



**What the Canadian Public is Being Told about the more than 1200 Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women and First Nations Issues: *A Content and Context Analysis of Major Mainstream Canadian Media, 2014-2015***

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April 2, 2016

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## Appendix

# **What The Canadian Public Is Being Told About The More Than 1200 Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women And First Nations Issues: *A Content And Context Analysis Of Major Mainstream Canadian Media 2014-2015***

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## **1. Executive Summary**

Our examination of coverage from 2006 to 2015 in eight major daily newspapers identified more than 30,000 stories that referenced issues relevant to Indigenous individuals and communities. Through a more in-depth search for coverage of Indigenous individuals and communities between 2014 and 2015, we located nearly 2,500 articles. Many of these articles dealt with murdered and missing Indigenous women, which is the particular focus of this study.

The fact is that there has been relatively little empirical research on patterns of coverage in the major newspapers, which still have a significant influence on public perceptions as well as for social media and television (Pierro, Barrera, Blackstock, Harding, McCue, & Metatawabin, 2013). The size of our sample, however, should not be interpreted to indicate heavy coverage. Far from it.

Our principal conclusion is that, despite a continuing flow of news stories on Aboriginal issues, there is a pattern of persistent under-representation of these issues in Canada's mainstream media. While thousands of articles are published each year, there are significant gaps and distortions in the coverage. If the mainstream media are to give Canadians a deeper insight into and understanding of Aboriginal affairs and the causes underlying the slow response by authorities to issue of murdered and missing, a stronger commitment of resources and attention is required.

In terms of all the coverage from the decade-long sample (2006 to 2015), an average of fewer than 11 articles per day referenced Indigenous issues across the eight print dailies

examined. This means each paper published an average of slightly more than one article per day, which is hardly adequate coverage.

**Table 1: A Ten Year Overview of Canadian Media Coverage of First Nations' Issues (2006-2015)**

Newspaper	Number of stories (06-15)	% of total (06-15)	Number of stories (14-15)	% of total stories (14-15)
Edmonton Journal	4120	13.3	--	--
Montreal Gazette	2056	6.6	--	--
National Post	3546	11.5	341	13.8
Globe and Mail	4182	13.5	404	16.3
Regina Leader-Post	5317	17.2	365	14.8
Toronto Star	1370	4.3	279	11.3
Vancouver Sun	4281	13.8	357	14.4
Winnipeg Free Press	5069	16.4	--	--
Calgary Herald	--	--	283	11.4
Le Devoir*	--	--	145	5.9
La Presse*	--	--	79	3.2
Ottawa Citizen	--	--	220	8.9
Total	30941	100.0	2473	100.0

Source: The Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women Media Working Group 2015

\*Francophone newspapers were unavailable for the decade sample but were included in the 2014-15 custom sample.

Readers could expect to find a front page story on First Nations' issues in any newspaper at most once a week, suggesting a lack of interest in First Nations' issues. One of the impediments to reporting on these events by mainstream media is the failure to focus on the deep rooted causes underlying the murders and disappearances.. Much of the reporting remains shallow and uneven. However, there are indications that Canada's media culture has begun to change.

Among our major findings were the following:

- The coverage of the Tina Fontaine case transcended ethnic stereotypes and engendered a broader human response by the national media. Personalizing her

story became one of the ways that the national media transformed a tragic news story into a national event that moved Canadians.

- The manner in which Aboriginal issues are reported by mainstream Canadian media is what we call a 'searchlight phenomenon,' meaning that the media presents brief intensive coverage of Indigenous issues (i.e. demonstrations, occupations, suicides, the murdered and missing Indigenous women, unsettled resource claims, police incompetence) followed by a reporting void.
- The issues surrounding murdered and missing women, including the call for a national inquiry, were the most heavily covered Indigenous stories in our 2014-15 sample of nine major daily newspapers.
- While Indigenous voices were present in more than half of the stories we examined, it is not clear that articles were consistently framed in terms that would communicate First Nations' perspectives effectively to non-Aboriginal audiences.
- There was considerable emphasis in the coverage on Canada's lack of response to the MMIW issue and on the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's (RCMP) perceived ineffectiveness in bringing closure and justice to the families of women who had been murdered or gone missing.
- While nearly a third of the coverage of the MMIW focused on straight-forward reporting of events, a high proportion included a reference to the moral or ethical issues involved in government policies or lack thereof, with calls for a public inquiry gaining most attention.
- In general the Indigenous news sources were found to be optimistic in their reporting of issues, with a strong focus on mobilizing for change. Despite limited resources, they offered more suggestions for repairing the broken relationship between the federal or provincial governments and First Nations than the mainstream news outlets. Even in articles that were not opinion-based, there was clearer apportionment of blame placed squarely on the government and police for their lack of effort and attention to the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women. The root causes of the issue were also discussed more frequently in the Indigenous coverage.
- In the First Nations media, racism and colonialism are often seen as the causes of the issues facing Indigenous people today. These media sources were also much more assertive than the mainstream media in their insistence not only that an inquiry into the missing and murdered Indigenous women was needed, but also that better protection for women, and an overhaul of social services were necessary.
- A major reason that the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women garnered increased coverage by the mainstream media is the pressure from First Nations

communities and their ability to use social media strategically to present their case forcibly to the Canadian public. Their mobilizing efforts have succeeded in forcing the issue from the margins where it had been relegated for too long onto the national agenda. The RCMP report into the murdered and missing aboriginal women itself appears to have been a response to the work of the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC).

Although Canadian daily newspapers have presented considerable coverage of Aboriginal issues, especially in recent years, the gaps and distortions identified in our media monitoring raise questions about their effectiveness in informing Canadians about these pressing issues. . This is not a healthy state of affairs from Canada’s leading print media, given the importance of First Nations affairs in the life of the Canadian nation. As Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner Marie Wilson put it in a speech at Ryerson’s School of Journalism, “Journalists must embrace their role as educators when reporting on indigenous issues and recognize how their work shapes perceptions” (Ghosh, 2016). In short, news organizations are being called upon to reach a higher standard because of the ongoing importance of reconciliation for Canadian society.

**Table 2: Type of Article in Three Daily Newspaper Samples**

Type of Article	Decade sample (2006-15)	2014-15 Sample	Articles dealing with MMIW in 2014-15
News or feature	71%	62%	61%
Opinion Column	13%	14%	14%
Op-Ed Commentary	4%	4%	4%
Editorial	4%	11%	13%
Letter to Editor	8%	6%	7%
Other	---	2%	2%
	100%	99%	101%
N	30341	2473	609

Source: The Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women Media Working Group 2015

The empirical media monitoring study found that after analyzing thousands of stories on Indigenous issues the news media were, in general, slow to take up the issue of missing and murdered women prior to 2013. The study revealed three critical turning points in news coverage. The first was the 2014 release of the RCMP report on missing and murdered Indigenous women which was a direct response to the NWAC’s (2010) empirical study on 582 missing and murdered women which exposed the high number of Indigenous women

that were missing or had been murdered. These reports and the subsequent coverage reframed the issue.

The second watershed moment was the intense media coverage of the disappearance and murder of Tina Fontaine, a young northern Manitoba woman, who disappeared after leaving her home in the Sagkeeng reserve to look for her mother in Winnipeg. This heartbreaking story captured the attention of many Canadian and foreign journalists and became a prominent news story in the mainstream media. The personalization of her story transformed the tragedy of the murdered and missing Indigenous women into a



Tina Fontaine (Jolly, 2015)

national news story. The Tina Fontaine coverage represented a breakthrough in mainstream media reporting (Jolly, 2015).

All news reporting is framed for the reader because it enables audiences to process and make sense out of what is being reported. While modern journalism relies on filters both for clarity and selection, filters also tend to reflect the “conventional wisdom” of society, as

interpreted by news organizations. The capacity to be both the gatekeeper and framer of the public agenda, even in the digital era, makes mainstream reporting a powerful instrument of control (Innis, 1995).

As far as we've been able to tell, there are no journalists who are full-time specialists in Indigenous affairs, though an increasing number of Indigenous journalists are appearing in the media. With the possible recent exception of the *Globe and Mail* and CBC.ca, it is arguable that mainstream news coverage of Indigenous issues suffers both in terms of quality and sophistication when there are so few journalists who have in-depth knowledge of Aboriginal communities, values, and cultures. Given the importance of reconciliation, this is counterproductive and largely correctable.

Recently CBC.ca and the *Globe and Mail* have made a public commitment to in-depth reporting on the missing and murdered Indigenous women crisis. They have played an important role in changing the media narrative about the marginalization of Indigenous women and the failure of the police to protect the rights of the missing and murdered women in the same way as they would a non-Indigenous woman or women. The *Toronto Star*, Canada's largest circulation newspaper, has also begun to address the issue more seriously. Even in an era of waning influence, the decisions of major news organizations to focus on an issue on a continuing basis is critical.



## 2. Acknowledgements

This report received generous funding from the Canadian Media Consortium, York University and is directed by Professors Daniel Drache and Fred Fletcher, faculty members of the York graduate program in Communication and Culture. The research was carried out by a group of York students hired during the summer of 2015 who developed expertise in media monitoring. These include Philip Côté, Amy Verhaeghe, Coral Voss, Meghan Maracle, and Amber Gooden each of whom contributed in a special way to the overall research effort. All mastered the skills of media monitoring and together became a formidable research and concept team. They, under the direction of Drache, Fletcher, and Andrew Laing, formed the nucleus of the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women Media Working Group. Dr. Laing deserves special mention in assisting us with his expertise and knowledge of media monitoring research. He generously made available resources from his company Cormex without which our work in coding would not have the same rigor and depth. Subsequently Coral Voss undertook the responsibility of preparing a number of early drafts for the project. Amy Verhaeghe edited the final draft. We wish to acknowledge their contributions. A special thanks to Infomart for providing access to its archive in order for us to conduct our mainstream media research.

This media monitoring project generated a great deal of data and it is pioneering to a certain extent in carrying out such a comprehensive examination of the role of the media in framing the way Canadians perceive and understand Aboriginal issues and concerns. We are happy to share our data with other researchers and scholars who are interested in pursuing this kind of research. The principal authors can be contacted at the following email addresses: Daniel Drache [drache@yorku.ca](mailto:drache@yorku.ca), Fred Fletcher [ffletch@yorku.ca](mailto:ffletch@yorku.ca).

### **3. Introduction: The Searchlight Phenomenon – Between Intense Interest and Indifference**

This report examines the media coverage of missing and murdered Indigenous<sup>1</sup> women along with a broad consideration of the media coverage of First Nations issues in Canada. The subject of missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW) has recently received significant media attention but historically the coverage has been cyclical, with news coverage oscillating between intense interest and indifference. It is like a searchlight that is turned on for several days at a time and then darkness descends. These swings in coverage are troublesome in large part because sustained attention is required to bring about significant changes in the public agenda (Soroka, 2002). The sustained nature of attention to the MMIW in the recent news cycle, along with what appears to be an intensification of public interest in the subject, prompted this report.

The central focus of this study is an analysis of the information and perspectives available to Canadians on issues relating to Indigenous peoples and, in particular, the issue of the MMIW. In order to analyze patterns of coverage, we began with a total of 30,941 articles dealing with Indigenous issues in eight major Canadian English daily newspapers over a 10-year time frame ending on 30 June 2015. In addition, we selected items from a slightly different sample of seven English dailies and two Montreal-based French newspapers for 12 months ending on 31 March 2015 (a total of 2,473 items). Among these were 528 articles dealing with issues related to MMIW, which were analyzed in more depth. In addition, we wanted to see the differences and parallels between mainstream Canadian reporting and Indigenous coverage of the murdered and missing Indigenous women as well as other issues. It was particularly important to find out whether

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<sup>1</sup> Present day terminology for First People's is varied and often disputed. Archibald (2008) notes that often "terms such as 'First Nations,' 'Aboriginal,' 'Indigenous,' and 'Indian' (were) interchangeably" applied (p. xi). "The term Indigenous (which) refers to the original peoples (global – wide) who have a long-standing connection, relationship, and occupancy of a particular geographical land base" (Michell, 2013, p. 4). In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Smith (2002) states that, "Indigenous peoples' is a relatively recent term which emerged in the 1970's out of the struggles primarily of the American Indian Movement (AIM), and the Canadian Indian Brotherhood. It is a term that internationalizes the experiences, the issues, and the struggles of some of the world's colonized peoples" (p. 7).

Indigenous coverage gave voice and empowerment to Aboriginal issues in a way that the mainstream media did not. The Indigenous news sources sampled include *Windspeaker*, *First Nations Drum*, *Anishinabek News*, and *Wawatay News*, all widely read by First Nations communities. It is difficult to obtain precise circulation figures but we estimate that they have a combined circulation of more than 50,000 readers. A qualitative analysis was conducted on the Indigenous media.

The issues of sexual violence and women's safety are among those public issues that are difficult for news organizations to report on because they tend to be surrounded by long-standing myths and stereotypes (Drache & Velagic, 2014). Recent research has noted that traditional media gatekeeping is open to challenge by public demands generated by social media (Chu & Fletcher, 2014; Albaugh & Waddell 2014). Our objective here is to examine the contours of public discourse on this important issue in the case of the more than 1,200 missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada. In addition to the quantitative analysis, we reviewed selected coverage with specific attention to the persistence of myths and stereotypes about victims from marginalized communities that have the potential to distort public debate.<sup>2</sup> We are also focused on the importance of the policy process in an historical context. This will involve analysis of the contents and context of traditional media news reporting with respect to: (1) the ongoing demands for a national public inquiry and policy-related action on missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada; (2) the central narratives in the coverage; and (3) the different variables that influence professional journalists in their coverage of Indigenous issues.

The analysis set out to test the general proposition that attention to social justice issues involving subaltern groups – women, ethno-cultural minorities, people marginalized by caste or class – tends to be limited to sensational stories that cause public outrage or active protests (Fleras, 2011). The media and public discourse around recent incidents of sexual violence in Canada also demonstrates, as we shall discover, that stereotypes of contemporary, cultural taboos and “rape myths” emerge, sometimes overtly, in the messaging. It appears to take a concerted public effort to repudiate these elements of the

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<sup>2</sup> In general, we have presented descriptive data to support our analysis. Where differences are noted, they are significant at the .05 level.

discourse and to put the prevention of sexual violence on the public agenda (Harding, 2005; Fleras, 2011).

The public response and reaction to the release of the RCMP (2014) report on missing and murdered Aboriginal women revived a long-running but at times oddly muted debate about violence against Indigenous women. One view widely held by the Harper government at the time was that Indigenous women face violence mainly from their own community. The figures compiled by the RCMP can be interpreted to bear this out to a limited extent. Between 1980 and 2012, more than 70% of the recorded murders of Aboriginal women were committed by husbands, family members or close friends (Galloway 2015). But as the BBC investigative reporter Joanna Jolly revealed

this leaves nearly 40% of women who were killed by strangers or casual acquaintances, a term that is often used to describe the sex worker-client relationship. The figure for other Canadian women is 27%. Aboriginal women are 1.4 times more likely to be killed by someone they aren't close to. (Jolly 2015)

The *Toronto Star* also published a detailed, statistically based refutation of the then federal government's interpretation of the RCMP report as part of a series on the issue (Bruser, Rankin, Smith, Talaga, Wells, & Bailey, 2015).

Nonetheless the report underscored the seriousness of the issue by reporting that more than 1,200 homicide victims in Canada over a 30-year period were Indigenous women and concluded that "Aboriginal women are over-represented among Canada's missing and murdered women" (RCMP, 2014, p. 3). The issue has gained public attention on specific occasions, driven by official investigations and public protests by Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities across Canada. The figures compiled by the RCMP can be read in this light. As we will see, the focus of some coverage on what the RCMP report calls "vulnerability factors" (2014, p. 17) can be seen in the context of a larger discourse of victim-blaming.

### ***3a. The Key Variables***

To better understand the role of the mainstream media and the way it shaped public perceptions of these issues required developing our assessment methodology to focus on the context of news stories as well as the events themselves. Some of the variables

considered during the coding process for mainstream media were: a) the principal **Frame** of the news story; b) who was given **Voice** in the story (e.g. First Nations officials, families, other Indigenous people, police and/or government and politicians); c) whether or not **Blame** was attributed to public authority, police, or large scale historical forces; d) the prominence or absence of **Stereotyping** in the reporting on the murdered victims in the news coverage; and e) the **Ethical/Moral** dimensions of the public discourse of news reporting on incidents of sexual violence.

The three main questions this report focuses on are:

- i. How prominent is the issue of MMIW in Canadian media coverage of Indigenous issues, and what kinds of information are Canadians being told about the issue through the media?
- ii. To what extent are common stereotypes about violence against women and about Indigenous women, such as lifestyle factors, present in the coverage of MMIW?
- iii. What persistent colonial or prejudicial stereotypes of Indigenous women perpetuate the social invisibility of Indigenous women to the public, police, and judicial system and therefore make them more vulnerable to violence?

### ***3b. Framing***

In order to understand what media content is telling the Canadian public about Indigenous issues and, in particular, the disappearances and murders of Aboriginal women, we turned to the concept of framing. News stories select information from the often complex and rapidly flowing environment in which we live. Journalists rely on filters to select the elements of an event around which to build their reports. Audiences in turn employ their own filters to sift through the coverage they receive. New frames, then, are “conceptual tools which media and individuals rely on to convey, interpret and evaluate information” (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992, p. 60). The selection process involved in writing any news story establishes the context in which it is presented and is most likely to be understood and discussed. As Tuchman (1978, p. ix) put it, the media actively set the frames of reference that readers or viewers use to interpret and discuss public events.” Frames may be relatively open, flexible enough to incorporate new and different or challenging perspectives, or relatively closed, drawn from a narrow repertoire of established narratives that are generally supportive of the status quo. For example, a news

report on a dispute over pipelines might place the story in the context of Aboriginal rights or in the context of economic development opportunities.

More often, a story will give one perspective primacy over a competing point of view. In their survey of the literature on news frames, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000, p. 94) conclude that in a number of studies “frames have ... been shown to shape public perceptions of political issues or institutions.” Bringing Indigenous perspectives into mainstream discourse is almost certain to challenge established views and, often, economic and political interests. However, as Cindy Blackstock argues, “a free press has the responsibility to report on matters the public needs to know not just what the public wants to hear” (Pierro, et al., 2013, p. 12).

In theory, filters ought to be neutral but they inevitably reflect standard journalistic practices and society’s conventional wisdom. The central question is often how well the frame selected for a news story conveys the essence of the story to audiences, placing it in a context that promotes audience engagement and understanding with as little distortion and stereotyping as possible. In this context, stereotypes are defined as unwarranted or oversimplified generalizations about an identifiable group. Media gatekeepers also determine how long a topic is kept in the media spotlight, usually on the basis of their estimate of the public’s interest in it. Of course, attention can create interest and inattention can cause an issue to drop off the public agenda (Soroka, 2002; Fletcher & Sottile, 1997).

No news story can be expected to cover in detail the complex legal and political relationships between First Nations and the government of Canada but it would be in the public interest for reporters to draw on the larger context. Reporting is after all about history, places, and trends and the framing can either bring understanding and clarity to news stories or perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions. We can see in the shortened chronology below that the rights of Indigenous women have been a key part of a long and difficult history, and that they have been the victims of serial killers since 1995 according to investigative reports by Kathryn Blaze Baum of the *Global and Mail* (2016). So context matters as much as content and tone. What is additionally pivotal in news reporting is how knowledgeable a reporter is about these complex relationships within First Nations communities and between First Nations and the different levels of government. With some

important exceptions, sustained coverage of the actual living conditions of Aboriginal people has been lacking, impeding efforts to obtain support for improved social services in Aboriginal communities (Robert Harding in Pierro et al., 2013, p. 17).

### 3c. The Dominant Role of Aboriginal Gender Issues in Canada's National Narrative

1951	<b>Amendment to the <i>Indian Act</i></b> [section 12 (1)(b)] introduced that Indigenous women who married a non-Indigenous man were not entitled to legal status registration under Canadian law.
1985	<b>Bill C-31</b> nullified section 12 of the <i>Indian Act</i> and reinstated status to Indigenous women affected by the amendment.
2004	Amnesty International released the <b><i>Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence against Indigenous Women in Canada</i></b> report documenting murdered and missing Indigenous women since 1971.
2005	The RCMP launched <b>Project E-PANA</b> to investigate unsolved murders along the Highway of Tears.
2006	A coalition of First Nations organizations held a symposium on the <b>Highway of Tears</b> . The event produced recommendations for prevention, emergency planning and team response, victim family support, and community development and support.
2007	<b>Robert Pickton</b> was convicted for six counts of second-degree murder. All of the women he killed had occupied Vancouver's impoverished Downtown Eastside at some time in their lives and several of them were Indigenous.
2010	<b>Bill C-3, Gender Equity in Indian Registration Act</b> , received royal assent, and made the grandchildren of Indigenous women who lost their Indian Status by marrying non-status men eligible to apply for the reinstatement of their status.
2012	<b><i>Forsaken: The Report of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry</i></b> (under the direction of Wally Oppal) was released. The Commission was established to investigate missing and murdered women in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.
2014	The RCMP released the report <b><i>Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women: A National Operational Overview</i></b> , <sup>[viii]</sup> considered to be the most comprehensive study conducted by a Canadian police force on missing and murdered Indigenous women.
2015	<b>Updated RCMP Report.</b>

Source: The Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women Media Working Group 2015

As will be seen, Canadian daily newspapers did not present Tina Fontaine's murder as just another crime or police story, as most stories dealing with murdered Aboriginal women had been presented. The story was given considerable prominence but was not sensationalized. . Sex crime reporting by its very nature is sensational, "a kind of drive-by journalism with a ton of anecdotes graphic detail but not an ounce of context to help frame and capture the crime" (Drache & Velagic, 2014, p. 12). Sexual crime reporting is best understood by identifying the story lines. In the comparable media monitoring study of the Delhi rape by Drache and Velagic, five story lines emerge: by far the most important was



the personal facts and details about the victim and her life, a journalistic method to foster public engagement and sell sensational stories to news-hungry audiences; second the public outcry and mass protests that that were organized as public opinion was mobilized by social media; third women's safety became a dominant story line; fourth police handling of the rape and their role in being a proactive force was a major part of the story; and finally the legislative response to sexual violence in the case of the Delhi rape was a critical dimension not usually present. Without understanding how these kinds of crimes are reported, we are left without the context to understand sexual violence in Canada today.

The Delhi rape has to be understood as a trigger event that provoked Indians to engage with the issue of gender justice. The empirical evidence from this earlier study leads us to the observation that incident-based reporting is superficial in that it insufficiently examines the causes and methods to prevent rape and sexual violence from a gender justice perspective. So how does the Canadian press measure up in its coverage of sexual violence against the missing and murdered Indigenous women if it intends to have a higher standard of journalism with a progressive view of sexual crimes and violence?

The place to begin is with Canadian media coverage. Two narratives were immediately identifiable and distinct. The first was developed by the NWAC and other organizations that have fought to have a national commission of inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and to hold the government and police accountable. The NWAC works "to advance the well-being of Aboriginal women and girls, as well as their families and communities through activism, policy analysis and advocacy. Aboriginal women continue to experience discrimination on multiple grounds and in various complex forms and from various sources, including from individuals, businesses, and governments" (NWAC, 2010). The key elements of the NWAC narrative were accountability and the need for immediate action to deal with the fundamental causes of violence against Aboriginal women.

The second is that of the national print media whose local and national reporting and news analysis has shaped the way Canadians understand the violence against and murder of Indigenous women over a long period, with only sporadic investigation and prosecution by the RCMP and other policing agencies. The relationship between the media and government institutions is critical to look at in terms of the Canadian policy process. In particular, the role of civil society in setting the public agenda – along with governments,

political parties, and organized interest groups – has been enhanced by the emergence of social media (Chu & Fletcher, 2014; Albaugh & Waddell, 2014; Callison & Hermida, 2015). Social media appears to have been significant in influencing public discourse, prompting inquiries like the RCMP report, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the Oppal Inquiry in British Columbia. Public demonstrations have demanded action from public authorities and have become a force that politicians cannot easily ignore. Until recently, the dominant news frame presented the MMIW issue as one of crime and policing.

Today's news coverage tends to be triggered by civil society, through reports and demonstrations, but more significantly by government reports, policy announcements, and responses to civil society actions. In many newsrooms, Indigenous issues have been considered of limited interest to mainstream audiences (Pierro et al., 2013). The disappearances and murders of Indigenous women was often seen not only in this light, but also as raising broader issues that were not easy to cover (Pierro et al., 2013; Travis, 2006). For instance, in the case of Aboriginal women's disappearances from Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, police did not take missing person reports seriously and the media did not hold them accountable for their lack of action (Travis, 2006).

#### **4. Methodology and Sample**

##### ***Canadian media coverage of Indigenous issues and missing and murdered Indigenous women – 2006-2015***

The media monitoring study reported here examines both the volume of stories devoted to Indigenous issues, with particular attention to the articles specifically about MMIW, and patterns in the content. Whether it is a study of agenda-setting effects, priming, or framing, several approaches to examining media effects suggest that increased media attention to a topic can have a direct impact on public awareness and the level of importance the public perceives it to have. (For a review of agenda-setting, see Laing, 2009.)

The first step in our work consisted of coding prominent mentions of Indigenous peoples in eight English-language Canadian newspapers: *Vancouver Sun*, *Calgary Herald*, *Regina Leader-Post*, *Ottawa Citizen*, *National Post*, *Globe and Mail*, and *Toronto Star*, between 1 July 2006 and 30 June 2015 (N=30,941). Analysis of this longer time frame was

completed using a keyword search indicating items pertaining to MMIW (N=1617), as well as a number of other major issues. The MMIW articles constitute about 15% of stories that deal with a prominent Indigenous issue but only 3-4% of items dealing with any other Aboriginal issue.

A second sample was generated using the same search criteria, but adding two French-language dailies, *Le Devoir* and *La Presse*, and using a slightly different English language sample, for the period between 1 May 2014 and 30 April 2015 (N=2,473) that was subject to human coding. Following this coding process which identified items pertaining to MMIW, a third sub-sample was generated consisting of MMIW stories (N=528) for further quantitative evaluation of variables specifically concerning the issue, as well as qualitative analysis.

Consequently, if MMIW can be shown to have produced a unique period in coverage of Indigenous issues, it could have a much larger impact on the importance that Canadians in general may ascribe to Indigenous issues. This question presented two testable hypotheses to determine whether the recent attention to MMIW presented a unique period of coverage of Indigenous peoples' issues in Canada:

- H1. Coverage of Indigenous issues in general was significantly higher during the period in which the MMIW issue drew peak media attention;
- H2. The MMIW issue was responsible for the rise in coverage of Indigenous topics during this period.

Using the 10-year longer-term sample, three periods were compared: (1) Pre-MMIW (defined as the period between 1 July 2006 and 30 April 2014); (2) MMIW (1 May 2014 – 30 April 2015); and (3) a final two-month period between 1 May 2015 and 30 June 2015 which includes the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's interim report.

## 5. Analysis of Media Coverage

*Prima facie*, the MMIW period ending 30 April 2015 appears to be a sustained period of media attention on Indigenous issues. The coverage may have reached heights not seen since the 1990 Oka crisis (See Appendix - A Partial Chronology of Recent Major and Minor Turning Points In First Nations Relations). Of course there have been other peaks and many valleys in Canadian mainstream media coverage of the growing militancy and mobilization of First Nations movements across Canada. It is often forgotten just how prominent Aboriginal affairs are in the political and constitutional life of Canada. Since Oka the standoff between armed Kanehsatà:ke militants and the Canadian Army, there have been more than 40 spikes in news coverage, approximately one or two a year, often lasting for extended periods of time such as in the constitutional crisis in the 1990s. The Accord was effectively defeated in the Manitoba legislature, when MLA Elijah Harper raised an iconic eagle feather in resistance to Ottawa's refusal to consult First Nations on changes to the constitution (see Appendix – A Select Chronology of Recent Major and Minor Turning Points In First Nations Relations). It is fair to ask whether Canadians understanding of these issues has deepened over time. Additionally, what role has the national mainstream media played in giving Canadians a deeper understanding of these complex events?

While Canadian media coverage of Indigenous issues saw its single biggest spike in the last weeks of 2012 and early in 2013 due to the hunger strike by Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence and the related Idle No More protest movement, and another more recently with the release of the Truth and Reconciliation interim report in June 2015, the MMIW period saw sustained coverage over a longer period of time. The difference between the volume of coverage dedicated to Indigenous issues over the 10-year period and that during the 12-month period ending April 2015 was substantial and statistically significant. This difference held up when the stories were weighted for length. Using unweighted data, we found that about 4% of stories from the period between 2006 and 2013 focused on the MMIW; in 2014 and 2015, the percentage was 13. The percentage of front page stories on the issue was double the average for the previous eight years (10

compared to 5).<sup>3</sup> The analysis also supported H2, with a keyword search indicating 13% of coverage was comprised of MMIW stories within the May 2014-April 2015 target period. When MMIW-related news items are excluded, the coverage of Indigenous issues during the May 2014-April 2015 period is at about the same volume as previous periods. In summary, the data support the contention that Canadians have been exposed to a significant volume of coverage of Indigenous issues during this period primarily because of the attention devoted to missing and murdered Indigenous women.<sup>4</sup>

### ***5a. Voice in Media Coverage***

Voice is an important element in public discourse, especially with respect to marginalized groups. In our more detailed analysis of the coverage of Indigenous issues from May 2014 and 30 April 2015, we looked at which groups were given voice in the articles as well as whose statement or action appeared to trigger the story. Voice was operationalized in the coding as: “who was quoted or paraphrased in the article?” In examining stories that give Indigenous issues prominence, it is reasonable to expect that Indigenous voices will be present most of the time. Good journalistic practice requires interviewing individuals or representatives of groups directly affected by the issues. Groups that do not routinely appear in news coverage, especially on issues that affect their communities, are likely to be overlooked or viewed as inconsequential. When this occurs, stereotypes tend to fill information vacuums.

Coders were also asked to determine what triggered the media attention. What action or event caused the story to be researched and written? The triggering event could be an

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<sup>3</sup> In testing the first hypothesis, all items in the sample were scored between 1 and 99 based on length computed by word count in order to give more weight to longer items. The average monthly volume of coverage for the 12-month period ending 30 April 2015 was compared to the average of all other 12-month periods beginning with the twelve months ending 31 December 2006, and finally with the twelve months ending 30 June 2015, comprising 97 periods in total. Standardizing the scores from this procedure indicated that the 12-month period ending 30 April 2015 was significant over the last ten years in the volume of coverage dedicated to Indigenous issues [ $Z = 2.04, p < .05, n = 97$ ], and was in fact the third-highest 12-month period in the sample.

<sup>4</sup> The human-coding sample set (excluding French language outlets) put the share of coverage concerning MMIW at 25% (unweighted), probably as a result of a broader definition of the topic. Overall, the results were also examined based on front page stories only (unweighted) and reached the same conclusion.

action or event, a report or public statement, or something else that caught the attention of assignment editors. Groups are most often given voice in response to action by someone else, for example being sought out for comment on a government action or report. Nevertheless, it is instructive to consider how often stories about Indigenous issues are triggered by First Nations themselves.

For voice, media coverage was evaluated to determine whether Indigenous, government, or other speakers were cited on any of the subjects listed in Table 3 in order to examine the relationship between issues involving Indigenous peoples and voice within news items. Within the coding protocols, the category “Aboriginal” encompassed individual Aboriginal people, band leaders, and other Indigenous spokespersons, as well as some non-Indigenous persons speaking on behalf of Indigenous peoples. “Government” included federal, provincial, and municipal political leaders and other government officials. Finally, an “other” group was identified which included non-Indigenous, non-government speakers including other citizens, researchers, law enforcement officers, NGO/advocacy groups, businesses, courts, and health care professionals. These categories were created for analytic purposes from more detailed coding of persons quoted or cited in news stories.

Patterns of voice in news stories are important but surprisingly complex. Overall, Indigenous voices appeared in 53% of the articles in the 2014-2015 sample (or 58% when weighted for length). This means, of course, that nearly half of these items, all of which dealt with issues important to Indigenous individuals and communities, did not include a voice from those communities. In general, the percentage of articles that had at least one Aboriginal voice was highest for topics that had the most emotional resonance for Indigenous communities. For example, two-thirds of stories on murdered and missing Aboriginal women featured at least one Indigenous voice. The proportion of articles including at least one Indigenous voice in various topic areas is set out in Table 3.

**Table 3: Coverage by Subject by Share of Voice by Group  
(1 May 2014 – 30 April 2015)**

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Indigenous</b>	<b>Gov't</b>	<b>Other</b>
<b>MMIW</b>	66%	41%	46%
<b>Rights and resource development</b>	45%	38%	59%
<b>Political/administrative</b>	60%	39%	36%
<b>Cultural</b>	67%	8%	48%
<b>Criminal/judicial</b>	51%	26%	72%
<b>Business/economic</b>	56%	19%	73%
<b>Health and social welfare</b>	59%	30%	64%
<b>Other</b>	58%	22%	57%
<b>AVERAGE</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>54%</b>
<b>AVERAGE (excl. MMIW)</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>52%</b>

Weighted By Length On A 1-99 Scale. Prominent Items Only, N=2425.

Source: Murdered And Missing Indigenous Women Media Working Group 2015

As this table shows, Indigenous voices were featured in a higher percentage of stories than government or other non-Indigenous voices for most subjects. The only exceptions are the stories about land and treaty rights, pipelines and resource development or economic development generally, and stories involving crime and the courts, where “other” voices are most commonly featured. When breaking down this category of voice, it is important to note that the largest sub-groups within the “other” category “are experts (32%), who were often lawyers or business representatives (18%) and representatives of the courts (14%). Government spokespersons, mostly federal, are also well represented in these stories. As might be expected when dealing with extractive industries, business spokespersons were most often quoted in stories related to land use rights (34% of “other” voices) and business development (46%), while law enforcement personnel were the most prominent in murdered and missing women coverage (nearly half of “other” voices). These groups, along with lawyers and other experts, had a major role in public discourse, sometimes more prominent than Aboriginal voices.

When an Indigenous voice is present in an article, there is a very good chance that it is the voice of a spokesperson for an Aboriginal organization or band council. In one-third of stories featuring a single Indigenous voice, the speaker represented one of these Aboriginal groups. Surprisingly, only about one-third of those were from the Assembly of First Nations (AFN). More than 35% of such articles, however, included multiple Indigenous voices, often including spokespersons for the AFN. About one in four articles quoted individual Indigenous persons. Quite often, as we will see, these individual Indigenous people were relatives of murdered or missing Aboriginal women.

A key finding, then, is that while Indigenous voices were common in articles on most of the topics covered, they predominated primarily when the topics covered in the article had emotional resonance, as was the case with murdered and missing women. In other areas of great importance to First Nations, such as treaty rights, economic development, criminal justice, and health and social welfare, Canada's economic and professional elites were heard from most often.

In their extensive study of news coverage of Aboriginal issues in the Ontario news media between 2010 and 2013, the authors of a study for Journalists for Human Rights found that "the majority of stories that portrayed Aboriginal people in a negative light stemmed from editorials and opinion columns" (Pierro et al., 2013, p.10). Not surprisingly, our data indicate that fewer Indigenous voices are present in opinion items, which are believed to be more prone to stereotyping than the more carefully written news stories. The pattern shown in Table 4 holds true for most of the daily newspapers examined (data not shown).



**Table 4: Percent of Indigenous voices in newspaper articles by type (1 May 2014 – 30 April 2015)**

Type of article	Indigenous voice present	Indigenous voice not present	N	% of Total
News	67	33	71930	60
Op-ed commentary	23	77	5772	5
Opinion column	44	56	22185	19
Editorial	57	43	13644	11
Letter	26	74	4047	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>69397 (58%)</b>	<b>50558 (42%)</b>	<b>119955</b>	<b>100</b>

Weighted By Length On A 1-99 Scale. Prominent Items Only, N=2425.

Source: Murdered And Missing Indigenous Women Media Working Group 2015

Bearing in mind that all of the articles examined here deal with subjects related to Indigenous communities, it is perhaps remarkable that fully one in three news stories did not feature an Aboriginal voice of any kind. Nevertheless, it appears that Indigenous voices are getting more play in news stories than they did in the past. These voices, however, were not well represented in commentaries, letters to the editor, or opinion columns. In more than three in four op-ed commentaries, no Indigenous person was quoted or paraphrased. As the recent Journalists for Human Rights study points out (Pierro et al., 2013), it is these articles that often frame Indigenous issues negatively. It would seem desirable for op-ed page editors to seek out more articles by writers from the communities affected. Our review of Aboriginal news media demonstrated that there is no shortage of such writers.

The notion that one of the responsibilities of quality journalism is to promote informed public debate is featured in many journalism texts (Kovach & Rosensteel, 2007, pp. 162-206). In the case of Aboriginal issues, much of the debate is between government, especially the federal government, which is responsible for relations with First Nations, and Indigenous people, both official and unofficial. It is instructive to note, therefore, that only one in five articles quoted both a government official and an Aboriginal person. Government voices appeared on their own in 12% of items (and appeared in only 33% of items overall), while Indigenous voices were quoted without government comment in 38% of items. While voices seeking government action often outnumber government responses, it seems to us that the federal government in this period was unusually reluctant to enter

into public dialogue with First Nations. While it is often not feasible for journalists to get “both sides” of the story in a single article, failure to do so leaves readers to piece the discourse together themselves.

Often, it appears, Indigenous people must go to extraordinary lengths to force their issues onto the mainstream press agenda. Only one in four stories dealing with First Nations issues resulted from an action or statement by an Aboriginal person or group. Media-initiated stories were the next most common (24%). Most other stories result from actions by governments (15%) and by the courts and law enforcement (13%). Indigenous voices were poorly represented in stories initiated by advocacy groups (11%) and by experts (5%). Even though many of the statements and actions were in support of Aboriginal interests, most did not include any First Nations speakers.

While protests and demonstrations have been a long-standing part of the coverage, over the past decade they have not dominated the news cycle, with one exception. The Idle No More movement and, in particular, the hunger strike by Chief Theresa Spence within walking distance of the Canadian parliament in 2013 did attract national media attention (see the Chronology, above). From 2006 to 2015, protest news averaged about 3% of stories about Aboriginal issues. This figure jumped to 9% in 2013. These stories accounted for more than one in five stories that dealt with issues of politics and public policy. There is little doubt that protests make news. The extent to which they lead to deeper analysis of the issues they raise is less clear. From a news coverage point of view, however, the momentum of the call for a general improvement in First Nations conditions proved difficult to sustain and the issue of the MMIW became the central focus of calls to action in 2015.

### ***5b. Regional Variations***

The issues surrounding murdered and missing women, including the call for a national inquiry, were the most covered Indigenous story in our 2014-15 sample of nine major daily newspapers. In total, 24% of all stories dealing with Aboriginal issues focused on the MMIW. It was the most covered story in five newspapers and trailed only resource development issues in three others. Fishing and logging rights, pipeline issues, resource extraction, and economic development issues received more attention in the *Calgary Herald*, the *Vancouver Sun* and the *National Post*. Somewhat surprisingly, given the

prominence of the MMIW issue in Vancouver over the past decade, only the *Vancouver Sun* fell significantly below the national average in attention to the issue.

On the high attention side, the *Globe and Mail* stood out, with several lengthy high profile features on the subject. Of 404 articles dealing with Aboriginal issues in the *Globe*, more than one in three focused on the MMIW. The topic drew a similarly high profile in the two other Ontario dailies surveyed, the *Toronto Star* and the *Ottawa Citizen*, as well as in the *Regina Leader-Post*. The two French newspapers, *La Presse* and *Le Devoir*, displayed patterns of attention that were not significantly different from English-language dailies outside Ontario, but the Quebec-based dailies featured a considerably higher proportion of analysis and opinion items and fewer Indigenous voices.

The geographic orientation of articles, based on where the key events in the news item took place, tells a similar story. The MMIW and related issues received less attention in areas where conflicts over treaty rights and resource extraction were controversial enough to detract attention from the fate of Indigenous women and girls. More positively for public discourse involving the MMIW issue, the regional breakdown indicates that by 2014 it had transcended the local nature of crime and victim stories in the media and began to be portrayed as a national issue. The continuing work of the NWAC and other advocacy groups, through protests, research reports, and social media updates, kept the issue in the public eye.

**Table 5: Media coverage of Indigenous issues by topic  
(1 May 2014 – 30 April 2015)**

<b>SUBJECT</b>	<b>Quebec</b>	<b>Ontario</b>	<b>Sask.</b>	<b>Alta.</b>	<b>B.C.</b>	<b>National</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>MMIW</b>	20%	27%	28%	18%	14%	29%	<b>24%</b>
<b>Rights and resource development</b>	16%	12%	9%	33%	33%	22%	<b>20%</b>
<b>Political/administrative</b>	20%	14%	14%	15%	22%	16%	<b>16%</b>
<b>Cultural</b>	15%	12%	11%	8%	6%	5%	<b>9%</b>
<b>Criminal/judicial</b>	11%	12%	13%	8%	5%	5%	<b>8%</b>
<b>Business/economic</b>	1%	3%	7%	3%	9%	7%	<b>6%</b>
<b>Health and social welfare</b>	14%	18%	15%	11%	7%	15%	<b>14%</b>
<b>Other</b>	4%	3%	4%	3%	4%	2%	<b>3%</b>

*Weighted by length on a 1-99 scale. Prominent items only. N=2425  
Source: Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women Media Working Group 2015*

Health and social welfare services on reserves and political and administrative issues within First Nations and between Indigenous leaders and federal officials also received significant attention in all regions. Despite the high environmental stakes involved in pipeline development and resource extraction policies, concerns about environmental protection were reported in only 17% of stories in the sample. The level of concern was highest in stories from Atlantic Canada (42%), B.C. (44%) and Alberta (35%), all areas with significant resource development issues. Crime stories were relatively infrequent (8.3% of all stories related to Aboriginal issues).

In 2014-15, the media spotlight had moved away from individual incidents of crimes, though these were still reported when they occurred in major centres, and began to focus more heavily on larger issues of protection for Indigenous women and girls and the root causes of the MMIW issue. In this respect, there was considerable coverage of the activities and the preliminary report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. From 2006 to 2011, the Commission received a low level of consistent attention (between two and three

percent of Indigenous news), except for spike in 2008, when it was formally established, followed by another peak when conflict arose among the Commissioners. Attention to the Commission increased when they released their interim report in 2012 and ongoing discussion of the issues raised therein continued to garner media attention over the following three years, peaking at 11% of stories in the first half of 2015. Advocacy efforts and the Commission's reports appear to have shifted the discourse towards a deeper analysis of Indigenous issues.

## **6. Framing and Attribution of Blame**

As noted above, the news media employ framing devices to shape news narratives. Among the most important of these are characterizations of victims in telling stories like those of the MMIW, the attribution of blame for news-worthy events or conditions, and the identification of moral or ethical issues in a particular story. These framing devices are generally used to communicate the context in which the stories should be understood and to suggest elements audiences might consider relevant when judging the claims that might arise from the event or situation.

The RCMP Report on missing and murdered Aboriginal women identifies "vulnerability factors" that might be significant in the crimes against Indigenous women. In this study, we looked for references to so-called risk factors related to MMIW in the coverage. In total, a little more than one in five of the 538 articles on the MMIW mentioned risk factors. This requires some explanation. It is significant that in some instances the press has adopted a less stereotypical approach to gender-based violence. These data could also indicate that the press has developed more of an interest in explaining the stories in greater depth. Another 12% of the articles included a specific denial that a victim had a "high-risk" lifestyle. In a small number of stories (7%), the vulnerability of the victim was disputed. In the final analysis, one in four MMIW-related articles included a reference to "high-risk" behaviour, mostly by asserting its significance and, occasionally, by denying its application to a particular victim. Risk factors identified included alcoholism, drug abuse, homelessness, participation in sex work and/or coming from a difficult family situation. It seems clear that stories that mention "high-risk" behaviour, even in the context of denying

its applicability<sup>5</sup>, are in danger of reinforcing stereotypes and encouraging some readers to blame the victim. In emphasizing the absence of “vulnerability factors” in a particular case, reports can appear to be implicating other victims in their own victimization.

References to “high-risk” behaviours were most common in features that sought to provide background on victims and include interviews with family and friends. Nearly one in three of those items include a reference to vulnerability or risk. It seems likely that questions about risk are routinely asked by reporters doing background research and analysis. Opinion pieces also give above average attention to risk. References to both high- (26%) and low-risk lifestyles (16%) are mentioned in stories reporting on groups and individuals seeking a public inquiry into the MMIW. The challenge for journalists is to place these lifestyle issues in the larger social context that affects the lives of Indigenous women.

### ***6a. Attribution of Blame***

In the early years of the past decade, as the issue of murdered and missing Indigenous women gradually worked its way onto the media agenda, coverage was marked either by its absence (only 2.3% of 1747 stories on Indigenous issues in the last six months of 2006) or by a tendency to blame the victims. In addition to decontextualizing the murders and disappearances of Indigenous women from the fall-out of Canadian settler colonialism, especially the impact of residential schools, the media’s portrayal of the stories as individual tragedies opened up the lives of these women to interrogation. Numerous stories attached risk factors such as, addiction, poverty, lack of permanent housing, or participation in sex work to the disappearances and deaths of Indigenous women. By appearing to blame the women for the violence to which they were subjected, this focus on “risky lifestyles” and “bad decisions” shifted the blame for their deaths and disappearances from perpetrators, the government, and police to the women themselves. Alternatively, these women “are rendered invisible—a kind of negligence—except in contexts of resentment (because of scandals or social problems), rejection (because of Aboriginal peoples’ demands and claims), or resistance (ranging from blockades to stand-offs to protests)” (Fleras, 2011, p. 217).

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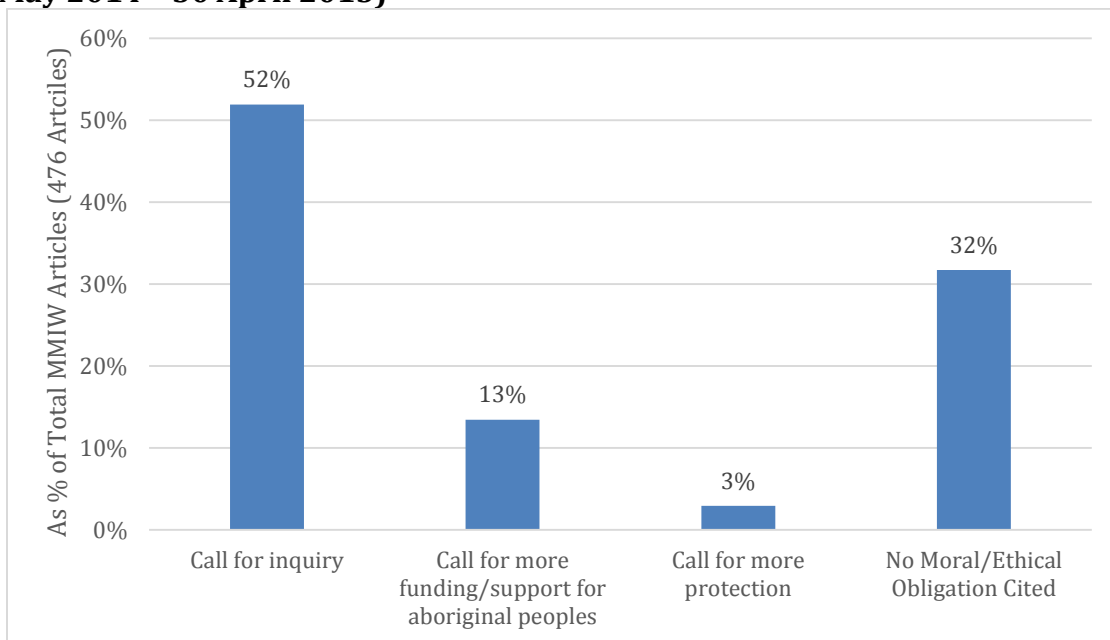
<sup>5</sup> We are indebted to Paula Todd, author and journalism professor at Seneca College, for this insight.

When blame was directly assigned in the news, however, the focus tended to be on the Canadian government and the police, particularly the RCMP, which provides police services on most reserves. In general, concerns about policing were not a major feature of the coverage, peaking at about 15% in background stories. The focus in all types of stories was on the federal government, particularly the need for a public inquiry and for better support and protection for Indigenous women. Much of the political reaction to the MMIW crisis focused on the federal government (61%) and, in particular, then Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s refusal to launch an inquiry on the grounds that, because the problem should be seen strictly as a criminal issue, an inquiry was not necessary. He dismissed concerns about root causes as putting sociology ahead of simple policing. The results of our study demonstrate that he did not convince attentive Canadian public opinion that he was right.

**6b. Moral or Ethical Obligation**

While nearly a third of the coverage of the MMIW focused on reporting events, a high proportion included a reference to the moral or ethical issues involved. The emphasis was on Canada’s responsibility for its lack of response to the issue of the disappeared and

**Table 6: Moral/Ethical variable for MMIW media coverage (1 May 2014 – 30 April 2015)**



N = 538

Source: Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women Media Working Group 2015

murdered women and the RCMP's inefficiency in bringing closure and justice to the families. Numerous articles discussed next steps, such as calls for a national inquiry into the cases of the missing and murdered women, for more police protection and government-funded support of Indigenous women, for signing of UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, and for more funding and support for Indigenous people. While political activists and politicians stressed the call for a public inquiry, interviews with families of victims and opinion pieces also emphasized the need for better social services on reserves and for Indigenous people in general. The pattern of coverage suggests that many commentators recognized the need for new forms of engagement between Canadian society and First Nations in order to confront issues of reconciliation, as well as public policy options that should be on the public agenda.

## **7. Some Revealing Historical and Root Causes**

One of the aims of this report is to understand how the mainstream media portray Indigenous issues in general and the disappearances of Indigenous women in particular and how these portrayals could shape public understanding. Providing the context and the background to the missing and murdered Indigenous women issue is an essential part of the narrative. Canada's professional newspaper culture is similar to that in other democratic countries, which focuses on the "human interest" of the victim and provides some biographical and other details about the missing. It is not that journalists in general lack the capacity to address the historical context and deepen the story when required, but rather that current work pressures make it difficult for most to do so. At a time of scarce resources and around the clock deadlines, the newsroom has remade the culture of modern journalism into an assembly line operation. What struck the researchers in this report were the parts of the narrative that were scarcely present. Our qualitative assessment of mainstream coverage indicated that the historical and root causes are the missing and silenced dimension of the narrative. It seems clear that this history is critical to understanding the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women. While media often blame women's deaths and disappearances on their behaviours or lifestyle, they frequently fail to account for the social and economic conditions, and the underlying causes for these conditions, which put Indigenous women at higher risk than their non-Indigenous



counterparts. Some experts consider these practices to be entrenched, historical legacies from the past with a contemporary, active institutional presence.

In *The Media Gaze: Representations of Diversities in Canada*, Fleras (2011) offers an comprehensive examination of the media coverage of Indigenous issues and clarifies the argument that Indigenous stories are essentially negative and/or concerning the stereotyped “bad Indian”. A key concern is the manner in which the mainstream media tends to place Indigenous news coverage into a largely negative framework for non-Indigenous Canadians. While Indigenous voices were present in more than half of the stories we examined, most articles were not framed in terms that would communicate First Nations’ perspectives effectively to audiences. Straight news stories tend to be limited to specific incidents with little space for background and context. As noted above, the Journalists for Human Rights study found that negative stereotypes were most common in opinion pieces (Pierro et al., 2013). In our sample period, few op-ed commentaries were from Indigenous writers. An unsystematic reading of national newspapers since the sample period suggests that there have been some improvement in this regard, with a notable increase in references to context and more commentaries by Aboriginal writers. In any case, it seems clear, as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission stressed, that a better understanding of Indigenous issues is an essential starting point for understanding the root causes of the problems faced by Indigenous peoples living in Canada (TRC, 2015).

These root causes are both anchored and tolerated, whether passively or actively, by the continued practices of systemic racism and discrimination against Indigenous people in Canada as Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin warned in her recent address on the very same subject. Here her words are worth recalling: “The most glaring blemish on the Canadian historic record relates to our treatment of the First Nations that lived here at the time of colonization” (Fine, 2015). Among these are the well-known effects of the multi-generational trauma from the violence and abuse of residential schools; the anger and resentment of unfulfilled treaty obligations and years of unsettled land claims; and the cancellation of the Kelowna accord by the Harper government (Brooke, 2015; Courtney, 2011). We have developed a chronology to provide a historical framework for our analysis. This is an abbreviated version and the longer version is found in the Appendix.

### ***7a. The Persistent Narrative of Contemporary Resistance and Grassroots Mobilization***

1990	The <b>Oka Crisis</b> arose due to a land dispute involving a development company and the Mohawks of Kanehsà:ke. During the dispute the Sûreté du Québec (SQ), the RCMP, and the Canadian Armed Forces were involved, resulting in the deaths of SQ Corporal Marcel Lemay and Mohawk elder Joe Armstrong.
1995	In the <b>Gustafson Lake Standoff</b> , members of the Shuswap Nations occupied unceded territory on a ranch owned by Lyle James. The RCMP launched a massive operation and as the occupiers left the site many were arrested. James Pitawanakwat, one of the occupiers, was sentenced to imprisonment, fled to the United States, and successfully fought extradition to Canada, becoming the first Indigenous person to be granted political asylum in the United States. <b>Ipperwash</b> was a result of the Ojibway people occupying a portion of Ipperwash Provincial Park to assert their claim to land. The Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) raided the site at night killing Dudley George, an unarmed Ojibway man. His killer was convicted but was not imprisoned and retained his OPP job.
1999	The <b>Burnt Church</b> incident began when non-Indigenous fishers destroyed thousands of Mi'kmaq lobster traps when the Mi'kmaq trappers laid them out of season. The Supreme Court ruled the Mi'kmaq had treaty rights to do so. An agreement was reached in 2002 which only allowed members of the Burnt Church First Nation to fish off-season for subsistence purposes.
2005	An agreement was reached in the <b>Kelowna Accord</b> , which would have committed the government to spend 5 billion dollars on improving Aboriginal education, employment, and living conditions. When Stephen Harper was elected in 2006 he refused to implement the Accord's provisions and ended the process of reconciliation.
2008	Harper made an official apology to residential school survivors on behalf of the Government of Canada. The <b>Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)</b> , chaired by Justice Murray Sinclair, was launched. The TRC's final report was release in 2015.
2009	Harper claims Canada has " <b>no history of colonialism</b> " at G20 summit in Pittsburgh.
2010	<b>Bill C-3, Gender Equity in Indian Registration Act</b> , received royal assent, and made the grandchildren of Aboriginal women who lost their Indian Status by marrying non-status men eligible to apply for the reinstatement of their status. Bill C-3 made 45,000 people eligible for Indian Status.
2012	Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam, Nina Wilson, and Sheelah McLean found <b>Idle No More</b> after the federal government passed the omnibus Bill C-45, which drastically reduced environmental protections in Canada. <b>Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence</b> declared a hunger strike until Stephen Harper and Governor General David Johnston would agree to meet and discuss the fundamental problems facing Indigenous people in Canada, which they did after 44 days.
2013	As part of the <b>Idle No More</b> movement, members of the <b>Aamjiwnaang First Nation</b> set up a blockade of the Canadian National (CN) railway near Sarnia, Ontario to protest Bill C-45. After two weeks, an Ontario judge ruled that the blockade must come down, and protesters disassembled peacefully.

Source: The Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women Media Working Group 2015

The pattern seems to be that media coverage often spikes regarding an Indigenous issue, such as conditions on reserves or residential schools, which forces some self-

reflection or deeper analysis on the part of the Canadian public, but as the spotlight dims so does the Canadian engagement with the issue. The manner in which First Nations issues are reported by mainstream Canadian media is what we call a 'searchlight phenomenon,' accounting for intensive coverage of Indigenous issues, i.e. demonstrations, occupations, suicides, the murdered and missing Indigenous women, unsettled resource claims, police incompetence. For several days the reading public is faced with information overload and then there is a reporting void. For example, in the days following the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report, the mainstream media gave rich and compelling coverage with both long analytical pieces and short summaries of the document. By week's end hardly a further word appeared in newspaper pages about the report, its recommendation, or its action plan to address the legacy of cultural genocide (Watts & King, 2015).

During these periods of focused coverage the media and public discourse does draw strong attention to the question of racism such as that seen in the case of Betty Helen Osborne, the comments by Devon Clunis, then chief of police of Winnipeg, Manitoba, on the importance of police involvement in the fight against racism or the powerful remarks by Canada's Chief Justice on cultural genocide (Fine, 2015).

Yet the underlying factors of colonialism, such as the reserve system, cultural genocide, and policies of assimilation, are still largely ignored by the mainstream media or silently dismissed as being in the past. To define the deaths and disappearances of Indigenous women as individual crimes disconnects the discourse from the disproportionate rate at which Indigenous women are murdered or go missing (RCMP, 2014) and from the underlying systemic issues. The filters and framing do not seem to be part of the contemporary narrative requiring corrective action and fundamental change of values and practices. With the election of the Trudeau government in September 2015 and its commitment to appoint a national commission of inquiry into the missing and murdered Indigenous women and to make changes to Canada's laws with respect to First Nations, Canada may have entered a new chapter but it is still early days. The new government has declared its commitment to implementing all 94 recommendations of the TRC (2015).

## **8. Reflections on Mainstream Media Reporting**

One explanation for the media's failure to place the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women in context is the lack of access reporters have to Indigenous communities, particularly on reserves, and the scarcity of Indigenous journalists employed by mainstream news organizations in Canada. This lack of access may severely limit journalists' ability to present balanced stories. When families and communities whose loved ones had gone missing or been murdered were interviewed, however, the women's deaths and disappearances were frequently explained by racism and colonialism. Yet journalists often failed to build on these explanations in their stories. Instead, journalists frequently overemphasized statements released by politicians, police, social service workers, and experts (Lambertus, 2004; Furniss 1999; Brown & Brown, 1973).

Lack of access is compounded by a number of factors: 1) limited knowledge in newsrooms of Aboriginal history and the complex legal structures affecting reserves; 2) the assumption that Indigenous issues have already been covered and are of little interest to mainstream audiences; and 3) anxiety among journalists about mistrust and cultural sensitivity in Aboriginal communities. Reporters and assignment editors may simply find it easier to avoid challenging stories that they regard as of limited interest than to confront these challenges (Pierro et al., 2013, pp. 18-19). An additional challenge arises from the fact that many Indigenous communities are difficult to access simply because they are remote.

By including two or more opposing views, journalists presented stories that gave the impression of being neutral but were in fact selective, frequently conveying a variety of opinions from non-Indigenous people without including the perspectives of the Indigenous communities and families. The Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples noted in the 1990s that "[m]ost of the information Canadians acquire about Aboriginal people and societies comes from the news . . . When the media address Aboriginal issues, the impressions they convey are often distorted" (RCAP, 1996). Furthermore, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in its Executive Summary stated that "[m]edia coverage of Aboriginal issues remains problematic; social media and online commentary are often inflammatory and racist in nature" and continued by asserting that "the media's role and responsibility in the reconciliation process require journalists to be well informed about the history of Aboriginal peoples and the issues that affect their lives" (TRC, 2015, p. 295).

While many commentators repeated the calls for a national inquiry into the crisis of MMIW in Canada issued by the NWAC, Amnesty International, and the United Nations (CBC, 2015), others proposed increased funding to police (particularly the RCMP) or more funding to Indigenous communities to tackle what was perceived as a reserve issue. A public inquiry has the potential to call attention to the colonial relationship and legacy<sup>6</sup> between the various levels of government in Canada and Indigenous nations. It is in line with one of the major recommendations of The Truth and Reconciliation Final Report and the Liberal Party's election promise to the Canadian electorate in 2015.

### ***8a. Media Coverage National Attention***

In examining the patterns of coverage in the national news presented by the mainstream media, this report has tended so far to focus on shortcomings. It is also instructive, however, to examine a different standard of professional journalistic practice. We have identified three examples. The CBC has invested a great deal of time, effort, and resources into exploring the issue of murdered and missing Indigenous women. Specifically, the CBC has created, and continues to maintain, a database resource of many of the missing and murdered Indigenous women. (CBC, 2016) This database not only puts faces to the names of some of these nearly 1,200 women but it also offers a glimpse into their lives, personalizing the cold statistics of many other media outlets and placing individual stories in larger context. Presently the database has approximately 230 women listed of which more than 100 have had family input into the available information. Searches in the database can be run by name with filters for province, year/decade, under or over 18, and missing or murdered. For example, a search for Tina Fontaine would result in the following:

Tina Michelle Fontaine, 15, was a young and carefree girl from the Sagkeeng First Nation in Manitoba. She went missing in late July 2014 and her body was

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<sup>6</sup> The term colonial relationship refers in particular to the dominance of the federal government in relations with First Nations under the Indian Act. According to the Canadian Encyclopedia, "The *Indian Act* is the principal statute through which the federal government administers Indian status, local First Nations governments and the management of reserve land and communal monies" (np.). This paternalistic and historically discriminatory and exploitive legislation is at the heart of what can only be called a colonial relationship.

found wrapped in a bag in Winnipeg's Red River on Aug. 17, 2014. The Winnipeg Police Service continues to investigate her death as a homicide, but no arrests have been announced to date.

Age	15
Home community	Sagkeeng First Nation
Status	Murdered
Year	2014

**Family survey**

Inquiry	No
Police investigation rating	0

**Note:** Family asked to rate investigation on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being very poor and 10 being excellent.

There is also an interview with Tina's great-aunt and a short report included.

In addition, the CBC has covered this issue through numerous avenues of the media, including television and radio news broadcasts and special series/reports as well as regular articles on the website (cbc.ca). CBC's *As It Happens* broadcast a five-part special series "Missing and Murdered, Unsolved Cases of Indigenous Women & Girls" focused on five women, their cases, and their families.

The *Globe and Mail* has been publishing "an ongoing investigation into the hundreds of missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada" (Baum, 2016). Recent articles include "The Taken" which examined the intersection of five serial killers and five Indigenous women and "Prime Target" which considered how serial killers prey upon Indigenous women (Baum & McClearn, 2015). This series has not only personalized but also humanized the issue, a necessary step in becoming an engaging national news story. The *Globe and Mail* continues to publish this series of investigative reporting by assigning reporters with expertise on First Nations issues entitled "Missing and Murdered." One of the latest articles, by Kathryn Blaze Baum, "Political activism on behalf of indigenous women rooted in chief's frightening personal experience" highlights the link between political activism and biography. When a series of stories reinforce one other, as is the case with the *Globe and Mail* series, it creates a very different and much higher journalistic standard that gives Canadians fresh insight (Baum, 2016). In December 2015, the *Toronto Star* published a series of articles on the MMIW that explored the issue in considerable depth. In particular, the *Star* conducted its own statistical analysis to demonstrate that

Indigenous women were much more likely to be murdered by strangers than other women living in Canada in order to refute an argument made by spokespersons for the Harper government that the MMIW issue was essentially a problem only for Indigenous communities (Bruser et al., 2015). Clearly, the stronger news organizations, with better resources, should take the lead in exploring these difficult issues, as the three cited here have done.

## 9. Indigenous Media

Through our examination of Aboriginal media online, we identified a number of important differences between mainstream media and Indigenous news outlets. In the absence of available databases, we undertook a qualitative analysis of selected titles: *Windspeaker*, *First Nations Drum*, *Anishinabek News*, and *Wawatay News*<sup>7</sup>, all community-oriented news services with a substantial reach, often with some content in Indigenous languages. For example, *Wawatay News* publishes online in English, Cree, Ojibwa, and Oji-Cree. Although it would have been desirable to examine a larger sample of Indigenous publications, this limited sample provides a helpful counterpoint to the mainstream daily newspapers examined. In addition to publishing many positive stories about the achievements of Indigenous people and life in their communities, these outlets presented a variety of important perspectives not well represented in the mainstream media.

Among the most important common themes present in the articles published in these news services are:

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<sup>7</sup> Our qualitative analysis of these four sources was based on a minimum of thirty items from the online archives of each title published between 2014 and 2015. These media organizations publish both in print and online and, in some cases, offer radio and television services, all have accessible websites and online archives. As a result, it is difficult to estimate audience figures, but our best guess is that total circulation approaches 50,000. The total audience, however, is almost certainly considerably larger. The Union of Ontario Indians publishes *Anishinabek News* weekly in North Bay, Ontario for the Anishinabek Nation and other First Nations in Ontario. *First Nations Drum* is published in Vancouver and Toronto and describes itself as “Canada’s largest First Nations newspaper”. It aspires to a national audience and seeks to reach both “Native and non-Native” residents. *Wawatay News* is published by the Wawatay Native Communications Society and has offices in Sioux Lookout and Timmins. It is a weekly publication with full online news services and seeks to be the voice of Northern Ontario. The Aboriginal Multi-Media Society publishes *Windspeaker* in Edmonton and also seeks to serve a nation-wide audience.

- A focus on the lasting effects of colonialism, such as racism and stereotyping, as the root causes of violence against Indigenous women
- Critiques of the lack of services available to Indigenous people and of the failures of policing on and off reserves
- Lack of sympathy the Harper government displayed towards Indigenous people by refusing to consider a national inquiry in MMIW, in spite of public support (Elyas, 2015)
- A generally positive tone, focusing on achievements, cultural events, and successes
- Predominant use of Indigenous voices in the coverage, especially local band chiefs, elders, and representatives from national organizations like the AFN and NWAC
- Positive coverage of events such as memory walks and vigils as responses to murdered and missing women
- A focus on the importance of recognizing the MMIW issue as the responsibility of all Canadians and of strengthening partnerships between Indigenous groups and others living within Canada

For example, *Windspeaker* explored the continuing effects of stereotyping and colonialism in articles such as Nahwegahbow's (2014) item "Ontario chiefs to undertake independent inquiry." This article stresses the importance of recognizing the issue of MMIW as the responsibility of all Canadians, not as an Indigenous issue alone. *First Nations Drum* published articles focusing on activist groups and mobilization, which gives a distinct character to its editorial direction and tone. Authors from *First Nations Drum* also noted the importance of the work of Sisters in Spirit, a group that runs vigils and memory walks to honour the missing and murdered women (Macdougall, 2014).

Another issue that is prominent in *Windspeaker* and some of the other publications is the 2014 RCMP report. While the writers expressed concerns over the accuracy of the data in the report, in general they were optimistic that the report would bring the issue of missing and murdered women to the forefront and increase the Canadians' attention on and support for the issue. The journalists stressed the importance of not only an inquiry, but also more funding for Indigenous communities, better policing, and an action plan for investment in health, education and housing. *First Nations Drum* differentiated itself from



the mainstream press as it was very quick to respond to the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada by focusing on the NWAC's 2010 report rather than the RCMP's 2014 report. They also questioned the validity of the data and interpretations presented in the RCMP report. Additionally, *First Nations Drum* cited more victims personally than the mainstream, which most often only named select victims such as Tina Fontaine and Rinelle Harper. Between 2014 and 2015, the mainstream press focused almost exclusively on these two victims. Many of the articles *Anishinabek News* published mentioned the need for a national inquiry to determine the root causes of the issue of missing and murdered women. These writers were more likely to call attention to the inaction of the federal government and the need for a national solution.

### ***9a. A More Positive but Cautious Tone***

In general, the Indigenous news sources were optimistic in their reporting of issues, with a strong focus on mobilizing for change. Despite limited resources, they offered more suggestions for repairing the broken relationships between the federal and provincial governments and First Nations than the mainstream news coverage. Even in articles that were not opinion based, the apportionment of blame was more clearly placed on the government and police for their lack of effort and attention to the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women. The root causes of the issue were also discussed more frequently in the Indigenous coverage. Racism and colonialism are often seen as key roots to the issues facing Indigenous people today. A few of the common stories that were noted in the Indigenous coverage and mainstream newspapers are: analyses of the RCMP report, missing and murdered Indigenous women, and associated mobilizing/activism; Indigenous art and literature; the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report; and the lasting effect of residential schools. While these issues were represented in the mainstream coverage as well, the tone and prominent voices in the stories were distinctively more critical in the Indigenous media

Understandably, the Aboriginal media coverage features a significantly higher number of Indigenous voices than the mainstream press. While the mainstream coverage does quote provincial, national, and local Indigenous band leaders/chiefs and family members of victims, Indigenous news stories feature predominantly Indigenous voices, providing a good basis for understanding the issue from Indigenous perspectives. The reporters have

access to local communities and individuals who are in positions of authority. The coverage is often more locally focused, which is essential for presenting the disparities between issues affecting Indigenous people in diverse regions of Canada. The coverage is also much more personal in the Indigenous press compared to the mainstream media. While the names of specific victims and quotes from family member are often mentioned in the mainstream coverage, the Indigenous press takes it a step further by also including the effects the murders of these women are having on their communities. They are also much more assertive than mainstream media in insisting not only on the need for an inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women, but also in demanding immediate action, better protection for women, and an overhaul of social services.

## **10. Conclusion: *Looking Forward***

In Canada's major newspapers over the past decade, Indigenous issues have received continuing attention at what appears to be a moderate level. Many of the hundreds of news items that appear annually are routine stories that arise from mainstream journalistic practices based on news releases from government agencies, police reports, etc. that reflect normal patterns of newsgathering. It is a truism and worth repeating that the media's investigative spotlight can only focus on a few major issues at a time, with attention guided by ideologies, expectations, considerations of audience interests, and the personal concerns of key journalists and news managers. Significantly, the coverage and news reporting on MMIW has spiked and received extraordinary media attention between 2014 and 2015.

The spike in coverage we documented in our study of 12 newspapers in two samples can be understood as a searchlight phenomenon. This concept explains that intensive coverage of Aboriginal issues—demonstrations, occupations, suicides, the murdered and missing Aboriginal women, unsettled land claims, and police incompetence—that attracts the spotlight for several days before darkness seems to descend on the media's coverage of these issues. The reading public, arguably, is overwhelmed by information and then receives no information. Part of our study seeks to explore the searchlight phenomenon and how it can distort the coverage of murdered and missing Aboriginal women.

In his comprehensive examination of the media coverage of Aboriginal issues, Fleras (2011) makes the important point that Aboriginal stories tend to be essentially negative and about “problem Indians”. Related to the searchlight effect is, according to Fleras, the way the mainstream media stereotypes or shoehorns Aboriginal news coverage into a largely negative framework for non-Aboriginal Canadians. While our data do not speak directly to this issue, we did find limited attention to non-conflictual aspects of topics related to Indigenous people. Part of the problem appears to be the absence of continuing coverage that focuses on community life rather than conflict. In general, critics of mainstream coverage are calling not for a less critical journalism, but rather for one that includes more positive depictions as well (Gillmore, 2016).

Since 1980, as can be seen in our chronology, Aboriginal issues and concerns constitute a grand narrative in modern Canadian life. There is no shortage of news and the stories to be told are as diverse as First Nations communities. As far as we've been able to tell, there are no mainstream journalists who are assigned primarily to covering Aboriginal affairs. A number of major news organizations do have reporters, mostly from Indigenous backgrounds, who cover Aboriginal affairs along with other assignments. The Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) seeks to provide news from an Indigenous perspective to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences, as does the CBC, including CBC North (radio and television), Radio 1 and CBC.ca. The *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* has an Aboriginal columnist, Doug Cuthand. According to the *Star-Phoenix* website, “Doug brings a First Nations perspective to issues of importance to both Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals.” This commitment to providing an Indigenous perspective, however, is not common in the mainstream media.

Although the circulation of news within and between Indigenous communities, through APTN and the growing number of online Aboriginal news services, continues to improve, cross-over to mainstream discourse is, we believe, insufficient at this time to contribute to the success of reconciliation. With the recent exception of the *Globe and Mail* and the CBC, mainstream news coverage suffers in terms of both quality and sophistication to bring about the success of reconciliation because there are so few journalists who have in-depth knowledge of Aboriginal communities, values, and cultures. It is imperative, in our view, that effective reporting include not only Aboriginal journalists, but also non-

Aboriginal journalists who have been able to develop both the knowledge and the trust to bring Indigenous perspectives into mainstream discourse. With education and the time necessary to develop rapport with Indigenous people, non-Aboriginal journalists can make a significant contribution to improving coverage. A key theme in the Aboriginal media, the need to forge partnerships to promote reconciliation, offers a perspective that would help balance the conflict frame that pervades much of the mainstream media coverage.

In *The Inconvenient Indian* (2013), Thomas King powerfully makes the case that the mainstream media disempowers Canada's Indigenous peoples and marginalizes their stories and concerns. The patterns of coverage we have identified generally support this conclusion. The coverage tends to be episodic, of uneven quality, and inattentive to the historical context.

As we've seen, if there was a turning point when news coverage by the mainstream media was transformed into a national news story, it was the murder of Tina Fontaine. News organizations focused on her murder and it became a national story about government inaction and the lack of justice for the disappeared. A story in *Maclean's* with the provocative title, "Welcome to Winnipeg: Where Canada's racism problem is at its worst" was one of the stories that made up a "tipping point" in mainstream media coverage. It was sub-titled "How the death of Tina Fontaine has finally forced the city to face its festering race problem" (Macdonald, 2015). Nancy Macdonald devoted two weeks to the story, in Winnipeg and the Sagkeeng First Nation (Tocker, 2015). The story not only profiled Tina Fontaine but also highlighted her strong family and community background. It engendered strong reactions, both positive and negative, including a spate of follow-up reports in other media, and appeared to engage a wider audience than previous coverage of murdered Indigenous women.

In this case the reporter and the editors ensured that the story and other related stories provided historical context and a strong basis for understanding the broader issues. In retrospect, Macdonald states that she wished she had given more attention to the larger issue of systemic racism in the Winnipeg context (Tocker, 2015). This concern, however, does not diminish the importance of her contribution to public discourse. It seems clear that her work helped to change the prevailing narrative.

The fact that the RCMP conducted a special investigation on missing and murdered Indigenous women also contributed significantly to this national reassessment. That it led to a national debate about the RCMP's analysis and its failure to investigate these murders vigorously and effectively has also contributed to the widespread concern that justice has been denied.

In 2015, the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report calling for the establishment of a national commission of inquiry in MMIW has also had an impact on media coverage. But most importantly, a major reason that the issue of murdered and missing Aboriginal women garnered increased coverage by the mainstream media is the pressure from First Nations and their ability to use social media strategically to present their case forcibly to the Canadian public. Their mobilizing efforts have succeeded in forcing it onto the national agenda from the margins where for too long it had been relegated (Saul, 2015). Additionally, the RCMP report itself appears to have been a response to the work of the NWAC, again highlighting the ways in which Indigenous mobilizations pushed the issue into mainstream discourse.

Overall, the increased mainstream media coverage can be attributed to continuing and well-focused advocacy, especially the work of the NWAC, protests organized by social media activists in response to the RCMP reports, the human interest stories generated by a few specific murders and assaults, especially the murder of Tina Fontaine, and the TRC report. In general, the coverage has focused on these human interest stories with limited attention paid to root causes. From an equity perspective, the increased focus on the issue of murdered and missing Indigenous women by the *Globe and Mail* and the CBC and, to a lesser extent, the *Toronto Star* and a few others, is encouraging.

It is also significant that as the issues moved through the news cycle more attention was paid to issues of racism, the tragic legacy of residential schools, conditions on reserves, and other failures of social services, on reserves but most especially in the cities. From a media theory perspective what is most revealing is accounting for the periodic spikes of serious coverage and followed by the long gaps and silences when the attention to First Nations issues falls back to historic levels.

The willingness of news organizations to recognize the importance of Aboriginal issues and to undertake not only in-depth features and investigations but also ongoing routine

attention to Indigenous communities would constitute an important contribution to keeping reconciliation on the public agenda. Reconciliation is a long-term project and there is no doubt that for the media it is a long-term challenge.

If, as we suggest based our exploration of current coverage patterns, the standard practices of mainstream journalism fall short of meeting society's current needs, what is to be done? The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) recommended that the media play a role in reconciliation. In particular, the Commission called on the federal government to provide funding "to enable Canada's national public broadcaster to support reconciliation, and be properly reflective of the diverse cultures, languages, and perspectives of Aboriginal peoples" (p. 335). For individual journalists, the Commission underlined the importance of better education: "We call upon Canadian journalism programs and media schools to require education for all students on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal-Crown relations" (p. 335).

Following up on these recommendations in a recent speech at Ryerson University's School of Journalism, Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner Marie Wilson, an experienced journalist, made the case that journalism as usual will not meet the goals identified by the Commission. In offering a number of guidelines for better coverage of Aboriginal issues, she noted that established journalistic aspirations, such as explaining the context of specific events and building trust with sources, take on special meaning in Indigenous communities where there is a history of mistrust based on past abuses.

To overcome a history of misunderstandings, journalists need to become familiar with the specific rules and practices of each Indigenous community, which vary considerably, and to be prepared to check stories with sources to avoid miscommunication. Equally as important, Commissioner Wilson urged journalists to persist in telling Aboriginal stories in the face of opposition within their organizations to keep stories in the media spotlight until greater understanding is achieved. The issue of reconciliation requires a special effort to "find fresh angles, new perspectives and . . . unheard voices" (Ghosh, 2016).

As our analysis indicates, journalism as usual has not ignored Aboriginal issues and has produced some notable coverage. The spikes in attention, usually in response to external

factors, have helped to shape public perceptions, both positively and negatively. However, when the searchlight moves on, the issue drop off the media (and public) agenda until the next protest or report. The plea for going beyond journalism as usual is based on the belief that the issue of reconciliation is a matter of such great public importance that it requires an extraordinary effort.

## Appendix – A Select Chronology of Recent Major and Minor Turning Points in First Nations-Canada Relations

- 1990 The **Oka Crisis** arose when a development project proposed to build a private golf course on land to which the Mohawks of Kanehsatà:ke also laid claim. The government called in the Sûreté du Québec (SQ), the RCMP, and the Canadian Armed Forces. During the dispute, SQ Corporal Marcel Lemay was killed by gunfire and Mohawk elder Joe Armstrong was killed when a boulder was thrown at his chest.<sup>1</sup>
- Meech Lake Accord defeated:** The Meech Lake Accord was a series of amendments to the *Constitution Act* of 1982, primarily to encourage Quebec to sign the Constitution. The Accord was effectively defeated in the Manitoba legislature, when MLA Elijah Harper raised an eagle feather in resistance to the government’s refusal to consult with First Nations.<sup>2</sup>
- 1991 The **Catholic Church** expressed regret for the harm caused by **residential schools**, but has refused to formally apologize for its involvement in the system.<sup>3</sup>
- 1992 **Charlottetown Accord defeated:** The Accord was a second package of amendments to the *Constitution Act* of 1982, which was drafted in consultation with Aboriginal leadership. The Accord was defeated by national referendum.<sup>4</sup>
- 1993 The **Anglican Church of Canada** issued an apology for its involvement in the residential school system.<sup>5</sup>
- 1994 The **Presbyterian Church** issued an apology for its participation in the residential school system.<sup>6</sup>
- 1995 **Gustafson Lake Standoff:** Members of Shuswap Nations occupied unceded territory on a ranch owned by Lyle James. The RCMP launched a massive operation (one of the largest police operations in Canadian history), and occupiers eventually left the site at which point many were arrested. James Pitawanakwat, one of the occupiers sentenced to imprisonment, fled to the United States and successfully fought extradition to Canada, becoming the first Aboriginal person to be granted political asylum in the United States.<sup>7</sup>
- Ipperwash:** Ojibway people occupied a portion of Ipperwash Provincial Park to assert their claim to land. The Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) raided the site at night and killed Dudley George, an unarmed Ojibway man. His killer was convicted but wasn’t imprisoned and retained his job at the OPP.<sup>8</sup>
- 1996 The **Nisga’a Treaty** was signed in New Aiyansh, making it the first treaty to be signed in British Columbia since 1899. This was the first treaty to recognize both resources rights and the right to self-government.<sup>9</sup>
- The **last federally-operated residential school** closed in Regina, Saskatchewan.<sup>10</sup>
- The **Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP)**, co-chaired by René Dussault and George Erasmus, released their findings. The RCAP was launched in 1991, partly in response to Oka, and laid out a 20-year vision on how to create a new relationship between the government and Aboriginal peoples that was never implemented.<sup>11</sup>



- 1998 The **United Church of Canada** issued an apology for its involvement in the residential school system.<sup>12</sup>
- 1999 **Burnt Church:** Non-Aboriginal fishers began destroying thousands of Mi'kmaq lobster traps because the Mi'kmaq trappers laid traps out of season, which the Supreme Court ruled the Mi'kmaq had treaty rights to do. An agreement was reached in 2002 when members of the Burnt Church First Nation agreed to only fish for subsistence purposes off season.<sup>13</sup>
- 2003 The Ontario government launched the **Ipperwash Inquiry** to investigate the death of Dudley George and find ways to prevent violence in future confrontations. The final report was released in 2006, and recommended improving police planning on responding to Aboriginal protests and settling land disputes and treaty claims in Ontario.<sup>14</sup>
- 2004 Amnesty International released the ***Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence against Indigenous Women in Canada*** report documenting murdered and missing Aboriginal women since 1971.<sup>15</sup>
- 2005 An agreement was reached in the **Kelowna Accord**, which would have committed the government to spend 5 billion dollars on improving Aboriginal education, employment, and living conditions. When Stephen Harper was elected in 2006 he refused to implement the Accord's provisions.<sup>16</sup>
- The **RCMP** launched **Project E-PANA** to investigate unsolved murders along the Highway of Tears.<sup>17</sup>
- 2006 The **Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement** was reached between residential school survivors and the four churches involved. This was the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history for the amount of \$1,900,000,000.<sup>18</sup>
- Members of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy began their occupation of an unfinished housing development in **Caledonia** called Douglas Creek Estates. The OPP has repeatedly and unsuccessfully attempted to remove the Haudenosaunee land defenders, who remain at the site to this day.<sup>19</sup>
- A coalition of First Nations organizations held a **symposium on the Highway of Tears**. The event produced recommendations for prevention, emergency planning and team response, victim family support, and community development and support.<sup>20</sup>
- 2007 **Robert Pickton** was convicted for six counts of second-degree murder. All of the women he killed had occupied Vancouver's impoverished Downtown Eastside at some point in their lives and several of them were Aboriginal.<sup>21</sup>
- 2008 **Harper made an official apology to residential school survivors** on behalf of the government of Canada.<sup>22</sup>
- The **Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)**, chaired by Justice Murray Sinclair, was launched. The TRC's final report was released in 2015.<sup>23</sup>
- 2009 **Harper claims Canada has "no history of colonialism"** at G20 summit in Pittsburgh.<sup>24</sup>

- 2010 **Bill C-3, Gender Equity in Indian Registration Act**, received royal assent, and made the grandchildren of Aboriginal women who lost their Indian Status by marrying non-status men eligible to apply for the reinstatement of their status. Bill C-3 made 45,000 people eligible for Indian Status.<sup>25</sup>
- The Government of Canada issued an **apology for the relocation of Inuit people to the High Arctic**.<sup>26</sup>
- After voting against the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* in 2007, Canada agreed to endorse the declaration as an “aspirational,” non-legally-binding document.<sup>27</sup>
- 2012 Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam, Nina Wilson, and Sheelah McLean founded **Idle No More** after the federal government passed the omnibus Bill C-45, which drastically reduced environmental protections in Canada, including the exclusion of over 98% of lakes and rivers from federal environmental oversight.<sup>28</sup>
- Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence** declared a hunger strike until Stephen Harper and Governor General David Johnston would agree to meet and discuss the fundamental problems facing Indigenous people in Canada, which they did after 44 days.<sup>29</sup>
- Forsaken: The Report of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry* (under the direction of Wally Oppal) was released. The Commission was established to investigate missing and murdered women in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside.<sup>30</sup>
- 2013 As part of the Idle No More movement, members of the **Aamjiwnaang First Nation** set up a **blockade of the Canadian National (CN) railway** near Sarnia, Ontario to protest Bill C-45. After two weeks, an Ontario judge ruled the blockade must come down and protesters disassembled peacefully under the supervision of Sarnia police and the OPP.<sup>31</sup>
- 2014 The **RCMP** released the report *Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women: A National Operational Overview*,<sup>32</sup> which is considered to be the most comprehensive study conducted by a Canadian police force on missing and murdered Aboriginal women.<sup>33</sup>
- 2015 Supreme Court Chief Justice **Beverley McLachlin** acknowledged that Canada’s treatment of Aboriginal people constituted “cultural genocide.”<sup>34</sup>

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