

Race & Politics Special Report

Journalists inherit ‘institutional blindspots’ that cloud coverage of race in politics, says media expert

When confronted with their biases, Prof. Tolley says journalists she interviewed for her research tried to explain away differences in their framing of a candidate’s electability.

BY BEATRICE PAEZ

Increasing the diversity of newsrooms isn’t a cure-all for improving political coverage of racialized people, says a media expert, who argues that journalists often end up inheriting the institutional blindspots of the outlets they work for.

“Even journalists of colour sometimes will produce coverage that differentiates and treats white and racialized subjects differently,” said Erin Tolley, political science professor at University of Toronto, in a phone interview. “Journalists are a product of the institutions that see whiteness as a norm. It’s not a problem of individual journalists.”

Prof. Tolley spent four years surveying the mainstream media’s coverage of race in politics with data from the 2008 federal election, including how its depiction of non-incumbent, visible-minority candidates’ viability compared to non-incumbent, white candidates.

“White, straight men are still seen as people who deserve to be in institutions of power, who naturally fit into those roles. ... [Journalists] come at stories about racialized subjects with a different standard,” she said. “They present the white, non-incumbent candidates as more politically viable, more qualified to win, than racialized non-incumbents.”

These unconscious biases towards visible-minority candidates tend to disappear from coverage, she said, when they occupy political office.

Andrew Griffith, former director general at Citizenship and Immigration Canada during the Harper era, echoed Prof. Tolley’s assertion that improving diversity within one’s ranks doesn’t necessarily translate into a diversity of thought, particularly when the culture of the institution in question might promote conformity. “You had management teams that had a degree of diversity, but the corporate culture is about conforming. Did those diverse people bring a diverse perspective? You didn’t necessarily see that,” Mr. Griffith said of his own experience in government.

Since retiring from public service, Mr. Griffith has now developed a tool with Mirems—a company that monitors and translates coverage from ethnic



Hill media scrum Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in Ottawa. Journalists are a product of the institutions that see whiteness as a norm, says University of Toronto professor Erin Tolley. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

media sources—aimed at providing context about how issues are being covered in diaspora communities. The online tool is at Diversityvotes.ca. For journalists, he said, it can serve as a resource to deepen their understanding of the complexity of ethnic communities and to demystify perceptions that there’s a monolithic ethnic vote. “There’s a diversity with the diversity, and simply labelling or assuming people within a com-

illustrates how journalists are instructed to think about the subject of racial stereotypes, Prof. Tolley said. In both the previous and latest editions of the guide, one measure for determining whether it’s “pertinent” to mention a person’s race is if one is reporting on an “accomplishment unusual in a particular race.” Thinking of issues of race in those terms, she said, shows “some outdated thinking about race and racial

characteristics. In defending CP’s standards, the guide’s editor, James McCarten, told her in an interview for the book that the word “unusual” may not be the right word, but he stood by the guideline, saying, “journalism oftentimes is all about firsts” and “historically relevant” events.



Ryan McMahon, host of Canadaland’s *Thunder Bay* podcast series, says having firsthand exposure to the subtle ways that racism manifests itself is helpful in effectively naming racism. Photograph courtesy of Ryan McMahon

munity are representative of an entire community is dangerous,” Mr. Griffith said.

When confronted with their biases, Prof. Tolley said, journalists she interviewed—who spoke on the condition of confidentiality—tried to explain away differences in their framing of a candidate’s electability. For example, she observed that non-white candidates were more seen as long-shot candidates compared to their white counterparts. They insisted that any differences stemmed from a candidate’s level of experience, not stereotypes, even as she pointed out that those factors had been controlled for in the research. (The findings were published in her book, *Framed: Media and the Coverage of Race in Canadian Politics*.)

The Canadian Press style guide’s—the definitive handbook that many reporters have copies of handy—section on race

Efforts to deepen coverage of race, politics

Ryan McMahon, the host of Canadaland’s *Thunder Bay* podcast series, said that his Anishinaabe identity, coupled with the privilege of not immediately being seen as Indigenous because of his skin colour, informs his approach to reporting on issues of race.

In setting out to tell the story of why Thunder Bay has the highest hate-crime rates in Canada and why there’s deep distrust in the city’s institutions, Mr. McMahon said, the “one thing” the podcast got right was getting someone like him to report on the city. Having firsthand exposure to the subtle ways that racism manifests itself, he said, helps in identifying and effectively naming racism. In his hometown of Fort Frances, Ont., for example, it was “rare”

to see a “brown face” behind the cash register.

“The way I experience racism is very different than someone who is visibly native. I can walk down the street and not be identified as Indigenous, so my experience is very different,” Mr. McMahon said. “[Racism in Canada] is often quiet, but aggressive, unspoken. ... The kind of racism we’re talking about isn’t necessarily a Nazi skinhead, KKK apologist. It can often be an unconscious ignorance, with deeply held misperceptions. People hold on really tightly to stereotypes.”

The groundwork laid by journalists such as Mr. McMahon and *Toronto Star*’s Tanya Talaga in chronicling the systemic racism in Thunder Bay that underpins its public institutions—and the national conversation that followed—helped open up the space for *The Globe and Mail* to establish a temporary presence in the northwestern Ontario city earlier this year. The paper had also done extensive coverage of Adam Capay, the Lac Seul First Nation man who spent about four years in solitary confinement.

David Walmsley, *The Globe*’s editor-in-chief, explained in a staff memo that temporarily setting up shop in Thunder Bay, in an election year, presents this country a “chance to look inward and to encourage improvement in areas where we all know improvement needs to be made.”

Having spent more than a decade reporting on Indigenous issues, veteran Hill reporter Gloria Galloway was among the first reporters assigned to live for a couple of months in Thunder Bay, as part of the paper’s effort to deepen

its coverage of the systemic racism in the city. *The Globe* does not have an Indigenous reporter on its staff, so it had a “limited pool” to choose from for the first stint, Ms. Galloway said.

That *The Globe*, the country’s national newspaper, still doesn’t have an Indigenous columnist or staff reporter is a reflection of how the “markers” for improving diversity don’t appear to have moved much in Canadian media, said Mr. McMahon, who added that there are a bunch of journalists who are closer to the story. He said he’s been disappointed by *The Globe*’s coverage of Thunder Bay, pointing to the first piece released that gave an extensive overview, in interactive form, of the issue, with interviews from a cast of characters in the city. “So far, we’ve seen a Thunder Bay 101 piece. I understand why they had to do that, but it was a surface-level piece, a collection of stories that other journalists have already told,” Mr. McMahon said.

Ms. Galloway acknowledged that there’s a “huge learning curve” that comes with reporting on Indigenous issues, as a white woman. But, over time, through her reporting, she said, she’s developed a “sensitivity” to covering issues of race and has developed friendships and earned the respect of Indigenous peoples: “Every year, I’ve learned how much more I don’t know.”

Ms. Galloway said *The Globe*’s decision to dedicate resources to cover Thunder Bay was not an “insignificant financial commitment” for the paper, particularly in an election year. “I was pulled out of the Ottawa bureau for months. Losing a body in Ottawa for us is very difficult,” she said.

But there was an acknowledgment that shining a light on the situation could help elevate the issue to become part of the election discussion. “We’re not activist



Globe and Mail reporter Gloria Galloway has been covering Indigenous issues for more than a decade. Photograph courtesy of Twitter

journalists, but certainly, there’s a sense in *The Globe* culture that shining a light on things that are wrong and having corrective action is [important],” Ms. Galloway said.

Though Ms. Galloway is retiring next week, having decided to take a voluntary buyout, she said, the paper is committed to having a presence in Thunder Bay through the summer and fall.

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