently interpreted the program
critically, viewing it as an example of American capitalist culture.

This study was influential in media studies because Katz & Liebes found that
media products have different meanings for different social groups. It provided an
important turning point for work in critical communication studies, because it
examined the perceptions of what was slowly becoming known as “the ethnic audience.” I want to take a short but valuable detour here and insist that this term is misleading and requires interrogation. Although one would hope that now, in the academic realm, we are all well aware that all audience members are, obviously, “ethnic” and regularly dismiss the utility of the concept of “race” in our efforts to emphasize that “race” is a social construction, the term “ethnic audience” has effectively become racialized and has come to represent people who are racially marked. The term still has a social currency, despite its problematic constitution. The term is often used as a euphemism for “minority racialized audience.”

David Morley’s (1992) work on audiences drew from interviews with a variety of sociocultural subgroups to discover how they read the British news and information program Nationwide. He showed two programs to 29 smaller groups of two to thirteen people and found that different subgroups constructed radically different readings of the program. Classifying them into “dominant readings,” “negotiated readings,” and “oppositional readings,” Morley concluded that members of a given culture will tend to share a cultural orientation toward decoding messages in clear ways, framed by shared sociocultural experiences and practices. He also emphasized that audiences actively decode meanings from a media text, thereby suggesting that the audience’s interpretation is dependent on various factors outside the text, including socioeconomic frameworks, such as “race,” gender, class, sexual orientation, and other factors, but also more generally on previous knowledge and understanding of the medium to which the audience is exposed.

Such formative analyses in the arena of audience studies became subject to criticism from other media scholars, who claimed that studies had yet to examine in detail the complex relationship between media and racialized-audience consumption patterns (Gillespie & Cheesman, 2002). To be sure, these early studies were useful because they successfully examined how audiences may complicate the interpretation and understanding of the text. However, as researchers such as Thurman (2007), Srebreny (2005), and Gillespie and Cheesman (2002) have indicated, there remains a paucity of research that explores how particular axes of identity—including “race,” gender, class, and sexual orientation, among a wide array of other identity markers—play a role in media-consumption patterns. These studies also provided little information about how it is that individuals understand their own relationship to the medium, especially in relation to their own critiques of news coverage vis-à-vis issues of belonging, identity, and geographies of inclusion.

The work of Marie Gillespie (1995) has been particularly important in the study of racialized audiences, as it provides an ethnographic account of Punjabi Londoners and their viewing patterns. Gillespie examined how TV is implicated in the remaking of ethnicity, racialization, and cultural identities. She argues that the juxtaposition of culturally diverse television programs and films in Punjabi homes in London sparks cross-cultural and contrasting analyses of media texts and that this heightens an awareness of cultural differences. Gillespie’s more recent research post-9/11 has examined how news broadcasters covered 9/11, with a corresponding study focusing on the responses to TV news coverage after
9/11 by audience members in a range of British families and households. This range includes multilingual households and families, thus serving to complicate the construction and idea of the “ethnic audience” (Gillespie & Cheesman, 2002; see Karim, 1993). The authors found that TV news is consumed ritualistically and collaboratively and confirms rather than challenges political worldviews. This research queried how identities within diasporas are forged in relation to dominant images of the nation-state in television news.

More recent research in the area of racialized audience perceptions of media post-1990 have emphasized that transnational communities use a variety of forms of media and communication apparatuses to keep in touch with their communities back “home” (Cunningham & Sinclair, 2000; Dayan, 1998). Indeed, it may be argued that research on audiences and racialized groups is becoming increasingly popular across an array of interdisciplinary lines (for example, see Srebreny, 2005, who argues through the analysis of focus groups in Bristol, Leicester, and London that minority audiences desire more equitable representation).

Despite this surge of international interest in exploring the media consumption patterns of racialized groups and their corresponding perceptions of coverage, Canadian research remains surprisingly limited in this area. While Canadian media researchers have examined the role of the ethnic media (another term deserving further interrogation) in providing crucial information to develop enhanced social consciousness and a sense of place for immigrants in Canada (Karim, 1998; Lam, 1980), no study has yet examined, to the best of my knowledge, how particular racialized groups—immigrant viewers of Chinese and Iranian descent—perceive and consume Canadian English-language TV news coverage.3 While American media organizations carry out research to identify the size and nature of their respective audiences routinely, there is much less information available among Canadian media-market-research firms about perceptions and understandings among non-White audiences, and the research that is conducted is often kept confidential. However, an important analysis offered by Canadian social analyst Leslie-Anne Keown followed news consumption patterns among Canadians by drawing from the 2003 General Social Survey on Social Engagement. Her goal was to discover whether Canadian news consumption was composed of different media types or instead reflected a “monodiet” that lacked variety (Keown, 2006). Coining the phrase “media diet,” Keown found that Canadians, especially seniors, are very likely to have a daily diet of news and that television is the staple “food” of the frequent user’s media diet. However, while Keown gestures toward the media diet of immigrants in Canada, suggesting that frequent news users born outside Canada are likely to use the Internet as a news source, the paper does not focus specifically on the thoughts, perceptions, and beliefs about TV news among immigrants. The present research project was designed to provide an introductory snapshot of the perceptions of news coverage among those who self-identify as Chinese-Canadians and Iranian-Canadians as a step toward understanding how they perceive and challenge English-language news coverage in the Canadian media and to address this long-standing omission in Canadian media and minority literature.
The problems and potential of focus-group research on audiences

Our research team decided to employ a focus-group approach to analyze racialized-group perceptions of English-language TV news because several researchers have argued that focus groups offer the opportunity to provide information on the insights, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs of a selected target population (Breen, 2006). Focus-group research works to generate underlying themes and concepts and to identify the scope of issues important to the population. It has also been noted that this method of research may be effective in garnering particular minority groups’ thoughts on an issue, in a more familiar and “safe” group setting—for example, focus groups have been employed by researchers at Metropolis, an international network for comparative research and public-policy development on immigration and integration (Pratt, 2002). This section of the paper will examine the particular methodological approach employed, paying attention to the challenges of conducting focus-group research with racialized groups.

Our research team conducted two focus groups, with Iranian-Canadians and Chinese-Canadians in Vancouver. We contacted ethnoculturally specific not-for-profit groups to recruit participants for this study, and this process led to snowball sampling. We attempted to recruit as diverse a group as possible, keeping in mind age, gender, sexual orientation, and class differentials. It is important to note that we included individuals who chose to personally identify as members of these particular groups. If participants chose to identify as “Chinese-Canadian” or “Iranian-Canadian,” we were interested in including them in our sample. We chose to conduct the focus groups for these two samples separately, rather than putting them together, primarily because, as Matas (2003) discovered in his own focus-group research, the dynamics of focus-group discussions can change radically when participants are all from different ethnocultural backgrounds. However, it is crucial to note that although all participants in this study identified as “Chinese-Canadian” or “Iranian-Canadian” immigrants, their definition of what that term meant varied significantly between group members.

Participants in this study framed the discussion differently based on their own experiences in Canada as self-identified “hyphenated Canadians.” Some participants had moved to Canada recently; others had been living in the country for longer than 30 years. However, they all identified as either Iranian-Canadian or Chinese-Canadian, and all had immigrated to Canada at some point in their lives, except for one Iranian-Canadian participant, who was born in Canada from refugee parents. This experience of immigration had a significant impact on participants’ responses to the questions asked in the focus group. We chose this approach to acquire a wide range of commentary, given that this was merely a pilot study. After completing this research, we envision a second stage of research that would involve a longitudinal analysis with particular immigrant groups, asking immigrants who have been in Canada for six months, one year, two years, and five years about the perceptions they have about English-language television news, which would bolster this existing data greatly.

As is recommended by some focus-group researchers (Pratt, 2002), we ensured that the site for the focus groups was in an easy-to-find location, in this case in downtown Vancouver. We set up the room with chairs placed around a
table, where participants could face each other freely. Tape recorders were set up as unobtrusively as possible around the table. We also had two note-takers and a moderator who identified as a member of a visible minority group. The first focus group was conducted on a Friday night at 8:00 p.m., the other on a Saturday afternoon, in order to maximize the participation of people who worked during the day.

A brief description of the participants is useful here. I have included the description that participants offered to us in the questionnaire we provided—some participants gave more information; others gave less. This strategy was meant to put participants more at ease. The Iranian focus group consisted of eight participants: three females and five males. They ranged in age from 20 to 55 years of age. As mentioned earlier, there was one 20-year-old male who was born in Canada to Iranian refugee parents. All participants had been in Canada for more than three years, which had a significant impact on the comments made in the focus group. Future research ought to explore the perceptions of TV news among immigrants at differing stages of integration. The oldest male respondent was a retired teacher. He had been volunteering for seven years as an English-as-a-second-language instructor in various community agencies with immigrants and refugees. The three women had university degrees, which they had obtained in Iran. They had also attended courses to upgrade their skills since arriving in Canada. The eldest, in her early 40s and now unemployed, had worked as a program officer in one community organization. The other two women are actively involved in their respective communities. One of the men, in his 30s, works for the federal government. Another is an established planning architect in North Vancouver. The third, 26 years old, is attending the University of British Columbia.

In the Chinese-Canadian focus group, there were two men and six women. The participants in this group were well established professionally. One male and two females were involved as front-line workers in the two biggest community settlement agencies in British Columbia; of the other women, two were students, one a teacher, and one a media worker. The second man was also a student. The Iranian-Canadian group was composed of people with political-refugee backgrounds, while the Chinese-Canadian group was composed of independent and voluntary immigrants, also sometimes called “economic immigrants.”

We started each focus group by introducing ourselves, and the moderator began by asking participants where they turned to for their news coverage. The questions were open-ended and were developed after researching past focus groups conducted with immigrants (Pratt, 2002). We found that discussion flowed freely in both focus groups. However, I would be remiss if I did not point out that despite the free flow of ideas, there are both considerable potentials and pitfalls with the employment of focus-group methodology for this study. As Pratt (2002) points out, “[F]ocus groups potentially offer a safe space . . . in which to discuss issues and experiences, and one in which the authority of the researcher can be challenged and negotiated” (p. 215). One of the key tenets of focus groups is that knowledge can be created and negotiated in relation to others. However, while focus groups can allow for participation by all participants, they can also serve as spaces where silencing occurs. While a less hierarchical relationship can
develop between researcher and researched, other kinds of domination and control may emerge within the focus group, among participants. As Pratt notes, “[Such] hierarchies . . . must be carefully negotiated within the focus group, and assessed when interpreting focus group evidence” (2002, p. 222). This is particularly important in the case of interpreting focus-group material that involves researching people who identify as members of a racialized group.

As a research team, we spent a great deal of time considering how power dynamics between the researcher and researched might play out. While we insisted on the importance of a research team that was multiethnic in composition (the research team consisted of a recent immigrant from Nigeria, a “mixed-race” woman of Japanese-Canadian descent, and myself, a woman of “mixed-race” identity of Iranian and Indian descent), it would have been naïve for us to assume that as researchers of colour, we would automatically develop a shared sense of identity and commonality with our participants. Indeed, various hierarchies began to emerge at the start of the process, during recruitment. It was clear that many participants became more interested in the project when they found out that the focus group was not for a marketing firm, but rather for a university research project. This may be because of the esteem placed by several of the participants on university education and research. At the same time, there was residual suspicion or concern that the research could be used as a form of “surveillance” on behalf of official Canadian or American agencies in the search for terrorist organizations. Gillespie & Cheesman’s 2002 study found that, in attempts to recruit British Muslim participants to gauge their thoughts and perceptions of TV news coverage after 9/11, at least 25% of the British Muslims approached in her study refused to participate (Gillespie & Cheesman, 2002). While our numbers were not that high, it did emerge as an issue, particularly within the Iranian-Canadian focus group.

We also noted that the Chinese-Canadian focus group was more lively and exuberant than the Iranian-Canadian focus group. There may be several reasons for this difference. First, the Iranian-Canadian group met at night, and most participants came straight from work, which may have explained why the energy level seemed lower. It may also have been that the moderator was half Iranian, and that members of the Iranian community may have viewed the moderator with some scepticism. Research on “mixed-race” identity has indicated that people who identify as “wholly” of one ethnicity may express concerns about, or not fully trust, individuals who are only “half” of the same ethnicity (Mahtani & Moreno, 2001).

Finally, for many participants, it was the first time they had articulated their media consumption patterns and behaviours, and the group dynamic affected and altered participant responses significantly. For example, it was clear that the discussion was gendered. Women were less likely to raise their opinions and thoughts, and at times, men dominated the conversation. The moderator attempted to draw out the women in both focus groups and a greater balance was struck three quarters of the way through both groups. This suggested to us the importance of contemplating a women-only group for research in the future. The next section of the paper delves into some of the significant findings from the focus-group research.
Complex television-consumption patterns as part of a media diet

The results from the focus groups were both complex and contradictory. At times, participants in the groups not only contradicted each other, but also disagreed with and backtracked on their own perspectives, changing them over the course of the discussion. However, significant themes did emerge around expectations of English-language television news organizations and consumption patterns more generally. Both groups emphasized that they did not trust U.S. media for their news, preferring to draw from Canadian mainstream media. They also told us that channels that catered to “ethnic audiences” specifically were not as appealing for their news coverage, because they felt that these channels sometimes “ghettoized” their experience. Extending Keown’s finding that “immigrants may also use the internet more commonly as a news source” (Keown, 2006, p. 14), this research suggests the value of a more complex analysis of immigrant media-viewing patterns, demonstrating that we cannot simply assume that immigrants turn only to the Internet or that the Internet is their primary source for information. Indeed, this research shows that Chinese-Canadian and Iranian-Canadian immigrants, too, display a rich, varied, and sophisticated practice of multisite viewing. Participants offered a wide array of suggestions to networks, including recommending more international news coverage, while at the same time emphasizing that such options may not be feasible, given what they saw as significant constraints on broadcast news services in Canada.

Perceived bias in news coverage

At the start of both focus groups, participants expressed admiration and respect for English-language Canadian television news. Both groups explained that they watched English-language Canadian television news regularly and that they tune into CBC, Global, or CTV approximately once a day. While there were disagreements about the “best” channel, participants in both groups told us that CBC was their favourite, followed by CTV and then Global. As one participant in the Chinese-Canadian focus group explained, “CBC has done a marvelous job . . . to be fair, I think the Canadian media has done a superb job, and even when it is biased it has been good.”

As the above quote demonstrates, participants complimented Canadian television news. However, there were voiced reservations. Individuals in both groups explained that the English-language news media regularly contribute misleading portraits of international affairs to the Canadian public and that they themselves are excluded and misrepresented by the English-language Canadian television news media. They told us that their own experiences are absent and that their needs as Canadian citizens are not being met. This was demonstrated in different ways in the two focus groups. In the Iranian-Canadian focus group, it was emphasized that a limited sphere of representations about Iranians, and Muslims more generally, served to reinforce a sense of marginalization and exclusion, while posing significant obstacles to open discussion cross-cultural dialogue in Canada. This was specifically pinpointed regarding coverage of Muslims after 9/11 in the Iranian-Canadian focus group. While similar themes emerged in the Chinese-Canadian focus group, discussion focused around SARS and the Beijing Olympic bid. I will explore each of these themes in turn.
In the Iranian-Canadian focus group, participants who identified as Muslim explained that they found English-language Canadian media problematic after 9/11. Analysis or debate inclusive of an Islamic perspective was rarely present, in their eyes. They believe they experienced marginalization and alienation as a direct result of the negative coverage of Muslims in the Canadian media. As one participant put it, “The media tell misleading stories about Iran on purpose. They never show successful people or successful stories. They are always showing bad things about Iran; it affects our community.”

One participant, a young man in his early 20s, explained how the Canadian media altered his view of Iran significantly and only served to develop a negative image of Iran for him: “I had the worst perception of my own country. From what I saw on Canadian TV I had no real idea about Iran. I never really had the chance to learn about it. . . . They need to teach the younger generation about Iran.”

They also remarked that the long-term effects of 9/11 and the resulting discrimination that they faced were not fully covered in the press. One participant indicated that he felt that the news coverage led people to become fearful of Iranians: “When you hear the news, it affects people. After 9/11 they were afraid of us.”

This particular participant’s comment differed from the opinions of some journalists, including reporters like Christie Blatchford at The Globe and Mail, who insisted that the Canadian media responded to 9/11 through too many reports renouncing the anti-Muslim backlash (Mahtani, Henry, & Tator, 2008).

In the Chinese-Canadian focus group, disdain was showered upon Canadian English-language television networks for their SARS coverage. As one female participant in the Chinese-Canadian focus group explained, “I get a sense if there is any news on China, it is always negative news. Never positive; it’s always, ‘Oh, SARS is coming.’ I don’t know if that is their intention.”

Others felt similarly. One male participant in the same focus group emphasized that the Olympic [Beijing] bid warranted a different kind of coverage than he witnessed on Canadian networks, and others offered their thoughts on the matter. In a highly reflexive and analytical exchange, participants in the Chinese-Canadian focus group explained that mainstream Canadian networks did not cater to their needs as media consumers:

Participant One: One incident that turned me off was when Beijing won the Olympic bid. People took to the street to show their happiness, this is a time for national celebration. The feelings were genuine. The feeling I got from CNN or CBC was that they seemed to focus more on what could go wrong. Could we trust China? . . . It was a moment that ought to be celebrated. . . . But we had this story—could China be trusted? There was a frenzy to paint everything green. . . . Why couldn’t they say congratulations? It’s like turning the decision around. It was political. It was all about sympathy for Toronto.

Participant Four: It is a natural attitude of the Canadian media. In China there was not a lot of media coverage about the Olympic bid in 2010. They didn’t report it widely that Vancouver was the winner. I emailed
back and told my friends and I am proud of Vancouver. I think it’s the natural attitude of the media.

**Participant Three:** When the media decides what to report on, it focuses on the audience.

**Participant Two:** There is a difference between not reporting an event and then reporting it with a tinted view. If you choose to report an event to make it look negative, that’s the difference.

**Participant One:** Probably when they report they lead you in different directions. It depends on your training and how you have been educated in the news.

**Participant Four:** I have a different opinion. Sometimes we have negative feelings when we hear negative things about our home countries, but maybe it is a new perspective. When people criticize you, sometimes to think about what they are saying is reasonable, why not learn some lessons? But of course you notice that the Canadian media focuses on the negative side. It needs to be balanced.

Chinese-Canadian focus-group participants emphasized that the news coverage in Canadian English-language news media assumes an Anglo-centric audience, as indicated by the statement, “When the media decides what to report on, it focuses on the audience.” Pointing out that the coverage of the Olympic bid was slanted in favour of the Toronto bid, participants were quick to explain or justify why this might be the case. “Participant Four” emphasizes that although the coverage can be misrepresentative, audiences may need to consider how they themselves perceive and consume the Canadian news coverage through their own eyes as minorities. This qualification emerged as a significant theme throughout both focus groups. Participants tempered their comments about negative coverage by emphasizing and reminding other participants that there must be significant obstacles—including financial and time constraints—placed upon journalists who might wish to develop more equitable representations. This demonstrates a considerable degree of reflexivity on the part of audience members, compared with other international studies of viewership patterns among racialized audiences, where most viewers in other studies did not seem to reflect upon the structural constraints that inform news production, but rather emphasize the ideological biases of journalists. As a research team, we wondered why both groups were careful to qualify their comments. Participants may have thought that they were being too critical of Canadian English-language news media and wanted to downplay their criticisms. We assumed in part that their educational-attainment levels may also explain their propensity to view media content critically and reflexively.

**Lack of trust in U.S. media**

Focus-group participants emphasized that Canadian English-language media was superior to U.S. media, and in both focus groups, there was demonstrable distrust in the U.S. media, especially after 9/11. CNN was condemned for its apparent manipulation of storylines, as well as limited storytelling frameworks.
Participants explained that CNN was far too patriotic in its coverage. As one male Iranian participant put it, “As Iranians we know better; the U.S. is more likely to lie and take news in the direction they want. CNN just wants to protect their side. It’s too dramatic. It does not show reality but people believe it.”

This participant suggested that he was able to critique the news from a different perspective because of his Iranian identity. He also doubted that CNN’s programming accurately mirrored reality. Others felt similarly, stating that they chose to turn off CNN entirely from their news diet. As one male Iranian-Canadian explained, “I boycotted CNN. It was just a show—movie-like. CNN rewarded people who were for the war.”

In contrast, Canadian news was seen as more balanced and democratic. Much discussion went on in both groups about the apparent superiority of Canadian news versus American news. As another female Iranian-Canadian participant explained, “Canadian news is not trying to judge the news. . . . In Canada the news is freer than American channels. I trust them more. They are just reporting, not analyzing: maybe that is just the system. Once CBC . . . they had a website for people to post opinions, it was good.”

Canadian news was seen to be more democratic and fair compared with U.S. accounts of the news. Many participants criticized CNN because they saw it as pro-Israeli and sensationalistic. Canadian news was favoured because of its seeming openness to hearing what the audience had to say about the coverage. Several people in both focus groups appreciated being offered the opportunity to contribute to the news-making process by posting their opinions on websites, or by leaving messages for producers and reporters on phone machines, which were often aired the next day. Such opportunities to participate and critique the news were praised by participants in both focus groups and had an impact on what news they chose to watch. As stated earlier, media researchers exploring the relationship between media and minorities in Canada have remarked that immigrants are often portrayed as deviant or sinister in representations in news media (Fleras & Kunz, 2001) and are positioned consistently outside the parameters of the nation-state. Opportunities to voice their thoughts about news coverage were of great interest to many of the participants in both focus groups, primarily because they felt they could contribute democratically toward the process of news making in some small way. Of course, CNN, FOX, and other American news organizations also offer audience ways to “talk back” or respond to programming online. However, this similarity was rarely mentioned in the focus groups. We assumed that this was because some focus-group members faced challenges in getting their voices heard in a primarily American market versus the Canadian market, where they had more of a chance to see and hear their perspective on the “talk back” lines or online news sites.

Varied viewing patterns
In both groups, participants demonstrated viewing patterns around their consumption of English-language Canadian media. Participants in both focus groups explained that they choose to diversify their sources for news coverage deliberately. The Internet was cited as a key alternative source for news because it offers a space where multilingual viewers can gain access to a wide range of sources.
This echoed the findings from a study in Britain that found that members of various diaspora groups admit that they often “pick and mix” different media and compare and contrast sources of information (Srebreny, 2005). Similarly, a Statistics Canada study that examined Canadian consumption of news and current-affairs media demonstrated that Canadians like to sample news from a variety of media sources (Keown, 2006). Participants in both focus groups explained that they had a multifaceted “media diet,” where they sampled from various news programs on a regular basis. As one man in the Chinese-Canadian focus group explained, “I watch CBC’s The National if something big is happening. For daily news, I use the Internet and read the papers. If I am curious about Mainland China, then I use the Internet. I can then compare with TV and sort it out, find out what really happened.”

The above quote also demonstrates the pervasive critical nature of viewing practices. Both groups insisted that they compare and contrast programs regularly due to the deep scepticism that members of both groups had toward mainstream media. As one Iranian-Canadian female group member put it, “It’s a good idea to check between channels. I love Al Jazeera news and I compare that to CNN. Compare for yourself—it’s good to compare Canadian and British news.”

Participants also made distinctions between different kinds of news shows. Current-affairs programs and news shows that provided more context were favoured over half-hour news programs, or what is known as “hard news” within the industry. Programs such as CounterSpin were especially applauded for their attempts to provide a debate on global issues and were regarded favourably, primarily because they brought in more ethnic and racialized minorities as guests on the program. As one Iranian focus-group male participant explained, “CounterSpin was the only international show that brought in minorities and had discussion among the public. I try to watch it whenever I am at home. The other networks don’t have such a show. The Passionate Eye is a good show about international issues.”

Participants also cited bookmarking their favourite blogs for news, but also drew from the online sites of the major networks (e.g., CBC.ca and CTV.ca) regularly because of the ease of access and customizability of information retrieval.

Lack of interest in news that caters to “ethnic audiences”

Surprisingly to us, there was scepticism voiced toward some news channels that are trying deliberately to attract a more diverse audience. Channels such as Channel M, which started up in June 2003 and is no longer broadcasting, and CityTV were regarded as too local, without enough in-depth focus into global news. The following exchange in the Iranian-Canadian focus group highlights some of those beliefs:

Participant One: I just don’t like CityTV; it’s too light.

Participant Two: I don’t like Channel M; I think they’re programming for a different segment of the population. That doesn’t mean that’s bad, but I like my news to be serious, in depth; to be heavy.

Participant One: Yes . . . if I’m really looking for information I will turn to CBC. I guess Channel M wants to change their image, to see what . . . but if I want serious information I wouldn’t watch Channel M.
Participant Two: I don’t like the way they joke, news anchors, as if they know each other; some people may like it, but that doesn’t work for me. I like the way that Peter Mansbridge anchors.

Focus-group members emphasized that they do not watch “ethnic” news coverage because they find that the news stories on such programs are “fluffy”—in other words, the coverage does not provide substantial pertinent information for them, nor does it reflect their lives in a less reductionist manner than mainstream programming. Some of the participants explained that the news content on these shows sometimes includes coverage of ethnic festivals and events. Such coverage assumes that immigrant audiences desire programming that focuses on reflecting “red-boots multiculturalism”—programming that promotes staged ethnic representations, supporting the expression of cultural difference through food, family, and personal and religious practices. It has been suggested that this myopic celebration of ethnicity and multiculturalism masquerades as cultural differences through the portrayal of ethnic snapshots (Mahtani, 2002). Participants emphasized that such programming is not of significant interest to them.

This suggests that networks need to reconsider how they are reaching immigrant audiences by moving beyond “light” coverage that celebrates ethnic events toward more representative programming that takes into consideration the way participants live out their lives in Canada. Strategies that have been employed by networks (and critiqued subsequently by media scholars and anti-racist journalists) to develop more equitable portrayals include a focus on what has been called “calendar journalism” (Siddiqui, 2001)—focusing on events such as the Chinese New Year or the Iranian celebration of Nowruz. However, it was clear in both focus groups that participants favoured programming that moved beyond “red-boots” coverage toward more inclusive and representative storytelling.

British media researcher Annabelle Srebreny made a similar finding in her own study, which included focus groups with minority ethnic audiences in Bristol, Leicester, and London, U.K. As Sreberny (2005) notes, “[T]he challenge is to avoid the . . . reductionism of racial and ethnic classifications—and that includes thinking that a minority media channel alone and in itself satisfies the expressive needs of a minority group” (p. 447).

More global coverage and geographies of media exclusion

When asked what kind of programming they did want to see in English-language television news in Canada, participants recommended more global coverage. They were increasingly frustrated with the lack of information about international affairs—not just about their own countries of origin, but about other countries as well. The following exchange from the Chinese-Canadian focus group captures some of these sentiments:

Participant One: I hunger for international news . . . global stories . . . because . . . we are eager to know what is going on around the world.

Participant Two: A lot of us come here for different reasons. But one of the reasons we come here is to get outside. To explore the world. To
broaden our worldview. We get outside and we feel like we’re more closed, actually. Because we know what happens in the world, and it’s very disappointing to me. The media is closed. And so we feel more closed. I feel I am less informed about the world.

Participant Three: [Talking over Participant Two] [T]he one page that’s devoted to the world in Canadian newspapers. . . . I find that ludicrous. Toronto is looked at as one of the most cosmopolitan city in the world. . . . The news we get on the outside world is so insulated; that needs to be changed.

Participant Two’s comments in particular are striking. Many participants nodded as she spoke. One of the key reasons cited among participants for migrating to Canada included the desire to see more of the world. They explained that the news coverage in Canada in their eyes did not include coverage of international events and that the majority of the English-language Canadian news was very local or national and limited their own worldview or perspective. While participants emphasized the importance of covering Canadian national news stories, they also recommended that coverage include international stories. The spatial implications of Participant Two’s analogy are also of interest here. As she sees the media being more “closed” because of their apparent limited perspective of what is considered newsworthy, she insists that this affects how she feels as an immigrant in Canada. She claims that such coverage makes her feel more boxed in and closed off, with less access to the outside world. It was clear that others felt similarly; Participant Three explains that he feels that the news coverage is insular and does not provide adequate representation of events occurring on a global level. These geographies of exclusion only serve to reinforce feelings of isolation for some participants.

Recognition of the challenges facing mainstream media

As briefly introduced earlier in this paper, in both focus groups, participants reminded each other continually that there are structural and business imperatives facing news organizations that make it challenging for networks to cover international affairs and the experiences of racialized groups more generally. The following exchange in the Chinese-Canadian focus group illustrates the awareness among many focus-group members of the diverse array of limitations facing English-language media in Canada:

Participant Four: But, you know, all this, it’s a hard thing to ask.

Moderator: What is a hard thing to ask?

Participant Two: We do need to see what kind of positions other people have. . . . That is my opinion. . . . We need to see more of that. But what about advertisers, and the role that they play. . . . A lot of people have the voice, but they are not mainstream, but not enough response, the program will be cut. . . . Some people had this voice, but they were not mainstream.

Participant One: But they will become. . . . They have to wake up and realize that the faces of Vancouver are ever-changing.
Participant Two: But when people get used to it . . . you know, like the producers . . . if they change it, they might have a pleasant surprise.

Participant Four: They are for profit! But even they are . . . they are looking for more viewers, and they should keep their eye on their long-term goal.

Participant One: That’s the dilemma for me. . . . BBC is not-for-profit channel, but are we prepared as consumers to pay for our television? To pay for the air time? Like Channel M, they show TV games and stuff that I have no appetite for watching, but I’m not prepared to pay for a TV signal . . . like in the UK, because they’re not profit driven. In Canada . . . I don’t know if I’m prepared to pay, so maybe I’m prepared to settle for rubbish programs.

Participant Two: I remember before I never ate Indian food. I always focused on Chinese food, and someone said you should try Indian food, so I did and I liked it. So now I can pay some money to go to Indian restaurant and eat their food. So they don’t know anything about it, they don’t have a chance to know. . . . They don’t know what news happens, might be interesting to them. . . . They could be more educated. . . . There could be a surprise and they could make more money. Do they want to make their audiences better or keep it at the same level?

Participant One: The other strategy is that there needs to be better channels. They share a lot of resources, and providing better quality programs. There are over 100 channels, and they are spreading the resources too thin; it is not healthy for profit margin. . . . They don’t have resources.

Participant Two: Although we may criticize the Canadian media, we still watch it.

While participants emphasized that they would like to see more international news coverage and more balanced representations of racialized groups in the media, at the same time, they offered a wide array of reasons this was a challenge for mainstream networks. Citing the difficulties in convincing advertisers that such coverage is financially feasible, as well as their own reticence to pay for more equitable news coverage, participants duly noted their own growing awareness around issues of media ownership in Canada. Most participants felt that it may be asking too much of networks to develop more representative and accurate portrayals of racialized groups in the Canadian media. One of the key findings of this focus-group research is that the majority of participants are continuing to watch English-language television news, despite having generally more access to satellite television and cable television channels. Very few participants said that they regularly consume satellite television news, for example, which is in stark contrast with the findings of several European studies. Although the technological revolution has made it possible for many immigrants in Canada to have access to radio, television, and Internet news and entertainment from their home country, participants in these focus groups do not seem to be consuming these more globalized forms of media on a regular basis. Their consumption of non-Canadian
satellite media was limited. Instead, Canadian English-language television news was their medium of choice. It has been largely assumed that racialized groups turn to ethnic media for their daily news. These findings counter that assumption. This may indicate that the mainstream English-language television news media in Canada is in fact attracting racialized immigrants successfully—now they must diversify their programming if they wish to keep this segment of their audience intact.

Moving beyond the monolithic audience
In this final section, I point out the salient findings of the research and emphasize the value of examining the complex relationship that emerges between the production and consumption of TV news. I point out in particular the impact of that consumption on understandings, beliefs, and perceptions of immigration and “race” more broadly among both producers and consumers of TV news.

This study demonstrates how two particular racialized groups contemplate and critically evaluate their viewing patterns of English-language Canadian television news. It was conducted to challenge the approach favoured in Canadian media studies on minorities, where the focus has been largely upon employing discourse analysis to understand more fully the continued misrepresentation and underrepresentation of minorities in the media (see Mahtani, 2008). Although only a pilot project with a small sample size, these results have ramifications for Canadian English-language mainstream news organizations that are currently engaging in diversity training in order to reach that seemingly elusive and troublingly named “ethnic audience.” Both the Chinese-Canadian and Iranian-Canadian focus groups emphasized that they consume mainstream English-language Canadian television news regularly and that they have great respect for the Canadian English-language television news media in general.

This was in contrast with the findings of Gillespie & Cheesman (2002), in their analysis of British multiethnic audiences, which found that multilingual news viewers are increasingly turning to the Internet because of their dissatisfaction with television news providers in Britain. The Canadian results of consumption patterns as indicated through these two focus groups are markedly different. The members of both the Chinese-Canadian and Iranian-Canadian focus groups explained that while they developed varied-media news diets that included turning to online sources, they were avid consumers of Canadian television news. This resonates with Keown’s (2006) finding that Canadians are very likely to have a daily diet of news. While Gillespie & Cheesman’s (2002) study underscored the importance of transnational satellite TV news stations in the lives of multiethnic media consumers, such forms of media were rarely mentioned in this study. Instead, Chinese-Canadian and Iranian-Canadian participants expressed not only ambivalence, but at times disdain toward television news that focused on “calendar journalism.”

When asked to specify what kinds of coverage were problematic in their eyes, most participants were unable to name a particular story or come up with precise examples, although broad media spectacles were discussed (such as SARS). Milot (2002) recommends that we distinguish between perceived discrimination and experienced discrimination and explore how it is that particular
groups understand, consume, and challenge media representations so that we may begin to develop a more nuanced picture as a step toward more equitable and representative stories. How do particular racialized groups decide what a misrepresented story is? Is there agreement among individuals who identify as members of the same racialized group? How do other axes of identity (class and age, in particular) influence those decisions? Previous research has suggested that minorities tend to focus on their own representation and may sometimes overestimate how establishment groups are intent on working against them, even to a conspiracy level. This study challenges this assumption, as participants emphasized that they recognized the structural barriers facing mainstream media organizations who wish to diversify their news programming.

This research indicates that, according to participants, Canadian mainstream English-language TV news does not necessarily offer racialized immigrant audiences a space through which to see themselves accurately reflected as part of Canada’s rich social life beyond the celebration of ethnic events and festivals. Participants explained that they appreciated Canadian English-language television news, with important caveats. They would like to see the Canadian English-language television news media create spaces in which they could see their own ethnic, racial, cultural, and immigrant identities reflected against the backdrop of the Canadian multicultural state.

Responding to such demands poses significant challenges to Canadian television news networks. If these audiences respect mainstream television news, yet would like to see more international affairs and news coverage on these channels, how might these requests become institutionalized within mainstream media networks? How can this kind of programming become implemented within current operational structures? This has been a difficult question for networks to answer.

As a counterpart to the focus-group study, I am in the process of conducting interviews with individuals whom I call “media gatekeepers”—or news producers in positions of power—in various newsrooms in Canada. Questions include inquiries into perceptions of who the Canadian audience is and how they are attempting to reach out to more diverse viewers.

I asked “Steve” (a pseudonym), a TV news producer, about his perceptions of strategies aimed at diversifying programming at his network. When asked whether news coverage has changed since 9/11, Steve explained how the attacks on the World Trade Center dramatically recast how journalism is contemplated and negotiated, culminating in a reassessment of responsibilities for establishing a more globally oriented and democratic political discourse on cultural differences and religious identities in Canada:

Since September 11th, we’re no longer talking about celebrating Canada as multicultural. You can’t—it’s no longer a question of hiring people to show sort of on the surface of it that you’re reflecting the communities and that you all celebrate the fact that you live together and it’s fine. But since September 11th... it’s so much more difficult than that... because reflecting community is now about reflecting points of view... What scares me is most of the ideas on our show seem to come from me and from the top few people. It scares me because my exposure is [only] the
It is tragic that I have to be responsible for ideas on our program given my limited life experience at the moment. Maybe it’s about fostering a different kind of environment?

Steve’s response makes clear that September 11th produced a significant rupture in news reporting in Canada. At the same time, however, Steve is clearly aware of the cultural hegemony of the newsroom, where he reflexively laments his own complicit position of power in reproducing and re-circulating the same kinds of story ideas and struggles to propose alternative models to intervene in these problematic discourses. The racialized structures within the newsroom make it difficult for journalists to challenge or disrupt prevailing discourses of storytelling in the newsroom. Fear of challenging the status quo within newsrooms means that many journalists keep silent about problematic reporting for fear of losing their hard-earned jobs, especially in a climate of consolidating media ownership and increasing convergence, where positions for Canadian journalists are becoming increasingly scarce (see also Mahtani, 2008).

In response to calls from watchdog groups that monitor the prevalence of problematic portrayals, several Canadian newsrooms have taken an interest in examining possibilities for “mainstreaming” the portrayal of immigrants in their news coverage. Various initiatives have been proposed, including mentoring programs for immigrant youth who wish to pursue a career in journalism, diversity training for journalists who are working in newsrooms, and “rainbow rolodexes” to diversify sources currently employed in news stories, among other initiatives. However, despite these proposals, media coverage of immigrants remains within limited frames, promoting grammars of “othering” (Jiwani, 2006).

It is important that this research be seen as neither absolute nor representative. Indeed, this pilot study can merely open the door and pose new questions about future research on diverse audiences in Canada. While providing an introduction, it can only serve to emphasize the value of conducting further research on particular segments of the audience and, more specifically, on the ways racialized groups consume mainstream media. The research indicates that English-language mainstream Canadian news is a significant source of information for members in these focus groups, and while members of both groups would like to see more representative coverage, they do not necessarily expect it. These considered responses around expectation offer another important avenue for future analysis and challenge predominant models of audience research, which, it has been suggested, remain “outdated” (Gauntlett, 2007) and “pessimistic” (Nightengale & Ross, 2003, p. 11). Through their reflexive responses, the participants in these focus groups display a rich sophistication in their complex readings of media and urge us, as researchers, to ask how we could use their recommendations to foster more equitable images of their respective minority groups in news coverage.

This study pushes us to further ask what specific kinds of representations racialized groups think are fair and equitable, and how misrepresentative stories influence their sense of self-esteem and belonging in Canada. In particular, this pilot project has encouraged our research team to ask how media representations impact what has been called “the warmth of the welcome” for new immigrants as
a step toward a much more precise examination of the agency and role of problematic portrayals in Canadian English-language television news media and, more broadly, to further examine the complex relationship between producers and consumers of mainstream English-language TV news in Canada.

Acknowledgments
I would like to thank SSHRC and Metropolis for funding this research. I am also grateful for the research assistance of Moussa Magassa, Lisa King, and Charissa Jattan. This paper has benefited from the cogent and constructive comments of Dr. Augie Fleras and Dr. Joshua Greenberg.

Notes
1. In this paper, the term “ethnic minorities” is employed. This term carries a particular political and social salience in the media, and especially minority literature, and it has been used to encompass a wide array of racial, cultural, and linguistic groups, including “visible minorities,” “racialized peoples,” “non-Whites,” “religious minorities,” and “people of colour” (see Karim’s [1993] valuable examination of the struggles between discourses on competing ethnocultural terminology that reflect different conceptions of majority-minority relations in Canadian society). However, it is important to note that this term is contentious and subject to debate, because it can be essentialist, failing to recognize the wide diversity of ethnicities, cultures, and religious groups that fall under this domain. As will become obvious, I prefer to use the terms “racialization” and “racialized” to refer to the process of marking groups racially or to a situation in which a racial element is injected (see Miles, 1989). This is particularly pertinent in this study because I am focusing on the ways that both the Iranian-Canadian and Chinese-Canadian populations interviewed feel they are racially stereotyped in the news.

2. I only refer to English-language Canadian television news media in this paper. It is crucial that we begin to analyze the perceptions of French-language television news in Canada (see Belkhodja & Richard, 2006; Mahtani, 2001; Miljan & Cooper, 2003) to develop a more complete picture of the perceptions of all Canadian citizens. Such a project is outside the scope of this paper, however, and must remain the focus of a future study.

3. It is important to note, however, that Statistics Canada has analyzed Canadians and their consumption of news and current-affairs media using the 2003 General Social Survey (Keown, 2006). While this study does mention the consumption patterns of immigrants, it does not delve further to ask how particular immigrant groups perceive news media coverage.

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