

Denying our racism: the media's role in discrimination

by Maya Jonson
The Link
(Concordia University)

MONTREAL (CUP) -- More Canadians than we'd like to imagine are closet racists who dislike immigrants and believe that the only way you can truly be Canadian is if you're a white, Christian anglo. But because part of Canadian national identity is to idealize our society as exceptionally tolerant and multicultural, we vociferously deny any accusations of racism to protect our sterling reputation.

That's what Bohdan Szuchewycz of Brock University suggests in an essay called, "Re-Pressing Racism: The Denial of Racism in the Canadian Press."

And I agree with him. Before I get started, let me establish a context: I'm a black journalism student, and both of my parents are Jamaican immigrants. As

you continue to read this article, I think it should become pretty clear why I choose to identify myself that way, and why I agree with Szuchewycz.

His essay begins with the assertion that our "national myth" of tolerance was "seriously challenged when the results of a federally commissioned survey on attitudes toward immigration were made public." Szuchewycz takes a look at how The Globe and Mail presented and interpreted the results of the survey, and argues that the newspaper's reports adopted a "strategy of denial of racism which reinterprets, marginalizes and mitigates evidence of racism in Canada, and thus reinforces the dominant and preferred view of Canadian society as tolerant, pluralistic and free of systemic racism."

Szuchewycz contends that the Canadian press plays a fundamental role in maintaining our myth of tolerance, by using language

that perpetuates social inequality. He also states that although overtly racist discourse is generally considered unacceptable in modern society, it has been replaced by a "new racism" and involves a "new racetalk" that is subtle and sophisticated in its exclusion of visible minorities.

Szuchewycz then presents the results of a government survey, as summarized by The Globe and Mail:

o Most Canadians believe there are too many immigrants, especially from visible minorities

o Four in 10 Canadians believe that there are too many members of visible minorities, singling out Arabs, blacks and Asians for discrimination

o About 16 per cent of Canadians are hardcore xenophobes

o About one-quarter of the population is flirting with intolerance

Szuchewycz looks critically at the language used in The Globe's analysis of the survey, noting that "variations in vocabulary choice" can either "emphasize or de-emphasize the positive or negative aspects of particular events, acts, individuals or groups," and are clues to the writer's ideological stance.

To illustrate Szuchewycz's point, I like to refer to rapper Kanye West's take on how the media covered the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

"I hate the way they portray us in the media," West said at a live concert fundraiser for the victims of the hurricane. "If you see a black family it says they are looting—if

you see a white family it says they are looking for food."

But I digress. Let's take it back to The Globe and Mail.

Szuchewycz points out that the newspaper's reports failed to use the terms "race," "racism" or "racist," but referred instead to an "intolerance" of "immigrants." Since, in the context of the survey results, the term "immigrant" refers specifically to visible minorities and not to immigrants in general, Szuchewycz says The Globe essentially softened the hard edges of what is clearly a racial issue.

The Globe reported that half the people in this country have "intolerant attitudes." But don't worry because they're "just average Canadians" who are "cranky."

Thanks, that's very reassuring.

What's also reassuring is that "only a small percentage of Canadians—about 16 per cent" are "hardcore xenophobes." Only about 5.25 million Canadians hate or distrust foreigners? Gee, it's really comforting to think that roughly the number of people who live in the Greater Toronto Area are totally disgusted with me and my country-wrecking family of immigrants.

Let's face it, says Szuchewycz. Using the word "only" to describe a significant chunk of the population with—and let's call a spade here—racist attitudes, is a not-so-subtle way of trivializing the issue.

Now let's talk about the term "Canadian" in the context of these reports. Szuchewycz says: "Canadian" here does not refer, as one might assume, to a status of citizenship, the implicit reference

is exclusively Canadians of 'white' and 'Christian' backgrounds." He also notes these "Canadians" are likely monolingual anglophones, otherwise statements like the following wouldn't make sense: "four in 10 Canadians believe there are too many members of visible minorities, singling out Arabs, blacks and Asians for discrimination."

Szuchewycz therefore argues that the conception of what it is to be Canadian is ethnocentric and exclusionary.

That's exactly what I try to point out to people who argue that Michaëlle Jean, our new Governor General, shouldn't be our Head of State because "she wasn't born here."

Yes, she was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. But she moved here with her family when she was 11, speaks both of Canada's official languages, attended the University of Montreal, and has worked for the CBC - the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation - for almost two decades.

Personally, I think she's just as "Canadian" as anyone who was born here.

And just for the record, Sir John A. MacDonald - the man who founded our country and was our first prime minister, the man whose face you see every time you whip out a ten-dollar bill - was born in Glasgow, Scotland.

Sure, the first few years of his life weren't spent here in the Great White North, but somehow I doubt many Canadians would deny he was capable of running the country.

And truly, if acquiring a position of power is all about who was here first, it to me seems we should have a few more First Nations faces in our political arena.

But, again, I digress.

As Szuchewycz comes to the end of his essay, he points out that The Globe's reports reversed the roles of agency and responsibility.

Rather than say, for example, "Canadians are intolerant of immigrants," the reports articulated that "Canadians have always worried that their national identity would be submerged by waves of immigrants."

"Instead of the situation being characterized as 'Canadians' subjecting members of visible minority groups to intolerance and discrimination," says Szuchewycz, "the issue has been transformed into one in which visible minorities threaten 'Canadian' cultures and values. In a classic example of blaming the victim, those who experience social inequality are themselves held ultimately responsible."

So here's my conclusion. Just because I'm not picking cotton, and I'm not being called a nigger, doesn't mean injustice no longer exists. Racism is a lot more subtle these days, which makes it all the more dangerous because most people can barely detect it. And when it does begin to creep into our consciousness, we hastily fold our arms and treat it dismissively. But racism is a serious social problem, and until we acknowledge that it exists, we have no way of solving it. The denial of racism - in part perpetuated by our press - may help Canadians protect their national myth of tolerance, but it also reveals a deep, ugly truth about our collective mentality.

Bohdan Szuchewycz's essay is available at www.cjc-online.ca/viewarticle.php?id=600&layout=html

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