

News Discourse about Aboriginal Self-Governance in 1990s British Columbia

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Abstract

In recent years, the scope of news discourse about aboriginal issues has broadened and the tactics for managing relations with aboriginal people have become more varied and sophisticated. News media tend to frame aboriginal self-governance issues in ways that protect dominant interests and signify aboriginal people as a threat. However, discourse has evolved to include a wider range of actors, whose voices were largely excluded in the first half of the twentieth century. While the media still offer one-dimensional, stereotypical images of aboriginal people and issues to audiences, the incorporation of the voices of aboriginal people and their allies into discourse presents opportunities for challenging dominant representations of aboriginal self-governance.

I Introduction

Understanding news discourse on aboriginal-non-aboriginal relations is a first step towards situating aboriginal policy questions within a contemporary socio-political context. The focus of this research is news discourse about two issues – authority over child welfare matters and control over land and resources - that have significant implications for power relations between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people. While control over land and resources has obvious and direct economic implications for both aboriginal and non-aboriginal people, the field of child welfare may be seen as a symbolic battleground where the inherent right and ability of aboriginal people to govern themselves and exercise control over their own lives is at stake.

The writer examines select newspaper coverage of two “flashpoints” in the history of aboriginal – non-aboriginal relations in British Columbia, Canada:

1. The 1991 BC Supreme Court decision in the “Gitksan-Wet’suwet’en” case
2. A community panel’s 1992 report on aboriginal child welfare

One of the main findings of this study is that, while late twentieth century news media offer *racialized*, hegemonic interpretations of aboriginal issues to their audiences, the incorporation of aboriginal voices into news discourse presents opportunities for modifying and even challenging dominant representations of aboriginal people and issues.

II Methodology

Analytical framework

Methods of discourse analysis are used to analyze news texts about two flashpoints in recent aboriginal-non-aboriginal relations in BC. This approach, which focuses on how meaning is structured in news text, is “essentially interdisciplinary, combining linguistic, discourse analytical, psychological, and sociological analysis” (van Dijk, 1988, 15). Discourse analysis may be regarded as an “extended interrogation of the text, the intentions of the author, and the response of its readers” (Nesbitt-Larking, 2001, 257). Because it allows for such a “finer-grained [sic] analysis of the subtle manipulation of images and the variations in meanings that result” (Furniss, 2001, 33), this methodology is particularly well-suited to studying the treatment of people of colour and other minority populations in the press. A number of recent studies of Canadian news media coverage of aboriginal issues have employed discourse analysis (*see* Lambertus, 2004, Henry & Tator, 2002, and Furniss, 2001).

In this paper, particular attention is paid to the following features of news discourse:

Relevance Structuring or “Fronting” refers to the tendency of reporters to place the most “important” information in headlines or lead paragraphs of news stories;

Semantical Strategies include *lexical style* or word choice, syntax, the use of *exaggeration*, *emotional vehemence* and other techniques;

Argumentative/Rhetorical Strategies include the use of *oppositions* (such as *us vs. them*), *equations* (such as *good citizen = good Christian*), selective use of *sources*, *minimization* and a variety of other strategies.

As well, methods of *frame analysis* (Gitlin, 1980, Fairclough, 1989) are used to elucidate some of the underlying assumptions of dominant news discourse. Gitlin describes news frames as “principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of tacit little theories of what exists, what happens, and what matter . . . that routinely organize discourse” (6).

Data

In total, 23 news stories are examined in this project. The 1991 BC Supreme Court decision in the “Gitksan-Wet’suwet’en” case – attracted intense media scrutiny. A total of 19 articles appeared in *The Vancouver Sun*, *The Province* and *The Times-Colonist* on the day of the decision and during the three days that followed. A number of these news stories were quite lengthy, the longest being over 1600 words. By contrast, only four articles about the 1992 report on aboriginal child welfare appeared in the days following its release in BC’s three major daily newspapers. All of these news items were quite short, averaging about 440 words each.

News stories from 1991 and 1992 issues of *The Vancouver Sun* and *The Province* were accessed through Canadian Newsstand, an on-line full-text database. This database contains all news items from every issue of 17 major daily Canadian newspapers as well as *The National Post* beginning as early as 1985. This database permits the use of a variety of search parameters such as date, author, and headline as well as by key words that appear anywhere in headlines or text. Searches generate full-text versions of articles, although not in their original format. Additionally, a summary and word count of each article is included.

III Two Case Studies in 1990s British Columbia

1. 1991 BC Supreme Court decision in the *Delgamuukw vs. The Queen* case

Background

In 1987, hereditary chiefs from the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en First Nations of northwestern BC took the Province of BC to court claiming ownership and jurisdiction over 57,000 square kilometers of their traditional territory. Their case was based on the argument that their right to the land had not been extinguished either by the British Government, during the years that BC was a colony, or by the governments of Canada or BC after BC came into confederation as a province in 1871. The case was decided on Friday, March 8, 1991, when BC Supreme Court Chief Justice Allan McEachern ruled that "aboriginal rights exist only at the pleasure of the crown" and that the Crown may extinguish such rights whenever it clearly indicates its intention to do so. In his lengthy judgment, McEachern described the lives of pre-contact aboriginal people as "nasty, brutish and short."

This judgment was widely condemned as based on a flawed interpretation of history and ethnocentric assumptions by a broad cross-section of BC society including church groups, trade unions, opposition politicians, academics from a variety of disciplines, along with local, provincial, and national aboriginal organizations. Subsequently, the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en First Nations appealed the decision to the BC Court of Appeal where in 1993 the lower court's ruling on the extinguishment of aboriginal title was overturned – it was determined that aboriginal rights in the territory had not been "extinguished" by the Crown. This case was

ultimately appealed to the Supreme Court of Canada,¹ which ruled in late 1997 that aboriginal rights do exist and that they include a right to the “land itself” – in other words, aboriginal title is more than simply the right to hunt, fish and gather.²

Newspaper Articles

The Vancouver Sun

DATE	HEADLINE	WORD COUNT
1. March 8, 1991	Indians Lose Case: They don't possess exclusive title to lands in BC, chief justice rules	1400
2. “	Judge firm on rule of law	851
3. March 9, 1991	Vigorous confrontation likely, Indians say	1656
4. “	Tears, vow to fight on greet ruling in Smithers (Series: Judgment Day)	717
5. “	(no headline – sidebar to “Judgment Day” series)	588
6. “	Judge offers insight to those deciding next round (Series: Judgment Day)	919
7. “	(no headline – sidebar to “Judgment Day” series)	823
8. “	Foresters surprised, pleased: Judge's Gitksan ruling greeted with caution	848
9. “	Death of a Dream (Series: Judgment Day)	1308
10. “	Court's Decision sound in law	353
11. “	Common-sense cited in decision: Fisheries Council boss queries Ottawa's recent shift on policy (Series: Judgment Day)	597
12. “	Colonial mentality criticized (Series: Judgment Day)	471

The Province

DATE	HEADLINE	WORD COUNT
13. March 8, 1991	Land judgment today: Experts expect Indians to win	216
14. March 10, 1991	Industry cautious on land-claims judgment	499
15. March 11, 1991	Think about us for a change, argue Indians: Time non-natives quit concerning themselves with themselves	479
16. “	Appeal may bypass highest BC court; Appeal fast-track sought to bypass BC Court	326

¹ While this decision had profound implications for the land rights of aboriginal people in BC and for treaty negotiations in the province, no decision was rendered on the actual Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en land claim. The court deemed that a new trial would be necessary in order to decide this.

² Coincidentally, another sensational story involving land in the province was vying with this case for media scrutiny in 1991 – the controversial sale of a BC Premier's Vancouver residence to Hong Kong businesswoman Fay Leung: “Leung has since been convicted of real estate fraud, and Premier Vander Zalm resigned in 1992 when it was decided that he had, indeed, been in a conflict of interest position in relation to the sale of Fantasy Gardens” (Culhane, 1998, 256-257).

Times-Colonist

DATE	HEADLINE	WORD COUNT
17. March 8, 1991	Natives, politicians await key land ruling	850*Ψ
18. March 9, 1991	Gitxsan-Wet'suwet'en: majority still rules	510*
19. “	Decision shocks Indian leaders (continued as “Native Anger” on p. A6)	945*

* approximation

Ψ incomplete article

2. Community panel's report on aboriginal child welfare in BC (1992)

Background

In 1991, the NDP Minister of Social Services, Joan Smallwood, appointed two community panels – one aboriginal and one non-aboriginal – to review child welfare policy and practice in the province.³ The appointment of the aboriginal community panel came in response to lobbying by aboriginal communities for the creation of an aboriginal committee, which would produce a separate report from the non-aboriginal panel. Many aboriginal people believed that the existing child welfare legislation, the *Family and Child Services Act*, did not serve the interests of aboriginal people.

After holding discussions with aboriginal communities around the province, the aboriginal community panel released its report on December 3, 1992. *Liberating our Children, Liberating our Nations* recommended a radical new approach to child welfare policy for aboriginal people:

one in which the distinctive aboriginal historical experience would be recognized and an aboriginal right to self-determination would be acknowledged. This included recognizing that aboriginal children constituted the majority (51.6 per cent) of all children in care by court order (British Columbia 1992a, I). For the future, policies were proposed that began with the principle of respecting aboriginal communities. (Armitage, 1998, 100)

The government responded by drafting new legislation that incorporated a number of the aboriginal panel's key recommendations. The *Child, Family and Community Services Act* (Bill 45) contained provisions that made preservation of cultural identity a priority for aboriginal

³ Armitage points out that, in British Columbia, policy changes in the field of child welfare usually come about as a result of either judicial inquiry or community review (94).

children. However, the report of a judicial inquiry into the death of a child in care, released in November 1995, recommended that these provisions not be proclaimed into law.⁴ As a result, many of the key recommendations of the aboriginal panel were not included in the stripped down version of the legislation that was proclaimed into law in 1996.

Newspaper Articles

Times-Colonist

DATE	HEADLINE	WORD COUNT
1. December 3, 1992	Major change urged for BC's child services	350
2. December 5, 1992	Native leader urges caution on child welfare changes	705

The Province

DATE	HEADLINE	WORD COUNT
3. December 4, 1992	Law to focus on family	334

The Vancouver Sun

DATE	HEADLINE	WORD COUNT
4. December 4, 1992	Minister promises to trim incidents of removing children from families	363

⁴ The report of the Gove Inquiry questioned the philosophical direction charted by the draft legislation. In particular, Judge Gove's report was critical of its emphasis on support services and the proposed use of the "family group conference" to resolve child protection issues. In June 1995, the guiding principles of Bill 45 (*Child, Family and Community Services Act*) were changed as Gove had insisted: "the family group conference not be used for children who are in need of protection" (Gove 1995, Vol. II, 218). As well, Gove's recommendations resulted in the language of the legislation being changed so that the importance of kinship for aboriginal people was de-emphasized (Armitage, 1998, 99).

IV Analysis of News Discourse

One of the most significant findings of this study is the degree to which the broader features of news discourse about aboriginal people have remained constant over the last century and half. In the 1990s, aboriginal issues were framed, much as they were in colonial times, in ways that protect dominant interests and signify aboriginal people as a threat to such interests.

Traces of two primary news frames associated with 19th Century colonial newspapers – *Aboriginal People as Inferior* and *Heroic White Man Saving Primitive Aboriginal People*⁵ – were found in 1990s news discourse about aboriginal issues. A third frame, *the triumph of reason over emotion*, dominates news discourse in the two cases under study. This frame is so pervasive and overarching that it nearly reaches the archetypal proportions of what Yellowhorn (2003) terms a *meta-narrative*.⁶

On the other hand, some of the more flagrantly racist features of earlier news discourse have disappeared or been subsumed into the seemingly more neutral, though ethnocentric, assumption that Euro-Canadian conceptions of reason, science and logic must necessarily be regarded as superior to feelings, emotions and beliefs. Some would argue that the press has adjusted its strategies of “political containment” (Furniss, 2001, 27). However, it is clear that news discourse about aboriginal people is no longer uncontested terrain.

Historically, aboriginal people have always taken an interest in what was being written about them and attempted to set record straight. However, their voices were excluded or

⁵ In *Historical Representations of Aboriginal People*, Harding (2005) found that these two news frames dominated colonial discourse about aboriginal people in the 1860s press in the colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia.

⁶ The *triumph of reason over emotion* frame is akin to the meta-narrative of the “Grand Morality Plan” which involves an epic struggle between forces of good (White people) and evil (aboriginal people). Yellowhorn contends that this meta-narrative has informed relations between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people since first contact.

marginalized in news discourse about aboriginal issues. Aboriginal sources were rarely quoted and news stories were directed to non-aboriginal audiences. However, towards the end of the 19th century, this began to change. By 1887, aboriginal leaders were directly confronting elected government officials to express their “bitterness at being depicted in White newspapers as violent and unpredictable” (Tennant, 1990, 56). The rise of pan-Indianism in the late 1960s was associated with a recognition, by aboriginal leaders, of the necessity of influencing public opinion through the media. By 1972, Aboriginal people in British Columbia had a “thriving set of Indian publications” (165) and perhaps, partly in response to Aboriginal pressure and competition, the *Vancouver Sun* became the first paper in the province to devote a journalist solely to covering Aboriginal issues. In their protests in the 1980s, Aboriginal leaders “actively sought the understanding of non-Indian editors and journalists in order to influence white public opinion” (208). Most modern aboriginal organizations have communications or media relations branches which systematically attempt to influence reporting on aboriginal issues and counteract “bias” in the press. To this end, strategies employed by organizations such as the Assembly of First Nations and the Native Action Committee on the Media include “petitioning the courts, lobbying ‘power-brokers,’ and utilizing government regulatory bodies whenever possible” (Henry & Tator, 2002, 203). These efforts by aboriginal people have helped to create some space, however limited, for aboriginal voice in news discourse and have contributed to forcing some of the more flagrantly racist views about aboriginal people “underground.”

Although the views of aboriginal people are now routinely included in the news, their impact is diluted through techniques of *deflection*, *de-contextualization*, *misrepresentation* and *tokenization*. For example, while some aboriginal sources are quoted in news stories about a ground-breaking report on aboriginal child welfare in BC, the majority of quotations used are

those that support “concerns” about the report or promote stereotypical representations of aboriginal people. *Liberating our children, liberating our nations* (1992) provides a strong critique of the cultural chauvinism embedded in aboriginal child welfare policies and practices. Yet the criticisms contained in the report are virtually ignored in the articles surveyed; in fact, its main recommendations, and the context in which it was commissioned, are not reported on at all. Rather, news reports on this issue suggests either that the changes are dangerous and radical, without providing any details, or fall back on venerable stereotypes, such as *aboriginal-as-victim*. News discourse about this issue minimizes the importance of the aboriginal report, reports on it in a de-contextualized fashion, and deflects attention away from the critique of racist societal structures that is the report’s primary focus.

A similar strategy of deflection is apparent in news discourse about the 1991 BC Supreme Court decision in the *Delgamuukw vs. The Queen* case. Framing the story as the *triumph of reason over emotion* diverts attention away from widespread criticisms of the judicial ruling, one that was eventually overturned by the BC Court of Appeal.⁷ In his ruling, Chief Justice McEachern’s recasts the fundamental question put before him – that of aboriginal rights – into one of “social and economic problems” (Monture-Angus, 1999, 51) and the print media do not question this. Reportage on this issue, unlike in the case of the aboriginal child welfare report, includes extensive quotations of a wide variety of aboriginal sources. However, the fact that most of these quotations focus on the emotional reaction of aboriginal people to this decision or on their potential for violence serves to reinforce stereotypes of aboriginal people as “emotional,” “volatile” or “war-like.” In reportage on this ruling, voices of aboriginal people are *selectively* incorporated into news discourse in a way that supports the dominant frame.

⁷ In 1997, the Supreme Court of Canada upheld the BC Court of Appeal’s decision and ruled that aboriginal title *does* exist and that it includes more than simply the rights to hunt, fish and gather.

An exception to this pattern is an opinion piece, written by Nisga'a leader Frank Calder, which suggests the possibility of an alternative news frame – namely, that of the “colonial mindset” underlying a judgment that proceeds from the assumption that pre-contact aboriginal life was, to quote Chief Justice McEachern, “nasty, brutish and short.” In spite of the flagrantly discriminatory and offensive language contained in McEachern’s ruling, and the widespread criticism that it received at the time, questioning the colonial assumptions underlying the ruling never became part of the dominant news frame. Calder’s article may be seen as *The Vancouver Sun*’s attempt to convey the views of a “token Indian.” The story is prefaced with a brief biography of the author, which documents his long history of involvement in aboriginal issues, effectively establishing him as an “expert.” However, he is not constructed as an impartial expert of undisclosed ethnic origins as is the case with Chief Justice McEachern, but rather as an *aboriginal* authority – that is, someone who brings a significant bias to bear on this issue. Since “Indians” were defined as one of the parties involved in this case, the conclusions reached by this aboriginal *activist* might be regarded by readers with skepticism or even dismissed outright as “sour grapes.” After all, Calder’s article – an *opinion* piece – is the only one published in the 3 days following the decision that was written by an aboriginal person and the views expressed in it are generally not reflected in news stories written by other authors. Readers may regard Calder’s condemnation of the ruling as predictable and easily dismissed. Thus, through a technique of *tokenization*, an alternative critique of this ruling is consigned to the margins of news discourse.

While the emergence of Aboriginal voices coincides with the decline of obvious displays of racism in the press, some features of earlier news discourse have survived intact late into the twentieth century. In particular, there is ample evidence of binary thinking in news coverage of

aboriginal issues. In colonial times, discourse focused on two groups, “settlers,” usually of European origin, and “Indians.” A wide range of oppositions emerged in the press, beginning with the most basic ones, such *us vs. them* and *civilized vs. savage* (Harding, 2005). Many of these oppositions are also found in 1990s news coverage. As well, a number of particularly damaging stereotypes of aboriginal people, such as *aboriginal-as-warrior*, are present in news texts.

One of the effects of casting news stories in binary terms is to limit potential avenues of audience interpretation in news discourse. Lambertus (2004) observes that polarized news reporting of conflicts between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people predisposes non-aboriginal Canadians who may be unaware of the “historic context of disputes, are otherwise ambivalent, or have already come to negative conclusions about Native protests” to be unsympathetic to aboriginal causes (201). This type of reporting mitigates against a nuanced reading of complex issues and events.

Alongside binary representations of issues and events involving aboriginal people, the press offers a unitary *prescription* to “aboriginal problems,” namely, *treat everyone the same*. This contrasts sharply with the prescription offered by colonial newspapers, which was *treat aboriginal people differently* from Europeans.⁸ In the late 20th century, biological explanations of aboriginal “inferiority” had long been discredited and society was multicultural, secular and democratic. Moral relativism and cultural pluralism had supplanted 19th Century notions of moral absolutism and racial hierarchy (Berkhofer, 1978, 27). In the 1990s, the solution to the aboriginal problem is simple: treat them like other Canadians. According to this thinking, the

⁸ While the press sometimes criticized the colonial government’s treatment of aboriginal people as unfair and even immoral, the solution it proposed involved assigning aboriginal people less rights than settlers, forcing them onto tiny reserves, and legislating the mandatory attendance of aboriginal children at residential schools designed to remake the “Indian” after a European image (Harding, 2005):

main cause of problems with aboriginal people is the years of “special” treatment that aboriginal people have received.

The Canadian legal system may be seen to embody this view of Western egalitarian society. In news discourse about the *Delgamuukw vs. The Queen* case, the BC Supreme Court is constructed as the final arbiter of the “truth” about aboriginal claims. Since everyone is “equal” before the law; this system cannot be racist since it recognizes no differences among the individuals who stand before it. This proposition typifies a response of denial by modern elites to racism that is couched in terms of tolerance and equality:

Much elite text and talk about minorities may occasionally seem to express tolerance, understanding, acceptance, or humanitarian world views, although such discourse is contradicted by a situation of structural inequality largely caused or condoned by these elites (van Dijk, 1993, 6)

News discourse about the *Delgamuukw vs. The Queen decision* ignores issues of structural inequality, ethnocentrism and the long history of oppression of aboriginal people by the state. A feature of contemporary journalistic writing is its tendency to fixate on the extreme socio-economic conditions of colonized peoples, while simultaneously, exhibiting a general *amnesia* about colonial history and its connection to the current state of affairs:

poverty exists simply as a given condition of the melodrama, created *ex machina* and unrelated, except for the purposes of dramatic contrast, to the prosperity that thrives on other shores – unrelated, that is, to colonial history, including its post-colonial form (Spurr, 1993, 48)

The strategy of invoking the principle of *identical treatment as essential to the maintenance of a modern democratic state* requires that the present be unyoked from the past.

However, the “old racism” is very much alive and well in Chief Justice McEachern’s ruling in the *Delgamuukw vs. The Queen* case:

Much of what Judge McEachern wrote about Native culture in that decision could as easily have been written by another judge one hundred, two hundred, three hundred years ago....Because Native North Americans were so different, had so few of the “badges of civilization” as Judge McEachern calls them, it was seriously debated whether they could properly be called human beings at all. (Francis, 1992, 6).

In this case, the role of the press in promoting racism is passive rather than active. By not fostering a critique of the racism inherent in this decision, the press reproduces it in its coverage. In many news stories, lengthy excerpts from the ruling, often presented uncritically, are juxtaposed with long passages praising McEachern as reasonable, diligent, impartial and fair.

The nature of the case and the magnitude of its consequences – economic and political – may partially account for the exceptionally *racialized* news coverage that accompanied the ruling. While the paramount fear of settlers in colonial times may have been the military threat posed by the aboriginal people who surrounded and outnumbered them, in the modern era, the greatest fear of non-aboriginal Canadians may be of aboriginal victory in the courtroom. The outcomes of *their* claims in *our* courts have profound economic implications for aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians alike. Other research suggests that when significant economic resources are stake, news media tend to report news about aboriginal issues in ways that “protect established economic/political interests by rejecting Aboriginal claims” (Furniss, 2001, 29).

Unlike the *Delgamuukw vs. The Queen* case, the release of an aboriginal child welfare report in 1992 did not *directly* involve substantial economic resources. However, the aboriginal panel’s report emphasizes the crucial relationship between aboriginal control over child welfare

and the quest for self-government. The issue of self-government has clear implications for the distribution of economic resources between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people.

By ignoring this aspect of the report, the press silences an important aboriginal critique of an instrument of colonization – the child welfare system – that has inflicted and, in some cases, is still inflicting, enormous damage to the identity, culture and language of Aboriginal communities.⁹

The issue of aboriginal control over child welfare is also of strategic importance to aboriginal people because if they can demonstrate that they are able to effectively manage and deliver child welfare services, their case for being given control over other institutions – such as education and justice – is strengthened. Moreover, effective aboriginal management of these services advances the case for increased aboriginal autonomy from non-aboriginal institutions and governments and, ultimately, for self-government itself, which has clear implications for control over, and access to, land, resources and tax revenue. Therefore, control over child welfare may be seen as a symbolic battleground where the inherent right and ability of aboriginal people to govern themselves and exercise control over their affairs is at stake. In this context, it is not in the best interests of mainstream media to make the connection between child welfare and self-government or to provide a forum for the discussion of the role of racism towards aboriginal children in the child welfare system since this would strengthen the case for self-government and create a new discourse about racism in dominant society.

The findings of this study are consistent with those reported in other research into the representation of aboriginal people in the press. After analyzing thirty-one *Williams Lake*

⁹ For one thing, control over the areas of child welfare and education is integral to the cultural and linguistic survival of Aboriginal peoples. In the previous century, the practices of coercing parents to send their children to residential schools and “abducting” Aboriginal children and placing them in non-Aboriginal foster homes and institutions have been compared to acts of cultural genocide.

Tribune articles and twenty-five *Vancouver Sun* articles about a public inquiry into the relationship between Aboriginal people and the justice system, Furniss (2001) concludes that both urban and rural presses demonstrate that they are “adept at manipulating news frames as a strategy of political containment,” resulting in the “silencing of Aboriginal concerns” (28).

Based on their analysis of coverage of the Burnt Church fishing dispute in *The National Post* and *The Globe and Mail*, Henry & Tator (2002) find that First Nations peoples were portrayed as “problem people who posed a threat to law and order” (204). Lambertus (2004) finds that the “threat” posed by aboriginal people is often framed by the press in military terms. Media coverage of aboriginal – non-aboriginal conflicts such as the 1995 Gustafsen Lake standoff “rely on wartime characterizations” that tend to reinforce the “social dichotomy of *us against them* that has persisted since the colonial era” (200). The *us vs. them* polarization is a feature of news discourse about in both flashpoints identified in this study.

Similar framing devices and wartime imagery were found in media coverage of the *Delgamuukw vs. The Queen* case. This BC Supreme Court decision was rendered less than a year after the Oka “crisis,” which is one of the most conspicuous recent examples of media coverage couched in war-time imagery and stereotyping. In the case of Oka, aboriginal people were armed with automatic weapons, while in the *Delgamuukw vs. The Queen* case, they came armed with lawyers. In their study of media coverage of events at Oka, the RCAP (1996a) found that, in spite of the complexity of the issues and the long history of aboriginal grievances over the land in question, “one image was repeated over and over again: that of the ‘warriors’ – bandanna-masked, khaki-clad, gun-toting Indians” (6). Other authors reached similar conclusions about media coverage of the Oka Crisis. After surveying newspaper headlines about the Oka situation, Roth, Nelson & David (1995) conclude that the media adopted “government

discourses of thuggery and terrorism and symbolically placed all Mohawks within a system of categories of violence” (77). Instead of providing audiences with an understanding of the context and history of the Oka events, the media opted for the safety and marketability of old stereotypes of aboriginal people.

The conclusions of both Roth et al. (1995) and the 1996 Royal Commission resonate strongly with the findings of this research. The failure of the media to inform audiences about the context and history underlying critical issues facilitates binary, stereotypical and one-dimensional coverage, which further entrenches what the RCAP (1996a) describes as the “communication gulf” between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people.

V Conclusion

While the media tend to report aboriginal issues in ways that support dominant interests, this reportage is not monolithic. For example, while situating the *Delgamuukw vs. The Queen* decision within dominant news frames, the press also reports on some elements of the decision that were widely condemned and also gives voice to dissenting views. One aboriginal author presents an eloquent critique of the ruling which hints at the possibility of an alternative news frame, namely, that of the ethnocentric and colonial assumptions underlying the judgment. It is also apparent that some of the mainstream journalists covering this story are sympathetic to the position of aboriginal people. Even though Terry Glavin's sidebar in the *Vancouver Sun* is cast within the dominant news frame and is couched in old stereotypes of aboriginal people as "emotional" or "violent," his reliance on aboriginal sources rather than elite sources (legal experts, Chief Justice McEachern, etc.) provides a forum for an aboriginal critique of the ruling.

Furthermore, the press is not simply a *factory* for the transmission of a hegemonic understanding of aboriginal issues; rather, the news media may be regarded as an *arena* wherein control over the definition of "preferred meanings" (Hall, 1978) is contested. While dominant interests do indeed enjoy significant advantages in setting agendas and framing issues in news discourse about aboriginal issues, media audiences "can and do refuse, reuse and reduce" (Nesbitt-Larking, 2001, 394). Media coverage of the Oka crisis provides a particularly clear illustration of audience autonomy. Critiques of the media's one-dimensional and stereotypical coverage of this news event by Roth et al. and the 1996 Royal Commission have already been discussed. In addition, Winter (1992) persuasively argues that Canadian news sources simply embraced Brian Mulroney's self-serving take on Oka. The former prime minister is described as "conducting the press like a symphony" (251). Yet, in spite of this one-sided coverage, many

Canadians “came away from the entire 78-day standoff in 1990 feeling a sense of support for and even solidarity with the Mohawks and other aboriginal peoples” (Nesbitt-Larking, 301). Selling particular ideas and definitions to the public through the media is a complex process, fraught with contradictions and containing the potential for alternative interpretations. Furniss (2001) acknowledges that while reportage of the Cariboo Chilcotin justice inquiry had “hegemonic potential,” it also “restated” the “contradictory elements” of the dominant Euro-Canadian culture, “leaving room for further aboriginal challenges” (30).

The voices of aboriginal people, and many other voices that were formerly excluded, have been incorporated into news discourse. As well, the public has demonstrated an ability to resist racist and stereotypical interpretations of events. However, the press may not be able to tell us what to think, but it is sometimes successful in telling us what to think *about*. This has been described as the agenda-setting function of the media or setting the “bounds of discourse, and among the properly educated, the bounds of thinkable thought” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, 59). In the future, one of the greatest challenges for aboriginal people and proponents of an inclusive press is ensuring that everyone’s story is told and that the historical context of important issues is sketched in. While news discourse about aboriginal people may be structured in dominance, the outcome of the contest for meaning is anything but certain.

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