

Media's Indigenous coverage has always been slanted. And it's still scant, says writer Hayden King

By **HAYDEN KING** Special to the Star
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There is an archive in the basement of the band office at Beausoleil First Nation. Its shelves overflow and crowd the narrow aisles. Among other things, the archive includes remnants of missionary and Indian Agent propaganda. Still, I have spent time there, friends and cousins, too. Excavating curious artifacts from those dusty boxes.

It was with similar interest that Les Couchi from Nipissing First Nation began his research at the Toronto Star's archive. While he discovered some community history, there was much more. Couchi found a collection of stereotypes and myths about Indigenous peoples promulgated by the paper.

"As long as papers are striving to find 'balance' in cases of injustice they will remain an institution that serves power instead of challenging it," writes Hayden King. (LUCAS OLENIUK / TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO)

After all the Toronto Star was a part of a zeitgeist among Canadian newspapers, a 20th-century consensus that cast Indigenous people — if they were covered at all — as savages to be mocked, excused or contained so the great promise of Canada could be realized.

This reflects what Mark Cronlund Anderson and Carmen L. Robertson recount in their book *Seeing Red: A History of Natives in Canadian Newspapers*. An exhaustive discourse analysis of national, regional and local newspaper coverage of key Canadian-Indigenous conflicts from 1869 onward, they chronicle common themes of "depravity, innate inferiority and a stubborn resistance to progress" in the representation of Indigenous people.

While times have changed, in some ways the news industry in Canada has not. There have been superficial shifts in the tone, of course. Papers no longer print the deeply offensive "squaw," the term "Indigenous" now rightfully merits capitalization, and there is a growing cohort of Indigenous writers appearing in these pages. Yet, coverage of Indigenous issues is still scant.

Journalists for Human Rights has found that in any given year between 2010 and 2016, less than half of 1 per cent of news stories in Ontario focused on Indigenous issues.

There is something to say about the quality of that half-percent, too. Last year Environics found that while 73 per cent of Canadians are paying attention to news on Indigenous issues, 34 per cent have never read about residential schools. The defining issue of our relationship over the past decade has been the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's work and one-third of the public has no idea?

More, we still see the undertones of that depravity narrative in reporting, whether the subject is that [reoccupation teepee](#) on Parliament Hill during Canada 150 celebrations, youth suicides in the [Nishnawbe Aski Nation](#), or violence [against Indigenous women](#) and girls in Thunder Bay. The

media often frames this tumult as resulting from the community's own anger or dysfunction but rarely the structural conditions of ongoing colonialism.

In my decade of contributing to newspapers, I've watched these trends persist. Correspondingly I read my colleagues taking familiar defensive postures, making similar counter-arguments, calling out the exclusion and misrepresentation over and over again. Despite a campaign against deceit we are somehow Sisyphus, successfully rebutting that offensive column or op-ed only to do it again tomorrow.

But the routine of pushing that rock may be nearing an end. There is a fragmentation in the Canadian media landscape.

While the decline has a variety of explanations, from an Indigenous perspective, the rise of social media, independent magazines, podcasts and fearless commentary and writing on blogs is increasingly preferred. In fact, racialized people generally seem to be devoting their energies towards mediums in which they can control their own representation. This is how the Toronto Star will die.

Is there salvation in the waning days of the newspaper?

Perhaps a brave mainstream publication will hire the first Indigenous editor. Or privilege Indigenous perspectives on their own experiences. Context can be included in stories, just a sentence or two to prevent Canadians from filling the vacuum of their ignorance with stereotypes.

Accountability to Indigenous communities could be nurtured. Even the notion of objectivity might be reassessed. As long as papers are striving to find "balance" in cases of injustice they will remain an institution that serves power instead of challenging it.

To its credit, by featuring Couchi's research and considering past reporting, the Star is engaging in critical self-reflection. Maybe this is the beginning of a new trend. Otherwise what remain of today's newspapers may be mere dusty boxes in crowded aisles and archived digital files that the next generation will read as a regrettable era and cautionary tale.

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Article can be found here - <https://www.thestar.com/news/insight/2017/07/31/medias-indigenous-coverage-has-always-been-slanted-and-its-still-scant-says-writer-hayden-king.html>

Exhibit: *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*
Location/Phase: Part 3: Toronto
Witness: Jesse Wente
Submitted by: Christa Big Crow / Commission
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