



**MEDIA  
AWARENESS  
NETWORK**

[www.media-awareness.ca](http://www.media-awareness.ca)

**Level:** Grades 9-12

**About the Author**

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**Lesson Plan**

**The White Screen: Absent Voices in the Media**

**Overview**

This lesson helps students become aware of the under-representation of First Nations peoples and visible minorities in the media. Students begin with a discussion about different forms of diversity and then read and discuss handouts about representation of visible minorities and First Nations peoples in broadcast media. Assignments include a journal entry responding to the statement "What is not said by the media is as important as what is explicitly articulated" and diversity audits of news programs, dramas, TV advertisements and sitcoms. For students who wish to investigate this topic in depth, there are a series of extension activities.

**Learning Outcomes**

Students demonstrate:

- awareness of the imbalance that exists regarding representation of First Nations peoples and visible minorities in the media
- understanding of the effects of under-representative and stereotyping on both non-white people and on society's perceptions and attitudes towards them
- appreciation of the consequences of under-representation both behind and in front of the screen

**Preparation and Materials**

Photocopy student handouts:

- [The White Screen: Absent Voices in the Media](#)
- [Minority Representation of Reporters and Sources in Canadian Television News](#)

**Procedure**

Ask your students:

- How would you define diversity?
- What kinds of diversity are there? (Students may identify sexual orientation, religious, cultural, economic and racial diversity as examples that exist in society.)

- Do you feel that the diversity that exists in society is accurately represented in the media?

In today's class, we're going to focus on racial diversity and the media – how First Nations peoples and visible minorities are represented on films, TV, advertisements and in the news.

Distribute The White Screen: Absent Voices in the Media and Minority Representation of Reporters and Sources in Canadian Television News to students. Once they have completed reading these handouts, ask the following questions:

- This article identifies “North of 60” and “The Cosby Show” as examples of programs that represent racial and cultural diversity. Can you think of other programs that do this?
- Do you agree that First Nations peoples and visible minorities are under-represented in advertisements?
- Can you think of any ads that portray First Nations peoples or visible minorities? In these ads, are these individuals presented as ordinary, everyday people, or does the ad play on race or ethnicity?

The author of this article identifies the problems of stereotyping, or 'window dressing' in film and TV programs.

- What is the message that viewers receive when the majority of main characters on television are white males?
- Is there a genre of television show in which visible minorities are represented? Are these accurate or positive depictions?
- What are the dangers of stereotyping?
- What is the danger of under-representation of visible minorities and First Nations peoples as newspaper reporters, editors and producers?
- Do you think that there is a bias in how visible minorities and First Nations peoples are depicted in the news?
- What perceptions are created in the types of stories seen in the news that feature visible minorities and First Nations peoples? What stereotypes are reinforced?

A significant change in the television industry over the past few years has been the emergence of specialty cable channels (*Ask students to brainstorm some of these new channels*).

In theory, these specialty channels offer visibility to a wide range of interest and cultural groups. However, concerns have been raised that instead of promoting culture, tolerance and understanding, these stations may actually act as “ghettos,” with mainstream media thinking they no longer have a responsibility to promote

diversity in their programming and their organizations.

- Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why or why not?

## **Class Activities**

### **Activity One**

**Journal Entry** – Respond to the statement in this article: "What is not said by the media is as important as what is explicitly articulated." What are the consequences of the absence of the voices of visible minority and Aboriginal voices in the media?

### **Activity Two**

**Group Activity** – Divide your class into four groups.

**Group One** will monitor news broadcasts (both national and local, from at least six different television stations) for five days, noting:

- the number of non-white news anchors and reporters
- the number of stories featuring visible minorities or Aboriginal peoples
- the types of stories that are broadcast
- the role of these people within the story (i.e. victims, perpetrators, sources, experts)
- whether there is a difference in representation between American stations and Canadian stations

**Group Two** will spend half an hour each night conducting a five-day diversity audit of television advertisements, noting:

- the number of advertisements featuring white models and the number using non-white models
- the types of products being advertised in ads that feature visible minorities or First Nations peoples
- how First Nations peoples and visible minorities are depicted in these advertisements (i.e. positive, negative, neutral, stereotyped)

**Group Three** will survey sitcoms on television that include non-white cast members, noting:

- the depiction of these non-white characters (i.e. their characters' personalities, professions and socio-economic status)
- their role in the program (i.e. are they main characters, guest characters or window dressing)
- the way in which non-white characters are portrayed in these programs (i.e. positive, negative, stereotyped, accurate)
- how the roles played by non-white characters compare to the roles played by

white characters in the sitcom

**Group Four** will survey dramas on television that include non-white cast members, noting:

- the depiction of these non-white characters (i.e. their characters' personalities, professions and socio-economic status)
- their role in the program (i.e. are they main characters, guest characters, or window dressing)
- the way in which non-white characters are portrayed in this program (i.e. positive, negative, stereotyped, accurate)
- how the roles played by non-white characters compare to the roles played by white characters in the sitcom

Each group will prepare a summary of their findings and present them to the class.

### **Extension Activities**

#### **Activity One**

Visit MNet's [Diversity and Canadian Broadcasting Policy](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/ethnics_and_minorities/minorities_policy.cfm) <[http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/ethnics\\_and\\_minorities/minorities\\_policy.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/ethnics_and_minorities/minorities_policy.cfm)> section and the Cultural Diversity section of the CRTC Web site to summarize the policies and initiatives for representation of cultural diversity within the broadcast industry.

#### **Activity Two**

Contact local and national broadcasters to find out whether or not they have policies on representation of visible minorities and First Nations peoples in their programming and in their employment practices. If possible, find out their percentage of non-white and aboriginal employees.

#### **Activity Three**

If you were a broadcaster responding to the CRTC's policies and initiatives for representation and cultural diversity, what plan of action would you create for your company? Create a plan that includes a preamble stating why cultural diversity is important to you as a broadcaster, and then outline all the ways in which cultural diversity would be implemented within your organization. (*This outline would be expected to include a wide range of elements for consideration, not just on-air programming. Students must create a plan that promotes cultural diversity throughout the whole organization.*)

#### **Activity Four**

Music videos are a significant visual medium for teenagers. Have students conduct a diversity audit of the music videos they enjoy. Students could audit representation and messages about race from a wide range of musical genres: hip-hop, rap, rock, alternative, "top ten," etc. and then compare representation within each of these genres.

## **Activity Five**

Have students read the MNet essay [Ethnic and Visible Minorities in the News](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/ethnics_and_minorities/minorities_news.cfm) <[http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/ethnics\\_and\\_minorities/minorities\\_news.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/ethnics_and_minorities/minorities_news.cfm)> and write an opinion piece in response to the issues that are raised.

## **Evaluation**

- Journal Entry
- Group presentations
- Extension activities

## The White Screen



In the early 1990s, a great deal of press was devoted to the emergence of a more "multicultural" media. Pointing to TV shows such as "North of 60" and "The Cosby Show," and the increasing presence of non-white reporters on City TV, CBC and other media outlets, many people argued that the media had finally begun to recognize and represent the racial and ethnic diversity of North America.

While it is true that the representation of Aboriginal peoples and visible minorities has improved a great deal, the reality is that there is still a long way to go. High profile shows aside, when we consider the bulk of films, TV sitcoms, news and advertising that we encounter every day, the statistics show that visible minorities and Aboriginal peoples are still proportionally under-represented in the mass media, both on-air and off.

The impacts of this constant under representation are significant, especially in countries like Canada, where it's estimated that by 2006, one out of every six Canadians will be a member of a visible minority group. In his article, "Please Adjust Your Set," Augie Fleras posits the following:

*In psychological terms, media "whitewashing"(especially advertising) intensifies the invisibility of minorities in society. As one author put it, minorities are restricted in ways that "deny their existence, devalue their contribution to society, and trivialize their aspirations to participate, as full fledged members... The exclusion of people of colour also perpetuates the 'white face' of Canada, leaving others with 'feelings of rejection, of marginality, and of non-belonging.'" Whiteness is conveyed not only as the norm from which all else deviates, but also as a source of privilege – invisible and unearned – but real and at the expense of the non-white. One might conclude that what is not said by the media is as important as what is explicitly articulated.*

Although audiences are quick to identify bias and misrepresentation, whitewashing through omission is less obvious – and more common. In advertising, for example, Aboriginal peoples and visible minorities remain virtually invisible. Although statistics on representation of visible minorities in television advertisements are limited, studies of print ads have noted the absence of visible minorities and Aboriginal peoples. In a 1989 study on billboard advertising in Montreal subway stations, researchers found that minorities were featured on only one billboard (a promotion by Ontario Tourism featuring the image of a black ballerina, repeated 10 times) from a total of 163 on display. As a result, the ad industry has taken action to improve diversity representation. In 1990, the Canadian Advertising Foundation (CAF) established the Race Relations Advisory Council on Advertising – now known as the Council on Diversity in Advertising. With members from the ad industry, the media and the public, the Council acts on behalf of visible minority communities to promote



more racial and ethnic diversity in advertising.

How successful has the Council been? Since its creation, the presence of diversity in advertising does appear to have improved, but only in certain areas. In a 1994 report entitled *Cover to Cover*, the Canadian advocacy group MediaWatch found that while 20 per cent of the ads (in two issues) of *Maclean's* contained people of colour, there were entire issues of *Reader's Digest* and *L'actualité* which had no ads with people of colour. And although representation has improved in print and television since then, advocates still voice concerns about the limited portrayals of visible minorities within these ads.

Entertainment programming is only marginally better. Like advertising, film and TV programs tend to ignore visible minorities and Aboriginal peoples, particularly as "main" characters. Instead, Aboriginal peoples and visible minorities are used simply as window dressing, seen in the role of "the cop," "the judge," or "the store clerk," but seldom in a role central to the story. A 1992 study by MediaWatch of eight Canadian TV programs found that people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds accounted for about 16 per cent of the people on screen, but were seldom main characters. By comparison, white males accounted for over 50 per cent of main characters cast in each program. A diversity study of American prime time television by Children Now, in January 2000, had similar findings. *Fall Colors: 1999-2000* found that although 61 per cent of prime time shows were diverse, this percentage dropped dramatically when you looked at the roles assigned to actors of colour, compared to their white colleagues. Actors of colour were most likely to appear in guest roles or as non-recurring characters, and far less likely to play central or lead characters – in fact, only 17 per cent of lead characters in 1999-2000 prime time shows were from visible minorities. In their follow-up survey in 2000-2001, Children Now concluded that for the most part, prime time television is a world "overwhelmingly populated by able-bodied, single, heterosexual, white, male adults under 40." In other words, despite the presence of some programs featuring people of colour as central characters, the bulk of dramatic programming in both Canada and the U.S. features few aboriginal peoples and visible minorities in central roles.

Amidst much media hoopla, after virtually ignoring black actors for years, the 2002 Academy Awards honored the achievements of African Americans. For only the second time in Oscar history, three African Americans were nominated in major acting categories. Will Smith lost to Denzel Washington, who won for best actor, Halle Berry received an Oscar for best actress, and veteran actor Sidney Poitier was honored with a lifetime achievement award.

However, despite the significance of this event, skepticism exists whether this marks significant change, or is merely an anomaly. Industry observers and civil rights advocates believe that real change in the film industry will come only when more minorities work behind – and in front of – the camera. They note that despite these wins, there is still not a reasonable distribution of nominations across the board, for categories such as directors, screenwriters, musical scores, cinematography, film editing, etc.

In contrast to advertising and entertainment, news reporting is often held up as the one area where visible minorities and Aboriginal peoples have made distinct gains – in front of the cameras as reporters and anchors, and behind the scenes as editors and producers. Yet once again, the statistics tell a slightly different story.



Despite these half-page advertisements that appeared in newspapers in winter 2002, employment equity statistics for visible minorities and Aboriginal peoples at Canada's national broadcaster, the CBC, have dropped slightly over recent years. After reaching a high of 1.5 per cent in 1995, aboriginal employees comprised 1.3 per cent of CBC staff in 2000. Visible minorities, which also peaked in 1995 at 5 per cent, accounted for 4.8 per cent of CBC employees in 2000. (However, it's important to note that even these lower, 2000 figures are nearly twice as high as the numbers that were first reported in 1988.)

Both the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission and the American Federal Communications Commission have initiated equity policies and procedures for broadcasters. However, although there seems to be a commitment to improve the situation, much improvement is still needed.

## Minority Representation of Reporters and Sources in Canadian Television News

The percentage of reporters and sources who are visible minorities, on Canadian television news, by sex (1994):

Network	Reporters		Sources	
	% Female	% Male	% Female	% Male
CBC	1.0	6.0	3.7	12.7
Newsworld	none	4.6	2.3	7.4
Global	2.6	none	2.4	4.1
CTV	1.1	1.1	1.9	8.5

- 13.38% of Canada's population consists of "visible minorities".

Source: *Front and Centre: Minority Representation on Television*, published by MediaWatch, 1994.