Editorial

Race, Ethnicity, and Intercultural Communication

In the wake of the election of Barack Obama and proclamations of a vaunted “post-race era,” one might think that it is passé to study issues of difference. Unfortunately, the continuing validity of racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious identities, particularly as they impinge upon human communication, is underlined by the real but imperceptible ways in which they are brought to bear in the judgements that people make about each other. There is also the long-standing concern that minorities are underrepresented, misrepresented, or simply absent in the mediascape. One of the earliest Canadian research projects on this issue examined the portrayal of Aboriginal and other racialized groups in textbooks and advertising. A number of studies have appeared since the 1980s on their depictions in a variety of other media, as the contributors to this special issue’s report section on “State of the Art: Race, Ethnicity and Communication” attest. Research foci have shifted somewhat, however, from basic concerns about underrepresentation and the failure to include all groups, to the quality of representation. Qualitative analysis poses more challenges than quantitative examinations; nonetheless, a number of scholars have managed to conduct strong cultural, discursive, symbolic, semiotic and other qualitative examinations of media materials. There is a need to provide a consistent and systematic means of employing such tools to hold the media accountable for their engagement with race and ethnicity, as Murray argues in this issue.

Scholarly research on the portrayal of race and ethnicity in the media has served to provide substantial evidence supporting the case for fairer representation brought forward by minority community organizations. Governments in Canada have responded by establishing rules and guidelines to prevent disparaging depictions of marginalized groups, including women, Aboriginal peoples, visible minorities, and persons with disabilities, some of which are produced in this issue in the report section “Legislation and Regulations.” Whereas the provisions for penalties are generally weak, media organizations have not entirely disregarded the call to address issues of representation. Many have developed their own guidelines for portrayal; some, like the Canadian Association of Broadcasters and the CBC, have also conducted extensive research (annotated in this issue under “Issues of Race, Ethnicity, and Communication”). However, this does not mean that the problem is anywhere close to disappearing.

Community-based organizations remain active in monitoring and working with media to promote fair representation. Groups such as the Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations, in recognition of media’s power and limitations, have developed strategies for educating and monitoring media, providing tool kits on Muslims and conducting workshops in newsrooms. Some strides have been
made: open racism is less prevalent than in the past, but some forms of discrimination continue to persist. As Jenicek, Lee, and Wong’s article on refugee applicants notes, even the most sympathetic media outlets may have a tendency to fall back on easy stereotypes, racist discourse, and claims of cultural superiority.

Long-time scholars of race and ethnicity in the media note in this issue that concerns about unfair portrayal have been exacerbated since September 11, 2001. Special contributions from some of the key scholars in this area, such as Augie Fleras, Frances Henry, Yasmin Jiwani, Karim H. Karim, Minelle Mahtani, Sheila Petty, and Carol Tator, give an idea of the depth, breadth and scope of the research undertaken thus far. There are still myriad ways in which race and ethnicity form an undercurrent to national and international conversations about security, crime, community, belonging, and values. Much work remains to be done.

Whereas some of the articles in this special issue touch upon race and ethnicity in the media, several address more fundamental topics relating to intercultural communication. They assert that, from a clash of cultures near an Aboriginal reservation to ethnic mediascapes to the technically deterministic biopolitics of no-fly lists to ethnic humour, the critical study of race and ethnicity remains pertinent and topical. Alexis Conradi employs rhetorical theory to discuss news coverage of the Oka Crisis. Beginning with a group of Mohawk clan mothers occupying a particular territory in order to prevent it from becoming part of a golf course expansion, it grew into a major media and political event. Conradi suggests that this conflict represents a pivotal moment in Canadian history for a number of reasons, including larger discussions over Mohawk sovereignty, the adoption of unfamiliar techniques by the state, and a clash between different communicative and negotiating systems. The author analyzes the clash of cultures in a *pagus*, “a place without norms or rules where fear, tactics and tricks collide.” She suggests a “rhetoric of listening,” which would enable coming to judgement without a common set of understandings.

In another, very different examination of intercultural communication, Faiza Hirji deals with the issue of humour and race. Comedians who incorporate race and ethnicity into their acts can be alternately popular and offensive. Hirji examines the work of Canadian comedian Russell Peters, whose humour references, dissects, and occasionally deconstructs racialized stereotypes and asks whether or not such work can provide a space of open discourse. In a society that tends to view itself as politically correct, discussions of race and ethnicity can seem taboo. Ethnic humour brushes any timidity aside: as Hirji’s article notes, there are promises and pitfalls attendant in this technique. This form of communication can contribute to a positive sense of identity and commonality, even as it risks offending some audience members or legitimizing racist humour. As with other forms of racialized discourse, ethnic humour does not have simple operating rules or guidelines, nor is there one way of interpreting it. Its popularity with diverse audiences, however, makes it much more than a laughing matter.

Situating their analysis in the context of what Saskia Sassen describes as the global city, Ahadi and Murray take a look at media entrepreneurs who seize a voice for their community by creating ethnic media outlets. Using Vancouver as
the site for their research, the authors track media produced in Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, and Punjabi, investigating whether or not such media play a role in bridging a space between a home left behind and a home now found. The place of ethnic media in the Canadian mediascape remains underexplored in media studies. There appears to be a widespread perception that the media content produced by minorities in third languages as well as in English and French is marginal to understanding Canadian society. However, several scholars, including Browne (2005), Downing & Husband (2005), and Karim (2003), have demonstrated that ethnic media produced within countries and diasporic content that is transnational in scope have a significant impact on democracy and social participation in culturally pluralistic nations.

Jenicek, Wong, and Lee focus on mainstream media and the treatment of race and ethnicity in the news following September 11, 2001. In explaining the importance of press coverage of minorities, they point out that newspapers may be one of the few sources of information for the public on the topic of refugees seeking asylum due to persecution for their sexual orientation. In the wake of September 11, they argue, dailies employed a frame where Canada’s cultural superiority over other countries and regions was emphasized. In particular, these stories served as a way to contrast Canada’s liberalism with the repression encountered in some Muslim majority countries. Their analysis serves as a reminder of the very real ways in which the press may influence public sentiment regarding cases involving the most marginalized, and also offers a cogent discussion of overlapping forms of discrimination and oppression.

Werbin’s article examines similar issues with a specific emphasis on the biopolitics of the war on terror. He shows how the controversial no-fly lists have become tools for determining and policing who is normal and who is not. He unpacks these security measures and their links to a technoscientific discourse that essentially serves as an excuse for control, surveillance and exclusion. Racial and religious identities become the markers that determine entry into zones where rights and laws are brought to bear differentially between citizens and Others. Werbin argues that the rationale behind the no-fly lists veils the techno-deterministic and discriminatory thinking that pervades the war on terror.

Gada Mahrouse investigates the obligations and limitations of so-called citizen journalists, those who seek to reverse discriminatory practices in reporting. As social justice activists operating outside of Canada, these reporters consciously attempt to shape news coverage that is more balanced and representative than that offered by mainstream outlets; but as Mahrouse argues, there are racialized dimensions to these practices. Speaking with individuals who have attempted to fill this role, Mahrouse notes that many grapple with the ethics of speaking on behalf of a people, becoming the story rather than facilitating coverage of a story, and using the privileges of “whiteness” to assist the local population. These challenges are brought into focus when the media at home focus on the citizen journalists at the expense of individuals living in the countries from which they report.

Concluding these investigations of media and its relationship to difference, Catherine Murray argues that that an independent media monitoring institute in
Canada which looks at issues of racial equity is long overdue. While initiatives in media monitoring do exist, she suggests, they rarely receive significant public attention despite the evident need for bodies to conduct such analysis in a sustained way. The case that Murray makes echoes previous calls by minority community organizations. A sustained effort in the mid-1980s that sought public funding was ultimately rejected by the federal government.

This special issue of the Canadian Journal of Communication brings together previous work conducted on race, ethnicity and intercultural communication together with fresh insights on current issues. In assembling brief surveys of the literature from scholars working in this area, annotations of recent research reports and institutional guidelines on the portrayal of minorities, along with original, refereed articles, we hope that this issue will become a reference for scholars, students, policymakers, community organizations, and media workers seeking to address ongoing issues of race, ethnicity, and intercultural communication.

References

Faiza Hirji, McMaster University
Karim H. Karim, The Institute of Ismaili Studies, Carleton University