A primary function of the media is to construct the common sense that audiences use to interpret news. Content analysis of recent news texts indicates that common sense about Aboriginal people is constructed by the media in ways that preclude their being “ready” to exercise complete control over their lives.

Une fonction primaire des média est d’influencer le bon sens qu’emploie le public pour interpréter l’information qui leur est présentée. Cette analyse de contenu des actualités écrites indique que le bon sens du public par rapport aux peuples autochtones est construit par les médias de façon à exclure la possibilité qu’ils soient “prêts” à exercer un contrôle complet sur leurs vies.
Introduction

In this study, techniques of content analysis are used to analyze ninety news items about Aboriginal issues that appeared in three Canadian newspapers—The Vancouver Sun, The Province and The Globe and Mail—from June 1 to September 30, 2002. This research builds on work done by the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) that concluded that three damaging stereotypes of Aboriginal people are perpetuated in all forms of public discourse: 1) Victims, 2) Warriors and 3) Environmentalists.

Stereotyping is but one feature of the media’s construction of the “common sense” that the audience uses to interpret the news. The media do not simply “remind us of commonsense notions and classifications that we already have, rather they produce and reproduce them out of raw materials selected from the cultural and linguistic environment” (Hartley, 1982:105). The common sense produced in the news media is not value neutral, but part of a larger process of presenting a hegemonic understanding of the world to audiences or what Gramsci (1980) refers to as “the production of consent.” The findings in this study indicate that common sense about Aboriginal issues tends to be constructed by the media in ways that preclude Aboriginal people being “ready” to exercise complete control over their lives.

Since stereotyping has long been a feature of media coverage of Aboriginal people in Canada, it is not surprising that stereotypes still figure prominently in news texts about Aboriginal issues in 2002. While many older stereotypes, such as Aboriginal people as warriors, are still present in news discourse, a number of new stereotypes are emerging. The most prevalent emergent stereotype found in this research is one which casts into doubt the ability of Aboriginal people to successfully manage their own affairs.

This new stereotype appears at a critical juncture in the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In recent years, Aboriginal people have been reclaiming control over their lives and, in so doing, contesting the subservient nature of their relationship—as embodied by the Indian Act—with non-Aboriginal Canadian society. Across Canada, First Nations have assumed control over reserve finances and many have taken over, or are in the process of acquiring, responsibility for areas such as education and child welfare. In British Columbia, tripartite treaties between First Nations and provincial and federal governments are being negotiated. In the courts, Aboriginal people have won significant victories against federal and provincial governments with respect to Aboriginal title, land claims, hunting and fishing rights and compensation for residential school abuse.
These issues have significant economic implications for the state, large corporations and other dominant interests in Canadian society. The mainstream news media support the status quo through their promotion of common sense interpretations of Aboriginal issues that effectively discredit Aboriginal claims and obfuscate their complex nature and context. Stereotyping plays an important role in the construction of the common sense that audiences use to interpret news. In this study, it was found that the news media frame common sense about Aboriginal people in ways that suggest that they are not ready or able to assume full responsibility for their lives.

Recent Studies of Aboriginal Representation in the News

A major flashpoint in the history of modern Aboriginal-non-Aboriginal relations, the so-called “Oka Crisis” of 1990, attracted intense media scrutiny at the local, national and even international level. The coverage of these events in the Québec and Canadian press came under a great deal of criticism. In *Covering Native Issues: Traditional Reporting Just Won't Do It*, Heald suggests that the news media need to come to terms with the diversity and multifaceted nature of Aboriginal issues, arguing that they are “too complex to be dealt with in the single issue context that reporters work in” (1992:16). Not only did the media have difficulty dealing with the complexity of Aboriginal issues, there is evidence to suggest that some media organizations were too close to government sources to be objective about the events at Oka. In a study of news reportage of the Oka situation, Winter found that news outlets had a cozy relationship with the government and were “instrumental in accomplishing the government goal of public opinion management” (1992:249).

In its 1996 report, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples conclude that Aboriginal people and issues are often excluded from the media altogether. On those occasions when Aboriginal people register on the public agenda, their voices are routinely “misappropriated” by non-Aboriginal people or they are portrayed in terms of familiar stereotypes. According to the RCAP, the media’s perpetuation of three damaging stereotypes of Aboriginal people – 1) Pathetic Victims, 2) Angry Warriors and 3) Noble Environmentalists – has the effect of reinforcing “old and deeply imbedded notions of ‘Indians’ as alien, unknowable and ultimately a threat to civil order” (1996:5). One of the purposes of this pilot study is to test whether or not the RCAP’s conclusions about Aboriginal stereotypes in the media still apply in 2002.

In *We Are Not You: First Nations and Canadian Modernity*, Denis suggests that the media construct Aboriginal claims to self-government
in binary terms such as "us vs. them, civilized vs. barbarian, modern vs. traditional, individual rights vs. collective rights" (1997:13). The modern vs. traditional dichotomy is also given prominence in Alia's *Un/Covering the North: News, Media and Aboriginal People* (1991). The author argues that one of the "old-order colonial," "ethnocentric paradigms" propagated in the press is that "peripheral people" such as Aboriginal people and other Northerners, "learn from 'core' people and not the other way around" (Alia, 1999:167). In framing Aboriginal issues in ways that effectively deny or denigrate the inherent rights of Aboriginal people, the media exert a powerful and direct influence on public policy towards them and indirectly on their lives.

Recent research points to a basic distinction in the ways that rural and urban newspapers "frame" Aboriginal issues in Canada. After analysing news texts from the *Williams Lake Tribune* and the *Vancouver Sun* about a public inquiry into the relationship between Aboriginal people and the justice system, Furniss (2001) finds that rural presses deflect criticisms of local Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal conflicts into rural-urban dichotomies, while urban presses deflect challenges to state authority by evoking noble savage imagery and reducing Aboriginal claims to localized conflicts. (2001:28-29)

While urban and rural presses employ different news frames, both demonstrate their adroitness at "manipulating news frames as a strategy of political containment" resulting in the "silencing of Aboriginal concerns" (28).

In *Discourses of Domination: Racial Bias in the Canadian English-Language Press* (2002), Henry and Tator apply techniques of critical discourse analysis to news coverage of prominent stories involving Aboriginal people. Their first case study looks at media coverage of the trial of former MP Jack Ramsey for sexually assaulting a young Aboriginal woman, while the second examines the media's portrayal of Mi'kmaq fishing rights at Burnt Church, New Brunswick. They observe that Aboriginal people are frequently portrayed as a "significant threat to the social order" or as "problem peoples who have either problems or create problems" (204).

Finally, 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). In effect, *what is not said* in a news report may have as great an influence on the production of meaning as *what is said*. The
withholding of history and context about complex issues limits the interpretative choices available to audiences, particularly to those audience members who do not already possess or have access to more detailed or nuanced information on those issues.

**News and Aboriginal People in History**

Historically, the Canadian news media have functioned as a loyal auxiliary of the state, given to excesses of ethnocentrism and outright racism. In the 1860s, Victoria’s *British Colonist* routinely derogated Aboriginal people, using such terms as “rascally redskins” (Tennant, 1990: 113) and “miserable fish-eating tribes” (84). This particular paper consistently published unsigned racist letters advocating that Aboriginal people be “removed” from Victoria, a viewpoint that was echoed in editorials (113-114).

News media in the mid-18th century acted in the interests of property owners and those who wished to get Aboriginal people out of the way of further settlement and economic exploitation. In the modern era, the removal of Aboriginal people from the path of economic activity continues to be a preoccupation of the media. Initiatives designed to provide Aboriginal people with more autonomy over their lives and greater control over land rarely receive balanced media coverage. For example, in 1999 David Black, owner of fifty-five BC community newspapers, many of which have monopolies in their local markets, directed the editors of all his papers to refrain from publishing any editorial commentary in support of the Nisga’a Treaty.

Not only did colonial newspapers promote racist images of Aboriginal people and advocate that they be dispossessed of ancestral lands, they also performed the function of setting what has been described as the “bounds of discourse, and among the properly educated, the bounds of thinkable thought” (Chomsky, 1989: 59). In 1866, the editor of the *British Columbian*, a self-described defender of “Indian rights,” expressed the view that those rights “did not include the right ‘to hold large tracts of valuable agricultural and pastoral land which they do not and cannot use’” (Fisher, 1992: 166). Sympathetic, albeit patronizing, views towards Aboriginal people in the abstract could be found in colonial newspapers, but when it came to concrete issues such as land utilization, Eurocentric ideas of land use and notions of Aboriginal inferiority usually characterized the news. Traditional use of land by Aboriginal people was neither valued nor acknowledged by Europeans, and consequently never became part of public discourse.

In the nineteenth century, in particular, traditional Aboriginal culture was often publicly discredited:
highly sensationalized descriptions [of the Sundance and other traditional ceremonies] ...served to confirm suspicions regarding the state of savagery existing in western Canada. (Pettipas, 1994:101)

After the 1885 Métis uprising led by Louis Riel, news media generally assumed a more proactive role in trying to persuade the government to adopt more coercive policies to deal with Aboriginal people: “[news reporters] expected the Department [of Indian Affairs] to take measures to guarantee the safety of White communities” (102). At the time, the press saw the Department of Indian Affairs for what it was — a branch of the state dedicated to protecting the interests of White settlers.

Aboriginal people have always taken an interest in what was being written about them and attempted to set record straight. In British Columbia, as far back as 1887, Aboriginal leaders appealed directly to elected government officials, often expressing their “bitterness at being depicted in White newspapers as violent and unpredictable” (Tennant, 1990:56). In the late 1960s, a new generation of Aboriginal leaders associated with the pan-Indian movement recognized the necessity of influencing public opinion through the news media. By 1972, there was a “thriving set of Indian publications” (165) in BC and, partially 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. During the Aboriginal protests of the 1980s, Aboriginal leaders “actively sought the understanding of non-Indian editors and journalists in order to influence white public opinion” (208).

However, even in the contemporary political landscape, venerable stereotypes of Aboriginal people abound — especially the Noble Indian clad in traditional dress and situated in idyllic natural settings. Such portrayals play better in the media than do images of modern, politically savvy Indians dressed in casual, “western attire” from less picturesque settings:

journalists...quickly came on side when chanting Indians in traditional costume confronted white loggers on magnificent coastal islands or in pristine mountain valleys; less attention was paid when Indians and blue jeans and baseball caps did the same thing in the dreary spruce forests of the northern interior. (Tennant, 1990:209)

While the contemporary news media certainly demonstrates greater sensitivity to Aboriginal people and issues than did the early Canadian press, displays of outright racism still occur, especially in opinion pieces and editorials. A recent opinion piece in The Province serves as a re-
minder that media representations of Aboriginal people have not changed as much as some might think. In an article entitled, "Natives need freedom from both government and band council" (29 January, 2003), journalist Susan Martinuk blames Aboriginal people for the effects of colonization and racism. References such as "Native culture is a mess," "mis¬erable Native culture," "Canada's Aboriginals face a bleak future," and "despair, poverty and hopelessness are norm" would not have been out of place in a mid-19th century publication such as the British Columbian or the British Colonist.

**Research Questions**

The general research focus for this pilot study orbits *print media coverage of Aboriginal issues*. Major patterns, themes and trends in news coverage of contemporary Aboriginal social policy issues in Canada are examined. An analysis of coverage in three major Canadian daily newspapers reveals significant variations in reportage of Aboriginal issues. Within the general frame of reference, specific questions emerge concerning the selected news stories and by-lines:

a. What Aboriginal topics are covered most frequently? Least frequently?

b. How frequently are Aboriginal people the primary actors in newspaper stories about Aboriginal issues?

c. How frequently are non-Aboriginal people the primary actors in newspaper stories about Aboriginal issues?

d. What roles do the primary actors play in these news stories?

e. Are certain roles more likely to be assigned to Aboriginal primary actors than to non-Aboriginal primary actors? And vice versa? If so, which roles?

f. What is the identity of Aboriginal primary actors (e.g., First Nations, Métis or Inuit)?

g. Are stereotypes of Aboriginal people present in these news stories?

h. Are these stereotypes consistent with the paradigm articulated by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in their 1996 report?

i. Are stereotypes of Aboriginal people present in these news stories that are outside of RCAP's paradigm?

j. Are there recurring themes and patterns in these news stories?

k. Are these news stories sympathetic or unsympathetic to Aboriginal interests and issues?

l. In these news stories, how are Aboriginal people portrayed in relation to non-Aboriginal society and/or institutions?
Methodology

Method of Analysis

Techniques of content analysis were applied to 90 news stories about Aboriginal issues that appeared in three Canadian newspapers—one daily tabloid, one daily broadsheet, and one daily national broadsheet—from June 1 to September 30, 2002. A coding sheet was filled in for each newspaper article and the results were entered into a spreadsheet. Two types of content are analyzed in this study:

1) Manifest Content: elements that are physically present and countable (e.g., mentions of a particular topic, number of front page stories), and
2) Latent Content: interpretive reading of symbolism underlying the physical data (e.g., assessing whether a particular news story contains “stereotypes” or is sympathetic to Aboriginal interests).

Population

The content under study comprised all news items, including editorials, which refer to Aboriginal issues in the time period from June 1 to September 30, 2002 in selected sections of The Vancouver Sun, The Province and The Globe and Mail. Any article containing one or more of the following key words was considered: Aboriginal, Native, Inuit, First Nations, Métis and Indian (if used to refer to “North American Indians”). News content from the following newspaper sections was included:

- The Globe and Mail – front section only (A)
- The Vancouver Sun – front section (A) and Lower Mainland Section (B)
- The Province – front portion (everything except Business, Entertainment and Sports)

Sample

One of the advantages of the limited scope of this study is that it was possible to examine the entire population of data. Thus, the research sample consists of all 90 articles that referenced Aboriginal issues in the specified newspaper sections during the selected time frame. Thirty-four articles appeared in The Vancouver Sun, thirty-three were published in The Globe and Mail and twenty-three appeared in The Province. While the relatively small amount of data examined in this study limits the degree to which findings can be generalized to contemporary Canadian news coverage of Aboriginal issues, emerging patterns have been identified and will be discussed later in this paper.
Coding Sheet and Protocol

One 2-page coding sheet was filled in for each article. Reading an article and filling in a coding sheet by hand took about 15 minutes, depending largely upon the length and complexity of the news item being coded. The specific research questions listed above are reflected in the structure and design of the coding sheet and the associated coding protocol. This protocol provides guidelines for coding, definitions of terms used in the coding sheet and a selection of choices available for each coding category (e.g., for stereotypes, the coding protocol lists the following four choices: Pathetic Victim, Angry Warrior, Noble Environmentalist and Other). The coding sheet was divided into the following five sections:

A. Publication Details: headline, date of coding, story location, page number, month and day of month, genre, name of author, Aboriginal descent of author (if applicable)

B. Aboriginal Topics Present: twenty-five Aboriginal Topics were listed; provision was also made for writing in topics not included on the list

C. Actors and Roles: up to 6 actors could be named (3 Aboriginal and 3 non-Aboriginal); 6 role options for each actor were provided: none, victim, hero, villain, survivor and other (which could be written in)

D. Aboriginal Identity of Aboriginal Actors for all 3 Aboriginal actors – nine options were available: First Nations; Métis; Inuit; Canadian Aboriginal person(s) identified as being in one of above three categories; Pan-Indian; Native American(s); Other Indigenous person – write in; Unknown; Does not fit

E. Other Attributes of the Article:
   1. Stereotypes of Aboriginal People Present (provision made for 3 stereotypes per article) – drawn from a list of 3 with an “Other” that could be written in
   2. Main Theme (if not Opinion Piece) or Prescription (if Opinion Piece) – provision made for a 20 word summary
   3. Sympathetic/unsympathetic to Aboriginal Interests and Issues – options include sympathetic, unsympathetic, neutral or does not fit
   4. Aboriginal People’s Orientation to non-Aboriginal Society/Institutions (check one) – this allows the coder to select one of the following 5 options: conflict, negotiation, collaboration, participation in the system, and does not apply
   5. Photo(s) and Description – allows for up to a 15 word
description of the photo(s) attached to an article
6. Buzz words/phrases – allows for listing up to 3 key words or phrases used by the author
7. Comments – allows for up to 20 additional words of commentary by the coder

Essentially, sections A and B of the coding sheet are designed to record and count basic manifest features of the content under study; sections C, D and E incorporate interpretive analysis of latent content.

Data Format

The writer subscribed to the three newspapers under study, clipped all relevant articles, and mounted them in oversize artist's sketchbooks. This labour intensive process, while feasible for small scale research, would not be practical for larger projects. However, by extracting data from actual newspapers as opposed to on-line full-text news databases such as Canadian Newsstand or Lexis Nexis, the researcher was able to assess important features of the data that would not be accessible through on-line databases. Thus, articles could be situated within their context on the news page and in the newspaper itself.1

By getting a spatial sense of where the article is located on the news page and by having access to other details of article's original presentation (e.g., font size of headlines, accompanying material such as photos or maps, what other headlines and advertisements appeared on the news page), the researcher is better able to assess the story's relative prominence in the newspaper.

Findings

Aboriginal Topics Present

The topic that was most often the primary topic in the 90 articles (other than the “Other Aboriginal Topic” option) was “Treaty Negotiation/Implementation” (10 articles), followed by “Fishing and Hunting” (9 articles). The most common secondary topic (Topic “ Mentioned”) was “Reserves” (32 articles), followed by “Self-Government,” “Other Land and Water Issue,” and “Financial Management” (each topic was mentioned in 29 articles).2 For the most part, primary topics were distributed relatively evenly among the three newspapers with the exception of two closely related topics – “Treaty Negotiation/Implementation” and “Treaty Referendum.” Twenty-seven percent of the articles in The Globe and Mail had one of these two categories as the primary topic, whereas The Vancouver Sun had only 15% and The Province a mere 9%. This is noteworthy because treaty negotiations were a hot topic in British Columbia
during the time period the data were collected. BC’s Liberal government had just conducted a highly controversial referendum on treaty rights in June 2002. Yet, the two BC newspapers in this study provided far less coverage of issues relating to treaty negotiations and the referendum than did a “national” newspaper published out of Toronto. One of the many criticisms of the treaty referendum is that the average non-Aboriginal British Columbian lacked the basic knowledge about the history and context of treaties in particular, and Aboriginal rights in general, to make an informed decision about referendum questions. British Columbians who did not have a basic understanding of the underlying history and context of treaty issues may have simply fallen back on what Stuart Hall (1978) refers to as the “public idiom of the media” which tends to reflect the “statements and viewpoints” (61) of the individuals and institutions representing dominant interests in society.

**Actors and Roles**

The main purpose of this category is to determine if Aboriginal actors are treated differently than non-Aboriginal actors. Fifty-seven percent of the non-Aboriginal actors in the 90 news stories are portrayed as “Heroes”; by contrast, Aboriginal actors fulfill the role of “Hero” in only 10% of the articles. Aboriginal actors are most likely to be portrayed as “Survivors” (34%) or “Villains” (31%). More work needs to be done refining this part of the coding tool. One or two more role choices could be added to the list – e.g., “Ally of Aboriginal people.” In addition, in some news stories, certain actors appear to be playing more than one role at the same time due possibly to the journalist’s attempt to provide “balanced” coverage of the issue.

These findings point to fundamental differences in the ways in which the news media attribute agency to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In 94% of news articles, non-Aboriginal actors are depicted as active participants in news events. By contrast, in 65% of news items, Aboriginal people were portrayed as passive recipients of the consequences of the actions of others or events beyond their control. The myth of Aboriginal people inability’s to exercise control over their lives has informed social policy towards Aboriginal people since early colonial times and is reflected in current legislation such as the *Indian Act*, which defines Aboriginal people as “wards” of the state.

**Stereotypes**

One of the purposes of this coding category was to test the typology of media stereotypes of Aboriginal people that was elaborated in 1996 by the RCAP. The researcher wished to determine whether these
stereotypes were as prominent in the news in 2002 as they were six years previously. The provision of an "Other" option with a space to write in an additional stereotype allowed for the construction of a list of emerging stereotypes. Two of the three stereotypes identified by the RCAP were still very much present in 2002: the *Aboriginal-as-pathetic-victim* stereotype in 44% of the articles analysed and the *Aboriginal-as-Angry-Warrior* stereotype in 31% of news stories under study. However, the stereotype of the *Aboriginal-as-noble-environmentalist* occurred in only 3% of the news stories.5

Perhaps the most significant finding in this section is the list of emerging stereotypes generated by the coding sheet. More than 40% of the total number of stereotypes identified in this study fell outside the RCAP's typology. These 51 stereotypes have been grouped into five thematic groups followed by the number of occurrences in the data (a sixth catch-all group – "Miscellaneous Stereotypes" has been added):

- Aboriginal people as incompetent or corrupt financial managers (14)
- Aboriginal people as taking advantage of the system (10)
- Aboriginal people as "dependent" and/or incapable of self-governance (8)
- Aboriginal people as working within the "system" (6)
- Aboriginal people as living outside non-Aboriginal law and social norms (4)
- Miscellaneous stereotypes (9)

The concept of emerging stereotypes is an interesting phenomenon that has garnered little attention by academics. Their appearance may signal a backlash in the attitudes of non-Aboriginal Canadians that may be attributable, in part, to polarized media coverage of a number of recent high profile campaigns by Aboriginal people for increased self-governance and the resolution of long-standing grievances about land and residential schools.

**Sympathetic/Unsympathetic to Aboriginal Interests and Issues**

While operationalizing what "sympathetic" is for the purposes of this study is an exercise fraught with difficulty,6 the writer believes that it is important to attempt to determine what Ericson, Baranek and Chan (1991) refer to as "sides presented and side favoured" (168). In their groundbreaking study of representations of crime, law and justice in the Canadian media, these authors rarely found two or more sides presented in news stories; instead it was discovered that the "norm is decidedly one-sidedness" in individual news stories (172). Ponting and Gibbons (1980) place media outlets on an “Indian Sympathy Index” in
order to assess the degree to which publications are sympathetic to Aboriginal concerns. Skea (1993-1994), in looking at Canadian newspaper portrayals of the Oka situation, assesses sympathy to Aboriginal people involved in the news based on whether individual news stories reflect “anti-Native” or “pro-Native” themes (20).

However, in this study, whether or not a news item is sympathetic to Aboriginal interests and issues is determined by assessing the answers to a series of questions about each article, including:

1. Are stereotypes of Aboriginal people invoked?
2. Is the context of the issue(s) presented?
3. Are the views of Aboriginal people presented?
4. Does the article have an anti-Aboriginal slant?

The choices provided for this coding category are “sympathetic,” “unsympathetic,” “neutral,” and “does not fit.” Overall, 46% of news items are coded as “unsympathetic,” while 36% are classified as “sympathetic.” Only 17.8% of the news items studied are judged “neutral.” Reportage on Aboriginal issues in the Vancouver tabloid, The Province, was much more likely to be unsympathetic (78%) than in the other Vancouver paper (35%) and the national paper (33%).

**Portrayal of Orientation of Aboriginal People to non-Aboriginal Society/Institutions**

In this section, the coder chooses one of the following descriptors to characterize the relationship of Aboriginal people to non-Aboriginal society/institutions depicted in the news item:

1. Conflict
2. Negotiation
3. Collaboration
4. Participation in system
5. Does not apply

Predominantly, Aboriginal people are portrayed as being in conflict with non-Aboriginal society and institutions. In three out of 10 articles under study (30%), Aboriginal people are seen as participating in Aboriginal society and institutions. One of the problems with this section is that the choices are not mutually exclusive. For example, some news stories portray Aboriginal people as working in a more or less “positive way” with non-Aboriginal society and institutions, variously negotiating, participating, collaborating and even, at times, coming into conflict with non-Aboriginal society or its institutions. However, the coding protocol requires that the coder select the descriptor that reflects the “predominant” relationship portrayed in the article. Thus, selecting “Conflict” does
not preclude the possibility that the Aboriginal actors in question are also simultaneously engaged in other kinds of relationships with non-Aboriginal society and institutions. Several other potential options emerged that were outside the five available choices:

- taking advantage of the system to the detriment of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people
- inability to participate appropriately due to a lack of skills (often financial)
- helpless to effectively engage with non-Aboriginal society and institutions
- passive victims of the system and/or recipients of treatment
- excluded from the system
- participate in the system, but require the supervision/assistance of non-Aboriginal entities (e.g., Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development)

This supports findings about stereotyping and role assignment, discussed earlier in this paper, that suggest that Aboriginal people are constructed either as a threat to non-Aboriginal interests—"Aboriginal people as warriors"—or as victims or survivors lacking the ability to take independent action.

**Discussion**

Earlier in this paper, the news media was described as functioning—historically—as a loyal auxiliary of the Canadian/colonial state in terms of its coverage of Aboriginal issues. Based on the findings in this study, print media coverage of contemporary Aboriginal issues has, in some ways, changed little since the days of early Canadian newspapers. Much of the coverage of Aboriginal people in the three newspapers examined still perpetuates damaging stereotypes, is unsympathetic to the concerns of Aboriginal people and reports on critical issues, which have long historical antecedents that are little understood or known by the public, in an ahistorical, de-contextualized fashion. Old stereotypes abound and as Aboriginal people seek to gain more control over their lives, new stereotypes are emerging. The most common emergent stereotype is that of Aboriginal people as "incompetent or corrupt financial managers." Related to this are two clusters of stereotypes: 1) Aboriginal people as unable to meet modern standards of governance and 2) Aboriginal people as “taking advantage” of the system.

The phenomenon of stereotyping—how it arises, what function it performs and its impact—has an interesting history that might provide insight into contemporary manifestations. While it may have harmful
consequences on those who are subject to it, in fact, stereotyping is a function of basic cognition. Hartmann and Husband (1974) describe this as a feature of “normal thinking, namely categorization” which enables people to assign “structure and meaning upon events and objects” (56). In an age where people are sometimes described as being “bombarded” with information, stereotyping enables people to efficiency sort and interpret large amounts of data. Unfortunately, when this feature of “normal” cognition is applied to specific cultural and racial groups, “whole clusters of characteristics tend to become associated with the ethnic label” (57).

Stereotyping may perform a useful function for journalists. Reporters are not only under pressure to process vast quantities of information rapidly, they also are charged with fashioning stories about people, issues and events. By invoking stereotypes, journalists avail themselves of a ready-made structure that they can hang their stories on. Technological advances in news production in the early to mid-twentieth century may have made the use of stereotypes almost unavoidable since the brief amount of time available for the production of news texts and the “vast material continuously to be produced” requires “certain formulas” (Adorno, 1957).

There are other factors, in addition to convenience, efficiency, and technological innovation, which account for the routine use of stereotypes by reporters. After analyzing the media’s handling of the anti-war movement in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, Gitlin (1980) concludes that journalists had little direct contact with their audiences and tended to underrate their “knowledge and attention span, and form images of this abstract knowledge compounded of wish, fact and indifference” (267). Journalists do not derive their stereotypes based on actual contact with those people who are the object of them, but rather form their stereotypical ideas based on a wide variety of indirect sources including their immediate work and social circles, and from premises that filter through the organizational hierarchy: from sources, peers and superiors, on occasion from friends and spouses, and from the more prestigious media reports, especially those of the New York Times and the wire services. (267)

In developing their ideas about Aboriginal issues and people, reporters may rely more on such secondary sources of information than they do on direct contact with ordinary Aboriginal people themselves.

For Aboriginal people, the consequences of stereotyping are destructive. While reporters might rely on it as a type of a journalistic “short-hand” that allows for easy story framing, stereotyping Aboriginal people
results in glossing over critical nuances of issues and the conflation of diverse individuals, communities and First Nations. This leads to one-dimensional, de-contextualized coverage of important issues which further entrenches the “communication gulf” between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The RCAP (1996) contends that many of the persistent “myths and misperceptions” of non-Aboriginal people are “perpetuated by no communication, poor communication, or one-sided communication” (5).

The media’s handling of the so-called “Oka Crisis” was couched in stereotypical imagery of Aboriginal people. The RCAP found that media coverage did little justice to the complexity of the issues surrounding the Oka events and the long history of Aboriginal grievances over the land in question. Instead, most news reports were organized around one central image – that of “bandanna-masked, khaki-clad, gun-toting” warriors (6). This stereotypical image bears a remarkable resemblance to the “war-bonneted warrior – the dominant film and media image of Aboriginal men in the last [19th] century” (6).

Stereotypical representations of Aboriginal people are often cued by headlines. An analysis of newspaper headlines about the Oka events indicates that the news media uncritically adopted “government discourses of thuggery and terrorism,” effectively associating all Mohawk people with violence (Roth, Nelson and David, 1995:77). Rather than inform audiences of the context and history of the complex issues at stake, media outlets cast the story in terms of familiar, marketable stereotypes. While this type of coverage might play into the public’s fascination with conflict and violence, it results in an entrenchment of old ways of thinking and represents a missed opportunity to educate the Canadian public about issues that have profound significance for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike.

Persistent stereotypes also have damaging consequences on Aboriginal identity because they contribute to shaping the “negative self-concepts which Native parents have come to hold” (Ponting and Kiely, 1997:171). Labelling theory suggests that stereotypes may become “self-fulfilling prophecies” for those individuals and groups that are subject to them. A well-known example is that of the “drunken Indian.” Aboriginal people who have consistent long-term exposure to this stereotype may “feel that they have a certain license to imbibe to excess because it is expected of them by non-Natives, giving themselves permission to conform to a stereotype” (172).

A stereotype that appears frequently in the selected news articles is Aboriginal people as unable to competently manage their own finances and services. If this stereotype becomes a regular feature of public dis-
course, it is possible that some Aboriginal people may begin to internalize it and start to doubt their competence or potential in these areas.

Not all media stereotypes about Aboriginal people are overtly negative. In this study, there were three occurrences of the Aboriginal-as-noble-environmentalist stereotype and six appearances of the Aboriginal-as-working-within-the-system stereotype. However, even stereotypes that have some positive connotations may have a destructive impact on Aboriginal people:

the “noble Indian” stereotype allows non-Natives to think about pretend “Indians” whom non-Natives have conjured up in their imagination and entertainment media. Some First Nation people strenuously object to this image as being just as racist as the “helpless” Indian image, for they see it as implying that First Nation people acquiesce in their plight with dignity. Insofar as First Nation individuals believe that First Nation people are supposed to acquiesce, this image is disempowering and, ironically, can thereby contribute to a negative self-image. (Ponting and Kiely: 172)

Reporting that is couched in stereotypical terms serves to close off potential avenues of interpretation of Aboriginal issues for non-Aboriginal people and impacts Aboriginal identity and agency.

While the focus of this study is not on why the media cover Aboriginal issues as they do; it is worthwhile to consider some of the factors implicated in these patterns. Furniss (2001) contends that news coverage of conflicts between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal interests is quite variable, depending on the type of resources that are being contested. When those resources are economic, the news is often reported in ways that “protect established economic/political interests by rejecting Aboriginal claims” (29).

An issue that has indirect economic implications for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike is Aboriginal child welfare. In the two decades since authority for child welfare services was first devolved from a provincial government to an Aboriginal child welfare agency in Manitoba, dozens of First Nations across Canada have negotiated, and others are in the process of negotiating, the devolution of delegated responsibility for child welfare services. Those early Aboriginal child welfare agencies in Manitoba initially experienced difficulty taking on this responsibility because the provincial government provided “meagre financial resources and virtually no professional support” (Fournier and Crey, 1997:231). In effect, Aboriginal people were set up to fail.

The issue of control over child welfare is critical to Aboriginal people for a variety of reasons. First it is of strategic importance since it affords
Aboriginal people the opportunity to demonstrate their effectiveness at delivering child welfare services to their own people. Furthermore, capable management of these services by Aboriginal people advances the case for their increased independence from non-Aboriginal authorities in other areas of jurisdiction, such as education and justice, and ultimately for self-government itself, which has clear implications for access to resources and tax revenue. In this context, it is possible to conceive of the field of child welfare as a symbolic battleground where the inherent right of Aboriginal people to govern themselves and exercise control over their own lives is at stake.

In this study, nine articles focused on issues relating to Aboriginal control of child welfare services. Four of these news items (44%) portrayed Aboriginal people and issues unsympathetically, while three (33%) were sympathetic and two (22%) were neutral. Stereotypes were present in all but one article. The "pathetic victim" stereotype appeared in seven of these items and four articles portrayed Aboriginal child welfare authorities as either incompetent or corrupt in their management of child welfare services. Not only were stereotypes invoked in eight of these articles, inflammatory language was frequently associated with the actions of Aboriginal child welfare authorities.

In looking at other issues that have economic implications for non-Aboriginal interests in this study, news stories about the following topic groupings were extracted:
- Treaties
- Land claims
- Self-governance
- Financial Management of Reserves
- Fishing rights

Out of forty-nine news items on the above topics, twenty-nine (59%) were coded as unsympathetic to Aboriginal people and interests, ten (20%) were sympathetic and nine (18%) were neutral. Of the nineteen news items concerning treaties and land claims, seven were sympathetic, seven were unsympathetic, and three were neutral. However, coverage of stories relating to self-governance, financial management on Reserves and fishing rights was resoundingly unsympathetic, with 70% of news items (21 out of 30) unsympathetic to Aboriginal issues and interests. Only about 7% of these articles (2 out of 30) were coded as sympathetic. Six news items were coded as neutral.

This would seem to support Furniss' contention that when there is a major economic issue at stake, the media serve to protect the status quo by discrediting Aboriginal claims. If the news media consistently
convey the impression to the public at large that Aboriginal people are incompetent at managing their financial affairs and hence incapable of governing themselves, then the likelihood that the public will lend their support to vital initiatives in these areas decreases (e.g., treaty negotiation, the resolution of land claims and the further devolution of authority to Aboriginal people in education, justice and child welfare). A lack of public support for these processes may make it easier for governments to justify procrastinating in negotiations with Aboriginal people and obstructing the attempts of Aboriginal communities to gain more autonomy over their lives. The issue of public opinion is so important to the federal government that it "commissions expensive polling to keep its finger on the pulse of non-Aboriginal public opinion on Aboriginal issues" (Ponting and Kiely, 1997:174). The public's views about Aboriginal issues may play a decisive role in shaping public policy towards Aboriginal people.

What are some of the Canadian public's views about Aboriginal people and issues and how have they changed in recent years? Ponting and Kiely (1997) conclude that the results of the first Canada-wide survey on public opinion about Aboriginal matters in 1976 still held true in 1997. Public opinion surveys conducted in 1976, 1986 and 1994 indicate that non-Aboriginal support for Aboriginal people has consistently deteriorated. Other key findings of this research are summarized as follows:

1. Canadians generally have little knowledge about Aboriginal issues and attach low priority to them except when those issues affect them personally or threaten their livelihood.

2. Canadians generally oppose "special" status for Aboriginal people.

3. Canadian support for self-government depends on how that concept is defined. If Aboriginal self-government is contingent on Provincial government authority, the Canadian public supports it, but if Aboriginal self-government is defined as Aboriginals developing and running "their own programs [in such areas as health, education and child welfare] without the province having any authority" then it is not supported by the majority of non-Aboriginal Canadians (175-177).

For Aboriginal people, self-government and self-determination are closely linked. Some Aboriginal people regard contingent self-government as not resulting in self-determination since "replacing non-Native bureaucrats with brown-faced bureaucrats who administer essentially the same provincial policies is not self-determination, by any stretch of the imagination" (176).

A key determinant of public opinion on Aboriginal issues is the media's ideologically driven construction of the common sense that audi-
ences use to interpret the news. After all, the representation of others is a “political and social” act (Lischke and McNabb, 2005:3). Common sense ideas about socio-political “realities” promulgated in the media may be more effective at supporting the dominant ideology than propaganda-style messages since the latter is “contestable,” while the former is not (Hartley, 1982:105). Nesbitt-Larking (2001) observes that once common sense has been defined in the media, resisting it is difficult:

Common sense is a closed form of thought, resistant to curiosity, challenge or change. A successful ideological gambit mines the deepest seams of common sense and gives a particular and partial reading of the world, while appearing to be universal and uncontroversial. (2001:87)

Based on the findings in this study, which must be regarded as both limited and preliminary, common sense about Aboriginal issues is framed by the media in ways that preclude Aboriginal people being “ready” to exercise complete control over lives. This conclusion is constructed as natural, logical and inevitable. While there appears to be general low-level sympathy for the ‘plight’ of Aboriginal people in reportage on some issues, such sympathy does not seem to extend to Aboriginal people engaged in contesting the unequal power relations between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people. Common sense notions of non-Aboriginal self-interest preclude audience identification with “menacing” balaclava-clad warriors patrolling barricades; by extension, “sensible” audiences would not sympathize with any cause with which “warriors” are associated. In addition, Aboriginal people engaged in negotiations involving substantial financial resources are frequently portrayed in the media as being “beyond the pale” or unreasonable.

Widespread public acceptance of common sense notions about Aboriginal people is a by-product of de-contextualized news coverage of important issues. A number of factors account for why and how the context and history of important issues are left out of news reports. Hartley and McKee (2000) emphasize the role played by journalistic “priorities” in shaping news that is bereft of history and context, particularly in the case of news coverage of issues relating to Indigenous people in Australia. “History” has no place in the news, since news is “understood to be directly opposite to history” (338). As well, journalistic ethics advocate that people be given identical treatment, yet this often precludes the provision of detailed descriptions of the context and history of issues. However, this fundamental tenet of journalism has serious implications for Indigenous peoples since “not mentioning race for ethical reasons could deny precisely the ‘background’ and ‘context’ that would explain an event” (338).
Conclusion

This study, while of a limited scope, sheds light on some disturbing patterns in the Canadian print media's coverage of Aboriginal people and issues. In news discourse, the parameters of debate on Aboriginal issues are narrowly defined, particularly with respect to issues of self-governance. This serves to protect the status quo while limiting the potential for Aboriginal self-determination.

Stereotyping of Aboriginal people in the news, far from being a thing of the past, is alive and well in the new millennium. Old stereotypes are routinely employed in news stories about Aboriginal issues and new patterns of stereotyping are emerging. Emergent stereotypes of Aboriginal people must be understood in an evolving political context. It may be that the appearance of the stereotype of Aboriginal people as incompetent or corrupt financial managers represents a reaction against Aboriginal initiatives to gain more control over their lives and access to land and resources. In recent years, Aboriginal people have been increasingly asserting their voices in all forms of public discourse and contesting the very nature of their political relationship with non-Aboriginal Canadian society. For non-Aboriginal Canadians, Aboriginal challenges to the status quo and to state authority represent a political crisis. For the news media, and other institutions, political crises are "moments of truth," which unmask "characteristics which are more latent during more 'normal times'" (Hackett and Zhao, 1994:509). Self-governance may be the ultimate goal for many Aboriginal people, but other Canadians may see these aspirations primary in terms of the threat they pose to their lifestyle and standard of living:

> When we speak of Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs, Canadians obviously feel they have little stake in that message, other than what 'they' think 'we' take from 'them' in the process. (Burrows, 2002:140)

Since many Canadians are concerned that Aboriginal self-governance may result in a loss of "resources, rights and livelihoods" (157), the construction of common sense notions about the inability of Aboriginal people to assume full control over their lives is functional to the preservation of the current state of power relations. Common sense definitions of Aboriginal issues that emerge in news discourse represent acts of self-defence for dominant interests in a contest that has very real social and material consequences for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike.

Future research needs to meld critical analysis of the media's coverage of Aboriginal self-governance issues with an exploration of ways that Aboriginal people may be more involved in their own representation
in the mainstream media. The news media appear to be mired in a neo-colonial mindset; after all, the issue of Aboriginal “self-representation” in the media can only be discussed “in the context of neo-colonialism” (Leuthold, 1997:80).

Notes

1. For example, is an article on BC’s Treaty negotiations placed next to a huge advertisement for Honest Sam’s Used Cars? Is an article on a groundbreaking Supreme Court decision on Aboriginal rights buried in the bottom right-hand corner of page 16?
2. While only one primary topic could be designated per news article, no limit was placed on how many secondary topics or “Topics Mentioned” could be specified for each article.
3. Pollster Angus Reid referred to BC’s Treaty Referendum as “one of the most amateurish, one-sided attempts to gauge the public will that I have seen in my professional career.”
4. Exemplifying the “non-Aboriginal-as-hero” news frame are several articles that deal with the proposed First Nations Governance bill. In these news texts, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development Minister Robert Nault is portrayed as trying to “help” Aboriginal people meet modern standards of governance and human rights, while Aboriginal leaders who oppose the new bill are depicted as self-interested and/or standing in the way of progress.
5. The RCAP examined the impact of all forms of media on Aboriginal people, including television, film and the performing arts. It may be that the Noble Environmentalist stereotype is given more play in the realm of arts and entertainment.
6. For example, sometimes the text of a news item contains no stereotypes and is clearly sympathetic to the interests of Aboriginal people, but is accompanied by a headline that is highly inflammatory and a stock file photograph that presents a blatantly stereotypical image of Aboriginal people. Should this article be coded as sympathetic or unsympathetic?
7. The cultural and linguistic survival of Aboriginal peoples is tied to the issue of control over child welfare and education. In the twentieth 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 did enormous damage to the identity, culture and language of Aboriginal communities.
8. The data here are somewhat skewed by the fact that several sympathetic editorials appeared in *The Globe and Mail* shortly after BC’s Treaty Referendum in June 2002.

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