



LESSON PLAN

Level:	Grades 9 to 12
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Duration:	2½ to 4 hours

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Diversity and Media Ownership



This lesson is part of *USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools*: <http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework>.

Overview

In this lesson students are introduced to the media literacy key concepts that “media are created to re-present reality” and “media are influenced by commercial considerations.” They then read one of two articles – one is an overview of diverse media in Canada, the other is a more personal account of Michaëlle Jean’s experiences as an African-Canadian journalist in Quebec – and consider the importance of media ownership, the relative roles of diverse and mainstream media in reflecting and promoting Canadian multiculturalism, and changes in diverse participation and representation in Canadian media. Finally, students research and debate topics that emerge from their classroom discussions.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- critically reflect on the “creation” of media texts
- consider the “re-presentation” of people and events in media from a given point of view
- reflect on the importance of equitable representation in media
- consider the consequences of media representation on society
- reflect on the role of stereotypes in media and their consequences
- consider the importance of diverse groups owning their own media outlets
- participate in a formal debate

Preparation and Materials

Photocopy the following documents:

- *A Black Spot on a Snow-white Field*
- *Owning Our Stories*

Procedure

Begin by writing on the board “Media are constructions that re-present reality.”

Ask students: What does this mean? (Two key ideas: First, that media texts are created – every part of a media text is the result of a decision made consciously or unconsciously regarding what to include and exclude as well as how to present what is included. Second, that audiences perceive media texts – correctly or not – as representations of reality.) Give students the example of a documentary: we accept it as a representation of reality, but the director had to make decisions about what footage to include and what to leave out, what music to use on the soundtrack, and even where to point the camera – pointing a camera in one direction automatically means you’re leaving out everything that camera isn’t pointing at.

If you feel your students need more explanation of this concept, show the Media Literacy 101 video “[Media Are Constructions](#).”

Now introduce the idea that media are influenced by *commercial* considerations – how much money it costs to produce media, how the producers will make money off media, how media will appeal to the audience that will pay for it (either directly or in time and attention). Ask students if they can think of any examples of how commercial considerations influence media creation. (For example: TV has commercials because that’s how TV shows are paid for; big-budget movies that appeal to youth are mostly released in the summer because that’s when young people have time to see them.)

If you feel your students need more explanation of this concept, show the Media Literacy 101 video “[Media Have Commercial Implications](#).”

Distribute the article *A Black Spot on a Snow-white Field* and the *Owning Our Stories* article so that **half the class has one article and half has the other**. Have students answer questions and then share the answers to their respective articles.

Discuss as a class: Historically, Canadian journalists and newscasters have mostly been White males. Has this changed? If yes, how so and why has this happened? (For instance, women are now much more heavily represented – are other groups?) Do students think the changes accurately reflect reality?

Note that media ownership in Canada has also generally been White. What might be different when diverse groups have economic control of production and broadcasting? Might Michaëlle Jean’s experiences have been different if she had been working at an outlet such as APTN? Would she have been the trailblazer she became if she had only been visible to a small audience of her own ethnic group?

Evaluation Activity

Have students conduct a debate on issues that arose in the discussion above. Divide the students into groups of 6-8 and have each group select a topic to debate. Once students have researched their topic, divide each group in half and randomly assign one half the “pro” position and the other the “con.”

Have students present their points in a formal debate:

PRO: Opening statement (1 minute maximum)

CON: Opening statement (1 minute maximum)

PRO: First point (2 minutes maximum)

CON: Refute first PRO point (1 minute maximum)

CON: First point (2 minutes maximum)

PRO: Refute first CON point (1 minute maximum)

CON: Second point (2 minutes maximum)

PRO: Refute second CON point (1 minute maximum)

PRO: Second point (2 minutes maximum)

CON: Refute second PRO point (1 minute maximum)

PRO: Closing statement (1 minute maximum)

CON: Closing statement (1 minute maximum)

Suggested topics:

- Be It Resolved That: Diverse community-owned media is needed to reflect Canadian diversity
- Be It Resolved That: Diverse community-owned media will lead to a segregated society
- Be It Resolved That: Diverse community-owned media will result in a more tolerant society
- Be It Resolved That: Diverse community-owned media should be required to show only Canadian-made programs
- Be It Resolved That: Mass media outlets should be required to reflect the diversity of Canadian society

A Black Spot on a Snow-white Field

Written by Michelle Coudé-Lord

It's 1988. Michaëlle Jean is being interviewed at Radio-Canada for the first time. She is asked about her experience in the field, her analytical mind, her intelligence. And then she receives the question that catches her completely off guard: "Do you think you will be able to integrate?" Silence in the room. Michaëlle Jean is no longer responding. She is just a bit hurt. She thought that in the media domain, a domain that is allegedly avant-garde, that goes beyond prejudices, one wouldn't go there.

The silence is heavy with things unsaid. The speaker is trapped. He now has to see it through to put an end to this torture session. "Think about it, you're Black!" "That's not news to me," Michaëlle snaps to the man, who is becoming increasingly ill at ease. "You will be the first. You have to work in a team," he adds, as he continues to dig himself deeper. In a clear and direct voice, Michaëlle counters: "This discussion is a bit sick. We'll drop it..."

With that, she won her first victory. Michaëlle Jean made a splash and became a journalist assigned to *Actuel*, a show hosted by Michèle Viroly.

During the day, when she roams the halls and makes her way to the cafeteria, she feels like a "novelty". "I was the first Black person on TV for Radio-Canada. Of course, journalist Léo Kalinda was on the radio, but no one could see him. So I knew that I could not make a mistake. Everyone was waiting for it," she confided.

It's 1994. Michaëlle is living in the neighbourhood of Little Burgundy. One evening in January, a convenience store owner who was well-liked and respected by his neighbours was killed by some young people. Journalists came running, many rubberneckers watching the pathetic scene of this poor man, brutally and unjustly murdered. Michaëlle, the neighbour, is there. A fellow journalist tossed out: "There are too many Blacks in this neighbourhood; it's no surprise this would happen."

Haunted by this comment, she can't sleep at night. The next morning, she calls her colleague. When he hears Michaëlle's voice on the other end of the line, he already knows why she is calling. "I said something stupid last night. I'm sorry," he says, taking the lead.

Michaëlle reminds him of the image of all the spectators of the tragedy who were able to hear his words... the message was clear.

A few days later, the police would report that the crime was committed by two youth: one White and one Black.

It's 1994 and we are in the Radio-Canada newsroom. A colleague addresses Michaëlle with a smile and says: "It's strange, but you, I no longer see you as Black." "What does that mean? I'm becoming whiter because my face is on TV?"

"You know," she tells me while sharing this anecdote, "when you belong to a colour, you don't go anywhere. You self-exclude yourself."

It's to knock down barriers once again that she eagerly agrees to star in a documentary called *Tropique Nord (Tropic North)*, produced by her loyal life partner, filmmaker Jean-Daniel Lafond.

She came to Quebec at the age of 10. Her father, a very politically active teacher, had been tortured in Haiti and then released just to die a slow death, Michaëlle believes today. He asks for political exile. He finds himself in Thetford Mines, where there is a job for him. He's able to have his family join him, his wife and two girls including, of course, young Michaëlle, a few months later.

They move to Montréal, a more cosmopolitan city where a Haitian community has taken root.

An engaged citizen, she works to build shelters for battered women in Quebec. She writes about immigrant women in the magazine *La Parole métèque*. She does not hesitate to respond to racist remarks in the newspapers. She doesn't notice that a file has been opened on her at Radio-Canada. She is beginning to get noticed.

In 1986, she leaves for Haiti, where upheaval surfaces with the elections. She will experience Haiti in all of its glory.

A few months later, filmmaker Tahani Rached of the National Film Board asks her if she will work with him on a special documentary about the elections in Haiti. She goes. A few days later, the members of the film crew find themselves lying on the floor of a rectory, hoping to avoid the bullets whistling by their ears. The Macoutes¹ attack them. Someone is injured. Miraculously, they survive.

This is the mishap it takes for her to feel like Michaëlle, the journalist. "Watching the eyes of these people who begged me to keep talking about them, I fully understood the importance of this profession and its power."

The team is brought back to Quebec. And the documentary becomes a special episode on *Le Point*.

This is how Michaëlle wound up, one lovely morning in 1988, at Radio-Canada in this office of the man with the odd questions.

She has never regretted it since. After *Actuel*, there was *Montréal ce soir*, then *Virage* for two years, then *Le Point*, where she continues to work today.

"I have been lucky, but I'm a go-getter. In the beginning, I heard people say that I was there because of a hiring policy on immigration and equal access..." They needed a Black person; she was also a woman, pretty and photogenic. "I had the qualities to cultivate prejudices," she explained.

She was making herself sick working twice as hard to avoid making a mistake that would end her career.

One day, she attends a lecture by Esmeralda Thornhill, a Black Canadian lawyer with the Quebec Human Rights Commission. Thornhill speaks about the fact that many young Black people in the workforce were killing themselves at work to ensure their survival. Michaëlle quickly recognizes herself. "I said to myself: 'That's me!' From that moment on, I freed myself of this straightjacket and I was finally Michaëlle Jean."

The freed journalist then wins the Mireille-Lanctôt award for report coverage on violence against women and another from the Canadian Human Rights Commission for a portrayal of female immigrants.

Michaëlle had passed the test. Her competence was recognized. They were beginning to forget the "Black" journalist ... and noticing the journalist.

When she was young, she felt on some winter mornings like 'a black spot on a snow-white field'. No surprise that as an adult she feels like "the Black person in the newsroom."

Today, Michaëlle Jean is no longer a "novelty" at Radio-Canada. She hopes that she will no longer be the "token ethnic person". "It would be a shame if we gave ourselves a clear conscience thanks to me... I hope to have opened doors, not closed one!"

1 The Macoutes, or "Tonton Macoutes", belonged to a Haitian paramilitary force established by President Duvalier in 1959. The Macoutes were named after a "bogeyman" character in Haitian Creole mythology.

At the time of our interview, Michaëlle was preparing a story for *Le Point on life in the Little Burgundy* neighbourhood in order to portray the involvement of a community that took charge and decided to stop the flow of prejudice, which poured down on her for months.

Michaëlle did not yet know whether she was going to tell TV viewers that she lived in the neighbourhood. “I would be upset if people thought that the Black journalist, too, was coming to the defence of her peers” – and this authentic Black journalist’s story might be misinterpreted!

Questions

1. What was significant about Michaëlle Jean’s career on Quebec television?
2. What challenges did Michaëlle Jean face in working in Canadian news media?
3. Why was Michaëlle Jean offended by the colleague who said “I no longer see you as Black”? What does that statement suggest about how people see ethnicity?
4. How did Michaëlle Jean’s experiences influence the subjects she chose to cover as a journalist?

Owning Our Stories

Since before Canada became a Confederation, historically under-represented groups have been creating their own media: the first issue of the *Provincial Freeman*, which was a weekly newspaper edited and published by Black Canadians in the Province of Canada West (now Ontario), was first published on March 24, 1853, while Ojibwa chief, doctor and publisher Peter Edmund Jones, also called Kahkewaquonaby, launched the newspaper *The Indian* in 1885.

On the surface, the state of diverse media in Canada looks rosy: a 2013 study for Canadian Heritage reported a total of 427 ethnic media print publications across Canada.¹ But how good a job are these outlets doing of serving their communities and Canadian society as a whole? Are they promoting multiculturalism or keeping diverse groups isolated? And when media outlets of all sizes are facing tough economic times, how sure can we be that they will even survive?

There's no doubt that APTN is the great success story of Canadian diverse media. Since it first began broadcasting in 1999, the channel has become an essential way for members of Canada's far-flung Indigenous communities – not to mention Indigenous people living outside of those communities – to stay connected with Indigenous news and culture. It is part of every Canadian cable and satellite provider's basic package, thanks to the CRTC's decision to make it a national network, which means that it is accessible to nearly all Canadians. While in its early days its primetime schedule was dominated by imports such as "Northern Exposure" and "Young Riders," American-made TV shows with a small number of Indigenous cast members, as well as American-made movies with little or no relevance to the Indigenous community such as "Commando" and "Miss Congeniality," today it offers mostly Indigenous-made programs like "Michif Country" and "Petroglyphs to Pixels."

APTN is something of an exception, however. Nearly all Canadian channels that cater to historically under-represented groups depend heavily on imported content, and what original content is created is often of poor quality. In 2017, Rogers contracted Chinese-language programming for its OMNI Regional channel to Vancouver-based Fairchild Television, which depends almost entirely on footage bought from other sources and provides little or no analysis of news. Avvy Gao, director of the Chinese & Southeast Asian Legal Clinic, argued that this arrangement "means eliminating the opportunity for differing views and possibly reducing access to local news by our communities."² In some cases there are also concerns about the objectivity of the news being reported: media commentator Gloria Fung has speculated that the Chinese government has taken advantage of the financial instability of some Chinese-Canadian media to influence coverage of events such as protests in Tibet and the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.³

A desire to not make waves can hamper journalism in other ways as well. Commentators such as Aaron Braverman have observed that media aimed at persons with disabilities shy away from controversy in favour of inspirational stories and lifestyle pieces. Braverman suggests that they want to avoid offending the advertisers and governments that provide their funding – though these often have the most influence on the lives of persons with disabilities.⁴

As well, the focus on media by and for marginalized groups can mean that these communities are not portrayed any more or better in the mainstream media: Susan G. Cole, a lesbian who is Books and Entertainment Editor at *Now Magazine*, has criticized Canada's gay press for not challenging the mainstream's view of gays and lesbians.⁵

1 Yu, S (2016). Instrumentalization of Ethnic Media. *Canadian Journal of Communication*. 41, 343-351.

2 Wong, T (2017) OMNI Regional launches Sept 1 amid controversy over contracting out newscasts. *The Toronto Star*.

3 Yip, Joyce. "State of Disarray" *Ryerson Review of Journalism*, Summer 2010. <<http://www.rrj.ca/m8463/>>

4 Broverman, Aaron. "Crippled!" *Ryerson Review of Journalism*, Summer 2007. <<http://www.rrj.ca/m4097/>>

5 "Whip It Out." *Ryerson Review of Journalism*, Spring 2005.

A larger concern with diverse media is that it may not, in fact, help to make Canada a more multicultural nation. Sherry Yu, of the University of Toronto, argues in her 2018 book that definitions of ethnic media and mainstream media support “the binary framework in which ethnic media is positioned as ‘media for the Other’ and exists in isolation from mainstream media.”⁶ Jorge Ramos, a journalist for the American Spanish-language broadcaster Univision, makes a similar point, saying that while members of many communities rely on diverse community media to be informed, defining him as an ethnic media journalist marginalizes him and makes him feel like an outsider.⁷ Still, Ramos says, diverse community media is essential because “We don’t just report the facts, we also understand journalism as a public service.”

Similarly, Dave Steward III, founder of Lion Forge Animation (an American company that produced the Academy Award-winning short *Hair Love*), argues that having production and distribution companies owned by members of historically marginalized communities is essential to achieving true, accurate representation: “‘It’s representation on the screen. It’s representation on the producing side of things. But then also, and I think what’s always missed, is, there needs to be representation in the executive teams that have the power to be able to push the content through. Because if you have content that’s, let’s say, is from a Black creator and has a Black cast, but you have non-Black executives overseeing the projects... there are stories of those executives using their power to change that content based off of their perception and portrayal of a particular group.”⁸ The same is true in Canada: Nathalie Younglai, founder of BIPOC TV and Film, has argued that large production companies discourage meaningful representations of diversity by defining “Canadian” as meaning “White,” saying “How is this Canadian? How does someone in Saskatchewan relate to this?” Because it is typically cheaper to license foreign content than produce it locally, when diversity is represented on Canadian screens it typically reflects American communities.⁹

There’s no question that Canadian media needs to better reflect our increasingly multicultural community, not to mention recognize other minorities such as 2SLGBTQINA+ people and persons with disabilities. There’s also no question that some outlets, such as APTN, do a surprisingly good job with limited resources. But those limited resources are the bottom line: none of these outlets are sure to survive or remain in the hands of their communities. Between 2010 and 2020, the number of Chinese-language newspapers in the Greater Toronto Area dropped from 30 to two.¹⁰ Many publications that have survived, from the 2SLBTQINA+-focused *Xtra Magazine* to *Sing Tao Daily*, Canada’s largest Chinese-language newspaper, have moved online-only as a cost-cutting measure. While digital distribution has allowed diverse communities to produce podcasts, streaming services and other programming that wasn’t possible before, it also is unable to reach people who don’t have a reliable internet connection or lack skills to find and access it.

5 Yu, S (2018). *Diasporic Media Beyond the Diaspora*. UBC Press.

6 Gerson, D & Rodriguez, C (2018). *Going forward: How ethnic and mainstream media can collaborate in changing communities*. American Press Institute.

7 Laporte, N. (2020) The Black owned animation studio behind *Hair Love* is teaching Hollywood how to be authentic. *Fast Company*.

8 Roberts, Soraya. (2022) The Superficial Diversity of Canadian TV. *The Walrus*.

9 Liu, Scarlett. (2022) ‘Entering a new era’: What is the way forward for Chinese news outlets after *Sing Tao Daily* ceases publication? *The Toronto Star*.

Questions

1. What reasons does the article give for why it's important to members of diverse communities to make their own media and own the companies that make it? (Give at least two.)
2. According to the article, what are some of the drawbacks of, or concerns about, diverse media? (Identify at least two.)
3. What challenges does the article say are faced by diverse media companies? (Identify at least two.)
4. What do you think Canadian governments and broadcasters should do to make TV and other media more representative of Canadian diversity?