



LESSON PLAN

Level:	Grades 9 to 12
About the Author:	Matthew Johnson, Director of Education, MediaSmarts
Duration:	2½ to 4 hours

This lesson was produced with the financial support of the Department of Justice Canada's Justice Partnership and Innovation Program.

Diversity and Media Ownership

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 minority-focused 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 minority-focused and mainstream media in reflecting and promoting Canadian multiculturalism, and changes in minority 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 minority 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*
- *Minority Media*

Procedure

Begin by writing on the board “Media are created to 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.

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.)

Distribute the article *A Black Spot on a Snow-white Field* and the *Minority Media* 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 minority groups have economic control of production and broadcasting? Might Michaëlle Jean’s experiences have been different if she had been working at a minority-owned outlet such as OMNI TV? 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: Minority-owned media is needed to reflect Canadian diversity
- Be It Resolved That: Minority-owned media will lead to a segregated society
- Be It Resolved That: Minority-owned media will result in a more tolerant society
- Be It Resolved That: Minority-owned media lets minority groups bring their own biases to Canada
- 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

Star of the documentary *Tropique Nord* (Tropic North), journalist Michaëlle Jean discusses a reality that is sometimes painful, always sensitive: the place of Blacks in Quebec.

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..."

Busy with courses at the Université de Montréal as a respected literature professor in her field, she can allow herself to be independent and escape this discussion that took a turn to... a dark place.

Haitian by birth and a full-fledged Quebecoise, Michaëlle Jean did not need Radio-Canada to exist.

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.

“Jean-Daniel said to me: ‘Michaëlle, by participating in this film, I don’t want to perceive the journalist, but the Black woman, with emotion and truth.’”

She had just had a miscarriage and lost her first child. “So this documentary became therapy for Jean-Daniel and me. We were mourning.”

This child to whom she would have quickly told, without hesitation, that she is a full-fledged Quebecois. “I can no longer take being asked where I come from...”

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.

Her father, who Michaëlle admits was “a man forever broken by torture”, leaves them. She never sees him again. It’s now been 15 years. “I understood that my father has been destroyed to the point of no longer having any energy for his family. One out of every two marriages falls apart after exile.”

Michaëlle lives with her mother and sister. A brilliant student, she studies literature. All doors open to her.

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.

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.

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."

Tropique Nord provokes, disturbs. It is a film that every journalist should see.

"Yes, there are racists in Quebec, but that doesn't mean that Quebec is racist," Michaëlle Jean explains.

Quebecois identity itself is examined in this documentary. "Why is there this gap in the collective memory around a Black presence that dates back more than 300 years?" Michaëlle Jean asks. "Have historians not massaged, if not masked, the slave history of New France and Canada?" she adds in her presentation of the film. "Did they not quickly assert the 'whiteness' of this country, which only snow can guarantee, by pretending that Blacks have only been here for 30 or 40 years at most? This curious omission means Quebec is rejecting part of its own culture and can therefore not recognize the profound causes of racism..."

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!"

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?
5. Since this article was written, Michaëlle Jean has become one of Canada's best-loved Governor Generals. How much do you think has changed for African-Canadian journalists?



Minority Media

On the surface, the state of minority-focused media in Canada looks rosy. Copies of *Xtra*, a tabloid newspaper aimed at the gay and lesbian community, are available in kiosks across Toronto, Vancouver and Ottawa; TV channels such as Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) and OMNI deliver programming for aboriginals and minority ethnic groups; and newspapers in Cantonese, Punjabi, Spanish and other minority languages are common sights across the country. 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 minority 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 minority media. Since it first began broadcasting in 1999, the channel has become an essential way for members of Canada's far-flung Aboriginal communities – not to mention Aboriginals living outside of those communities – to stay connected with Aboriginal 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. The problem is APTN's programming: though it offers an impressive number of shows created for and by the Aboriginal community, its primetime schedule is dominated by imports such as "Northern Exposure" and "Young Riders," American-made TV shows with a small number of Aboriginal cast members, as well as American-made movies with little or no relevance to the Aboriginal community such as "Commando" and "Miss Congeniality."¹

APTN is hardly alone in this – in fact, it has almost certainly been the most successful at creating original content for the community it serves. Nearly all Canadian channels that cater to minority groups depend heavily on imported content, and what original content is created is often of poor quality. Fairchild, for instance – the largest Chinese-language news broadcaster in Canada – depends almost entirely on footage bought from other sources and provides little or no analysis of news. In some cases there are 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.²

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.³

A larger concern with minority media is that it may not, in fact, help to make Canada a more multicultural nation. Members of minority communities are increasingly turning away from mainstream media: a 2009 study found that Chinese speakers in Vancouver – including those who were perfectly fluent in English – preferred Chinese-language newspapers to English ones by a margin of two to one or more⁴ – echoing a similar study which found that half of all Chinese-Canadians read exclusively Chinese-language newspapers and magazines.⁵ That suggests not only that

1 APTN Schedule, accessed January 27, 2011.

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

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

4 Innovative Research Group Inc., "Reaching the Chinese Community." <http://www.innovativeresearch.ca/100201_SUCCESS%20media%20event.pdf>

5 Ipsos Reid, *2007 Canadian Chinese Media Monitor*, 2007.

English-language media are doing a poor job of serving minority audiences, but that these audiences are isolating themselves from mainstream Canadian culture. As well, the focus on media by and for minorities 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.⁶

There's no question that Canadian media needs to better reflect our increasingly multicultural community, not to mention recognize other minorities such as gays and lesbians 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. APTN, whose presence on the dial is guaranteed by the CRTC, lost its federal government funding in 2010. OUTtv has faced financial difficulties throughout its existence, finally being sold in 2006 to Shavick Entertainment⁷ – a development which helps to explain its near-constant airing of *Breaker High* and *The New Addams Family*, shows with little discernible gay or lesbian content but which are produced by Shavick Entertainment.⁸ The disabled community, meanwhile, is served by just one quarterly magazine, *Abilities*, described by its publisher as being perpetually in danger of bankruptcy.⁹ With almost no coverage of disability issues in the mainstream media – CBC's *Moving On*, the only national program about persons with disabilities, was canceled in 2007 – if *Abilities* closes, a community that makes up twelve per cent of the Canadian population will go unserved.

Questions

1. According to the article, what problems are there with the programming on minority-focused TV stations? (Identify at least two.)
2. What problems does the article say there are with minority-focused journalism? (Identify at least two.)
3. Why does the article suggest that minority-focused media may actually be making Canadian society less multicultural?
4. What do you think Canadian governments and broadcasters should do to make TV and other media more representative of Canadian diversity?

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

7 "OUTtv." *Wikipedia*, last edited January 8, 2011. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/OUTtv>>

8 "Shavick Entertainment." *Wikipedia*, last edited March 13, 2010. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shavick_Entertainment>

9 "Crippled!"