Beyond Vernacular Commentary: A Response to Minelle Mahtani

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The Canadian Journal of Communication’s special issue on race, ethnicity, and intercultural communication (Hirji & Karim, 2009) attempted something rarely seen in the literature on race/ethnicity in Canada: it presented a paper by Minelle Mahtani (2009) purporting to engage in genuine debate about research on racism in the Canadian media. This engagement is notable because the broader literature on racism in Canadian society operates in a vacuum. That is, a group of like-minded scholars sets out from various disciplinary locations to document and affirm the existence of racism in Canada, yet they do so by posing only certain kinds of questions pertaining to experiences and perceptions of racism; consequently, they have generated only certain kinds of explanations about the pervasiveness of racism in the country (Hier, 2007; and see Banton, 2005). Although this body of literature is important for gaining a complete understanding of the many ways that racism manifests in Canadian society, too often research is influenced by personal, political, conceptual, and methodological biases that fail to capture the complexity of shifting racialized and ethnicized identities in the context of changing, albeit inconsistent, patterns of ethno-racial social incorporation and change (see Hier & Bolaria, 2007).

Mahtani’s “critique” of “critiques about media and minority research” is, therefore, in one sense, a breath of fresh air; Professor Mahtani presents a thought-provoking, impassioned comment on the status of research on racism and media representation/production. Yet her commentary on the alleged set of growing “vernacular comments” (p. 716) about racism and media avoids analyzing the broad set of contributions she identifies as her target, concentrating instead on a six-and-a-half page contribution to an undergraduate teaching reader (see Hier, 2008). (The reader was produced with the explicit editorial and pedagogical purpose of generating debate among college and university students.) More importantly, Mahtani’s corrective is founded on thinly veiled essentializing tendencies that misrepresent and distort my arguments concerning racialized media representation in particular (Hier, 2008) and racism in Canadian society more generally (e.g., Hier and Lett, 2009; Hier, 2008, 2007; Hier and Walby 2006; Hier and Bolaria, 2006). Such essentialization not only contributes to the distorted intercultural communicative processes she seeks to avoid, but also represents broader patterns in the literature on racism, culture, and media representation.

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What follows is a rejoinder to Mahtani’s commentary that, first, clarifies my arguments about racism, media production, and social change, and, second, addresses the importance of conducting methodologically sound, analytically balanced empirical research on race, ethnicity, media, culture, and communication.

The object of “critique”

Mahtani’s “report” hinges on inaccurate characterizations of the methodological arguments I presented in Greenberg and Elliott’s (2008) Communication in Question: Competing Perspectives on Controversial Issues in Communication Studies. In 2006, my longtime research partner, Josh Greenberg, invited me to contribute a chapter to this volume. Greenberg asked me to write a chapter that challenges the assumption that media in Canada are complicit in the reproduction of racist discourse. I hesitated to accept the offer, explaining that such an argument would hide more than it reveals about the complexity of racism and media reporting. Greenberg subsequently explained the pedagogical intentions of the book—a point-counterpoint exchange on controversial issues in communication studies—and assured me that a balanced, non-polemical contribution was not only welcomed but also pedagogically necessary.

The reason Greenberg approached me to present the “no/counterpoint” to the question “Are the Canadian Media Racist?” was not based on our personal and professional connections. For several years, I have emphasized the importance of documenting the many ways that racism manifests in Canadian society, yet I have also called on scholars to take seriously patterns of social incorporation and change in Canadian institutions and to engage in productive dialogue about anti-racism and justice (Hier, 2007, 2008; Hier & Bolaria, 2006; Hier, Lett, & Bolaria, 2009; Hier & Walby, 2006). The literature increasingly presents conflicting arguments about the magnitude and extent of racism in Canada, and I have argued that race/ethnicity scholars need to divorce themselves from either/or thinking—that is, racism either exists or it does not (Hier, 2008)—and instead to incorporate a broader range of methods and evidence into their studies. I made these arguments to emphasize the importance of understanding how social change is accomplished and where it is stunted, “with the hope that researchers have the courage, strength, and humility to address ways of knowing and forms of evidence that are different from their own without resorting to rhetorical arguments, politicized identities, moralized research agendas, and dogmatic claims” (Hier, 2008, p. 24).

Part of this broad research agenda includes the paper in question. Using Henry and Tator’s (1996, 2006) groundbreaking contributions as a starting point, I argued that studies of racism and media tend to foreground one of three mutually reinforcing arguments: that media coverage misrepresents, underrepresents, or demonstrates a silence concerning the accomplishments, aspirations, and interests of minority populations. These three foregrounded arguments—paradigmatic assumptions that are explicitly used to inform theory, concepts, methods, and standards of evidence—are commonly situated against a fourth background supporting argument about Euro-Canadian cultural hegemony; as a background argument, such claims are asserted rather than demonstrated to provide rhetorical support for foregrounded arguments. (For a full discussion of foreground and background assumptions in social research, see Alford, 1999.)
Addressing patterns of misrepresentation, underrepresentation, and silence in media coverage of minority populations, I argued, is crucial for gaining a complete understanding of the cultural production of knowledge generally and of the relationship between racism and media particularly. Yet the same kinds of arguments, I continued, can be applied to scholars who study racism and media. That is, scholarly work on racism and media tends to misrepresent the diversity of coverage in the mainstream media, under-represent the diversity of media outlets, and remain silent on important patterns in mainstream and other media pertaining to equity and justice.

To illustrate the conceptual and methodological arguments, I presented a number of examples of each pattern to get students thinking about the linkages among method, conceptualization, and racialized media representation. Misrepresentation of the diversity of coverage in mainstream media, I explained, can be seen when scholars seek out explicit examples of stereotypical, sensational news coverage and use a limited set of case studies to generalize about racism and media representation. Under-representation takes the form of a disproportional (not total) focus on mainstream newspaper and television to the relative neglect of new or alternative media production. Silence involves a curious absence of analyses of anti-racist media such as films produced by the National Film Board of Canada. Finally, I explained that patterns of misrepresentation, underrepresentation, and silence are reinforced by background claims about racism that fail to acknowledge progress and change in key social institutions such as education, labour market attainment, immigration, and civic-democratic participation. My aim was to open debate about the diversity of media representation in Canada and to contest totalizing claims that the media are unequivocally racist.

The response

Responding to my counterpoint position, which encourages researchers to avoid excessive narrowness and to strive for analytical balance in racism and media studies, Mahtani concludes that my “vernacular comments” resemble “red-boots” and “neo-liberalism” that are “troubling” because they “trivialize” existing research by “dichotomizing” findings in either/or terms (2009, pp. 716-717). Moreover, Mahtani contends that my commentary “undermines” valuable contributions to the field by “naturalizing exclusions of difference” vis-à-vis a “dangerous/complicit epistemology” (p. 718). Mahtani concludes with a strange essentializing abstraction: “There is a racialized (il)logic that is privileged here: when White people write about White matters, these same critiques are not made” (p. 718).

Momentarily setting aside the fact that Mahtani is engaging in the very type of dividing practice (Foucault, 1982) she finds so devastating to intercultural communications, I will conclude with three brief, interrelated responses to her report. The first response is epistemological. As I explain elsewhere (Hier, 2007), there is an important difference between social comment and social critique in scholarly discourse. The intellectual orientation of social critique entails rigorous theoretical, conceptual, empirical, and methodological analyses to develop culturally and historically informed analytical explanations for social phenomena. Social comment, by contrast, is a descriptive intellectual orientation designed to present information about how
people actually or potentially experience, perceive, and live in the world. Both orientations are important for achieving holistic research findings, yet the problem is that social comment has overshadowed critique as the primary framework for scholarship on racism in Canada. This is problematic because researchers have distanced themselves from forms of evidence different from their own and defended their arguments based on essentializing attributions and dogmatic claims.

Exemplifying these trends toward social commentary in scholarly discourse (in the pages of a scholarly periodical, no less), Professor Mahtani fails to interrogate, examine, or acknowledge the historical and cultural foundations of knowledge/media production and instead posits a dubious straw argument with the intention of formulating a set of rhetorical comments that is neither demonstrated nor entirely clear. Admittedly, it was not Mahtani’s purpose to present a full-length critique of racism and media production in Canada. Still, rather than presenting a report on what the editors of the special CJC issue requested—a follow-up piece to her work on immigration and media (Mahtani, 2009, p. 715)—she presents a polemical, moralizing commentary focusing on my contribution to Greenberg and Elliott’s teaching reader. This kind of conviction about the role of “critical race scholars” in scholarly communication on racism in Canada is more common than atypical, and Mahtani’s tone and epistemology represents broader trends in the field that need to be addressed.

The second response is ethical and political. Mahtani’s commentary is based on an all-too-familiar set of essentializing tendencies and background arguments about whiteness, “racialized researchers,” and scholarly claims making. Taken as a whole, her commentary suggests that non-White scholars possess the truth about racism and that White scholars hide behind methods, scholarly standards, and arguments about balanced analyses. These kinds of simplistic comments, which function to subordinate the substance of one’s arguments to mystifying cultural interpretations of their skin tone, are not new – an extended discussion of essentialization can be found in the literature on the race relations industry (see, for example, Miles, 1982, and Jhappan, 1996) and on the authorship/authentication requirements associated with confessionalism in race studies (see Satzewich, 2007). Of course it matters who speaks about certain aspects of race and racism, and it matters that we take seriously the socio-historical and cultural contexts in which discourse on race and racism unfolds. But research on racism is not a zero-sum game: as more scholars engage in complementary, critical discussion on race, racism, and social change, the broader ethical and political goals of anti-racism and social justice will be realized (Hier, 2007).

The third response is academic. It is surprising that a small contribution to a point-counterpoint teaching reader was singled out for interrogation. Again, the purpose of my work on racism generally, and racism and media particularly, is not to ignore the storm clouds of racism and to marvel instead at the silver lining (Mahtani, 2009). Such a characterization is inaccurate and disingenuous. Rather, the purpose of my work is to engage in productive scholarly exchange about continuity, complexity, and change in patterns of racism in Canada and to strive toward analytical balance and methodological integrity in the research process. If the arguments I presented in Greenberg and Elliott’s book are all that it takes to stir the anxieties of race/ethnicity
researchers—or at least those who claim to speak for them—then the time has come for self-inspection and reflexivity about the level of conviction among the guardians of truth concerning racism, media, and social change in Canada.

To summarize, in 2008 I argued that researchers would be wise to embrace a broader set of methods and evidence before arriving at absolute polemical conclusions about racism and Canadian media. The argument about analytical balance in racism and media studies was presented in the context of a broader set of critical contributions addressing the importance of competing claims about the magnitude and extent of racism in Canadian society. In response, Mahtani commented on why analytical balance is dangerous, naïve, and, dare I say, racist. In her effort to discredit the call for greater analytical balance, however, she paradoxically vindicates the methodological strategies and modes of scholarly engagement that I am encouraging. Her report exemplifies the “troubling” (Mahtani, 2009, p. 716; see also Mahtani, 2007) trend of social commentary in scholarly discourse that increasingly comes at the expense of social critique—social commentary that frequently fails to move beyond the very “vernacular comment” it purports to critique. My contribution to Greenberg and Elliott’s book reaches beyond vernacular commentary: it speaks to the need for scholars to take seriously and understand progressive changes in Canadian media reporting as a central component of anti-racism and the politics of justice. Failure to incorporate patterns of progress into anti-racism politics only hinders the possibility for and the politics of (continuing) change.

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References


